Kudzu Wrangling at Chapman High School

Last semester the Kudzu Coalition got us involved in their crusade to eradicate kudzu without using chemicals. When they approached me about involving Chapman High students I was interested for several reasons.

First, it is a perfect tie-in to environmental science as kudzu is an exotic species to the southeast. It has wreaked havoc on ecosystems in our area for over 100 years. In an established kudzu patch it is easy to see the damage it causes. It is also very rewarding to see how fast an ecosystem will recover when the kudzu is removed: tress re-emerge, insects and birds return. In only one semester students were able to witness the results of their hard work, and the instant gratification helped keep them interested in the project.

Second, by removing the kudzu without using herbicides, my students have learned that there is an environmentally friendly way to eliminate this pest. The Coalition's method of kudzu removal poses no threat to the environment, and there is the added benefit of getting some exercise at the same time.

Third, kudzu wrangling affords the opportunity for hands on work in the field. By definition environmental science requires field work, and this was a perfect chance to literally get their hands dirty doing science. This followed training by Coalition members, who also led and supervised the work, especially Barbara Daniels and Paul Savko. A break from the classroom never hurts, and they were eager to go to the kudzu patch every chance they could-even in cold weather. They enjoyed being out of class, but as long as they stayed focused on the goal I let them go out every Friday. As a result we accomplished a lot of kudzu removal. They started out primarily being interested in getting out of class, but as the semester progressed, they began to see the difference they were making which inspired them to keep going.

Fourth, although kudzu is an invasive species, it does have some beneficial merit. It can be eaten by people and livestock, so I made some foods with kudzu as an ingredient and "persuaded" my students to give it a try. They were skeptical at first, but after the initial bite they decided it wasn't that bad. For those interested in arts and crafts, it is wonderful for making baskets and wreaths. It is also a legume, and since we have discussed use of fertilizers, benefits of crop rotation, and the nitrogen cycle, it was worth pointing out that while it is a menace to any ecosystem, it does return valuable nitrogen to the soil.

Last, I think the experience as a whole gave the class a sense of pride in knowing they were doing something good for the environment. It has also given the community a chance to see a good deed done by Chapman students. We had fun in the kudzu patch, made some memories, and bonded as a group. All semester I have stressed the importance of respecting the environment, and the necessity to give something back whenever possible, whether it is recycling plastic bottles, composting, or removing kudzu. As a teacher it has been rewarding to see their willingness to put a little elbow grease into a good cause simply because it is the right thing to do. I am very proud of what we have accomplished so far and look forward to continuing next semester with a new batch of students.

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