

Providing Academic Support

Some students, regardless of their intellectual abilities, lack the skills necessary to excel in class. A few of these students may even defensively project an attitude that academic success is not a priority. Other students' difficulties may pass unnoticed because they are quiet, do not show up for class, or because they lack one or two skills for which they have not yet been tested. All of these students require academic help, so it is crucial for TAs to implement strategies and practices that will allow them to target these students. Also, teaching techniques should be such that the students themselves will be able to sense what their areas of weakness are, and, moreover, feel comfortable enough to approach their TA for extra help. Listed below are a few strategies for structuring classes, helping students to discover their own weaknesses, and drawing them into the life of the classroom.

Keeping Students Afloat

- a. Make attendance mandatory. Consider counting attendance and participation for a percentage of the students' grades.
- b. Write all major concepts on the board. Use the board frequently and organize ideas as clearly as possible. Always follow-up with a question and answer session—students can then ask for clarification, and you can question students to see if they have understood.
- c. Have students read assigned passages aloud in class and then ask them to paraphrase what they have read. This forces them to concentrate more fully on the ideas, while helping you see where they are having difficulty.
- d. Plan discussion sessions. These sessions allow students to “work with” their new knowledge and help TAs to target those who are not understanding the material.

Myths & Misconceptions about Videotaping

Have you scheduled a videotaping of your class this semester or have you hesitated because it brings to mind Orwellian images of “Big Brother?” Myths and misconceptions about videotaping—its goals and uses—may discourage TAs from taking advantage of what is a useful and informative teaching tool that can only work to their advantage.

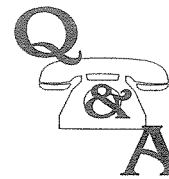
First, appointments for tapings are scheduled at the instructors' convenience so that they can decide the material to be covered and the best day of the week for a taping. Videotape technicians are staff members of TAP, usually graduate students, who know how to shoot videos that give instructors the best possible overview of their teaching. On the day of the taping, the technicians arrive before class and set up the equipment as inconspicuously as possible. Once the taping is completed, the TA makes the decision about who will see the tape; if there is no faculty member in the TA's program with whom he or she feels comfortable

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Academic Support

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Call
932-IITA

Clarify Class Requirements

a. At every step of the way, make your expectations absolutely clear and provide students with the tools for meeting them. Encourage students to visit during office hours if at any time they feel they are falling behind in the class.

b. As a general rule, make students adhere to deadlines for assignments and do not permit makeup tests. This will force students to keep pace and prevent them from falling behind to the point where they will never catch up. Consider rules like the following: subtract a full grade for each day a paper is late; permit make-up exams only when excuses for missing them are compelling and suitably documented. Determine how to be strict and demanding without being tyrannic and intimidating (it takes some practice).

Draw Students in to the Life of the Class

a. Learn your students' names quickly and use them often. Whenever possible, connect ideas in class with points made by students days or weeks earlier. (If you find this difficult, take a few minutes after class to jot down who said what.) Students will not only be more comfortable with you and the class but will be motivated to do well because they know that their teacher notices and responds to their contributions.

b. At the beginning of the semester refrain from grading written assignments. Give detailed comments so that students focus more on feeling comfortable with their writing as opposed to worrying about grades. Initially, they may strongly resist this strategy because they are unsure how to evaluate written comments; stay with it, however, because this practice can get some people to take seriously the task of improving their writing, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

It is always distressing to witness students doing poorly in a course. Obviously, this cannot always be helped, but there are ways to actively draw students into the life of the class. Keep students aware of your expectations and yourself alert to their progress. Encourage active learning, and keep the communications lines open.

How can I get the results from the university evaluations that my students complete at the end of the semester? Is it true that teachers who grade hard get the worst evaluations?

At the semester's end, the Teaching Excellence Center (TEC) scans the Student Instructional Rating Forms and creates a data base from the results. They then generate statistics and a summary sheet, and return them to each department, along with the actual evaluation sheets so that students' written comments can also be reviewed. TAs should check with their department chair to find out when the results will arrive.

