Special Issue: The Ethics of Teaching

This expanded issue of TapTalk is intended both to inform TAs of their rights and responsibilities as teachers within the university community and to provoke a dialogue among faculty members and students about their ethical responsibilities to the undergraduates and to each other. What responsibilities do graduate students have to the university community, to the faculty members with whom they work, to the undergraduates in their classes? What legal and ethical issues arise in the context of the classroom—in the way students are treated, in grading exams, and in working with students outside of the classroom?

Unless TAs are fully informed about the issues involved, they cannot be expected to respond in an appropriate manner. Ignorance of the law or university policy can be a disservice to students, who may, as a result, be treated in a capricious and unfair fashion. Such ignorance can also jeopardize the TA, who may be subject to legal action for unknowingly violating students’ rights to due process or confidentiality.

How important are the issues raised here? Academic dishonesty strikes at the heart of the university, at the ability of scholars to work together and build upon each other’s work. Student/teacher relationships raise some thorny issues—personal life vs. public, power vs. powerlessness, individual wishes vs. community standards, etc. Sustaining an ethical community requires that these issues are raised for discussion periodically, so that the members of the community can understand where they agree and, perhaps more importantly, where they disagree.

Of course, all of the topics included in this issue of TapTalk have wider implications for graduate students. The dilemmas about ethical behavior that graduate students and faculty members confront and the decisions they are forced to make are often quite complicated and best engaged on a specific level: what practices in the lab are acceptable? how does one determine the order of authorship on a paper, or indeed, who should be included as an author? what are the components of an ethical graduate student/mentor relationship? what can be done if a graduate student becomes aware of an unethical act on the part of a colleague? Every discipline has a standard of conduct to which its members are expected to adhere. Unless there is an ongoing conversation among faculty members and graduate students, these standards will not be clear—and they must be. It is up to graduate students to examine their own practices as teachers and as researchers and to initiate conversations about these matters where they are not already taking place.
Stopping Cheating Before It Starts

How strongly does a teacher influence a student’s standard of behavior in a course? More, perhaps, than many might think. Although there may be some few students who, as a general policy, think it is always better to cheat than to work honestly for a grade, these students represent no more than a tiny percentage of the student body. For most students, the decision to cheat is either born out of desperation or the result of an on-the-spot decision, less a premeditated action than a case of taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity. These cases are preventable, and the intervention of a teacher can help the students confronting such temptations.

To avoid situations where students feel they have to cheat to pass a course, teachers should be firmly in charge of the course from the beginning. Frequent quizzes and small exercises or writing assignments early in the semester will identify students who are having difficulty keeping up. Seek out students who are not doing well or who are missing too many classes and try to help them get back on track, either through tutoring, extra assignments, time management workshops, or even university counseling. Make sure that students who are in danger of failing receive an official warning, and require that they come to see you as soon as possible.

Teachers whose students are writing research papers should have them report on their work frequently, either in writing or orally, not only to weed out cheaters but also to motivate students to develop the paper as a term-long project and not just to “throw something together” the night before it is due.

The other form of cheating that can be controlled is spur-of-the-moment cheating, when a student taking an exam, for example, is able to read his or her neighbor’s paper without difficulty. Although this student would never plan to cheat, if the opportunity presents itself and the student is feeling nervous about passing the exam, there is a strong possibility that he or she might yield to temptation. This situation can usually be prevented. Make sure that students do not sit next to each other during an exam. Move desks or ask students to leave empty desks between themselves and their fellow students. Do not allow students to bring books or notebooks into the classroom and tell them beforehand of this restriction. Students who do bring books or papers should leave them in the front of the classroom. For certain essay exams, an opposite strategy is often effective: allow students to bring in a notecard or sheet of paper filled with whatever notes the students choose. This reduces the emphasis on memorization, as well as the associated stress, and may actually encourage students to prepare more thoroughly for the exam. Regardless of which policy you think is best, make sure students are informed about the policy well in advance. During the exam, make sure that there are enough proctors for the size of the room; proctors should not just sit in the front, grading papers or reading, but should move around the classroom, making their presence felt.

Although not always possible, your personal knowledge of the students and understanding of their capabilities make it more difficult for students to cheat and much easier for you to recognize their own work. A teacher who reaches out to students and who displays a genuine enthusiasm for his or her field increases the likelihood that students will catch that enthusiasm and try harder to produce work that reveals their own abilities more fully to the teacher.
TA/Student Relationships

The relationship between teacher and student can be complicated. Both teachers and students can inspire, challenge, guide, care for, and learn from each other. In fact, creating a safe and respectful atmosphere in a classroom is an essential condition for learning. Too informal and friendly an atmosphere, however, can impede the learning process if not inhibit it entirely, just as too imperious and impersonal a teacher can stifle students’ ability to learn. Consequently, the relationship between teacher and student is a delicate matter, where the teacher must strike a balance between friendliness and distance.

