“Spring Block” in the Environmental Education Program at WWU

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Among the main tasks the Spring Blockers undertake are outdoor environmental education programs for community partners. The first month of the term is consumed preparing for and delivering week-long environmental education programs for high school groups at Sucia Island SP. This year we have three high school programs as partners. The partner schools are necessarily atypical because they have to be able to free up 25 or so students for five days. The diversity of these schools means our SB student teams have different challenges and gains. One partner is a private (but financial-need-blind) school, Explorations HS, founded and led by my old Huxley college coop housemates/classmates, Daniel Kirkpatrick & Lisa Beck. Explorations provides a thoroughly experiential and integrated mixed-age curriculum. The students have outdoor skills and need engaging academic challenges. A wide range of reasons that regular HS “doesn’t fit” bring students to Ferndale’s public alternative, Windward HS. And for the Sedro Woolley Job Corps, a federally subsidized trades program with academics slipped in fits their needs; some are immigrants from eastern Europe, SE Asia, or Africa, or just from a displaced logging family.

Our Spring Block students get to know the Island during the second week of our term, transported there by the Snow Goose. Then two weeks later they return on the boat with their 25 learners ready to live with and teach them dawn to dusk about the cultural and ecological history of the island. We arrange service projects for the State Parks. One example of the latter is a five-year-long (and counting) Garry Oak restoration project and study I have helped the students facilitate with their learners. For the week, each student team creates a binder laying out all the details including original lessons and accounting for up to10 hours of instruction per day, and down to campfire or night program plans, and morning “no-ga” or other alternate get-up exercises. During the week of teaching, each student receives feedback on their instructional performance from me or Wendy, the partner school’s faculty, and from the undergraduate interns. Every phase is briefed and de-briefed, and re-unions of the whole group are intensely emotional.

As my co-instructor Wendy Walker says and exemplifies, the instructors’ roles include being the ‘glue’ that holds everything together, delegating much of the leadership and the teaching, setting parameters, providing extensive support, and providing seasoned feedback. There are substantially more contact hours than show in our credit loads! We maintain the long-term relationships with our partner organizations, but turn the running of the show over to the students. The students teach each other both formally (e.g., natural history lessons) and informally in many ways, including in their areas of relative strength or experience. We explicitly acknowledge these differences and the assets they represent from the start. We share much organizational and instructional responsibility with our undergraduate teaching assistants. The interns get an even more “inside view” of what they had experienced as participants the year before, attending planning meetings, leading the group, and handling parts of the arrangements with partners. Many parts of the show wouldn’t happen if we (often Wendy, who’s a master of delegation) didn’t say “this is a good idea, but it needs someone to be responsible for it.” We frequently have students or interns who excel in instruction, interpretation, some aspect of ecological science, risk management, emotional intelligence, and so on. Regular academic skills are relevant also, as guiding concepts must be identified and engaging and effective methods to teacher the learners designed or tested out. Sometimes the young leaders need coaching to step up; other times to step back and, like us, try to “lead from behind.”

We put as many resources and live examples at the students’ disposal as we can, and we place substantial responsibilities in their hands. Then we trust them to carry it out, and to learn from whatever

happens. The students work hard and accomplish educational programming they didn't dream they could do, sometimes with some hard bumps along the way, but always with safety nets. Just as we hand the reins over, so we don't have to work hard motivating the students: they are preparing to teach real learners in real places, about real issues. Also, we don't have to deliver all the "lessons": the real world delivers them, and our job is to help the students discern and process them, and move forward. It is never a perfectly anticipated and choreographed process, but without this thorough sharing of responsibility, action and leadership the program would not be nearly as rich and empowering for all participants.

A palpable sense of the quality of the students' learning can be gained from student self-evaluations. See the self-assessments of Veronica and Heather – they both evince a student engaged to their core, challenged by their real-world learners and their material, and struggling to meet their own expectations. In the case of Veronica, what lies between the lines is the tears when her lesson was failing mid-stream the first time through, and the plentiful support given her by classmates, partner teachers, and staff to help her regroup and succeed two days later. See Veronica's Self-Assessment and Heather's Self-Assessment.

After we debrief the Sucia experience, we divide the 20 students into two different teams and they develop two-day programs for either Blaine Elementary fifth-graders (using the Birch Bay State Park's diverse ecosystems), or Whatcom Middle School's sixth-graders (using the District's Gordon Carter Environmental Education Site on Lake Whatcom). About 200 students are served by each program over a period of six days. Teaching in pairs or three-person teams to groups of 15 or so young learners, our students gain some mastery over the lessons they've chosen or created and increase their focus on individual learner's needs over the repetitions of this program. Again, there is intensive coaching and feedback, and we watch confidence grow steadily. The Gordon Carter program includes a focus on stewardship of Lake Whatcom, including a culminating and explicitly civics-focused role play of some of the players who affect the Reservoir's water quality. Doing civics education in a public school, our students must facilitate this in a neutral way while helping the students make connections to the field ecology instruction they've received in phosphorus, forest structure and biodiversity, and stream ecology. The 6th-graders are remarkably fair-minded and solution-oriented, and often identify ways the roles they are representing could help the situation. Achieving this task requires our students to call on their own experiences in prior classes where they had to understand not only the science of an environmental issue, but the positions and underlying values. The teaching our students do in SB brings their own educations full circle as they work to translate their understandings, through experiential education, to younger learners.

After the intensity of staging two outdoor environmental education programs (and coordinating five such programs on the part of staff), our students have much to reflect upon. What are the most important goals of environmental education, in light of your recent experiences? What sort of educator do you want to be? What has engaged them intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and what elements of the experiences have led to these different qualities? What experiences have changed you and how? How might you change your life after returning from the wilderness and Spring Block to renew your "normal" life routine? If you sixty years more, and could write your obituary, what would you like it to say? These are some of the questions we suggest to prompt integration as the students embark on the final wilderness portion of spring block.