Professor Monica Devanas, of TEC, offers several suggestions for TAs regarding their evaluations. First, since each class will only receive as many evaluation forms as there are students registered, TAs should contact TEC if the number of students in the class is greater than the number on the roster. Also, TAs should consider adding a question to the evaluation so that students can respond to a particular concern they may have about the class, to help guide future decisions the TA may make about the structure of the course. This question, which can address a specific assignment or text, should be written on the board or on a

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

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IN THE PROGRAMS

Over twenty graduate programs were represented at the first meeting of the TA Liaison Committee, which took place on February 5. The committee discussed ways of making the TA experience more valuable for TAs in various programs. Contact the liaison from your department for an update on the activities of the committee or to suggest topics for the committee to discuss at future meetings.

Q&A

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half sheet of paper handed out with the evaluations.

Most research on the validity and reliability of student ratings has found that students tend to be rather objective in rating a professor's knowledge of the subject, preparation, or interaction with students. William Cashin (Kansas State University) reports that students who learned more gave higher ratings to instructors and that a student's expected grade had only a low positive correlation to student ratings. Until more research can be conducted in this area, however, student ratings should be considered one of several tools useful for evaluating teaching skills.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

Helping Students Get Help

If students are having a difficult time keeping up with a class, there are a number of resources at Rutgers to which they can turn for assistance. Below are just a few of the places where TAs can refer undergraduates who may need some extra help with an assignment or who would like to improve their learning skills in general.

The Learning Resource Centers on the College Avenue and Livingston Campuses provide tutoring Monday-Thursday from 3-11 p.m. in several different subjects. Writing assistants, who work with students in 100 level courses and higher, are also available. Learning assistants at the center emphasize reading and notetaking skills, and time management. Students may call 932-1443 for a weekly schedule or to set up an appointment.

The Math/Science Learning Centers on Busch and Douglass campuses provide tutoring and maintain a file of old exams for students to review. Computer and study rooms are also available, or teachers may schedule a videotape there as part of a class.

The libraries on all campuses participate in a library instruction program. Workshops can be scheduled to provide students with information about the computer and on-line services available. TAs can also schedule course-related instruction that focuses on researching a specific topic. At Alexander Library, contact Stan Nash to schedule an appointment (932-7099). For a workshop at one of the other libraries, ask to speak with the coordinator of the instruction program.

The Writing Centers provide assistance for students in writing-intensive courses. Students must be committed to scheduling five meetings with tutors who will work with them on reading comprehension, rough drafts, and research skills. Contact the Writing Program Office at 932-8176 for more information.

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA
Monday-Friday
between the hours of
8:30-4:30

Myths & Misconceptions

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reviewing the tape, a TAP staff member will be happy to set up an appointment to view and discuss it.

TAs should recognize that a videotape can reveal—quickly and dramatically—information that may be difficult to gain otherwise. TAs get a firsthand look at the way they appear and sound to their students and are able to make immediate changes when indicated. For example, upon viewing their tape, some people realize that they move around the room too much or that they have nervous mannerisms—behaviors that are rather simple to change.

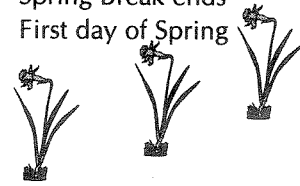
Viewing the tape may also help TAs begin to consider longer-term changes to improve their teaching. Upon seeing the reactions of the students to the class, the range of responses and the level of engagement, TAs can begin to think about how to make their teaching more inclusive, so that all types of learners are engaged.

TAs who wish to be videotaped this semester should contact the Teaching Assistant Project, at 932-11TA, as soon as possible to set up an appointment.

MARCH



- 4 TA Liaison Committee Meeting, 4:30, 25 Bishop Place, CAC
- 4 Purim begins at sundown (Jewish)
- 5 Holi (Hindu)
- 8 International Working Women's Day
- 10 Spring Break begins
- 17 St. Patrick's Day
- 17 Spring Break ends
- 20 First day of Spring



Teaching Assistant Project

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