It is hard to grade and evaluate one’s close friends objectively. As a result, a personal friendship with a student may compromise a TA’s ethical obligations to the other students in the class. The befriended student may also be put at a disadvantage by the friendship. For example, in such relationships TAs may not be as conscientious as they should be about such things as challenging and criticizing student work and providing needed leadership and guidance. These and other dangers are explained in a work by the philosopher Robert Audi on the ethics of teaching. Of a teaching environment which is too friendly, he says: “The pressures created by too personal an atmosphere can embarrass students who yield to them and make an outgroup of those who do not.” (“On the Ethics of Teaching and the Ideals of Learning”, Academe September-October 1994, p.

Many of the messages between teacher and student are conveyed implicitly, often even unconsciously. Because of this, it is worthwhile for TAs to reflect on what it is they want to create in their classroom, and with what types of student–teacher relationships they are comfortable, what kind of relationship they consider ethically acceptable.

Although the proper boundaries defining the student–teacher relationship may seem unclear at times, there are many cases in which the ethics of teaching are clear and simple. Consider romantic attachments. It is never permissible for TAs to date or be in any way romantically involved with their students. Because the student–teacher relationship contains a power imbalance, any advances made by the TA could constitute sexual harassment, so it is never acceptable for a TA to date or form other romantic attachments with a student. Furthermore, even if the interest between TA and student seems mutual, dating is impermissible because of the appearance (if not worse) of unfairness this establishes, the atmosphere of confusion and misunderstanding it fosters, as well as the distraction from learning it can create.

A certain amount of detachment is necessary to insure that the teacher is being fair, and this is jeopardized when the relationship becomes too personal. The risk of this behavior having a detrimental effect on the student, TA, and others is so great that the possibility should not be entertained. TAs must never approach a student to initiate such a relationship, and any advances, however slight, from the student should be firmly ignored or discouraged, as the situation warrants.

It goes without saying, of course, that general ethical ideals such as honesty, respectfulness, and tolerance apply equally well in the classroom as they do in all areas outside of it. But, further than this, there are special factors present in a teaching and learning environment which suggest more than simple endorsement of general ethical principles. The ideals and principles just mentioned take on added urgency in the context of a university, where teachers serve as powerful models for students (a fact

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Confessions of a Ghost Writer

[The author of this article, who chooses to remain anonymous, worked for more than ten years as an academic paper writer; he has since retired from the field. This article is reprinted from the January 1992 issue of TapTalk. The ideas and opinions expressed in this article should not be construed as reflecting those of the Teaching Assistant Project or the Graduate School—New Brunswick.]

For most people, writing term papers is a chore, for others an addiction. Over the course of fifteen years, working first for a term paper mill and then on my own, I researched and wrote several thousand undergraduate, graduate, and professional school papers, a few dozen masters' theses, perhaps fifteen doctoral dissertations, not to mention any number of journal articles for professors. These papers were written in every subject—graduate physics and math excluded—for the best as well as the worst colleges and universities. I have also been partially responsible for degrees with honors in some of the best MBA and law schools in the country. All this has been done without any background in most of the subjects I have written about and certainly without ever spending time in a classroom. If you have been teaching for some time, there is a good chance that this is not the first piece of my writing you have read.

A few of my clients, neglecting even to read what they were handing in, have been caught, but, on the whole, both they and their professors have been satisfied with my work. A few professors have, of course, tried to make my job impossible by asking their students to write initial drafts and bring in research cards, but these attempts served mainly to increase my income by providing me with additional work. The greatest difficulty I encountered was in gauging the style and content of the paper to make it believable—and many students specifically requested that the work be mediocre and badly written.

The interesting thing about this work was that it was not difficult. After getting the hang of adjusting my writing speed to my typing speed—and the low per-page rate of term paper mills demanded speed—it became possible to write up to five different papers on various topics in a single work day. If I did not have needed references on hand in past papers or notes kept on file, a day in the library might provide enough references for a week's worth of writing. As I became more and more experienced, I often knew what I was going to write before I even went to the library; with the necessary background in a subject, all I had to do was seek out the books and articles that would document what I wanted to say. As my files grew, and especially after a computer replaced my typewriter, ideas, references, and quotations could be creatively recycled into the most unlikely term papers: a thesis or dissertation literature review would provide a wealth of information that could be applied to a wide variety of topics. Very often, however, there was little need for new references or thought: my files are full of variations on such standard topics as "Oedipus & Willie Loman as Tragic Heroes," "The Great Gatsby and the American Dream," and "The Appropriateness of Prosecuting Victimless Crimes."

