

Exchange for Change: Learning from Our Network to Expand Our Teaching Practice

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Source: Lessons in Conservation, Vol. 12, Issue 1, pp. 23-24

Published by: Network of Conservation Educators and Practitioners, Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, American Museum of Natural History

Stable URL: ncep.amnh.org/linc

This article is featured in *Lessons in Conservation*, the official journal of the Network of Conservation Educators and Practitioners (NCEP). NCEP is a collaborative project of the American Museum of Natural History's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation (CBC) and a number of institutions and individuals around the world. *Lessons in Conservation* is designed to introduce NCEP teaching and learning resources (or "modules") to a broad audience. NCEP modules are designed for undergraduate and professional level education. These modules—and many more on a variety of conservation topics—are available for free download at our website, ncep.amnh.org.

Note to educators: access presentations, teaching notes, exercise solutions, and associated files for these modules by registering as an educator, and searching for module by title.



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Exchange for Change: Learning from Our Network to Expand Our Teaching Practice

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The global COVID-19 pandemic upended workplaces worldwide and the Network of Conservation Educators and Practitioners (NCEP) was no exception. In Spring of 2020, we were in the initial planning stages of our annual Conservation Teaching and Learned Studio (typically held in June at the American Museum of Natural History in New York). Suddenly we were asking ourselves not only about the logistics of holding the event (*how do we move our training to an online format?*) but also reflecting on the needs of our community (*in a time of considerable change and uncertainty, how can we best support our network of educators?*). We decided to turn to our community directly, in order to better understand their needs, interests, and preferences for information sharing and events before launching our own online Studio. Unbeknownst to us then, this marked a decided shift towards exchange in our professional development endeavors.

Exchange had always been a goal of NCEP Studios, but we found that pandemic realities made it possible in new and important ways. First, being aware that everyone was receiving a flood of online resources and opportunities as the realities of pandemic life unfolded, we surveyed our community before planning our online debut. In place of our customary three-day in-person event, our initial reimagined Studio took place over a four-week period in July 2020 with a total of three hours of synchronous and asynchronous programming each week. Importantly, the online format reduced costs and travel requirements as well as resolved space limitations, enabling us to reach a wider audience than ever before—more than twice as many participants as in 2019. Additionally, given the interest from our network, we held two concurrent events: a traditional training event for educators relatively new to practicing active and evidence-based teaching techniques; and a “Community Exchange” for those educators experienced in active teaching who needed support in their transition to online learning formats, and an opportunity to learn from peers. This latter format would be distinctive for its emphasis on co-creation (for example, we did not know what topics we would delve into beforehand!) and exchange, centering the experiences of our participants, as we all shared our own perspectives, tips, and approaches.

Our online event format would adapt as our community’s needs and availability changed in the months and years ahead, but the shift to online training allowed NCEP to hold more events and respond to the needs of our network more than ever before. For instance, in 2021 we saw the need and opportunity for an optional “sharing and work session” for recent Studio alumni to continue building community. Participants could ask the NCEP team or other alumni for advice and connect with other group members to continue making progress preparing their classroom materials. Additionally, our initial Community Exchange generated a list of online teaching resources that is still being updated, refined, and shared among our wider network (please email ncep@amnh.org for more information). We also continued our emphasis on exchange and learning from our community. In Spring 2022, we offered a two-session “Educator Exchange”



for Studio alumni and their colleagues focusing on centering equity when teaching conservation, drawing on the experiences of our colleagues at the Center for Biodiversity and Conservation. We continued this topic in our most recent Educator Exchange in October (following our summer Studio), organized in collaboration with the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB). Over 30 educators convened to discuss what competencies and literacies should be fostered in conservation education to meet the broadening scope of conservation practice. Social justice and equity are fundamentally important dimensions of conservation practice, and educators are increasingly seeking to make them a central part of their teaching and conservation competencies. Across the two exchange events this year, participants highlighted the role of social justice and equity, as well as affect, and collaboration, and multiple ways of knowing, as essential for a holistic conservation classroom today.

NCEP's Conservation Teaching and Learning Studios and other professional development events have never been about "right" or "wrong" ways of teaching, but about fostering a critical teaching practice and connecting educators to a wider array of tools for their teaching toolkits. The past three years have offered us new ways of connecting with and learning from each other and our network, further expanding our own toolkit. Moving forward, we intend to keep online training and exchanges as an important part of NCEP's professional development portfolio, even as we re-introduce in-person events at the Museum. We also look forward to new and continuing collaborations with organizations and associations such as SCB-North America. We envision this emphasis on true exchange and learning will lead us to a more effective community of practice and subsequently, a more inclusive conservation community.

Teaching Ecology and Conservation: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As a teacher leading an interdisciplinary course on Social Ecology for undergraduate social science students, the shift to online sessions due to COVID-19 was a challenging experience that nevertheless expanded my teaching and learning canvas. My reflections on that experience are informed by the feedback from my students.

"... the prompts in the running whiteboard made me curious and made me reach out to my friends to know what happened during the class which I missed."

Interrupted internet and power supply and technical glitches often affected the smooth flow of the classes from both ends. In addition to recording the sessions and pre-recorded videos of certain important concepts, as a class, we realized the possibility of having a running whiteboard in the form of a Google document where every student could comment. This was a valuable space for collaborative learning as students used it to comment on related works, visual texts, or case studies.

