

The Balancing Act

It's 8:45 p.m. on a Sunday night near the end of semester, and on your desk are several daunting piles: ungraded student papers which you promised, in a moment of madness, to return to the class on Tuesday; some rough notes and a stack of books to read for a conference paper which needs to be ready in a week and a half; two e-mails from students unhappy with their grades, and another e-mail from your advisor regarding your meeting next Friday; three journal articles and a book chapter to read for your Monday seminar; and, finally, a copy of *TV Guide*, from which Sunday night's primetime line-up calls out to you. Most teaching assistants have faced some version of the preceding scenario, and the resulting panic tends to follow one of three patterns: paralysis, in which you sit in a stupor and get nothing accomplished; hyper-activity, in which you attempt to work through all the piles at once and end up getting very little accomplished; denial, in which you shove the piles into a corner, amble off to watch television, and hope the situation improves by Monday morning. Such scenarios often result from a combination of poor organization and the tensions of graduate student life; TAs must maintain a precarious balance among pedagogical demands, academic goals and obligations, part-time jobs, and (lest we forget) personal happiness. What follow are some suggestions designed to help prevent extreme moments of imbalance, or to deal with them adequately when they do occur.

The main piece of advice that most time management and organization experts give is "make a schedule, and stick to it." This is hardly a monumental revelation, but for graduate students accustomed to working in random bursts of inspired energy, the idea of a regular schedule can be quite intimidating. The following steps will help ease the transition: a) obtain some sort of planning resource (calendar, daytimer, personal organization software, etc.); b) make a list of your various teaching, scholarly, work-related, familial, and social commitments, and block out *balanced* and *reasonable* amounts of time for each commitment during the week. Here

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Videotaping Services Available

The beginning of the semester is always a good time to think about changing or improving your teaching methods. One service available to TAs through the TAP Office is videotaping; a technician will come and tape one of your classes, labs, or recitations. TAs usually inform the class beforehand that the videotaping will take place, and explain why they have chosen to be videotaped.

After the taping session, you can view the tape with a faculty member or a member of the TAP staff to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your teaching. Among the factors that are considered are: class goals, and whether they were achieved; body language and eye contact; use of handouts and chalkboard; enthusiasm and ability to motivate students; asking questions; voice; use of humor and concrete examples.

To make an appointment contact the TAP office (932-7747), send an email to acarpent@eden.rutgers.edu or visit the TAP web page (<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>) and follow the links to the videotaping request form.

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are some further specific suggestions for developing and maintaining a useful schedule (adapted from *Craftways*, by Aaron Wildavsky, Transaction Publishers, 1989):

- Do not do anything yourself that technological, departmental or administrative resources can accomplish for you.
- "Play when you play, but work when you work." Try to keep the two areas separate.
- "Attend to interruptions:" don't fight them or ignore them, in case they come back to haunt you.
- "Control your schedule:" don't let it control you, and learn to say no to commitments you cannot honor.
- Make rules about your availability and accountability (e.g. "I don't come to campus on Wednesdays" or "my meetings with students never last more than 20 minutes") and apply them consistently.
- Keep yourself supplied with work; this helps avoid unproductive "downtime."
- Make use of travel and commuting time; work on airplanes, trains, buses, etc.
- Realize that if you are normally efficient and reasonably well organized, the occasional "wasted" day, when nothing works out and you get nothing useful accomplished, is not a disaster.

If your TA responsibilities include grading, the key is not to let the work pile up. When you receive a set of papers to be graded, for instance, don't toss them into a corner until the time comes when you can tackle them all - that time will never come. Large blocks of free time are extremely difficult to find once the semester gets underway, and trying to work through a stack of papers in one extended grading session is an invitation to both extreme fatigue and inconsistent grades. Instead, calculate how many papers you need to read every day in order to return them within a reasonable time, and then schedule this reading time into your week. It's never a good idea to promise returned work to students unless you're certain the promise can be fulfilled

Finally, when you must establish clear priorities (and sometimes you must), remem-

ber your own graduate work. Your primary responsibility at the university is to your own graduate studies, and ultimately your continuing TA status depends on your timely and successful completion of program requirements.

Spring Transfer Students

TAs who taught first-year courses in the fall are already sensitive to the needs of students who are new to the university. Sometimes forgotten, however, are the numerous students who transfer to Rutgers for the spring term, often from community colleges. These students must deal with the same transition to university life as fall semester students, but they usually do not enjoy the same initiation and orientation opportunities. TAs who are aware of the resources available to transfer students will not only help their adjustment to Rutgers but will undoubtedly notice better classroom performance.