This is not to say that none of my work was well-researched or carefully considered. There are certainly papers in my files that I would not mind publishing under my own name. Over time, as I became interested in a topic, I would, by suggesting related topics to students, research and work out my own ideas. For the most part, however, I found it quite amazing how easily a standard set of commonplace ideas could be applied to almost any subject to produce a paper that would often rate an excellent grade. My ability to write, with minimal background or reading, intellectually trite analyses judged worthy of honors in distinguished professional schools provides an indication of the low standards that exist in many disciplines. The ease with which my clients could achieve success (continued on page 5)
based on my work seems to indicate how little contact professors must typically have with their students. It is perhaps indicative of the educational process that often the most reliable signal that a term paper has been purchased is that it contains an original thought.

The term paper certainly could be among the most important learning experiences of a student’s career, but I do not think that many of my clients missed much by not doing their own work. Given the quality of the paper assignments, most, left to their own devices, could have gone to the library and patched together an adequate set of unassimilated references and ideas to get a passing grade. The papers that really could have been useful to the students were those that demanded that they think for themselves about a relevant topic and write a paper containing their own ideas. Given such an assignment and a teacher who had time and was willing to discuss the ideas and force the students to defend and modify them, the paper would not only help the students learn how to think, but the teacher would be more able to insure that the students’ work was their own.

Student records that are kept on file at universities are private matters which are protected by federal law. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (known as the Buckley Amendment) protects the privacy of students and insures that information such as identifying data (i.e., social security numbers), academic work completed, level of achievement (grades or standardized test scores), health data, or background information not be released to a third party without the written notification and permission of the student concerned. While this may seem like an obvious protection for students, it has many subtle implications for TAs and faculty.

For example, after a test or at the end of the term students often request that their grades be posted in an academic building; however, the law is violated whenever any identifying information about a student is posted along with the grade. This means that grades should not be listed in alphabetical order or by social security number. Similarly, discussions between faculty members about students’ academic status or other personal information are prohibited unless there is a clear “need to know” on the part of the faculty member. A written release from the student is required before information can be transferred to another individual, organization, or institution.

As with any law, a few exceptions are permitted. “Directory information” about students can be legally distributed by a university as long as students are given notice of what information will be released and an opportunity to keep their directory information confidential. Additionally, records can be provided to other schools or school systems where a student intends to enroll. Students must be notified of the transfer, however, and given an opportunity to contest any information in their permanent record. In some exceptional cases, information about a student may be discussed between a faculty member and the department chair or the dean of the college on a need to know basis, for example, but even in these cases the privacy of the student should be kept in mind by all parties.

Safeguarding student privacy is a serious legal issue, so instructors, TAs, and anyone in contact with students’ personal records should be very careful with how they handle such information. Consider randomly assigning numbers to students and posting their grades according to these numbers. Also, never discuss students’ work or grades with anyone else.
University Policy on Academic Integrity

In order to protect the rights of honest students and to foster an environment of caring and respect, TAs are obligated to report all cases of academic dishonesty. Violations of academic integrity are, in many cases, the indirect result of students’ sense of increasing alienation from and apathy towards the university. Not reporting such violations can further contribute to this attitude of not caring, in addition to gravely misleading students by letting them think that even minor violations may be acceptable. TAs play a vital role in creating an atmosphere conducive to learning by providing models of academic integrity, endorsing the university policy on academic standards, and making this policy clear to all their students.

The university recognizes four different levels of academic dishonesty and endorses certain sanctions appropriate to each level. The policy applies to all students, both graduate and undergraduate. [Graduate students should note that—because of the experience they are presumed to have upon entering graduate school—any violation of academic integrity on the part of a graduate student automatically qualifies as a level four violation, with the possible consequence of immediate separation of the graduate student from the university.]

It is the responsibility of the teacher to make sure that students understand what constitutes various forms of academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, and the university sanctions for such behavior. Students must also understand that TAs can and will enforce the university policy.

What should TAs do when they suspect a student of cheating? It is the TA’s responsibility to report it. If working with a faculty member, the first thing to do is to notify him or her. If the TA has complete responsibility for the course, or if the faculty member is not responsive to the situation, then the TA should notify the department chair. He or she can also call the student’s dean’s office for advice.

The university policy regarding academic dishonesty is described in the Academic Integrity Policy. What follows is a brief summary of certain key aspects of the policy.

