

Making Connections: Bringing the "Real World" Into the Classroom

Academics are often portrayed as being out of touch with the so-called "real world" and caricatured as self-absorbed creatures who quietly live out their days in ivy-covered towers. Although Rutgers boasts a respectable number of buildings enshrouded in ivy, this conception of the sheltered scholar is certainly not true today. In fact, perhaps even more so than professionals in other fields, the majority of members of the university community are involved citizens, knowledgeable about and participating in a wide range of activities--political, educational, social, religious, etc.--that extend far outside the confines of any single discipline, and even beyond the university itself.

Given this abundance of endeavors, one would assume that the "average" college graduate would leave college with an appreciation of the diversity of the world, fostered by a recognition of the broad spectrum of possibilities for action and commitment that exist in it. Since this "average" student would have been exposed to numerous widely differing role models, each with their own distinct political opinions, religious beliefs, and preferred lifestyles, the student could be expected to have an awareness of the important questions of the day and a determination to answer them and act on them for him or herself, having, over a course of years at the university, acquired the experience and knowledge to begin to make informed judgments about such complex matters. Whether these expectations are ever realized depends, to a great extent, upon the way that a student's teachers define their own roles in the university.

What are the limits of the role of TA? What are the responsibilities of TAs to the students in their classes? First and foremost, of course, they must carry out the job for which they have been hired--to guarantee that students have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the course material by the end of the semester. But can this be the end of a teacher's responsibilities? Although the students' academic development must, of course, come first, there may be a danger in allowing students to become isolated from that "real world."

How far should this "real world" intrude upon a classroom? What obligations do teachers bear toward students in helping them to become informed, intelligent citizens? Should teachers view themselves only as conveyers of a limited kind of knowledge, no more than walking textbooks? Or should they try to impart to their students some sense of the world beyond--but integrally connected to--their discipline, beyond the classroom, beyond abstract math problems or case histories?

Individual teaching styles will surely have an impact on the choices that teachers make. Some TAs feel very comfortable about introducing controversial topics or personal beliefs to their students; others feel that to do this

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TAP Focuses on In-Program Training

During the 1989-90 school year, a change has taken place in the way that TA training is being conducted in the Graduate School-New Brunswick. The Teaching Assistant Project (TAP) has begun an effort to assist all programs in providing discipline-specific training for their TAs. Although this effort is only in its first full year of operation, early responses have been encouraging.

In previous semesters, TAP has held workshops on topics of general interest for TAs campuswide, at different times in the semester. This year the focus was narrowed so that individual disciplines would evaluate their program's needs, decide what kind of training their TAs needed, and then work, with the TAP staff when necessary, to see that the training was secured for their TAs. By moving these sessions into the programs themselves, there are greater opportunities for targeting and meeting specific needs of TAs.

TAP will still be responsible for the August TA Training / Orientation, required for all new TAs in New Brunswick. The conference aims at giving students an introduction to Rutgers and to teaching, presenting students with some of the academic and ethical issues experienced by all teachers in all disciplines. In addition to the conference, TAP will continue to provide written materials, such as the handbook and newsletter.

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Teaching Points of View Other Than Your Own

1. Assign multiple readings to represent a variety of viewpoints. Developing a set of readings takes time. However [a teacher] can usually use it for two or three years with only minor modifications.

2. Assign readings directed toward revealing the reasons behind differing points of view. One professor says, "I use a semi-Socratic technique to lead my students through an analysis and critique of each theorist's position." The focus is not on opinions but on the reasons behind them. "Sometimes my own view is apparent either explicitly or implicitly; other times it is not."

3. Choose a textbook which represents one theoretical viewpoint and build your lectures around an opposing set of ideas. A professor of Economics, for example, assigns a textbook that represents the point of view of liberal economists, but designs his lecture presentations around the opposing views of leading conservatives or radicals.

4. Present each of several competing theories as if you were an adherent of that position.

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Even though they do have a distinct point of view, several teachers report that they also present the best case for each of several competing theories before they reveal their own preferences.

5. Invite guest speakers whose viewpoints differ from your own. One professor makes a point of doing this in his courses so that his students are exposed to a variety of positions. "I want them to understand what the different points of view are," he says, "and one of the best ways I have found to do that is to invite a colleague or practitioner whom I know to be an adherent of each view to make a presentation to the class.

6. Use your students' opinions to create a microcosm of society's attitudes on social, political, and economic issues. At the beginning of the term, one professor asks his students to give written answers to questions about their backgrounds and reasons for taking the course. He asks students to focus particularly on experiences which might give them a particular viewpoint on social, political, and economic issues to be covered in the course. Using a seating chart he calls on students whose prior experiences or interests may be relevant to a topic under discussion. In this way a full range of views is introduced in the course.

7. Draw upon the diverse backgrounds and experiences of your students to introduce different points of view.

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taking the course. He asks students to focus particularly on experiences which might give them a particular viewpoint of social, political, and economic issues to be covered in the course.

