

## Mid-Semester Evaluations

TAs are required to administer end-of-semester evaluations, and these usually provide invaluable information about one's strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. Often, however, it is helpful to have a mid-semester review of the class in order to get immediate in-course feedback. Why wait until the end of the semester to find out that a routine course activity or requirement is considered ineffective or that students don't really understand your lectures? An opportunity to modify assignment questions or alter teaching techniques may help to make the second half of the semester work more smoothly than the first. Asking for mid-semester reviews can be a risky proposition, however; harsh evaluations may shake a TA's potentially fragile confidence. The key is not to panic and attempt to make radical changes to the course structure or in your teaching personality. Instead, take the opportunity to make a few effective adjustments and apply the large concerns to a more long-term process of pedagogical improvement.

An important step when handing out evaluations is to assure student anonymity. Students are not likely to be entirely honest if they feel that their grade will be jeopardized by frank comments concerning the inadequacies of the class or the failings of the teacher. One solution is to let students take an evaluation form home so that they can type up their responses and thus feel secure that their handwriting will not be identified. Another solution is an evaluation that only requires students to circle answers to multiple-choice questions. A more formal option is to have an outside person—a fellow TA or another graduate student—administer the evaluation and collate the results; in such cases students should be assured that their TA will never see the actual evaluations. The outside evaluator can also confer with the class and get feedback about the TA's performance and the structure of the course.

What are the right questions to ask? What kinds of questions will elicit useful responses? It is crucial for a TA to determine beforehand what he or she wants to know. Evaluations might include questions about particular assignments and

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## News and Announcements

If you are an international TA and need assistance with your 1998 U.S. tax return, plan to attend the Nonresident Tax Workshop sponsored by the Center for International Faculty and Student Services. A professional tax advisor from H&R Block will provide a free on-campus workshop on filing your tax return. Please note that this is the only tax filing workshop that will be offered to nonresidents this year, and that staff members of the Center for International Services are **not** qualified to provide tax return advice. The workshop will take place on Thursday, March 11, 7:00-9:00 p.m., at the ARC Building, Room 103, Allison Road, Busch Campus (new building between Psychology and Alcohol Studies, Busch Campus). Tax return forms will be provided, but please bring your W-2 (statement of earnings) form and a pencil to the workshop.

Two workshops designed to aid graduate students with their professional development are scheduled to take place on Wednesday, March 24. The Graduate School-New Brunswick is offering a session

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# Evaluations

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what students think of them. A model for a more comprehensive evaluation is included on this page. This sample evaluation covers students' feelings about their ability to fulfill the course requirements successfully (and be rewarded accordingly); their judgment as to the worthiness and relative difficulty of these requirements; their estimation of the TA's overall teaching style and effectiveness of methods; and their suggestions for course improvements.

Unless a TA chooses the multiple-choice option, an evaluation form should encourage students to be as specific and detailed as possible in their responses. For example, the first question on the sample evaluation asks students to *explain* their judgment regarding the difficulty of the course. It is in these explanations that TAs will find the material they need to help improve their teaching.

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

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## Sample Questions for a Mid-Semester Evaluation

The mid-semester evaluation is a useful way of discovering whether you and your students have the same impression of how the course is going and gives you an opportunity to make adjustments if they are needed. Leave plenty of white space to encourage students to answer at length.

By answering the following questions in as much detail as possible, you will help me improve the remaining weeks of the semester. Please answer as fully and honestly as possible, and use the back of this form if necessary.

1. Do you find the subject matter of this course easy, average, difficult? Explain.
2. At this point, what grade do you expect to get in the class? On what do you base this expectation?
3. Have you been able to keep up with the reading assignments in this class? If not, approximately what percentage of the readings have you been able to complete?
4. How much time do you spend preparing for this class outside of regular class hours?
5. Do you feel that you can ask questions or make comments in this class? Explain?
6. Is the class material presented in a well-organized manner?
7. Can you relate the lecture to the outside readings?
8. Are you able to understand what I am saying? Do I enunciate clearly? Do I speak too rapidly?
9. What suggestions could you give to improve the class?
10. How would you describe your own work in the class so far? Are you satisfied with your effort and progress? Where have you noticed improvement? Where do you see a need for further work to be done?
11. Add any additional comments you would like to make about the class. Use the back of the form if necessary.

