

## Across the Disciplines

Academically, what do we owe to our students and how far do our responsibilities toward them extend? Primarily, of course, our role is to help students achieve a specified level of mastery in the subject matter of the courses we teach. Our special knowledge of a subject must be transmitted to the students in an effective and efficient way so that they acquire a sound understanding of the course material. Whether as class or lab instructor, recitation leader or grader, we all share this basic goal.

But beyond achieving this fundamental objective of transmission of knowledge--which, to be sure, is to achieve quite a bit--do we owe something more to our students? To a great extent, the answer to this question depends upon how we define the mission of the university and our role as teachers within it. Consider the following description of the function of the university, written by John Henry Newman more than a century ago:

University training gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, truth in developing them, and eloquence in expressing them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle thoughts, to detect what is unwise, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fulfill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to come to an understanding with them, and how to bear with them.

Most striking about this definition is how unconcerned Newman is with the *particular* knowledge to be imparted; rather, he sees the university as a powerful shaping force of the whole person. The purpose is not to teach students to think about biology or literature but to teach them to *think*, clearly and logically, and to express their thoughts wisely which is, of course, a much more difficult task. We do not help our students by looking at them only as subjects to be trained in a specific discipline; we must attend to their total development and attempt to make them see the discipline within a larger context, to illuminate the many connections among the various disciplines.

To avoid a dangerous insularity, we can encourage our students to develop a wider world view, to look outside of their chosen major and investigate courses beyond their own discipline. Although students will always object that their requirements for a major leave little room for elective courses, as a matter of fact, all students in the university exercise some choice in their program. Taking a course far removed from their field of study can provide students with fresh insights, new ways of looking at familiar situations. For example, the engineering student who takes a literature class brings to that class a different

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## CCIS OFFERS WIDE RANGE OF SERVICES

In almost every field, computers have become as essential as books, and, in fact, in some cases are even replacing books. Most of us by now have managed to acquire at least basic computer skills and those who haven't must surely be feeling the pressure to learn. It is a valuable and necessary skill, one which we and our students should be developing.

The Center for Computer and Information Services, located in Hill Center, Room 017, on the Busch Campus, has a wide collection of microcomputers and micro-computer software available to all graduate students, for use in both teaching and research. Computer aided instruction is not just a passing fad but a legitimate way of helping the students in your class progress. An added benefit is that many students enjoy working on computers and so may spend more time on their assignments.

The range of materials available is wide. You may find out which software packages are available by checking the IRIS system on the terminals in any of the Rutgers libraries; most of the software is in the library catalog, listed under either Wisc-Ware (for IBM) or Kinko (Mac). However, the best way to really find out about the collection is to go over to Room 017, Hill Center, where CCIS maintains its Faculty/Staff Development Center. There you can not

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## On Writing Well

Holding students to high standards of written English is not the job of those in the English Department alone but is a responsibility shared by all teachers in the university. Although it is rarely apparent to teachers outside of the discipline that a particular student is weak in a subject such as mathematics or science or history, almost all teachers in the university have the opportunity to evaluate their students in written and spoken English. Students unable to communicate effectively are at a disadvantage, so teachers should monitor their students and assist them in improving these skills whenever possible.

Students who cannot write well will suffer whenever they are faced with an essay exam or required to prepare a term paper. Although students may put much effort into studying for the exam or researching the paper, their efforts will not be fully rewarded if the exam or paper is poorly written. Some teachers tell their students that their work will be graded on content and not on grammar, mechanics, or style, but it is unclear how content can ever really be separated from presentation. It

*TAP TALK* is a monthly newsletter produced by TAP, the Teaching Assistant Project, The Graduate School-New Brunswick. Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:

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is almost certain that, all other things being equal, a competently and gracefully written essay will receive a higher grade, because students with poor writing skills simply cannot present their ideas as clearly as necessary. Students unable to choose precise and appropriate language, organize paragraphs logically, or obey the conventions of standard English usage are at a loss when trying to construct a coherent argument. Furthermore, teachers who accept sloppy and rambling prose are encouraging sloppy and rambling habits of thought. Demanding clarity in writing forces students to focus their ideas more sharply.

