Our Ocean Backyard

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Teaching Oceanography

Ten days ago I gave the last lecture of my 55th year of teaching at UC Santa Cruz. I’m not retiring, however, and will be returning. There have been a lot of changes and many things to reflect on over those 55 years. One realization is that those 18-20-year-old students that I had in class back in the late 1960s and early 1970s are now in their early 70s. I’ve now had a number of their children in class and even a few of their grandchildren – that’s a frightening thought, but I’ve gradually accepted it as some sort of badge of honor.

When I arrived in Santa Cruz in 1968, Lydon Johnson was president of the United States, Ronald Reagan was governor of California, Barack Obama was in the second grade, and Gavin Newsome was just celebrating his first birthday. There were no cell phones, no personal computers or internet, and no social media. Life was much simpler.

I have been teaching a big undergraduate oceanography class (big as in 200-250 students) since 1969, and other courses as well. But it has been oceanography in many ways that has defined my career. There have now been about 16,000 students who have taken my classes, and it’s always a surprise when I run into one of them, often in odd places. But then a lot of UCSC graduates decided to remain in Santa Cruz after graduating so running into them shouldn’t be surprising.

Those students have gone on to become doctors and attorneys, teachers and professors, realtors, city and county government staff, business owners, consulting geologists, state and federal government scientists, water agency managers, wine makers, fire fighters, artists and writers, politicians, an astronauts and even a professional surfer. Many have already retired, which is another chilling thought.

One of the many rewarding things about being a professor or teacher, is that, rightly or wrongly, probably wrongly in most cases, you sometimes feel that you can take some modest credit for those students’ success in their own lives and careers. They must have gotten some really critical knowledge, perspective, guidance or encouragement while sitting in your classroom for them to have been so successful. Well, we can all dream or imagine our own version of how we think our classes and lectures have inspired students.

I recently met the new partner of a good friend who I’ve known for many years. And the first words she spoke when he introduced us were “You failed me in oceanography”. It was a rough start, but this was 40 or 50 years ago so we moved on from there, but she clearly remembered me for that event.

Nearly 20 years ago now, I was introduced to a couple who were having dinner with some neighborhood friends. They wanted me to meet this nice couple who had gone to UCSC but had moved over to the San Joaquin Valley to start their careers. As soon as we were introduced, the young man said to me “You failed me in oceanography. But I deserved it”.

I have to say that there are a few others, well quite a few others, that have failed one of my classes over the years. That first year or so in college can be a shock for many young students, as many of you readers may recall. Away from home, no parents to tell you to do your homework or when to be home at night, or both. A college or university does provide a lot of freedom and flexibility, but also an invaluable opportunity that will impact and affect the rest of your life. I always start out each new class telling students that college is a huge investment that someone is paying for, and they ought to be getting their money’s worth and coming to every lecture. This often falls on deaf ears, however, especially if the class starts before noon.

Part of a liberal arts education at most universities has always been a required mix of science, humanities, and arts courses. In the early days of UCSC, the 1960s and 1970s, there weren’t a lot of introductory classes in the physical and biological sciences for non-science students to take. So most of them took lower division classes in marine biology, astronomy, and oceanography, rather than chemistry, physics, or calculus. Because of this trend, I ended up having a large percentage of the UCSC students in those early years in my oceanography class. When meeting or running into one of those early students in later years, the probability was fairly high that they had taken oceanography.

In 2016, a highly accomplished and respected writer for the New Yorker, wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book, Bohemian Days – A Surfing Life. The book by William Finnegan was considered a "finely crafted memoir of a youthful obsession" by the Pulitzer Prize Board. I’ll just say that I loved this book. It’s a wonderful piece of autobiographical writing that I enjoyed every page of. Finnegan’s early years starting to surf, first in southern California and then Hawai’i, going off to college, and ultimately traveling the world searching for waves is a great personal story. But it’s not just a book about surfing or for surfers, but a very engaging account of his growing up, lessons learned, people met, and adventures experienced along the way. During his travels became a war correspondent from some troubled areas around the world. He has now written a number of acclaimed books and also been writing for the New Yorker for many years.

William Finnegan says he put off writing this book for a long time because he thought if people knew he was a life-long surfer that he wouldn’t be taken seriously as a writer. Winning a Pulitzer Prize for Bohemian Days made it quite clear that this wasn’t the case.

But I digress. There is a local connection as William Finnegan actually graduated from UCSC in 1974. Several years ago he gave a reading from his book at the Santa Cruz Mountains Brewery on the Westside. I made it a point to go and listen and looked forward to possibly meeting him. The reading was memorable and after he spoke, and there was a little space around him, I took the opportunity to go up and introduce myself. On a hunch, since he had been at UCSC and had been a surfer, I asked him if he took my oceanography class. His response was classic, “Gee, I don’t remember”…so much for my remarkable influence on students.