

Special Place Assignments: Connecting Ecological Concepts to Each Student's Unique Locale Through Scaffolded Portfolio Assignments

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In introductory biology and ecology courses and those that build on them, a central learning objective is for students to be able to describe and explain how environmental factors interact to contribute to the ecological properties (structure) and processes (function) that are observed at multiple scales. In this poster we will introduce 'special place' assignments, novel forms of assessment, that provide biology students with scaffolded opportunities to link course topics and a physical place that has unique value for them. In our introductory biology course, we have students make repeated observations of organisms in their place, which allows them the opportunity to practice formulating evolutionary and ecological questions. In our introductory ecology course students respond to a series of questions for each topic, and in our more advanced community ecology course, students reference journal articles and formulate research questions. By anchoring concepts and ideas to a special physical place, our goal is that students more meaningfully comprehend the importance and relevance of the information they learn about. This will in turn open the door to new ecological ideas and questions that will further undergraduate student learning beyond the classroom.

Keywords: ecology, alternative assessment, scaffold

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