How can a teacher decide when a student needs help? In some cases it will be readily apparent that the student is in immediate need of remedial help. If the number of problems seems overwhelming, or the types of problems are so severe that they interfere with a reader's comprehension of the paper, the student should be referred to one of the campus writing centers as early in the semester as possible. Do not impose this referral on the student as a kind of punishment; rather, honestly discuss the reasons you are recommending this action. Most students will acknowledge that they have a writing problem. Many, however, will protest that they do not have time for tutoring; to these students you should make clear that their success in your class--and at Rutgers--probably depends upon it. Others may object that how well they write has nothing to do with the subject you are teaching; you must then take the time to explain the connection between writing well and academic success.

Even those students who, overall, can write fairly well but still make

a few mistakes should have their errors pointed out to them. An English teacher would of course point out errors of fact in history or science in a student's paper--a student who said that the South won the Civil War or that the sun and all the planets revolved around the earth would, of course, be set straight. Equally, a student who does not understand possessives or verb tense or who spells poorly should be corrected. You must at least point these errors out to the student. If you can spare the time, meet with the student and try to explain the problem. Many students just need their errors pointed out and are quite diligent about eradicating them, but they cannot hope to overcome problems of which they are unaware.

About what sorts of problems should teachers be concerned? All problems should be brought to the student's attention, and if they occur regularly, the student should be strongly urged to register for tutoring. Among the more common problems plaguing student compositions are:

**Lack of clear organization:** The student who has not yet learned to organize his or her ideas clearly and coherently has a serious problem. Even if this student's writing is reasonably free from obvious grammatical errors, failure to structure and develop an argument logically and coherently, unified paragraph by unified paragraph, indicates that the student either does not understand the material clearly or that the student has never learned how to organize an essay. You may want to recommend that students make up an outline before beginning to write and then make up another when they have finished in order to recheck their organization.

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## Writing

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**Sentence fragments:** Sentence fragments indicate a lack of understanding of the basic parts of a sentence. A fragment is a part of a sentence, a phrase or subordinate clause, written as a sentence. All sentences must have a subject, verb, and whatever else is needed to make a *complete thought*.

**Possessives:** The misuse of possessives is a common problem but one that is easily corrected. The use of 's to signify possession is understood by most students. Most problems occur with the personal pronouns, which do not take an apostrophe. Many students confuse its (of it) with it's (it is) and whose (of whom) with who's (who is). A single explanation usually eliminates this problem.

**Agreement:** Lack of agreement between parts of a sentence leads to ambiguity and confusion. A pronoun should refer unmistakably to its antecedent and agree with it in number. Verbs must agree in number with their subject. Errors commonly occur when the subject and verb are separated in the sentence by nouns or pronouns.

**Spelling errors:** When grading papers or exams it is a good policy to indicate all mistakes, even though they might be attributed to rushing during the exam or may be just typos. After all, editing is an essential part of writing. Patterns of error should be identified and the students encouraged to look up correct spellings in the dictionary.

### Where to Get Help

For information about the New Brunswick Writing Centers, contact:  
College Avenue Center, Murray Hall (CAC) ext. 7428  
Livingston College, Lucy Stone Hall 104D ext. 4048  
Douglass College, Language Building 107 ext. 8856

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only find out what is available, but you can also look at written descriptions of the programs, which detail the hardware requirements (such as memory and type of computer) needed to operate that program. You may then preview and evaluate the software on the the machines reserved there just for this purpose. Among the disciplines for which software exists are anthropology, art, biology, chemistry, engineering, foreign languages, general science, geography, geology, history, law, literature, mathematics, music, nutrition, philosophy, physics, psychology, sociology, statistics, and writing. The holdings of the center are constantly being expanded, so if there is a specific program you wish to use, suggest it to the staff at the Center and they may be able to help you obtain it for your class.

