I care about my students and am deeply committed to their education about environmental issues. My basic goal as an educator is to make society better by fostering educated citizens who participate constructively in civic life. Three objectives flow from this goal. First, students need a working understanding of basic environmental problems, opportunities, and management strategies. Second, students need to experience, emotionally or psychologically as much as intellectually, how critically evaluating environmental issues can help them make better choices as citizens. Third, because the issues we discuss in class are too important for insight about them to be restricted to people who have the opportunity to attend a university, my students must be able to communicate effectively what they learn to others.

In the three 40–60 person courses I have taught in introductory environmental studies and policy, I use a simulation to help students experience Hardin’s tragedy of the commons and understand some ways it can be avoided. This activity helps students understand and learn to communicate about environmental problems and tangibly experience consequences of sustainable versus unsustainable behaviors. In this simulation, I assign students to groups and tell them they are the heads of households who have to feed their families using only fish (Goldfish crackers) caught from a lake each day. At first, I tell them they live in very different places around the lake and can’t talk to one another. If a point comes when no one had enough fish to sustain his or her family until the next day, I tell them, the community had driven itself to extinction. Nearly every student over-harvests or is a victim of others’ over-harvesting, and communities collapse rapidly. Next, I allow group members to confer between each fishing day. Most groups persist longer, sometimes not collapsing until the final round. Some groups harvest sustainably even then! In the subsequent discussion, I ask students in groups that collapsed early to explain what went wrong and ask students in long-surviving groups what helped them stay alive. They invariably hit on Hardin’s take-home message about self-interested action leading to collective ruin, but also hit on a major contribution of my advisor, Elinor Ostrom, who showed that communities where people communicate and commit to one another can manage common pool resources sustainably. Students have enjoyed my activities, saying that “group activities helped with understanding subject matter” and that they “liked how she [instructor name] got us involved in what we were learning.”

I use online nature journaling to encourage students to become deeply aware of and emotionally attached to a specific spot in their local environment. This activity also helps develop communication skills. Students respond to weekly journal prompts, such as one which asks them to draw a map of their natural area and highlight its key features and another which asks them to describe how they perceive the area using senses other than sight. I chose an online format to access the particular learning affinities and challenges of “Net Generation” students. Students can include in their entries original digital pictures, multimedia elements such as videos, digital scans of their own drawings and primary source documents, and hyperlinks. One student documented in her journal the destruction of her natural area. Rebecca observed workers fencing off the area, removing trees, then tearing up sod and grading. She documented the escalating damage in a series of photos in her journal. Rebecca learned from the construction crew that the university was turning the area into a parking lot. She was dismayed, noting that “it [the area] provided green space that was utilized year round . . . it created a ‘backyard’ environment for students to relax in . . .” While Rebecca’s natural area experienced a striking transformation, journaling itself elicited some striking student transformations. One student who rarely spoke in class proved an adept artist, drawing beautiful maps and site sketches. Some students who were not excellent writers proved to be excellent photographers, while still others revealed a depth of feeling for the environment that I might never have suspected given their relatively shallow contributions to class discussions. Responses to
Journaling were sometimes polarized, with some students saying that “nature journals [were] not useful at all” while others “liked the nature journals [because they] gave an opportunity to get to know the natural campus.” Some of the reasons students disliked the activity helped me think of ways to improve it, and I describe those options in my forthcoming article about the project in *Journal of Environmental Education Research*.

Academic writing assignments help me deepen my students’ understanding of environmental issues, teach them to use evidence to evaluate such issues in real-world contexts, and show them how to communicate persuasively about environmental topics. I ask them to write three 4–5-page position papers which require them to make arguments about real-life policy scenarios connected to class topics. After a unit that covered market-based strategies for environmental management, some students responded to this paper prompt: “Should the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency establish a pollutant trading program for non-point source water pollution similar to the program it established for sulfur dioxide pollutant trading? To answer this question, you must first provide some background both on the problem of non-point source water pollution in the United States and on the sulfur dioxide trading program. Then, you must argue for or against using a trading market to control non-point source water pollution.” To help students improve their writing, I provide detailed guidance on how to structure their papers for maximum rhetorical impact and specific grading rubrics. In my second semester of teaching, I gave students anonymized copies of high-quality papers written by students in my first semester (with permission) and reviewed the kind and quality of writing I expected. I complement students’ numeric paper grades calculated using the rubrics with extensive comments. I assign three papers so students can learn from earlier papers how to improve latter ones; the papers are weighted in the course grade such that each can earn more points. I offer to comment on drafts and particularly encourage struggling students to work with me. One student, a participant in a university program for students who are the first in their families to attend college or have limited financial means, worked closely with me on his latter papers after receiving a low grade on the first. His writing, research, and critical thinking skills improved and his grade jumped nearly 65 percent between the first and third papers. While students did not necessarily comment in their evaluations on how their writing skills improved, I often noted improvement. Students did observe that they “liked the clarity of what was expected from me” and that “[the] instructor is the most organized and prepared instructor I have had in my four semesters at IU.”

I look forward to teaching courses in environmental studies, politics, and policy, the public policy process, the bureaucracy, and some topics of special interest within the policy sphere (e.g., entrepreneurship, implementation). I also can teach courses in introductory research methods and institutional theory and analysis. In the future, I plan to construct courses that revolve around case- or simulation-based learning and service learning. Scholarship of teaching and learning experts generally consider experiential education a best practice, and I know that such activities engage my students. Service learning particularly fits my goal of helping students become constructive participants in civic life. More prosaic but nonetheless important is my plan to pre-test students the next time I teach a large introductory class. I want to improve my understanding of students’ baseline knowledge and skill levels and their initial cognitive domains so that I can better determine how basic or advanced to make course content (particularly readings, which students in my courses frequently found challenging) and the cognitive development trajectories on which I should focus. I will care about and commit to the education of my students in the courses I teach at XYZ University. I expect my students will say—as my former students have—that they “liked her enthusiasm and genuine interest in the topics as well as her interest in each individual student.”