Every spring, The Planet magazine student writers, editors and photographers get ambitious. This year was no exception. The Spring 2013 issue of The Planet addresses issues of ecological recovery and the pesky complexity of that concept. In doing so, they covered a range of ongoing contaminated site cleanups, from the Hanford Nuclear Reserve to the more local work to remove mercury from the Georgia Pacific Mill in Bellingham, Wash.

Twenty writers and photographers fanned out across the region to document these stories. As always, the class was a dynamic mix of journalism and environmental science students. When the journalism students floundered in understanding the regulations and scientific research behind wolf recovery or mercury contamination, the science students explained the processes. In turn, the journalism students encouraged the science students to bring a sense of story, life and broader context to their technical descriptions of mycoremediation and the reclamation of exposed riverbanks.

Adding even more cross-disciplinary learning, six Planet editors, writers and photographers participated in the SMoCS spring course. This cross-over boosted both courses’ outcomes. Planet students brought videography equipment and editing know-how to the documentary projects in SMoCS; SMoCS students recorded interviews and gave crucial feedback on The Planet’s feature article on the Hanford cleanup.

SMoCS III 2013

The final SMoCS class for 2013 is now complete! This class was co-taught by Ruth Sofield and Rebekah Green. It included 6 journalism students and 11 environmental science students. There was a lot of cross-over amongst the students; some of the journalism students were also environmental studies students, all of the journalism students were also in The Planet class, and some of the environmental science students had taken The Planet class.

The primary goal of SMoCS III was to complete a group project. The projects proposed by the environmental science students from the SMoCS I and II classes (Winter quarter) were used by many of the groups. These projects were refined and completed in 10 short weeks. The final deliverable for the students was a public showing of their work.

Their projects included:

- A laboratory based project on the toxicity of contaminated groundwater to marine organisms.
- A modeling project on PCB accumulation in mussels (this project builds on the work done by Geoff Lowery and Eli Patmont from SMoCS III, 2012).
- A documentary on MTCA.
- A documentary on the Skykomish cleanup.
- A comic book on public participation and MTCA.

The two documentaries and comic book can be viewed at: [http://faculty.wwu.edu/harperr/3SMoCS.shtml](http://faculty.wwu.edu/harperr/3SMoCS.shtml)

Thanks to everyone who helped out – we couldn’t have done this without you!

Observations of SMoCS III

- Stephanie Eckard

This spring, I had the pleasure of TAing SMoCS III, a split class of environmental science and journalism students. I watched the students’ relationships evolve over the quarter. In the beginning, they felt thrown in and pitted against each other: Science versus Journalism. The first assignment, intended to give each group an overview of the other through presentations on what their respective disciplines do, was perceived by the students more like this: which group can make a better presentation and outsmart the other with their “expertise” in their respective subjects? Jargon was thrown around, nervous ticks and tangents were as well. With time, the students immersed. They themselves did not understand even less. But the act of articulating their projects to their journalist classmates allowed the students to understand the big picture of the process in which they were immersed. The journalism students found themselves in the same situation during the class. Sometimes, we just need to take a step back to see the big picture. I think that helps to foster the kind of collaborative trust these students developed.

The journalism/science partnerships formed in SMoCS III expanded the students’ perception of what interdisciplinary teamwork might look like in their future careers. The best part is the connections they’ve made with each other. They now have a network of potential future colleagues to interview, partner with, seek advice from, and so on.

When I saw the final presentations, I could not have been more proud of their accomplishments. I know they had sleepless, overnight editing parties in The Planet office, or spent countless hours in a lab or in front of a computer model. In the end though, I think they all walked away with an appreciation for the balance of yin and yang, of science and journalism, of tedious timesheets and time with the profs, of tense teamwork and lasting friendships.

The bottom line is: SMoCS rocks!
The Yin and Yang
~ Jenna Dohman and Tim Sequin

I think there is a stigma out there that journalists should not be trusted when it comes to reporting science, due to fears of misrepresentation of their research. Now having directly worked with journalists, I have a much clearer idea of their goals as well and their constraints. By having a better understanding of their process, I will now be able to work much more effectively with other journalists. The positive experience I had with the journalism students in SMoCs was something that will unquestionably shape my interactions with journalists in the future.

In SMoCs III, I had the opportunity to work with students in environmental journalism. There were some challenges associated with the matchup. The journalism students had their own lingo that was completely foreign to me. This compelled me to ask a lot of questions early on, which they patiently answered. Since our specific project was a documentary, I found that the journalism students had more knowledge of the overall process for the project including storyboarding, framing questions, and visualizing the final product.

While at first I was intimidated by this, I realized that I also played an important role in the group. As a science student, I was most concerned with the scientific content of the documentary and thinking about the people we needed to contact that would best supply the information we were looking for. I think that by combining the scientific background of the science students with the skill sets of the journalism students, we were able to create the best possible product.

Working in a cross-disciplinary team in SMoCs was an extremely valuable experience. Our team's success was a direct result of relying on one another's expertise and constant communication on the choices we made.

Jenna: I agree that time was the most difficult obstacle for us to overcome. Although much of the planning was done during the previous quarter, we really didn't start working on the project until the addition of the journalism students. Needless to say, we would never have been able to accomplish what we did if we hadn't worked as a cohesive unit.

Tim makes an interesting point about being accustomed to working with different departments. Both of the journalism students in my group had experience working with students in different majors and knew how to delegate tasks. The cross-disciplinary work required in SMoCs was much newer to me; initially I wasn’t sure how it would work. In the end, we really just had to communicate and rely on each other’s skills. It was a great learning experience.

Jenna also touched on something that I think was extremely important to our group and to the entire SMoCs class – trust. When you work in this type of cross-disciplinary environment, you have to establish a very high level of trust within the group. You have to know that each member of the group is going to use their unique expertise in a way that will most benefit the project. Our group had no problem with trust, but I think that, in general, it was more difficult for the science/studies student to trust the journalism students. Scientists are naturally wary of lazy or sensational journalism (often with good reason) but I think that as a class we were able to overcome that barrier.

Contact us:
Ruth Sofield: 360-650-2181 ruth_sofield@wwu.edu
Rebekah Green: 360-650-2707 rebekah.green@wwu.edu
SMoCs Webpage http://faculty.wwu.edu/harperr/Y SMoCs.shtml