

Encouraging Participation

TAs often think that the ideal class session is a well-prepared lecture, packed with information and, time permitting, some student input. Convinced that no other teaching style so efficiently delivers the same amount of data as the formal lecture, many teachers allow only a brief amount of class time for student participation, and these contributions are more often initiated by students than by teachers.

The efficacy of the formal lecture is, however, debatable. The traditional lecture-based approach, where students listen and take notes, is not, in most cases, the best teaching strategy. Placing the student in the entirely passive role of listener fails to foster creative and critical thinking about the material and is a poor way of getting students to retain information; passive listeners have only a short attention span. While it might be true that the traditional lecture format is capable of providing more information than other teaching methods, the information is useless unless students can absorb, remember, and integrate it with the rest of their knowledge. To give students a comprehensive command of the subject matter, consider implementing active learning strategies.

To some TAs, giving students more class time seems equivalent to *relinquishing control* of the direction of the class. For example, questions and comments can veer from the main topic to tangential issues. A confused but persistent student can slow down the rest of the class, or an arrogant, belligerent student can use the classroom as a bully pulpit. Group work presents another set of potential problems—time wasted on social issues such as deciding who is to represent the group, aggressive members dominating the group, or hard workers pulling an undue portion of the load. Indeed, some teachers question whether most students want to participate at all, and to be sure, some students are timid about speaking up in class.

While there is some basis for these concerns, they should be seen as challenges to successful teaching rather than reasons to resort to the traditional lecture. The successful discussion

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Videotape Your Teaching

The Teaching Assistant Project offers TAs the opportunity to have their classes or labs videotaped in order to analyze and improve their teaching skills. TAs of all disciplines may take advantage of this free service. Because colleges and universities throughout the United States are renewing their commitment to undergraduate education, hiring committees are focusing more and more strongly on the teaching experience of the prospective job candidate. Many programs recommend that TAs have their classes observed so that a written evaluation of their teaching can be included in their dossier.

TAs wishing to schedule an appointment for videotaping should call the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP) at the Graduate School-New Brunswick at 932-111TA. A TAP staff member will videotape a class at the requested time and day. The video equipment is quiet and unobtrusive and should not interfere with the class. It is best, however, if TAs inform their students ahead of time that it is not they who are being evaluated.

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facilitator has two goals: first, to involve everyone in the learning process, and second, to keep the attention of the class focused in the proper direction. Simply keeping these goals in mind may help to actively involve students, but it is also important to employ specific strategies.

When students are asked why they do not participate, they often respond that they are unsure of their grasp of the subject matter and their ability to formulate questions well. Before interrupting a lecture, students must feel confident that their question is relevant and worthy of diverting the class attention from the lecture.

Invite questions or comments on a specific issue and *pause* for a response or directly call on individual students. These strategies force all of the students to think actively about the material. Keep in mind, however, that age, gender, ethnicity, and even

location in the classroom can influence your decisions about whom to call on. Consciously distribute your attention across these boundaries. If you plan to call on students directly, consider telling them early in the semester that you expect participation and suggest ways in which they might prepare for class with this in mind. For instance, students can come to class with written comments or questions about the homework assignment or the previous lecture.

Warning students that they will be called on may increase participation, but it will not, by itself, put them at ease. To be comfortable, they must believe that they will receive a fair hearing and that their contributions are valued. Students say they are encouraged when teachers ask them to elaborate further on their questions or comments and when teachers rephrase student questions. Try to understand the student's point, no matter how counter-intuitive or obscure, and stress what is right or creative about the answer even if it is not exactly correct. Doing so will secure the students' trust, making them more likely to forward questions in the future.

Of course, sensitivity to students must be balanced by judgment. Students who routinely talk and side-track the

Questions and Concerns

Several of my students are performing so badly I can't imagine how they will pass the course. How can I help these students?

There are numerous reasons why students perform poorly, but all of your students have demonstrated their ability to compete at the university level by being accepted to Rutgers. For this reason, poor performance deserves attention and is a matter of some concern.

TAs should devise methods to reach out to students. While it is impossible and counterproductive for TAs to neglect their own work to "save" struggling students, there are, however, simple ways to reach out to students. Set aside the beginning of one class or lab session to discuss avenues of help open to struggling students. Remind them that your office hours are a resource; encourage them to visit you with copies of examinations or specific questions that will help them and you to target their problems and weaknesses. Refer to your *TA Handbook* for a list of counseling and tutoring centers, and prepare a handout listing these services for your students (if you don't have a handbook, call 2-11TA). Sometimes, simply taking the time to indicate your concern gives struggling students the will to do something about their situation.

