

Classroom Communication

Summer Session Support Services

(Below are some highlights from a talk given by Radha Hegde on January 29th to TAs in Engineering on effective communication.)

There is a method to unraveling the classroom and its dynamic. By thinking about a few general issues, TAs should be able to enhance the quality of their teaching.

Communication is central to the teaching/learning process. All TAs at Rutgers are TAs because, hopefully, they know the course content; however, this knowledge has to be translated and transmitted to the audience, and in doing this a number of elements must come into play. First, teachers must be concerned with the messages, verbal and nonverbal, that they present--their image, eye contact, the pitch of their voice, their posture, etc. Second, they must be aware of what they intend to convey and what is accidentally conveyed.

We all have times when we are well-prepared and, yet, the class falls flat, but we also know the day we are less prepared and somehow the class seems to run itself, as if it has an identity of its own. And, in a sense, a class does have an identity. Every class develops a certain characteristic, an environment, a distinct culture of its own. It has behind it a set of assumptions, practices, procedures, and rituals through which its identity and the teacher's image are being defined.

There are many ways to teach a class. Your class is a territory that you have created, a territory that is defined by your own personality and style. Every teacher has an individual style. Among the many styles of teaching are: the authoritarian teacher or the commander in chief; the laissez-faire instructor; the joker; the solo performer; the friend; the cantankerous professor. Most TAs will be able to identify themselves from among these choices, or, perhaps, see in themselves some combination of styles.

One interesting image TAs might model themselves after is the puppeteer model. Here, the teacher is steering a show--not as

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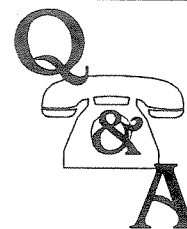
While many teaching assistants will be far away from the classroom over the summer break--travelling, doing library research, studying for orals, writing dissertations--quite a large number remain on campus to teach during the summer session. For many, it is their first opportunity to have sole responsibility for a course or to teach a more advanced course than is generally available during the spring or fall semester.

Teaching during the summer provides a unique set of challenges, different from those presented during the regular semester. All of the usual problems that might be expected to crop up over the course of the semester *do*, but they are intensified because they are packed into a much briefer period of time. Some students seem to feel more relaxed during the summer; others, however, panic at the thought of mastering a semester's worth of work in a few short weeks. Teachers must work hard during the summer

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some Napoleon of the classroom but as an ace puppeteer. Teaching is always negotiation--there are rules, expectations, cooperative enterprise. Although both teacher and student are co-creating the learning experience, the teacher must provide the scope within which the students will interact and improvise. The TA, as a professional at Rutgers, must set the rules by which the class operates.

Communication is never a random activity but is a rule-based process. The test of a good teacher is the ability to adapt and improvise in a situation, but there are definitely templates to fall back on. Teachers are socialized into the complexities of the classroom and must learn to cope with its attendant anxieties, must learn to deal with the professional heckler, the sleeper, the starrer, the perpetually confused, and the Einstein.

In a classroom, things don't always happen as expected--you may be taken off guard by student responses, you may misjudge the amount of time needed for a class and be left with time to fill. Teaching is often a learning experience where we confront ourselves. It should not be a debilitating process but an enriching one for you and your students.

Some of us dread teaching, some of us love teaching, some of us have had teaching thrust upon us. Not all are born to teach, but there is a method to the mystery that can be learned.

Summer Tuition Remission

TAs who have held a full teaching assistantship appointment for an academic year are eligible to take up to six credits in summer session, tuition-free. TAs are responsible for paying their own student fees. In order to take advantage of this benefit, TAs must submit a completed RT100 form when registering for summer session. The RT100 must be signed by the department where the teaching assistantship is held.

Ever since I returned their midterm exams, I seem to be losing control of one of my classes. Several of the students are extremely hostile and have begun to make rude comments during my lectures. Is it my fault or theirs? What should I do?

It does not really matter whose fault it is--what does matter is finding some way to change this situation before it gets even worse. Unless you act to regain control of the class, the rest of the semester could prove trying for you and your students.

First, if you have not already done so, speak to these students. Take them aside individually, not as a group, and try to find the source of their hostility. If they are angry about their grades on the midterm, try to discern what they felt was unfair about the test. Their perceptions may help you avoid a similar situation in another class and may also be useful to you in preparing the final. When students believe that the teacher is concerned about fairness and that s/he wants them all to succeed, they will respond more positively to a class. If you feel that it is justified, offer to work closely with them to insure that they do better on the next exam.