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goes beyond the bounds of the teacher/student relationship. Deciding how far to go may sometimes prove so problematic that the decision not to stray from familiar paths may be simpler. Fear of proselytizing or of giving biased or incorrect information intimidates many TAs--and these are valid fears--but these concerns should not stop TAs from examining their classroom strategies and considering how they can broaden the scope of their classes, how they can begin to help their students to make connections between the subject matter of the classroom and the rest of the world.

Bringing in current topics presents risks, of course, risks that beginning teachers may not wish to take. Most obviously this sort of activity threatens the control the teacher holds over the class; in allowing students to introduce materials from their own experience teachers cannot absolutely predict where discussions will lead. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the teacher will lose control; a good discussion leader learns how to guide and control any discussion.

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Teaching About AIDS

(Below is an abridgement of an article submitted to *TapTalk* by Cathy Charlton, Coordinator of the Sexual Health Education and Training Program of the Rutgers Student Health Services' Department of Health Education.)

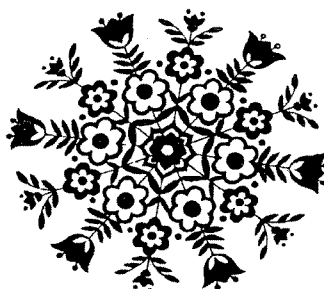
Aids is an issue with broad social, personal, ethical and legal implications and is an important topic for all students to consider. The number of people infected by the virus associated with AIDS continues to increase, potentially affecting students, faculty, staff, and their friends and families. As many students are now learning, HIV infection, including its most serious expression, AIDS, is a blood borne, sexually transmitted disease. The virus is transmitted from person to person in three major ways: by intimate sexual contact involving transfer of infected semen or blood, by injection through infected blood products or shared needles (such as steroid use), and by infected mothers to their infants prenatally or during delivery. New Jersey ranks fourth in the nation in the actual number of people with AIDS and second in the nation in the actual number of women and children with AIDS.

This past year, Rutgers University was one of nineteen universities who participated in a nationwide study. From this anonymous survey, it was learned that approximately 0.2% of college students in the United States are infected with HIV. Since Rutgers University is located in an area with a relatively high infection rate, the prevalence of infection may be even higher at Rutgers. Because AIDS is an important

issue for students, faculty and staff, some faculty have joined together to form an AIDS researchers group who share current findings and ideas. Others are integrating the topic into their course work through case studies, writing exercises, presentations by guest speakers, or developing semester-long courses that explore the social, political and interpersonal issues of AIDS.

The Rutgers AIDS Task Force is a voluntary group of students faculty and staff who work to reduce high risk behavior and increase coping skills and emotional support related to AIDS at the university. Among other things, the Task Force provides and supports faculty and staff in-service training; guest speakers for classes; an AIDS Hotline (932-8282); special events and educational posters, pamphlets and exhibits; initiatives to end homophobia, sexism and racism on campus; and encouragement for academic involvement and class-work related to AIDS.

Teaching Assistants are encouraged to join the Task Force or seek guidance from its members in developing courses that continue to reach students about HIV infection. If you are interested in the Rutgers AIDS Task Force or any of its services, contact Ms. Cathy Charlton, 932-7710.



Notes From the Field

Is it useful to incorporate information from the "real" world into your classes?

Economics is a very abstract subject, so you have to find examples in the real world. You need to be up on current affairs. Recently in class I was able quote a congressman and point out where he was incorrect in his understanding of a subject we were studying.

Keith Waehrer
Economics

Yes. I always bring in things from the newspaper on current culture--things like rap music--and I constantly scatter my conversation with references to current events and popular culture. I also try to show students the continuities between what they are doing in class and other subjects in the university.

Elise Lemire
English

TA Training

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Any program that has not yet gotten their TA training off the ground should contact the TAP office and discuss the training needs of their program. Among the activities presented in programs thus far this year have been seminars on public speaking and testing and grading. Video equipment is still available from the project so that TAs can improve their teaching skills by videotaping themselves teaching. For more information about TA training should contact their program director, or Barbara Bender or Valerie LePere at the Office of the Graduate Dean, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus (932-7034).

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What it does mean is that students will probably be more lively when engaged in a topic that can be related to some real activity in their world. When students begin to make connections between the course material and their lives and future, the material inevitably becomes more interesting. Although some students may appreciate physics for the sheer abstract beauty of the subject, most students need a "hook" to get them interested. Let them see you as a person whose interests--similar in some ways to theirs--led you to a fuller appreciation of the subject. Share your enthusiasm, and you will be helping your students make the transition from being passive to active learners.

Students of the eighties have been criticized as being self-centered and apathetic, lacking an interest in or commitment to solving community or national problems. Here at Rutgers, Edward Bloustein, late president of the university, whose love of philosophy and law were translated into social action and public demonstrations of belief, recognized the value of such involvement to the individual and was working to institute a community service requirement for all students in order to graduate. By making explicit the relationship between that which we speak about in our classes and that which affects the world around us, we can help our students see their own connectedness to the problems and the beauties of the world and help them to understand their own responsibilities to caring for and improving that world.

DATES TO REMEMBER



10	Foreign Language Exam
12	Lincoln's Birthday
14	Valentine's Day
15	Susan B. Anthony's Birthday
19	Washington's Birthday
28	Ash Wednesday

Teaching Assistant Project

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