

## POP is here!

This month, the Teaching Assistant Project offers a new resource to Rutgers TAs: the Peer Observation Program, or POP. The program is an initiative of the TA Liaison Committee, an interdisciplinary group that meets regularly to discuss issues and concerns relating to teaching, and to provide formal and informal suggestions concerning programs and resources that would be helpful to all Rutgers TAs. POP fills a niche between resources already available to many TAs: classroom videotaping (a service offered by TAP) allows instructors to document their classroom performance and review it with an experienced observer. Faculty observation is another common source of pedagogical feedback and, is often necessary for professional reasons such as letters of recommendation. And, of course, there are the student evaluations that TAs receive at the end of every semester. Where POP fits in is as a potentially less stressful complement to these already existing practices, a horizontal mode of evaluation that takes advantage of the specific issues and concerns common to teaching assistants. Barbara Bender, Associate Dean of the Graduate School-New Brunswick and Director of the Teaching Assistant Program, is enthusiastic about the potential of the new program: "peer observation in the classroom provides a wonderful opportunity for TAs to enhance their teaching skills."

POP is structured as a reciprocal peer observation process, and would ideally involve a tandem of TAs who watch each other teach and provide each other with feedback. This dyadic model should help to prevent two possible evaluative extremes: the wholly negative critique (e.g. "here, in no particular order, are the thirty-seven things you did wrong") that leaves the target of the evaluation with little more than self-doubt, and the uncritically positive response (e.g. "you did a great job – any suggestions I might add would be superfluous") that may provide immediate encouragement but does not allow for the necessary work of self-evaluation. POP evaluators, in anticipation of being on the other end of the observational spectrum, will recognize the reciprocal need for critique that is both honest and constructive.

To aid participants in the difficult task of approaching and commenting on someone else's pedagogical practice, the TA liaison

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## Mid-Semester Evaluations

Formal, end-of-semester evaluations required by the university provide invaluable information about one's strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. It is often helpful, however, 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 is considered ineffective or that students don't really understand your lectures? An opportunity to modify assignment questions or alter your teaching techniques may make the second half of the semester work more smoothly than the first.

There are several ways to go about administering mid-semester evaluations, but the first step 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 their teacher's failings. 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

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committee has drawn up a five-section evaluative template of factors to observe and discuss with one's peer:

- Overall Classroom Setup: general organization and the announced "goals" for the day's proceedings, the instructor's preparation, the clarity of the class content and its relevance to the stated goals, and finally the spatial arrangement of the classroom (seating, instructor's position, etc.) and its effectiveness in encouraging discussion, listening and note-taking.
- Personal qualities of the instructor: enthusiasm, voice (volume, clarity), eye contact, body language, distracting or disabling habits or tics, and the congruence of the instructor's style with the subject matter being presented.
- Specific Instructional Skills: knowledge of the subject, asking questions (quality and style of questions, the kinds of responses elicited, treatment of responses, etc.), the use of examples, and timing and

pace.

- Interactions with Students: student engagement and motivation, strategies for confronting silence and vacant stares, strategies for addressing unruly or problematic students, the use of humor, affirmative or constructive teaching (i.e. using positive examples instead of illustrating mistakes), and response to student questions and concerns.
- Classroom Materials: notes & handouts, audiovisual & multimedia resources, blackboard, use of assigned texts & readings in class.

Two further points are important concerning this template. First, each section asks peer observers not only to respond to what they have seen in the classroom but also to provide concrete and practical suggestions to the instructor under observation. Second, the template is intended as a flexible guide for structuring one's peer evaluation, not a rigid specification of necessary responses. Indeed, participants are encouraged to modify the template to suit their joint needs, or to develop an alternate schema of their own. What the template does point to is the need for a shared paradigm through which POP participants can usefully respond to each other.

While POP is clearly a program that will benefit TAs who are in the same or similar disciplines

and/or teach similar courses, it also has the potential for fostering true interdisciplinary interaction. With adequate preparation, a process of reciprocal observation between, for instance, a physicist and a sociologist, could lead to the kind of interdisciplinary exchange that is often celebrated at a theoretical level but less rarely implemented at a pedagogical one. The observer could, in effect, come to the class with an undergraduate's background in the subject matter but with a pedagogical background on par with the instructor, and thus offer a unique vantage point for evaluating the effectiveness of the class.

If you are interested in participating in POP, contact Amber Carpenter at the Teaching Assistant Project ([acarpent@eden.rutgers.edu](mailto:acarpent@eden.rutgers.edu)) or visit the TAP website (<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>) in the coming weeks.

