

Grading Fairly & Clearly

Grading student work and, in particular, determining the final grade for a course can be among the most difficult tasks for a teacher. Long hours spent conscientiously reading and commenting on essays or exams seem to go by the wayside as your efforts to provide constructive, qualitative criticism are often reduced by students to quantitative questions like "what did I get?" or, even worse, "what did you give me?" In an ideal classroom, "what did I earn?" would be the question, but in an undergraduate culture influenced by part-time jobs, 5-6 course workloads, grade point averages, graduate school, medical school, and law school applications, pre-requisite and required courses, and the distractions of a parent-free social life, "what did I get?" usually (and understandably) becomes the operative question. Like it or not, testing and grading are integral parts of the educational process and central elements of most courses to many students, and TAs who can establish and maintain a consistent grading policy will be able to deal most successfully with this pedagogical reality.

Jeffrey K. Smith (Graduate School of Education, Rutgers), and Brenda Loyd (University of Virginia) have developed a set of three principles to be used in assessing students' work and assigning grades to them. These principles are not intended as prescriptions but rather as a potential framework that can be used to examine and improve your own grading practices. The first principle, *communication*, is a twofold process: the grading system should be communicable (i.e. explicit and understandable to the students and to the teacher) and communicated (students should be made aware of, and consequently made responsible for, the grading system throughout the course). The second principle of grading and assessment, *fairness*, is divided by Smith and Loyd into three related components: validity, reliability, and lack of bias. For an assessment or grade to be valid it must have a direct relationship to the work the students are asked to do in the course; Smith and Loyd summarize the issue of validity by asking "does this assessment (grade)

Teaching/Learning Conference 1999

The third annual Teaching/Learning Conference is scheduled for Saturday, January 23, 1999, from 11:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Rutgers Student Center on the College Avenue Campus. The conference, organized by the TA Liaison Committee of the Teaching Assistant Project, brings together graduate students from across the disciplines to address issues common to teachers at the university. Graduate students will present papers or convene panels on an array of topics related to teaching. Among the topics that have been proposed are: mentoring; challenges in laboratory teaching; course design & motivation; modern pedagogy; models of interactive learning; teacher-student relations; and a roundtable discussion on the TA experience.

There is no registration fee for the conference, but those planning to attend should register in advance. For further information or to register, call 932-7747, visit the TAP website (tapproject.rutgers.edu) or email: (acarpent@eden.rutgers.edu).

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capture the material, all of the material, and nothing but the material?" Reliability means simply that we have enough information about our students to assign a grade in a fair fashion. The final component of fairness, a lack of bias, involves a consideration of whether all of the students in class have an equal chance of getting a good grade, and asks the teacher to consider how his or her own biases may be interfering with the establishment of a level playing field. A third principle of successful grading suggests that the assessment be compatible with instruction. Compatibility, in this instance, involves balancing the necessity to assess student performance with the goal of learning the material of the course; if the former impedes the latter, then assessment works against the very purpose of education. Smith and Loyd summarize as follows: "The goal of education is education; assessment is intended

to facilitate education and communicate its outcomes."

TAs who grade for another professor, while not necessarily responsible for the establishment of a grading system, are nevertheless responsible for its application. Be sure to discuss this with the professor at the beginning of the semester so that both parties agree on the criteria to be enforced and so that there will be no later misunderstandings.

Regardless of the teacher's level of preparation, students will often want to discuss or contest grades they've received on essays or exams. In such cases teachers and TAs have an obligation to explain how the grade was determined and what the student can do to improve. If a student does come to you with questions or complaints, listen carefully to what he or she has to say. Although you may decline to change the grade, you may discover that exam questions were more ambiguous or essay assignments less clearly defined than you thought. If the student's complaints seem valid, then consider changing the grade; do not, however, allow yourself to be manipulated or bullied into giving another grade. Issues not directly related to your classroom (e.g. professional school applications, academic standing, parental expectations) should not unduly affect your

evaluation; the grade is about the work done on a particular assignment, and not a reflection of some larger principle of assessment.

While posting final grades is a common practice at Rutgers, it is something TAs should try to avoid. If student demand is great and you do choose to post the grades, be very careful. Listing grades by student identification numbers or by student names constitutes a violation of students' right to privacy. You should post grades by using made-up codes for each student and by jumbling the order of students' names so that they do not correspond to the roster's alphabetized system. (Some teachers prefer to have students give them a self-addressed postcard so that grades can be mailed to their home.) It is helpful to remind students that the university is prompt in releasing grades and that they can telephone Touch Tone Registration a week or two after the instructor's deadline for submitting grades.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.

