



## Engaging Undergraduate Biology Students with Local Biodiversity Through a Free Online Website

### What is this Research About?

Most university courses moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic. In biology, key learning experiences would typically happen outdoors, especially while learning about local biodiversity. One way that scientists study local biodiversity is using coverboards, which are flat pieces of a hard material that are placed in nature and provide environments for reptiles, amphibians or arthropods. Hands-on, on-campus learning may not always be possible, so online alternatives may be necessary. This study investigates how a free website can be used to teach students about local biodiversity using virtual online coverboards.

### What did the Researchers Do?

First year biology students were tasked to use a website to engage with local biodiversity. Sixty coverboards were placed all around campus and monitored for six months. Afterwards, photographs of the biodiversity found underneath the coverboards were uploaded onto a [website](#). Students could engage with the website by 'viewing beneath' the coverboards to investigate local leaf litter species diversity. Participants completed questionnaires that asked about their learning and engagement experience with the website. The researchers also collected website analytics based on how many times students visited the website and how long they spent on there.

### What did the Researchers Find?

Most students (94%) indicated that they enjoyed the online coverboard activity and learning more about biodiversity. Many students reported that they preferred learning about coverboards online rather than needing to go outside. The few students that had neutral or negative responses to the website would have preferred to do the activity outside. Some students also indicated that they liked being able to learn from the virtual coverboard website on their own time. Studying the website analytics revealed that students visited the website frequently and spent an average of 15 minutes engaging with the content.

# SoTL

## Snapshot

A synopsis of a scholarship of teaching and learning journal article

### → How to Implement this Research in Your Classroom

- Since in-person activities are not always possible, providing engaging online learning opportunities is necessary. In response to the need for more accessible teaching practices, researchers measured the response of students to a free website used to teach subjects typically done outdoors. Questionnaire results showed that students responded positively and enjoyed their learning experiences. Instructors can supplement in-person learning with similar online teachings to enhance their learning experience when circumstances limit students' abilities to complete their learning in person.

### → Citation

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### → Keywords

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