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## Evaluations (cont'd)

third option is to have an outside agent administer the evaluation and collate the results; the Teaching Excellence Center (<http://teachx.rutgers.edu>) offers a service through which students can evaluate the course in an informal and

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

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Letters, responses to *Tapped In*, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

*TapTalk*

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## Tapped In – The Diary of a Practicing TA

by Rupert Peals\*

This academic year I have been a non-College Avenue instructor; in the fall I taught on bucolic Douglass campus (land of countless trees, babbling brooks, blissful silence, etc.), and this semester I'm teaching on the slightly alienating (e.g. "I'll meet you in an hour at the corner of Avenue E and Road #3") Livingston campus. What this multi-campus exposure has meant for me, a non-car owner, is an accumulation of hours spent in that strange transitory space known as the Rutgers bus system. I'm sure everyone who teaches here has had to deal with the bus in some capacity (think about how many times a student has rambled into class 15 minutes late mumbling something about the "GG"), but if you've never actually taken a ride, I recommend you try it at least once. Among other things, the experience is markedly infantilizing; remember the middle school yellow bus, with its sounds of sniffing and complaining, odors of wet wool and rubber boots, permanently slushy floors, impossibly obnoxious classmates, furtive hormone-inspired glances,

inexplicable line-ups in which you wait for hours, and the unpredictable oscillation between intense boredom and acute embarrassment? Well, a Rutgers bus replicates that experience in almost uncanny detail, although rendered up-to-date with cell phones, nicer drivers, and less spontaneous singing.

The following scenario exemplifies the weirdest aspect of bus ridership: you teach a class with your usual gusto, displaying unbounded enthusiasm and making a minor, although endearing, fool of yourself. Class ends, you come down from the teaching buzz, head for the nearest L-stop, and clamber on amidst a frenzied crowd that is trying to get to Brower Commons for meatloaf night. Packed in tight, you come face-to-face with student X, in front of whom you have just been your teaching-self for 80 minutes:

*Rupert Peals:* hello, X

X: hey, uh, Mr. Peals.

(...pause...)

*RP:* so...

X: uh...

*RP:* some class, huh?

X: mmhm (vague nodding motion)

After two interminable minutes of exchanging such pleasantries you each decide, in a very subtle manner, to rotate your body about 15° away from the other person, and the rest of the ride is

spent staring intensely at the passing scenery. The experience illuminates the sometimes sharp borders of the student-teacher relationship, and oddly enough makes you long for the comfort, or at least the contained and understandable space, that the classroom provides.

A more interesting and less immediately traumatic experience is travelling more-or-less incognito on the bus; whether mistaken for an undergraduate or just overlooked as "some guy," I hear about the ways this place actually "works," or at least is perceived to work by its largest demographic. A lot gets processed and decided in these inter-campus moments, and much of it affects what we do as teachers and administrators: instructors' reputations are made and unmade, classes are analyzed for their relative difficulty and enjoyment, and that oppressive power structure known colloquially as "the RU screw" is analyzed down to the finest detail. So, my suggestion is that we take fuller advantage of the bus as a teaching resource. If you want to get a line on the undergraduate population, don't try to engage your class in friendly banter; you'll never get the real story. Instead, don some size 50 corduroys and a Limp Bizkit t-shirt and light out for Piscataway. Or how about teaching on wheels: introduction to Jane Austen, perhaps, in which you study "sense" on the trip from Livingston to Cook/Douglass

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### Get In Touch!

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<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

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\*Rupert Peals is a pseudonym

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and “sensibility” on the return voyage. Or perhaps a mobile lab session; if you can successfully dissect a frog or titrate a solution of hydrochloric acid while rocketing down route 18, your qualifying exams will seem much less daunting. Maybe we could hold office hours on the “A” bus instead of breathing the stale basement air of some windowless cubicle. Rutgers students spend an inordinate amount of time on the move – we don’t want to get caught standing still.

### Evaluations (cont'd)

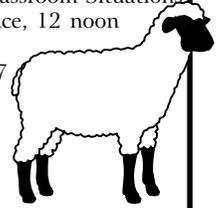
anonymous online survey. The survey results are sent directly to the instructor and are not kept or analyzed by the Center.

What kinds of questions will elicit useful responses? It is crucial for a TA to determine is what he or she wants to know. Evaluations might include: questions about particular assignments and students think of them; students’ feelings about their ability to fulfill the course requirements and be rewarded accordingly; judgments about the worthiness and relative difficulty of these requirements; estimation of the TA’s overall teaching style and effectiveness of methods; suggestions for course improvements. Unless the evaluation is multiple-choice, the form should encourage students to be as specific and detailed as possible in their responses. It is in these detailed explanations that TAs will find the material they need to help improve their teaching.



## March

- 10 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop  
25 Bishop Place, 1p.m.\*
- 12-18 Spring Recess
- 17 St. Patrick's Day
- 28 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop  
25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.\*
- 30 Workshop: Classroom Situations  
25 Bishop Place, 12 noon  
To register,  
call 932-7747



### COMING IN APRIL

- 2 Daylight Savings Time Begins
- 3 Workshop: Preparing a C.V.  
Call 932-9742 for details
- 6 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop  
25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.\*

\*please call 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at [sirman@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:sirman@rci.rutgers.edu), if you plan to attend a workshop.

## Teaching Assistant Project

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