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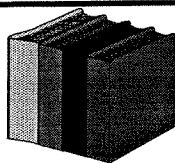
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TA Bookshelf



The November issue of *The Teaching Professor* contains two articles that provide a useful approach to the issues of group and/or teamwork at the postsecondary level. The first article is a review of findings from a recent Texas Christian University study that examined the roles of learner and facilitator in partnered student work. The study found that a student's performance depended much more on a particular student's ability to learn the material than on the partner's ability to facilitate the learning process. The authors stress that these findings correspond to a specific kind of learning task and a specific focus on retention; they do not, therefore, imply that group work should be abandoned but rather that we must not automatically assume that group work is inherently beneficial in all pedagogical situations. A second article, by Stephen Sweet of SUNY Potsdam, provides an outline of strategies for improving "student team projects." Aimed specifically at developing the social skills necessary to be successful in the current job market, four strategies are offered: generate student commitment to team projects, use one class session to tackle group management issues, trust students to manage groups, and involve students in grading.

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Tapped Out – The Diary of a New TA

by Rupert Peals*

In my last column I wrote about a model of teaching that seems inherently problematic, an approach that involves an over-identification with students combined with a reluctance or unwillingness to assume a position of authority. What was left unarticulated in that little tirade, and what remains unclear to me even as I near the end of my first semester as a TA, is what model or models of teaching I do imagine to be successful. It's easy to identify undesirable models—i.e., the Draconian taskmaster ("sit down, listen, and learn!") or the overly touchy-feely type ("everyone hold hands and concentrate—first one to Nirvana gets a B+!")—but harder to offer constructive alternatives.

In popular representations the charismatic and inspirational teacher-who-makes-a-difference (often a high school instructor who shakes kids out of their sleepy routine and forces them to appreciate the beauty of *Moby Dick*/invertebrate anatomy/the French Revolution while simultaneously overcoming their self-limitations) is such a pervasive fantasy that it becomes difficult to imagine other versions of a "good teacher." It is also difficult for most of us to picture *ourselves* as this fantasy figure. (Imagine Rupert standing on a desk shouting "seize the day!" or "stand and deliver!"—not very convincing,

*Rupert Peals is a pseudonym

is it?) Clearly something is lost in the translation; when we regard teaching as a calling rather than a profession we almost inevitably set ourselves up for disappointment. This is not to say that there can't be any room for inspiration—it just shouldn't be a prerequisite.

It's difficult to remember what I expected from myself or from my students when I entered the classroom for the first time. I know I didn't set out to change their lives, and most of them weren't expecting a life-changing experience. Mostly it's been a series of fits and starts, some successful and some disastrous. For me, there has certainly never been any sort of grand moment of connection, when everything falls into place and everyone leaves the room happy. It might be the way I run the class; faithful readers of *Tapped Out* can probably safely guess that I'm not a happy-go-lucky, idealistic teacher in the *Dead Poets Society* vein. (Students never call me "oh captain, my captain"—just Rupert, or Mr. Peals, or nothing at all if they can help it.) One obvious difference, however, between my experience and the fantasy experience described above, is that my class is much more discontinuous and open-ended, and much less intense, than the Hollywood version. Attendance, interest, enthusiasm, ability, weather, illness, scheduling—the list of variables affecting my performance and that of my

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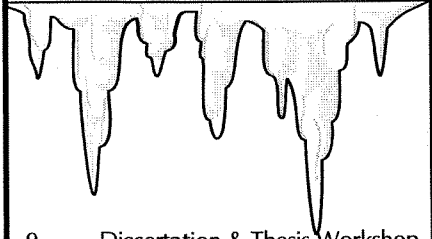
TAs interested in, or concerned about, classroom dynamics, should consult *The National Teaching & Learning Forum* (vol. 7, no. 6). In "The Angstful Professor," Laura Border of the University of Colorado-Boulder writes about crisis and contradiction in the classroom and how it may be used to examine and improve our own ways of teaching. James Rhem, the Executive Editor of the *Forum*, offers a survey of recent studies of humor in the classroom and suggests that a sense of "immediacy" between teacher and students is perhaps the most beneficial aspect of a humorous pedagogy.

Tapped Out

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students on any given day is almost limitless. They have lives outside the class as do I (or so I'd like to think!); we meet twice a week and try to coordinate our efforts. If, when exams are finished and final grades are assigned, it seems that the people passing through my class have absorbed a certain amount of information and improved a certain set of skills, I'll probably be satisfied. While this "model" wouldn't make a very exciting movie-of-the-week, it is the best method I have yet to come up with to keep myself stable and my students learning.

December



9	Dissertation & Thesis Workshop 25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.
10	Last Day of Classes
13	Hanukkah begins at sundown
21	First Day of Winter
25	Christmas
26	Boxing Day (Canada)

COMING IN JANUARY 1999

1	New Year's Day
18	Martin Luther King Jr. Day
19	First Day of Spring Term
23	1999 Teaching/Learning Conference - 11:00-4:30 Rutgers Student Center, College Avenue Campus.

Teaching Assistant Project

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