In addition to these software packages, the center also has "authoring tools," programs to help you develop your own customized program. So, even without being a computer expert, a teacher who is unable to find a software package that addresses the subject matter of a class can create a program especially tailored for that class. These programs can be used to illuminate difficult concepts, as a source of homework or extra-credit work, or to provide remedial work.

The Software Information Center is open Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. If you stop by the reference room in Room 128 Hill Center, you can pick up a copy of the CCIS newsletter and other information about the center. If you have further questions, Dr. Leny Struminger (932-2427) will be glad to assist you in any way she can.

## Notes From the Field

*Is it realistic to expect TAs to assist students with their writing difficulties?*

When grading, I look at both content and grammar. When there are severe problems, I strongly urge them to get tutoring help. The students are cooperative because they realize it's a skill that they need. To a certain extent they're glad to have the opportunity for someone to try to help them.

Eleanor LaPointe  
Sociology

Of course, the TA has a responsibility to help the student. If you are a good TA you try to find out what the real problem is and where the student can receive help. It's not a big problem in the kinds of classes I teach, but I know from other TAs that problems in writing are an almost university-wide problem.

Jurgen Koeneman  
Psychology

We have a responsibility to make sure our students are well-rounded in all disciplines. If we're not, we should know where to send them.

Joseph Bjerklie  
Sociology

### NOTICE

The Graduate Association of Women in Mathematics, Science, and Engineering will be holding the March meeting on Wednesday March 29 in the Busch Student Center, Room 122 A-B from 11:30 to 1:00. Bring a boxed lunch and we'll supply soft drinks and dessert. Dr. Elvira Doman, visiting scientist from the National Science Foundation, will present "How to Write a Winning Research Proposal." Business topics to be discussed include nominations for 1989-90 officers and future events.

## Disciplines

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perspective, just as an art student will bring a unique perspective to a geology class--thus enriching both the class and the individual. Try in your own classes to bring in examples from a wide variety of disciplines; let your students see that your intellectual interests range beyond the confines of your discipline. Encourage students to make connections between the material in your course and what they are studying in other courses. Acknowledge the fact that there is a world outside of your discipline where science, art, politics, and myriad other things hold a meaningful place--involve your students in that world.

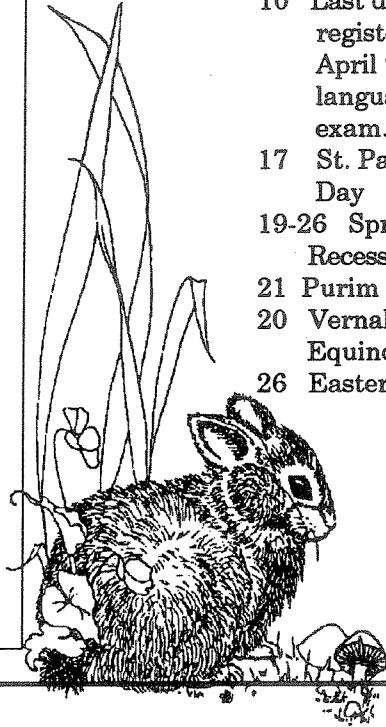
## Volunteers Needed

Planning for the 1989 Teaching Assistant Training Conference is underway, and experienced TAs are needed to help shape this program. If you can spare a few hours during the semester and would like to have some input into this important project, please send your name, address, telephone number, and your spring semester schedule to TAP, Office of the Dean, The Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus.

## DATES TO REMEMBER



- 10 Last day to register for April 9th language exam.
- 17 St. Patrick's Day
- 19-26 Spring Recess
- 21 Purim
- 20 Vernal Equinox
- 26 Easter



## Teaching Assistant Project

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