

This Teaching Tip is one of a five-part series from a Faculty Learning Community at Pennsylvania State University.

Teaching with Instagram

Instagram: @EvolutionAvery and @PSUWildlifeEcology

Social media provides novel ways to engage students in your classes. The use of Instagram (IG) in my daily teaching has cultivated esprit de corps in my courses and throughout our Wildlife and Fisheries major, leading to increased motivation and empathy for topics and values outside my student's typical reality. It also helps connect learning to everyday life and makes the discovery process more active inside and outside of class (Sakr 2019). Below are my reasons for using IG along with a few recommendations on process.

Reference Points

I began using IG as a way to capture important methods in lab, or specific aspects of a species that I wanted students to remember. In part this arose out of my student's exasperation with my drawing skills in class, and also my own frustration that I often forgot to circle back to the many things that occurred to me during lab time. For example, methods to identify the sex of an animal vary by species, and they are best taught when animals are in the hand. IG has become a place where I can capture moments the way I remembered them, and then have a teachable moment in the comments section.

Reflection outside of class is important, and IG posts enable a novel way to prepare students for discussion before class. My students look forward to the next post, and they talk about them amongst each other and, most importantly, outside of class. My worldview is also different from my



Figure 1 eDNA sampling photo showing proper procedure to collect low quantity DNA from stream systems

students, and they have told me that many of my experiences and views are foreign to them. IG has become a window into species, locations, and cultures that my students in central Pennsylvania are not familiar with.

Shared Identity

Our use of IG has become a point of pride for me and my students. At a large University, where we don't regularly see our students in the same building, it can be hard to have a sense of community. My two IG accounts have worked to counteract that feeling, creating a 'brand' that shows who we are.

Student Motivation

Students get excited to see themselves featured on social media. The possibility that they might show up on a social feed or in our college's IG Stories with an animal alongside brings a heightened awareness for the things they do in class. I 'tag' my department and college on social media posts which helps them see our work and gives them the opportunity to share photos when appropriate. I also find that some students are more likely to contribute to class discussions through an IG post which aligns with the findings of Davies et al. (2019).

Seeing The Invisible

I use IG primarily to show people what species are outside their reality. Unless you have a name for something, it won't be part of your daily environment. Consider this example.



Figure 2 Photo of wood turtle carapace showing marking methods and identifying characteristics

If you hear a chorus of birds in the morning, you may relegate those birds to your subconscious because it's a constant babble of noise. But, if you know one of those songs, perhaps it's a white-eyed vireo, you will always be paying attention to who is in your area and who might be missing as you travel around, not just the fact that there are birds singing.

Extend Your Creativity

The other thing I love about social media is that there's no end to the ways in which you can extend your own teaching phenotype. It's easy to bring humor and a sense of lightness and joviality to your teaching through social media in ways that might not work in a classroom. Whether it's through the use of different "filters", or the use of absurd hashtags and current conventions (e.g. #smol #snek #dangernoodle for rattlesnake etc...), it shows your students that you are vested in finding common ground.

Tips:

Post frequently. This keeps your student's attention and ensures that they and others will be 'actively' following your mini lessons.

Show the unusual or lesser known aspects of a topic. Make the posts memorable.

I find that self-deprecation helps students relate to you. You'll quickly learn by watching student engagement metrics (see below) what does and does not work! Maybe you made a mistake in a procedure or fell in a pond while taking a water sample. Show the aftermath!

Show material from a different perspective. Do this either in your caption or by changing the perspective that you take photos. Put the viewer in the shoes of the subject.

Enable metrics on your account so you understand which types of content garner more impressions and engagement.

Give It A Shot!

I encourage you to try incorporating social media in your teaching. Different platforms have neat tools and possibilities for a range of class topics. You may, like me, find new avenues to explore and make deeper impressions on your students as you use it to complement your teaching.

References:

Mona Sakr (2019): 'It just opened my eyes a bit more': student engagement with Instagram to develop understanding of complex concepts, *Teaching in Higher Education*, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2019.1613356

Thom Davies, Colin Lorne & Leon Sealey-Huggins (2019) Instagram photography and the geography field course: snapshots from Berlin, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 43:3, 362-383, DOI: 10.1080/03098265.2019.1608428

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