As Time Goes By

The fall semester has quickly passed by, and now is the time for all weary TAs to relax, reflect, and recoup—or is it? Does the semester’s end bring a gradual winding down and a much needed rest, or does it, in fact, intensify the pressure, forcing TAs to confront piles of ungraded papers, unwritten essays, and unread books? These end-of-semester pressures, coupled with the traditional stress occasioned by the holiday season—too much to do in too little time—can easily evolve into a crisis situation.

Where did it all go wrong? For TAs, indeed for all graduate students, juggling responsibilities becomes a way of life. Graduate work, TA duties, and personal obligations are constantly being shifted, with attention focused on the most immediately pressing task, creating a permanent state of triage. To a great extent, TAs become adept at successfully balancing all obligations, but sometimes everything just crashes down. Life does not come to a standstill while you are a TA; any out-of-the-ordinary event that demands immediate attention—a death, a birth, an illness, an unforeseen expense, a personal problem—can easily sidetrack the best planned schedule.

Taking grades of incomplete in course work may be one way of salvaging a semester gone wrong, but this can be a sure way of sabotaging next semester’s work unless you are very careful and very well organized. With incompletes hanging over your head, the winter break provides little relief; instead of offering a respite from academic work, a brief period to catch up on all those little chores and pleasures that have been deferred over the semester, the vacation becomes a continuation of the worries and pressures of the fall semester. So, if you must take incompletes, give yourself a rigid timeframe within which to complete the work and also schedule some time to relax during the break. Otherwise, you will worry about and work on the incomplete work during the entire break, and will probably finish just before classes begin. At this point, instead of starting the spring semester refreshed and enthusiastic, you begin even more weary and dispirited than you ended the last semester. Remember, too, that any student with two outstanding incompletes will not be allowed to register the following semester.

Gaining control of your life and work is a necessary survival skill, one that can be learned. (The article on page 2 of this issue offers some hints for doing this.) Your first semester experiences are valuable guides in helping you structure your next semester more efficiently. By now you should be able to estimate how much time will be needed for different responsibilities, academic and personal, so you can budget your time accordingly. While planning your time, however, be sure to schedule free time so that a sudden emergency won’t totally undermine your semester. If, however, no emergency arises, you have time to see a movie, take a walk, or visit a friend, all necessary elements of a balanced schedule and life.

TAP Purchases Video Equipment

The Teaching Assistant Project (TAP) has purchased an RCA Camcorder, which will be made available during the spring semester to TAs who wish to videotape themselves conducting a class. Procedures for using the equipment are presently being worked out and will be announced in the next issue of TapTalk.

Although some people may initially feel uncomfortable about “performing” before a camera, the compactness and unobtrusiveness of the new camcorders allow most people to forget very quickly that they are being recorded; nervousness and self-consciousness usually disappear after a few minutes.

Once a date has been arranged for videotaping, the TA should prepare the lesson in the usual manner. It is best not to try anything new and dramatic for the sake of the camera; far better to present yourself in your everyday style, conducting the class in the way that is most comfortable for you. Advise your students beforehand that the session will be taped, explaining that the purpose of the tape is to evaluate you, not them. The camera should be set up in the back of the classroom before the class begins so that the class can begin on time without any initial disruption.

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Eating An Elephant

At this late date in the semester, is there any hope of regaining control of your time? Can the remaining weeks of the semester be redeemed? Stephanie Donato of the Career Development and Placement Office says yes and offers the simple guidelines below for restoring order to chaotic lives. Although these strategies for using time effectively do entail an initial (but brief) investment of time, they will, in the long run, be time-efficient and well worth the effort. So, before you sink under a mountain of work, consider implementing some of Ms. Donato’s suggestions.

1. Rank all tasks in their order of importance.

This is perhaps the most important step because it provides you with a realistic perspective on the tasks before you. Classify tasks from the most to the least significant, “A” priority, “B” priority, etc.

2. Make an outline of all deadlines you must meet before the end of the semester.

Giving yourself an outline relieves some of the pressure; instead of worrying about all of the deadlines, you can focus more sharply on the imminent ones.

3. Enter all tasks and deadlines in a date book or calendar; highlight them with a bright yellow marker.

Looking at this date book daily will allow you to maintain a realistic notion of what remains to be done, forestalling panic and disaster.

4. Write a reminder in this calendar, two weeks before each deadline, so that you can plan accordingly, allowing yourself enough lead time to complete each task.

Be realistic about this; if you calculate that a task will take three weeks, budget at least three weeks of time for it. Better to err on the side of pessimism than optimism; that is, allow yourself four weeks rather than two.

5. Flag important dates in the calendar.

Using brightly colored slips of paper, mark the items on your “A” priority list.

6. Make up a daily “to-do” list.

Using your calendar or datebook as a source, record the most critical tasks first. Every day, before you begin your work, look at this list. Force yourself to handle the most critical tasks first. Review the list at day’s end. Reward yourself when one of the large tasks is completed.

