

Effective Testing

A well designed test is probably the best gauge of student progress, and the results of such a test can be invaluable to teachers in evaluating and improving their own teaching skills. For students who feel a test is unfair, however, or unlike what they expected and prepared for, the experience can lead to deep resentment and withdrawal from the learning process. A poorly designed test will not only alienate students but also fail to reflect their progress accurately. For instance, if a test covers material beyond that explicitly examined in the course, the results may reflect students' background knowledge more than their learning in the course; if the wording of the questions is ambiguous, wrong answers can be the result of unlucky guesses about how to understand the question. To insure meaningful testing, questions must be written with *at least* the same care and precision that is taken in preparing lectures.

One goal to keep in mind when designing a test is to avoid surprising students. This is not to suggest that students should only be expected to echo the lectures and readings: indeed, a good exam should present challenging problems. But, if students meet novel problems, they must have learned from the course the skills for solving them. One way to avoid catching students off-guard is to make a test that deliberately mirrors the stated course objectives. If the test is a final exam, for example, the questions should require students to demonstrate the range of knowledge or skills outlined in the syllabus as course goals. If the test is a simple quiz based on a lecture, the questions should mirror the stated goals at the beginning of that lecture. Outlining the course goals, and then pursuing and finally mastering them, provides a structured learning process that relieves students' anxieties, helps to focus their study efforts, and, after the test, offers a key to understanding their grades, i.e., where, exactly, they have succeeded or fallen short. To facilitate fair and effective test design, TAs should consider adopting some of the following practices.

Teaching/Learning Conference Held

On Saturday, January 25th, approximately 100 graduate students from across the disciplines participated in the first annual Teaching/Learning Conference, organized by the TA Liaison Committee of the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP). The conference offered graduate students the opportunity to present papers, to discuss with other students the challenges they face both as students and teachers, and to continue the dialogue at a reception following the conference. The session topics were wide-ranging—"The Writing Classroom: the Critical, the Personal, the Political"; "Practical Innovations and Strategies"; "Dynamics of Learning: Alternative Models"; "The Pedagogy and Practice of Service Learning"—and the roundtable discussion presented an opportunity for TAs to raise questions about situations that they had encountered as students and as teachers, to compare their common experiences, and to offer suggestions on how to prevent problems or how to deal with them when they arise. Given the enthusiastic response of those attending, TAP hopes to make this an annual event.

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Prepare: Compose test questions and answers regularly throughout the semester rather than all at once before the test. This will ensure that tests reflect what was taught, and, looking back on the questions, you will be able to evaluate your own coverage of the material.

Give sample questions: Prepare students for testing by presenting and working through sample questions in class. Do this on a regular basis, not just in a review class right before the test.

Self-test: As an assignment, have each student write and answer two test questions. When composing a test, use student-authored questions whenever possible. Answering their own questions helps students see the test as fair. Just as importantly, reading their questions and answers may, in itself, give you valuable and early feedback about their progress, e.g., if the majority of the student-authored questions are

peripheral or irrelevant, or if the answers are wrong.

Pretest your test: Give your test to a fellow TA before administering it to the class; offer to read your colleague's test. A fresh reader may spot ambiguities or errors that could weaken the test.

Post-test your test: Carefully analyze your test results. Are some questions almost universally missed? If so, check them for ambiguity and, again, consider whether the material was explicitly covered. Students are a valuable resource. A brief student evaluation of the test, given *before* grades have been assigned, can give you an honest response to it from their point of view. A written evaluation may provoke a franker response than a simple question asking the students' opinion, but the oral feedback may help build rapport with your students. In any case, students should be reassured that their responses will in no way affect their grades.

Regardless of your efforts, testing will never be a stress-free experience for some students. By working on your test design strategies, however, you can help students channel that unavoidable stress into motivation for learning. The improvement in the feedback you receive and in student attitudes will be the reward for the time spent designing a fair and effective test.

Questions and Concerns

Students whose names do not appear on the course roster are attending my class. Is it my responsibility to monitor this? What should I tell these students?

For an instructor, the presence of non-registered students has an impact not only on classroom space but also on the way the class is organized and the preparation that goes into it. Factors such as the copying of additional materials, the ordering of texts, arranging group assignments, and leaving more time to grade a larger pool of papers must be considered.

