

Collaborating with civil society groups for innovative teaching and learning: an initiative in the Conservation Ecology Teaching Programme at the University of Stellenbosch

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The Conservation Ecology Teaching Programme at the University of Stellenbosch is distinctly designed to train students for roles as conservation practitioners, land managers and researchers. The Department is well recognized for its research and teaching. With its institutional location in the Faculty of AgriScience and in keeping with the University's vision to establish and sustain relationships with its surrounding communities, the Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology is well placed to respond to the research and management needs of local land-user individuals and organisations, while simultaneously creating teaching and learning opportunities between students and members of civil society about topics relevant to conservation. Collaboration was initiated with civil society groups to exchange knowledge on topical issues relevant to the course. Members of these organisations were invited to share knowledge and experience during teaching and learning events, and students were assessed on tasks that included the production of educational material for the benefit of that audience. The aim with this initiative was firstly to expose students to practical, real-life conservation related scenarios, develop students' awareness and capacities with regard to the social realities in which conservation practice is embedded, create opportunities for two-way sharing and valuing of knowledge and experience between students, and civil society organisations, cultivate a culture of learning that values diversity of knowledge, ecological values and conservation actions, explore alternative methods of learning and teaching that will benefit our students, as well as serve the knowledge or research needs of local land-user communities. These aims are in keeping with the broader goals espoused in the University's 2012 vision, especially to make tangible, practical and meaningful contributions to the communities within which the University is situated. The initiative presented here was funded by the Fund for Innovation in Research on Teaching and Learning administered the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of Stellenbosch (US).

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