

## Rethinking a Class: on Mushrooms, Molds, and Society

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To BIPOC conservationists: When we encounter colonialist attitudes that marginalize us, our experiences often solidify as trauma, but our internal struggles are invisible if we keep silent. We must voice against such attitudes, but with empathy for Western conservationists' obliviousness. This is far from easy—or fair—because we fear repercussions and wish not to be recognized for our colors and accents. Nonetheless, we must be brave and speak up!

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## Rethinking a Class: on Mushrooms, Molds, and Society

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Inspired by the Black Lives Matter Movement, I changed my teaching to try to center equity; this involved centering the students and centering climate change. So, while the class I'm teaching is still Mycology, now I'm also teaching about history and culture, colonialism and agriculture, reindeer and termites, climate change and interdependence, entrepreneurship and listening.

I am still on a wobbly path of centering equity in the class. To do that, I focus more on student interests, student perspectives, and student ways of interacting with information. In that effort, I have made time to meet students one-on-one outside of class and ask them what they're interested in. Some students told me they wanted to learn more about



fungal medicines, which led me to discover so many intriguing fungal stories to share, especially with recent research on fungal effects on brains and uses of fungi in mental health treatment.<sup>i</sup> I am also trying to be a teacher who meets people where they are; I realize that I was being too judgmental about content that I'd thought was hokey but that actually resonated with student interests and imagination, like the fungal metaphors in the Avatar movie. So, when I introduce fabulous research about mycorrhizal networks that helps reframe our view of the world as a highly cooperative space, I facilitate a discussion about how that metaphor applies in other contexts.

Following the students' lead has also helped me integrate more types of sources in the class; students have a diversity of things they hope to learn in the class, so a diversity of sources makes sense. Being more responsive to student requests on what the class covers leads me to include some content that is outside of my expertise, and in turn leads to my being more imaginative in class design. For example, since climate is so important for how fungi grow, climate change can easily pop into the center of conversations in our mycology class. So, I made more space for climate change discussion in my class, which made way for making space for discussing equity since colonialism, capitalism, and racism have shaped the inequitable patterns in wealth, access, and infrastructure that underly many drivers and responses to climate change. When I talk about fungal ecology, I now link those roles to climate resilience (e.g., holding soils and water during extreme events) or climate chaos (e.g., crop failures, animal diseases). Plus, I make more time for lively discussions about mushrooms as climate solutions: as alternatives to meat to reduce the land, water, and carbon footprint of our diets; as alternatives to plastic; and as waste management solutions. When one student was leading a climate action event, I encouraged the others to join, and, in the next class, we talked about student reactions to the event and the connections between campus activism and fungi in ecosystems.

So far, my attempts to center equity by centering students and climate change has made the class more open-ended, more hopeful, and more fun to teach, and I have really appreciated the opportunity to talk over my changes with friends, mentors, and colleagues in the Network of Conservation Educators and Practitioners!

<sup>i</sup> Goodwin, G.M. et al. 2022. Single-dose psilocybin for a treatment-resistant episode of major depression. *New England Journal of Medicine* 387:1637–1648.