Rosters are usually issued four times per semester, with two rosters issued during the first month of classes. Early in the semester, some students' names may not appear on rosters. Students who register late may not have their registration processed before the rosters are mailed. If a special permission number was required for the course, students may have used an incorrect number or neglected to get one at all, so they must go back to the person who assigned the number and reregister. Students may also be deregistered by the university for failing to comply with certain regulations; unless they are able to resolve the problem, they will not be readmitted to the university and should not be in class.

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

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TapTalk

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Spring Career Workshops Announced

Many graduate students are unaware of the full range of career options that a Ph.D. makes possible. For some, a position outside of the academy may be more lucrative and enjoyable than a teaching post, and even those whose first choice is a career in higher education would be wise to keep abreast of the alternate opportunities that exist. To help graduate students become aware of these options, TAP, in conjunction with Career Services, will sponsor workshops featuring former graduate students who have chosen non-academic careers, to discuss the kinds of opportunities available and suggest methods for exploring such alternate careers. The two scheduled workshops are:

Career Options in the Humanities

March 10th, 6 p.m.
Rutgers Student Center
and

Career Option in the Social Sciences

April 2nd, 4 p.m.
Douglass Student Center
Trayes Hall, Room A.

Tax Workshop for Graduate Students

David Retz,
Certified Public Accountant

Wednesday
February 26, 1997
7:30 p.m.—9:30 p.m.
Multipurpose Room
Busch Campus Center

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADUATES

Campus Resources

Students often go to TAs for advice on academic and personal problems, but TAs must realize the limitations of their role. A number of academic and health services are available at Rutgers to help students deal with the variety of problems they may face, and it is the responsibility of TAs to direct the student to the correct place for assistance, *not* to attempt to solve the students' problems themselves.

If students are having difficulties with the course, some may come to the TA for help, but others may feel too embarrassed to ask. Talk to students individually and encourage them to come to office hours or make an appointment for individual help. If the course has tutoring available, suggest that the student take advantage of this service. Distribute cards with the names, numbers, and hours of tutors to students who need extra help. Even if this information is on the syllabus or a handout, another discrete reminder may be the incentive needed for floundering students to seek help.

The Learning Resource Centers also provides support services that include tutoring, writing assistance, and developing study skills. Centers are located in the Brower Commons Annex, CAC (932-1443), in Tillett Hall, Livingston

(445-0986), and in Loree, Room 124, Cook/Douglass (932-1660).

A student having academic problems in all of his or her classes might benefit from an appointment with a departmental advisor or a college Dean, who can give students specific information about the procedures and requirements of their academic program.

Sometimes students seek help with personal problems, ranging from physical ailments to emotional upsets. Be an empathetic listener, but be prepared to suggest some professional intervention. The student should understand that you are sympathetic to their concerns and not trying to push them off to someone else, but that you are committed to finding the most qualified person to help them. For students with psychological or emotional problems, TAs might suggest one of the counseling services available at each of the College Counseling Centers: Rutgers College, 50 College Avenue (932-7884); Cook College, Cook Campus Center (932-9150); Douglass College, Federation Hall (932-9070); Livingston College, Tillett Hall (932-4140). Depending on the severity of the problems, TAs might wish to allow the student to phone for an appointment from their office. Undergraduates should

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be referred to the services at their own college, but graduate students may choose any of the Centers for assistance.

TAs who are having trouble dealing with their own circumstances should seek help from one of these services or take advantage of Rutgers University Personnel Counseling Service. TAs, GAs, and their families can call a 24 hour hotline (932-7539); the Service can make outside referrals if necessary. For problems and questions relating to teaching, TAs can call the TA Helpline (932-11TA).

Questions . . .

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Students may also be attending an alternate section either by accident or choice. Verify their assigned course and section. Finally, if you wish, students who are not listed on your final roster can be added by writing in their name, student identification number, and course grade earned.

Some students do not realize that it is *their* responsibility to be registered correctly. Students can call their College Registrar's Office and solve many registration problems over the phone. For more information, contact the Registrar's Office (445-2778).



4	Lailatul-Quadr
7	Lunar New Year
9	Eid al-Fitr
12	Lincoln's Birthday Ash Wednesday
13	Dissertation Workshop
14	Valentine's Day Last day to register for March 1st foreign language exam
15	Parinirvana Day
17	Presidents' Day
21	Purim
22	Washington's Birthday
26	Dissertation Workshop Tax Workshop for Graduate Students



Happy New Year

Teaching Assistant Project

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