Level One:
These violations may occur because of ignorance or inexperience on the part of the person(s) committing the violation and ordinarily involves a very minor portion of the course work.

Examples: Unauthorized assistance on academic work or improper footnoting.

Possible Sanctions: Make-up assignment at more difficult level, or assignment of no-credit for work in question, or required attendance at a workshop on ethics.

Level Two:
Level two violations involve incidents of a more serious nature and affect a more significant aspect or portion of the course.

Examples: Quoting directly or paraphrasing without proper acknowledgment on a moderate portion of the assignment, failure to acknowledge all sources of information and contributors who helped with an assignment, submission of the same work for more than one course without written permission from both the instructors involved.

Possible Sanctions: Probation, a failing grade on the assignment, or a failing grade in the course.

Level Three:
Level three offenses involve dishonesty on a significant portion of course work, such as a major paper, hourly or final examination. Any violation that is premeditated or involves repeat offenses of level one or two are considered level three violations.

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Examples: Copying from or giving others assistance on an hourly or final examination, plagiarizing major portions of an hourly or final, using a purchased term paper, presenting the work of another as one’s own, altering a graded examination for the purpose of regrading.

Possible Sanctions: Ordinarily the minimum sanction is a one semester suspension from the university.

Level Four:
Level four violations are the most serious breaches of academic integrity. They include repeat offenses of level three violations.

Examples: Forgery of grade change forms, theft of examinations, having a substitute take an examination, sabotaging another’s work, fabrications of evidence, falsification of data, quoting directly or paraphrasing without acknowledging the source, and/ or presenting the ideas of another as one’s own in a senior thesis, within a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, in scholarly articles submitted to refereed journals, or in other work represented as one’s own as a graduate student.

Possible Sanctions: Expulsion from the university and a permanent notation on the student’s transcript.

All graduate students familiar with good research practices should know that published works with copyright privileges are the property of the author and legally protected. Consequently, the use of that material in other research requires a proper citation. This straightforward rule of thumb has become much more complicated with the rapid development of information technology in recent years. The reproduction and duplication of the printed word is faster and easier than ever before; however, the legality of doing so is often questionable and sometimes prohibited. In addition, computers and the internet present a number of new legal and ethical issues for graduate students and teachers to keep in mind.

When TAs use copyrighted materials for their classes or their dissertations certain guidelines should be followed. If the use of the material is legally considered “fair” use, such as including a short quotation in a dissertation, the publisher need not be consulted, and a citation is sufficient documentation. To copy a large portion of a text for teaching purposes, especially if doing so undermines the market-value of the original work, requires permission from the publisher. Permission should also be requested from authors of unpublished materials when their work is cited in a dissertation, especially if the dissertation itself will be published eventually.

Copyrights protect materials in many different forms. For example, musical works and lyrics, graphics and pictorial works, and computer software may all be copyrighted, and unauthorized duplication and/ or distribution is illegal. Computer programs are especially vulnerable to copying, but unless the program is in the public domain it cannot be copied, even if the disks are not copy-protected.

Finally, the internet has opened up a whole new avenue for the dissemination of information quickly and easily. Many legal questions about the use of information available on the internet remain unanswered, and it will take years for court decisions to catch up to technology. The “tried and true” practices of good research apply here as well. To copy or draw from other people’s original work without a citation is certainly unethical, even if not necessarily illegal, and ethical questions about a researcher can be just as damaging to an academic career as are violations of the law.
Liaison Committee

TAP is organizing a TA Liaison Committee with representatives from each department that has TAs. The committee will meet once or twice each semester to discuss the direction and content of TA training in New Brunswick. The first meeting will be on February 5, at 4:30 p.m., 25 Bishop Place (CAC). If you are interested in serving as a program’s representative, contact your department chair. If a representative has already been appointed, but you are interested in serving on the committee, contact TAP at 932-11TA and plan to attend the first meeting.

Relationships . . .
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which teachers often do not fully appreciate). The very purpose of the university is in part to foster and promote such ideals, and where intellectual progress itself flourishes best when ideals such as honesty, fairness, and respect for others are present.

Privacy . . .
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Handling students’ confidential information professionally is the only way to protect a student’s right to privacy and, not incidentally, to avoid university sanctions or a legal entanglement.

February

1  African-American History month begins.
5  TA liaison committee meeting, 4:30, 25 Bishop Place
14  Valentine’s Day
15  Dissertation Workshop, 1:00, 25 Bishop Place. Call 932-8122 to reserve a place.
19  President’s Day
     New Year (Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese)
21  Ash Wednesday
29  Leap Day

Happy New Year

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