Summer Suggestions

When the semester ends, after exams and papers have been marked, comments written, extensions granted, emergencies dealt with, and grades turned in, the thoughts of many TAs turn to anything but teaching. Whether you bury yourself in the library, travel across the country, or make a beeline for the beach, however, do not abandon all thoughts of the classroom only to find yourself reinventing the wheel when the fall semester rolls around. In this spirit, TapTalk offers some suggestions for a productive TA summer break.

Some TAs will, of course, 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 semesters. All of the usual issues and concerns are intensified because they are packed into a much shorter period of time. Summer courses typically meet four days a week for 1 to 2 hours or twice a week for 2 to 3 hours, so they require creative course design and scheduling to deal with the intensity and/or monotony that may develop in such a concentrated format. If you do not already include a variety of activities in your classroom, the summer is the time to start; depending on the subject and format of your course, consider mixing a traditional lecture style with discussion sessions, group work, quizzes, and even films and field trips. The students enrolled in the class may also differ from those who attend during the academic year—in fact, non-Rutgers students often register for summer session. Summer courses are typically attended by two broad groups of students: those who take classes for enjoyment or extra credit and are often quite eager and engaged, and those who are attempting to fill a long-neglected requirement or to catch up on credits missed during the regular school year. Variations in interest and ability may therefore be great, so teachers must plan their classes with these differences in mind. Teachers must also work hard at conveying large amounts of information in a short period of time while

TAs should consider putting together a teaching portfolio so that they are able to demonstrate to prospective employers not only that they have taught but that they have taught well. Candidates who can provide extra evidence of their teaching skills have an edge over those who cannot.

The portfolio should provide a profile of you as a teacher. Include syllabi and lesson plans that you have created to demonstrate your ability to organize and focus material in an interesting and useful way. Evaluations of your teaching by others should also be included in the package. If you have never been evaluated, ask a faculty member to observe your class and then write an evaluation. TAs who assist in a large lecture should ask the faculty member to provide an evaluation at the end of the semester. Another method of evaluation is to have your class videotaped and review the tape with a faculty member. Finally, you may also want to include student evaluations of your teaching if your department conducts such evaluations. A packet outlining the elements of a good teaching portfolio is available from TAP.
ensuring that students are able to comprehend and make use of the information. Work at being 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. Remind your students on the first day of class that a summer course should not be considered a less rigorous version of a regular course, and that the requirements and expectations have not lessened.

For those graduate students who will not be in the classroom, the summer can be a perfect opportunity for other kinds of professional development. This might simply involve a return to the perhaps neglected activities of graduate student life, such as catching up on research, studying for qualifying exams, or working on the dissertation. You may, however, find yourself missing the regular social contact that teaching and attending class and other departmental functions provide. Take advantage of the fact that many of your colleagues are in the same situation; consider forming dissertation reading groups or exam study groups.

Aside from a return to your own academic work, there are other options to explore during the summer. One such option is to take a summer course—it will remind you of what it is like to be on the other side of the desk and offer you an opportunity to expand your own horizons. This can be a particularly useful strategy for those TAs who are required by their departments to fulfill a foreign language requirement. Many Rutgers language departments offer the kind of reading-intensive courses that graduate students need most, so consult the Summer Session calendar.

It has become a truism that one of the most desirable attributes to have on the job market is evidence of dedication to both scholarly and pedagogical pursuits. One way to contribute to the latter is to turn your ideas about teaching into a conference paper or perhaps even a journal article. There are numerous publications and organizations that discuss teaching in general and in its specific disciplinary contexts. Find an appropriate forum, spend a couple of weeks researching and writing, and add your voice to the conversation. Applying your scholarly skills to pedagogical issues can allow you to address some of the questions and concerns about your own teaching that may have arisen during the school year, and, of course, a publication credit or conference appearance looks great on a c.v. The Teaching Assistant Project’s TA Liaison Committee organizes an annual Teaching/Learning conference for Rutgers graduate students. The call for papers will appear early in the fall semester, so watch for announcements in your mailbox, on the web-site, and in October’s TapTalk.

