

Dr. James Rowe, School of Environmental Studies
2013-14 Faculty of Social Sciences Teaching Excellence Award

1. What do you like about teaching at UVic?

I have felt a tremendous amount of freedom to experiment in my classes, which has been exciting and engaging for both myself and students.

2. Who or what inspires your teaching (past/present/future)?

I did my undergrad at UVic and benefited from extraordinary teachers like Warren Magnusson, Kara Shaw, and Rob Walker. In my first year I had a political awakening during a Saturday morning Philosophy class taught by Susan Turner. Becoming attuned to the injustices that shape our world along the axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and species has made my life more meaningful, and hopefully helpful to others. I feel a deep fidelity to the classroom experience given the positive transformation I underwent as an undergraduate student at UVic.

3. What is your favorite teaching tip?

Plan for spontaneity by leaving sufficient space in lesson plans for the unexpected to emerge. I am consistently surprised by the collective magic that emerges out of gaps in my lesson plans.

4. What is your philosophy towards teaching?

Students learn better when proximate to what they are learning about. Since not all classes can occur in the field, strategies are required to bring the world into the classroom. These include skyping in course authors, assigning the newspaper to be read alongside academic texts, bringing in guest speakers, and creating assignments that encourage students to engage with the community.

5. When you design a course/teach a class, what are the main goals you have for your students?

I am very keen to work with students on writing and argumentative skills. In my experience if one can make a clear and logical argument, with keen attention to how the evidence should be sequentially presented, then they are well positioned to organize real world events, campaigns, interventions of all kinds. The conceptual and communication skills that make for an excellent paper are transferable to the framing and logistic acumen needed to be an effective planner, be it as an activist, entrepreneur, or government official.

6. What do you take away from the students you teach?

Surprise. Any given classroom is filled with tremendous life experience, and unique perspectives that are different from mine. The productive friction caused by the plurality of perspectives in the classroom yields constant surprise and learning for me.

7. What do you feel has been your most successful teaching innovation at UVic?

Mindful awareness. I have started integrating short meditations or grounding exercises into most of my classes. These help myself and students be present for our time together (time none of us will live again). Being able to ground oneself in our increasingly speedy world is a transformative life skill that we should be integrating into all levels of education. Enjoyment is heightened, and possibility is multiplied, when we are fully present for our precious lives.