## Tapped Out – The Diary of a New TA

by Rupert Peals\*

So far, in my short career as a teaching assistant, I've encountered a variety of student reactions to me and to my class; these include enthusiasm, disinterest, anger, angst, engagement, complacency, fear, confusion (both productive and unproductive), belligerence, ridicule, over-familiarity, desperation, confidence, happiness and frustration. Nothing in my training or in my experience last semester, however, could have prepared me for the overwhelming *silence* that permeates my current class. Imagine the familiar "awkward moment," which occurs in any conversation, stretched out over almost the entirety of an eighty-minute Rutgers class period. I experience this silence not so much as another kind of reaction, an adjective to add to the list enumerated above, but rather as a distinct absence of reaction. My comments, questions, explanations and exhortations seem to melt into the ether; my efforts to involve students by calling on them are met with monosyllabic and

noncommittal grunts, so that I have no position from which to judge their understanding of the material. Often the jocular sounds of the class next door waft through the walls (ah, the river dorms) and serve further to mock the austerity of our space.

You will object that I must almost certainly be exaggerating, and it is true that Rupert has been known to spin a good yarn or two for the sake of a fine turn of phrase. I must, therefore, qualify my earlier comments and admit that my class is not always the vacuum I've made it out to be. There are times when my students are quite voluble: before class, in informal discussions among themselves or with me, in groups when they are working on in-class exercises. They are, therefore, clearly able to speak, and can do so quite well. It is when communication is attempted in a formal, group-level register that problems arise and my own frustrations mount. That the phenomenon is not merely my own warped perception was recently verified when one student blurted out "boy, we're a pretty quiet bunch, aren't we?" during another strained attempt at a group discussion. In addition to the irony of breaking a silence with a reference to that silence, the

comment is incredibly revealing; it demonstrates that the students are aware of silence as an issue, and indicates the extent to which my own anxiety over the problem has been projected onto the space of the class. In retrospect I could have taken that opportunity to make the discussion not about the material but about the structure of the class itself, but I'm not yet very accomplished at such pedagogical gestures and instead tried to highlight the humor of the remark.

I realize that the anxiety described above becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, so that the more I worry about and push the issue the more it becomes magnified. I also realize that this issue is not simply about the students but is also about the relationship(s) I establish with them as well as my own level of comfort and confidence in front of the class. I'm teaching the same course I taught last semester, and I'm employing most of the same in-class strategies, but as we've seen I'm not getting the same reactions from my students. Oddly enough, there seems to be a sort of compensatory mechanism at work. I teach a composition course in which both class participation and written work are crucial, and while this semester's class has been unaccountably silent they have produced fairly

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\*Rupert Peals is a pseudonym

## Announcements

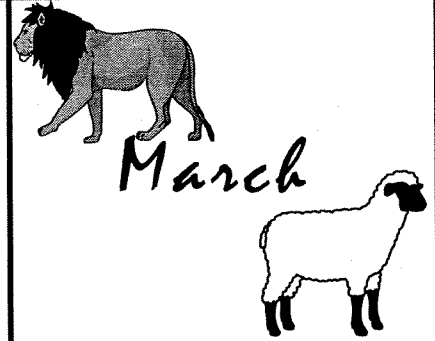
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on "Careers in Academe;" the workshop will take place from noon to 1:00 p.m. at the Graduate School, 25 Bishop Place, and will provide students with background information to assist them in planning a job search. Interested students should reserve a space in the workshop by calling 932-7747. Also on the same day, from 6:00-7:30 p.m., Busch Campus Center, 122 ABC. Rutgers Career Services, in conjunction with the Graduate School-New Brunswick, will present a workshop, "How to Interview," which will offer strategies to help job candidates prepare for job interviews.

## Tapped Out

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high-quality writing. I've talked to both colleagues and supervisors about my concerns, and the most common advice I've received is to just let the class proceed along whatever path is allowing the students to do good work. It's not exactly an "if it ain't broke..." philosophy, but instead a recognition that each class develops a certain personality and internal logic against which it is sometimes fruitless to concentrate one's energies. This is not to say that I am going to abandon the students to a realm of silence, but rather that I will try to manipulate that silence to my advantage.



15-19	Spring Break
17	St. Patrick's Day
24	Workshop: "How to Interview" Workshop: "Careers in Academe" (see News & Announcements)
30	Dissertation & Thesis Workshop 25 Bishop Place, 1 p.m.
31	Passover begins at sundown

### COMING IN APRIL

2	Good Friday
4	Easter Daylight Savings Time begins
8	Dissertation & Thesis Workshop 25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.
22	Earth Day

## Teaching Assistant Project

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