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TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick. Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:
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Summer Session

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to create an environment where students do not feel so relaxed that they fritter away the time in the class or so tense that they give up in despair and go to the beach. Work at being more strictly disciplined and organized during the summer in order to cover all the required material; when students see that you are in control, they will feel more confident of their own ability to master the material.

Teaching in summer session can be especially rewarding, a learning experience for the teacher as well as the student. TAs often feel more in control of the way the class is shaped and taught during the summer, and the pressures of the semester have eased up a bit, so it is an excellent time to have a class videotaped and get some feedback on their teaching methods. To set up an appointment to have your class videotaped, call Beth Griech or Jay Crossen (932-7034) as early in the session as possible.

TAs unsure about how to deal with certain issues and problems as they arise should remember that the TA HelpLine does not go on vacation. TAs may call 932-11TA from Monday through Friday, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., for help with any problem that may arise related to being a TA at the university.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

END-OF-SEMESTER SLUMP

The end of the semester can be a challenging time. Most undergraduates are beginning to shift gears, to look beyond final exams to summer activities--jobs, vacations, even summer session. Keeping their attention focused on papers and exams can be trying, and many students need help to insure that they will not squander a semester of work in a few weeks. What can TAs do to help?

The fewer major projects due at the very end of the semester the better. In planning the semester it is best to establish deadlines for papers and other projects early enough to allow a comfortable number of weeks before the semester ends. This gives teachers an opportunity to provide constructive feedback to the student and may give students time to make suggested revisions to improve their grade.

Help students to stay focused on the course by keeping the class interesting. Don't be a victim of end-of-semester blahs. If students sense that you are fading, they will not even feel obligated to attend. If the weather is too nice to sit inside, try holding a class outside. The end of the semester is a good time to show a video or slides connected to the course, to bring in a guest lecturer to

speak on a special topic, or to go on a field trip to a museum. Introduce activities that will bring students back with renewed interest to the topic at hand.

Try to ease students' anxieties about the final exam. Give them the assistance they need to do well on the exam. Help them to form study groups. Hold review sessions. Give practice exams or review old exams. Invite students to come to see you in your office if they have further problems. Reassure them. Encourage them. Finally, try to ease tension on the day of the exam. Make a joke. Bring cookies. Smile as they come in--this should be easy to do since the summer break is just around the corner.

Essay Contest Deadline Approaching

The deadline for entries in the TAP essay contest, "Things I Wish I Had Known," is May 1, 1993. Typed essays, 300-450 words in length, may be sent to TapTalk Editor, Office of the Dean, Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus.

The winning entry will be awarded a fifty dollar gift certificate for the Rutgers University Bookstore.

Attention: International
\$ TAs \$

Want to earn a little money,
effortlessly?
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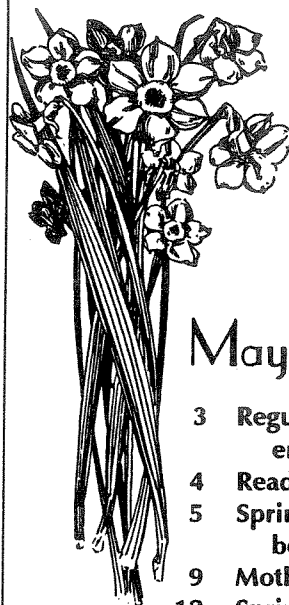
Your help is invaluable for a research project. All you have to do is to allow me to tape a 15 minute segment of your class. We will be as unobtrusive as possible. *This is not to evaluate you or your teaching.* You will be helping in a project to create a better academic environment for international instruction.

Please call:
Professor Radha Hegde
932-1416



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No matter what the source of their anger, however, students must understand that certain standards of behavior are expected. If they are unable to comply with the basic rules that you have established--in this case, no unsolicited comments that are clearly meant to be disruptive--then they must leave. No teacher is expected to put up with such unruly behavior, and, unless it is stopped, other students in the class may begin to get annoyed at the teacher for not taking any action.



May

- 3 Regular classes end.
- 4 Reading period
- 5 Spring exams begin.
- 9 Mothers' Day
- 12 Spring exams end.
- 20 Commencement
- 30 Memorial Day

Teaching Assistant Project

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