A good general resource for new undergraduates is the Campus Information Service (CIS). CIS coordinates several programs

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Tapped In – The Diary of a Practicing TA

by Rupert Peals*

I've heard fellow teachers make reference to what they call the "culture of silence" at Rutgers; they mean, I presume, that there is something built into the institutional matrix that prevents students from really "speaking," from fully taking part in their own education. I'm sure this kind of critique is repeated at other schools, and may perhaps be a sort of perpetual complaint about the passivity of the student body. I appreciate and understand the complaint, and there are certainly moments in my own teaching when I could swear that the "culture of silence" has descended on the classroom like a swarm of gnats. I'm constantly surprised, however, by how "noisy" this place is: most courses incorporate flexible discussion formats, individual and group presentations, peer review sessions, teacher-student conferences, and other interactive strategies. Students are poked, prodded, cajoled, monitored, administered, tracked, etc. - while there may be a "culture of silence" at work here, it is

engaged in a pitched battle with a pedagogical "culture of intervention" that attempts both to *speak* and *listen* to every student. I realize that this model is an idealized one, and that students "slip through the cracks" all the time, but as an impulse it is a palpable presence at Rutgers.

My purpose is neither to support or denigrate this impulse. What interests me, for both pedagogical and personal reasons, is the kind of student that does not always succeed in the "culture of intervention." In my undergraduate days I was that very student that is so frustrating to confront as a teacher: I sat in almost crystalline silence, often at the back of the class, and just listened. I learned a lot, and often enjoyed myself, but I see now that my presence was incredibly unsettling. My performance seemed almost pathologically perverse; professors who had read my papers and knew I had interesting things to say would call on me and be met with the Simon and Garfunkle-esque "sound of silence." It was as if I had declined an invitation to speak, which in hindsight is unfortunate, but the real point is that I *could* decline it. At Rutgers I doubt I could have gotten away with it - in this case "getting away with it" means emerging with an honors degree and the

wherewithal to make it into a good graduate program, but it could mean different things to different people. At Rutgers I would undoubtedly been put on the hot seat: oral presentations, hard-core Socratic method, crucial participation grades. One might argue that these methods would have allowed me to "flourish" by providing me with a social education to match my intellectual one. To me it seems just as likely that I would have withered and withdrawn further into anonymity. I certainly wouldn't have enjoyed the experience as much.

Now that I'm on the other side of the lectern I don't really know how to deal with students who act like I once did; I'm unsure how I would teach myself, in other words. I want to involve them in the flow of the class, while at the same time I want to respect as much as possible the silent space they have carved out for themselves. I've also learned that it's difficult to distinguish between the "contemplative" and the "vacant" student, which is presumably one of the issues that the "culture of intervention" is designed to address. Any social system, educational or otherwise, produces "others" that it cannot fully address; in this case I have a strong identification with those "others," which creates problems I clearly haven't yet resolved.

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School - NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

*Rupert Peals is a pseudonym

Transfer Students

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(such as the Rutgers Information and Referral Center and the Off-Campus Housing Office) and provides information concerning the local community, public transit, driving directions, campus maps, library & computer facility hours, etc. CIS is located at 542 George Street on the College Avenue Campus; you can reach them by phone (932-INFO), or you can visit their web page (www.cis.rutgers.edu), for a full description of their services .

A more specific resource is the FAS Transfer Student Office, located in the Allison Rd. classroom building on Busch

campus. The office provides general information, academic advising, links to other support services, and will help find and/or organize study groups. Transfer students can visit the office's web site (<http://mslc.rutgers.edu/transfer/>), which contains contact names, a wealth of useful information, and links to transfer coordinators at the various colleges.

Non FAS transfer students should consult the dean of their school or college. A list of Rutgers undergraduate schools is available at <http://www.rutgers.edu/aboutru/campuses/newbrun.html>



February

- 10 Workshop: Careers in Academic
25 Bishop Place, 12 noon
To register call 932-7747
- 14 St. Valentine's Day
- 15 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.*
- 16 Workshop: Classroom Civility
25 Bishop Place, 12 noon
To register call 932-7747
- 18 Powerpoint Workshop
see <http://TeachX.rutgers.edu>
for details
- 28 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 1 p.m.*

COMING IN MARCH

- 10 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
- 12-18 Spring Recess
- 28 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop

*please call 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at sirman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you plan to attend a workshop.

Teaching Assistant Project

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