I WILL TRY (ALMOST) ANYTHING ONCE!!!

Melvin Arthur Johnson

Assistant Professor

Department of Geography and Geology

University of Wisconsin-Manitowoc

Education is a life-long pursuit for me. I have continually attended school, not only for professional reasons, but also for personal interest. I share this interest in learning in whatever class I teach. I want the students to understand that education is an opportunity we need to embrace if we are to live in a society that is both wise and compassionate.

As an educator, I want to provide my students with new information, or a new way of looking at information that they may already know. I also want to give them the skills necessary to use the information in their day-to-day lives. I mentor my students recognizing the myriad of forces which affect their lives. While teaching at three Native American reservations, I helped students utilize their cultural backgrounds and current life challenges (children, tribal affairs, community demands, etc.) to view the world from a perspective that recognizes the wisdom and passion they have already achieved while incorporating the new knowledge they are gaining. I want my students to succeed, and it is my goal as an educator to assist them in their educational pursuits.

During my tenure as an instructor in community colleges and now in a 2-year liberal arts school, I have come to understand that teaching is both an art and a vocation. I also believe in the ideas of student ownership of the class and the instructor as a facilitator of knowledge acquisition and use. These concepts intrigue me. As a result, I have given papers at both anthropology and geography professional meetings on the topics of teaching concepts and techniques. I have given papers on teaching the concept of “post-modernism”, teaching about conflict and conflict resolution, the challenges of teaching world regional geography in “just one semester,” and the challenges encountered while teaching Native American students on reservations.

I have a policy of student interviews for all of my classes. The students are required to spend approximately 15 minutes talking with me either in my office or another appropriate venue. These conversations allow them to ask me questions, and, I hope, become more comfortable seeking timely assistance. They also help me understand their interests and goals, which enables me to tailor the course and the examples which I use in class to topics to which the students most relate. These have included music, art, fashion design, weddings, horse reining, soccer, football, home field advantage, carnivals, dictators, and many more. My goal is to help the students realize the role of geography in their day to day lives—and quite possibly gain some majors and minors from the classes.

In my Introduction to Geographic Information Sciences class I developed an assignment which brought a concern of our campus to the class for solving. The goals were: 1) a practical application of the principles taught in the class, and 2) an understanding of the complexity of solving a problem which involved three levels of government (city, county and state). They used data sources that were readily available to the average individual. They approached students, faculty, neighbors, city and county planning officials, and regional and national environmental organizations for data. The students then used those data to develop an answer to the question: “If UW-Manitowoc were to construct a new science building, where should it be located?”  The students prepared posters and made a campus-wide presentation with their results. The response from the students and all interested parties was very encouraging. I plan to do another similar project for the next GIS class and perhaps incorporate it into my other classes as well.