Teaching and Scholarship at Colgate University

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My views on teaching and scholarship at Colgate University are grounded in an appreciation for multiple ways of knowing. These views are a product of my undergraduate training in the liberal arts and background in geography. Multidisciplinary and integrative perspectives underpin a liberal arts education, and if the discipline of geography were a three-legged creature, it would position itself with a foot in each of the broad categories of intellectual inquiry — the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Many of the problems geographers address, such as the dynamics of environmental change, require uncovering their ecological, political, economic, cultural, and ethical components. It is only through the integration of multiple perspectives, data sources, methodologies, and explanatory frameworks that these components can be adequately understood.

As an active scholar, a primary teaching goal is to incorporate into the classroom my research experience, understanding of cutting-edge issues in nature-society geography, and embrace of interdisciplinary research. I use my study of environment and development to explore the complexity of environmental issues with students who often assume them to be simpler than they are. Whether the theme is deforestation, the health impacts of synthetic chemicals, freshwater scarcity, climate change policy, or earthquake hazards, students are asked to consider the range of social and biophysical forces at play, and possible societal responses to them.

Beyond these thematic components, my teaching philosophy mirrors the goals that Colgate establishes in its mission statement: provide students with ‘a demanding, expansive educational experience’; produce ‘wise, thoughtful, critical thinkers’ who challenge themselves, their peers, and their teachers; and foster in students value for all forms of intellectual rigor and respect for the ‘complexity of human understanding’ (quoted from the Colgate University Catalogue 2004-2005, p 1). And, of course, efforts to achieve these goals are matched by those to improve students’ writing, oral communication, research, and analytical skills.

The key to meeting these high expectations, and a guiding principle in my teaching, is active learning — getting the students to grapple with diverse ideas and perspectives, engage in discourse with each other and with me, and explore environmental issues through experiential learning. By definition, active learning involves much more than a professor giving a lecture. It asks the students to be a part of an exploration of ideas. A course, therefore, represents a shared intellectual experience in which the instructor and the students inform one another. While the instructor is expert in the subject matter and is the principal voice in the classroom, students share responsibility for their education. The traditional lecture form of instruction underpins
my teaching because it is an efficient way to convey information. But maintaining an engaged and energized class requires much more than an expert waxing eloquent.

One of the wonderful things about Colgate is that the conditions exist to exploit a broad range of pedagogical tools and stimulating learning opportunities: smart classrooms, small class sizes, study abroad and field trip opportunities, a university-wide program of lectures and films, and a lively mix of student organizations and campus activities that complement environmental studies. In-class discussion and exercises, role playing, field trips, guest speakers, required outside lectures, films, student presentations, reading response essays, and research papers and projects complement lectures and allow students multiple pathways for accessing the material.

The complexity of environmental issues lends itself to debate about the relative importance of a web of social and biophysical factors, and a range of explanatory frameworks. Given the degree to which values about environment and development differ, there are many shades of gray in interpreting environmental change. For example, there are legitimate differences in opinion in how far society should go to protect non-human life, which makes achieving consensus in environmental ethics hard to come by. Asking the students to debate their ideas with their classmates, guest speakers, and the instructor helps them understand how their own values influence how they interpret empirical evidence about the natural environment. There may not be right or wrong answers, but there are strong and weak arguments; my classes aim to teach students the difference. They learn to synthesize the range of perspectives on a given issue, consider the evidence, make a logical argument, and effectively communicate their ideas.

As with the students, my intellectual growth and productivity as a scholar depends on ideas exchanged in hallways and classrooms, at conferences and in farmers’ fields. Discussion-based teaching maintains my energy and enthusiasm, and is essential for active learning, the promotion of critical thinking and oral communication skills, and the creation of a classroom dynamic where students truly grapple with the material. Colgate’s teacher-scholar model allows faculty the opportunity to encourage young people to think about important problems and develop the skills and ideas to achieve full, productive, and rewarding lives as well as the ability to contribute to society as important thinkers. Being at a liberal arts college is wonderful for the students, but it is even better on the other side of the desk.