The summer is a good time to work on next fall’s round of grant and fellowship applications. The TAP webpage (http://tapproject.rutgers.edu) has a link to the Rutgers Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP), which offers a centralized repository of information on various grant and award opportunities both within and outside the university. They also offer guides to grant and proposal writing.

Finally, although most people do not have to be reminded of this, some graduate students do: Take a break. Rest a bit. Relax. Enjoy the summer.
It's the final TapTalk of the year, but if you tore open these pages in breathless anticipation of some concluding nuggets of Pealsian wisdom then you will no doubt be disappointed. At this juncture in my (admittedly short-lived) teaching career the memorable moments resemble outtakes from a Three Stooges film more than opportunities for pedagogical insight. I have stood in front of a class of twenty students, my mind a blank slate, unable to respond to the simplest of questions or even to make a coherent sound. I have, through the machinations of some frustrating but pervasive teacherly short-circuit, repeatedly forgotten or mixed-up the names of particular students. I have faced several days of 50% attendance and screamed "where are they?!!" at the ceiling, gesturing insistently in my best Marlon Brando imitation (i.e. STELLA!). I have ended an eighty minute session with nothing to show but a sea of confused faces and embarrassing chalky hand prints on my pants. I have been told on a student evaluation, for a course in which I was supposed to help students work their way through difficult essays, that I didn't seem to understand the essays myself (this last comment is actually promising, in a strange way—students need to realize that the process of investigation and interpretation is a never-ending one, that the transition from student to teacher does not exempt one from knowledge gaps, faulty reasoning, or run-of-the-mill bad days). I have scratched my head at some of the unanticipated and amazing work my students have produced and wondered where exactly the process of learning takes place.

All this to say that I find myself with more questions than answers. Of course, this admission is annoyingly similar to the kind of advice that a lot of more seasoned teachers always give me. I'm sure you've heard it before—"only when you realize that you have no idea what you are doing will you really be ready to TEACH!"—a line that sounds as if it were lifted from a B-rate Hollywood screenplay. Another version of this kind of advice likens teaching to learning how to drive on a standard transmission:

Dispenser of Wisdom (DoW): Okay, now, ease up on the clutch and give it a little gas.
Young Teacher (YT): How much do I ease up on the clutch? What constitutes "a little" gas?
DoW: Stop trying to think about what you're doing.
Feel the friction point. Can you feel it?
YT: Um, we're rolling backwards.
DoW: It's all part of the plan—YT:—there's a plan? Why didn't anyone tell me?—
DoW:—you just keep feeling for that friction point.
YT: You know what you can do with your $#%@ friction point!! There—I stalled it.
DoW: Exactly! Now, let's do it again.
YT (petulant & sulky): Why can't I drive an automatic?
DoW: Ah, yes, if only everything in life were automatic . . .

This sort of Zen-like calm that experienced teachers display is often infuriating, but even now I can feel it occasionally welling up inside of me (note: this may be a sign that I've already gone over to the other side, so read on carefully). I suppose any undertaking in which a repeated exercise (i.e. teaching exactly the same material in exactly the same

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*Rupert Peals is a pseudonym
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sequence using exactly the same methods and strategies) produces wildly divergent results (e.g. understanding, confusion, interest, boredom, enthusiasm, hostility, etc.) should be excused for its little bouts of mysticism. At the same time, TAs who already face such a long list of uncertainties (the job market; the future of tenure) can be forgiven for wanting at least part of their professional lives to be consistent and predictable. Well, I'm here to tell you that teaching does not fulfill those requirements, that for every series of "lessons learned" there is an equivalent series of "issues you hadn't even anticipated" and that teaching will never be the stable referent against which some "other work" can be played off.

So, if the bad news is that there is no hidden truth, no potion will make us into great teachers, and no substitute for hard work, the good news is the very same conclusion. It seems obvious to me now that people teach because of the very mysteries and difficulties that the profession offers. My initial foray into that mysterious world has left me, finally, with a great respect for those who can do it well.

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