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class can be handled more firmly. Try to reinterpret the question or comment so that it is relevant, or ask the student how he or she means the question to apply to the issue at hand. If you find that this usually leads to a further waste of time, give a polite but terse response and move on.

Dividing the students into groups for short periods (10 or 15 minutes) to work out a problem is another way to bring more students into the learning process. The groups should be highly structured and given a specific, well-defined project to minimize wasted time. The group setting is less intimidating than the classroom, and once students become comfortable within the group, they will be more likely to participate. The position of group leader can be rotated, and the leader can present the results of the group to the rest of the class.

Participation need not be oral. Short written assignments about the readings or material covered in class force active reading and listening. Written work on reading material will prepare students for oral discussion and provide a starting point for the class session.

Finally, the benefits of encouraging participation extend to the teacher. Regular feedback from the class builds rapport and keeps you informed of students' progress.

Notes on the Undergraduates

Taking Stock

The first half of November is an excellent time to set aside a portion of a class meeting to take stock of what material has been covered so far and what remains to be learned. While students were given a syllabus at the semester's beginning, it is nevertheless effective to step back from the everyday routine of teaching and learning to remind students of the course goals.

Students' sense of the overall purpose of a course can be reestablished by reviewing the course syllabus or distributing a handout outlining the second half of the semester's projects and plans. Go over the remaining major assignments and examinations. Breaking up the semester in this fashion imparts to students a sense of accomplishment for what they have achieved and serves as an invigorating pep-talk, inspiring them to continue in their efforts.

Taking stock will help students envision and plan for the remaining weeks of the semester. Since the holiday season brings the Thanksgiving break and anticipation of holiday festivities and activities, TAs will be doing students a service by reemphasizing the course's schedule. If students are reminded that they have a major assignment or examination soon after the Thanksgiving break, they will

be able to organize their schedules and develop plans to complete their assignments. Remind students that the end of the semester will be a study "crunch" and that the better they are prepared going into this period the better off they will be. For many first-year students, the finals' period is a shock, and they do poorly only because they have not managed their time well.

This is also the time to reiterate important class policies: Do you assign Incompletes? Under what circumstances will you reschedule a final examination for an absent student? Will you accept late work? Taking stock of what has been accomplished and what is to come is an effective pedagogical practice. A semester is long and students tend to lose focus and a sense of the overall goals of a course. Rekindle this understanding to give students a renewed purpose and clarity.

Brownbag Lunches

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| Nov. 15 | <i>Sexual Harassment: Issues for TAs</i> |
| Nov. 22 | <i>Teaching Portfolios: Improving your Teaching and your Chances on the Job Market</i> |
| Dec. 6 | <i>Looking Back: Evaluating the Fall Semester to Plan for the Spring</i> |

The Graduate School-NB, 25 Bishop Place, CAC, at noon.
All graduate students are welcome.
Bring lunch; TAP will supply soft drinks and dessert.

Videotape Your Class

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After the taping, the TA should make arrangements to view the tape with his or her faculty advisor or a member of the TA Project staff. During this session, the TA can expect honest and constructive criticism. Although the temptation to view the tape alone may be great, TAs are not the best judges of their own performance. The insights of another can best show both the weaknesses and the strengths of that individual's teaching.

TA Helpline
932-11TA

Teaching/Learning Conference

Mark your calendar for January 25, 1997, the date of the First Annual Graduate Student *Teaching/Learning* conference organized by TAs at Rutgers, New Brunswick. Pedagogy and issues related to being a TA, instructor, and researcher will be explored in papers, panels, and round-table discussions. Come and support your fellow TAs, make your voice heard, and learn something about being a better teacher. Watch for details in December's *TapTalk* as to the time, the place, and the specific offerings of the conference.

November

- 5 Election Day
- 10 Diwali (Festival of Lights)
- 11 Veterans Day
Remembrance Day (Canada)
- 15 Brownbag lunch on Sexual Harassment
- 22 Brownbag lunch: Teaching Portfolios
- 28 Thanksgiving



Happy
Thanksgiving!

Teaching Assistant Project

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