7. Learn to delegate work when appropriate.

Do not take everything on yourself. Share responsibilities whenever you can.

8. Manage interruptions.

Do not let yourself be deterred from major tasks by telephone calls or other distractions. Be aware of how you are spending your time—when a difficult task lies in front of you, almost any interruption will be a welcome one.

Not all of these suggestions will work for everyone. Trying to incorporate one or two of these systems into your life, however, can help you to structure your time more efficiently. Some stress is relieved when any one task is successfully completed, thus making the next task a little easier.

In order to manage a large job, break it down into smaller, more manageable components. Ms. Donato suggests that TAs faced with what seems like an overwhelming task should remain calm and remember this simple riddle: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.
Video
(continued from page 1)

You may view the videotape alone for the first time or with a faculty member. In either case, brace yourself for a shock. If you have never seen yourself on videotape before, remember this: everyone hates the way they look on videotape the first time they see themselves. This is one reason it is advisable to review the tape with a member of the faculty who can be much more objective than you, someone who will see not only the negative but the positive points as well.

Another way of using the camcorder to improve teaching skills is through micro-teaching. A small group of TAs—6 to 12—and a faculty member get together to discuss different teaching methods through group analysis of individual teaching styles. Each TA prepares a ten minute introductory lesson in his or her field, and at the first session, the TAs are taped presenting these lessons. No one may go on longer than ten minutes, and all must be recorded for the full ten minutes. Since the process generally takes from 1 1/2 to 2 hours, the group schedules a second meeting to view the tapes. At this second meeting, the entire group views and comments on each of the ten minute segments. The person who is the subject of the tape always goes first, giving his or her own comments, negative and positive, followed by the comments of all of the other group members. One member of the group records the comments so that each participant will have a written summary of their performance.

Listed below are a few of the benefits of videotaping. Clearly, the benefits far outweigh the initial embarrassment and discomfort.

1. Videotaping demonstrates, quickly and dramatically, how you look and sound as a teacher. You will immediately discover aspects of your presentation that you absolutely hate, and, with the help of an objective, experienced observer, aspects that you like. Recognizing your less effective teaching methods or annoying mannerisms is the first step to correcting them, and seeing what works well in your classes can boost your confidence.

2. Videotaping a class lets you analyze the quality of your interaction with students. Do you make eye-contact frequently? Do you notice when students are having difficulty and are not following your lecture? Do you give students an opportunity to ask questions? Do you listen and respond to these questions?

3. Observing a videotape of one of your classes with a faculty member gives you a balanced evaluation of your methods by an experienced teacher. In addition, a written evaluation of your teaching by a faculty member can be a valuable document when looking for a teaching job.

4. Micro-teaching gives you an opportunity not only to have your teaching evaluated by others but also gives you a chance to see and compare the teaching methods of other TAs to your own.

Clarification

An article in the November issue of TapTalk suggested that TAs who wished the complete text of the Academic Integrity Policy could secure a copy from the office of the Assistant Provost for Students Affairs but failed to give the address of this office. It is as follows:

18 Bishop Place
College Avenue Campus

Notes From the Field

How do TAs manage to survive the many demands of being a student/teacher? Below, some TAs offer comments and advice.

Be a planner... Try to map out a plan or schedule, setting out the goals you want to have achieved by a particular point in time... Put things in perspective. Very few things are real disasters... You can always go back and try again.

Jim Wiley
Geography

Do your work as soon as possible. If you leave it until the last minute, it will be very hard to manage. Graders should work out a technique for fast grading. For example, if there are ten questions on the exam, grade them problem by problem. The professor in charge of the course can usually give you some good advice.

Zoran Miljanic
Electrical Engineering

Don't freak out.

David Weisbrod
Communication, Information, and Library Studies

Volunteers Needed

Planning for the 1989 TA Training Conference is now underway, and experienced TAs are needed to help shape this program. If you can spare a few hours during the semester and would like to have some input into this important project, please send your name, address, telephone number, and your spring semester schedule to: TAP, Office of the Dean, The Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus.
Contribute To The Common Purpose

Actions which demonstrate intolerance towards or disrespect for any other member of the university—sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc.—have no place on the college campus. Denying or ignoring these problems will not make them go away; facing them squarely, bringing them into the open, is a start to abolishing them. The February issue of TapTalk will offer a number of articles on these related issues that contribute significantly to the quality of life at Rutgers, what President Bloustein has described as the common purpose of all members of the university community.

Because these problems are various, and because they affect different people in different ways, we would like to open this issue of the newsletter to any TA or faculty member who wishes to contribute. Now that classes have ended and you have some breathing space, take the time to drop us a brief letter or article dealing directly with one of these problems. You may want to define one of the issues clearly so that people are more sensitive to it, describe a personal experience, or discuss ways of dealing with prejudices in a classroom.

The few minutes you take to share your ideas and experiences with others may help to make a fellow TA’s years here at Rutgers just a bit easier. Please send your letters or articles to TapTalk, The Graduate School, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus, or call Linda Schulze, 932-7034, with any suggestions you may have for articles.