

## Teaching Learning Strategies: Give That Student a Fishing Pole!

As I think about what it means to teach students strategies for learning, that old proverb keeps coming into my mind: "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." I think of the fish as knowledge. We can give our students information, but will they become capable learners? Are they dependent on handouts, or can they arrive at the knowledge on their own, with the use of their own fishing poles?

Students need the skills to learn independently. While some small part of every teacher hopes that her students will absorb the wisdom of her lesson as through osmosis, listening to a lecture is perhaps one of the least effective forms of learning. Let's face it: The majority of learning takes place outside the classroom, as students read, take notes, write essays, study in groups, work out homework problems, and so on. Even in highly participatory and active classrooms, good preparation is key. What can we do as teachers, then, to help our students make the most out of their various learning activities?

Teaching learning strategies can be seen as an integral part of our curriculum, where the teaching of good study skills is built into the syllabus in a seamless way. The following are some suggestions about how to begin to think about incorporating learning strategies into your syllabus. Of course, not every strategy is appropriate to every subject or skill level, and there are limits to how much you can do in one semester. As always, you should think about what is most appropriate for your teaching style and course goals.

**Reading Strategies.** An amazing number of students read text books or scholarly essays as if they were novels—in a linear fashion, giving each word equal weight. Effective reading is really a set of acquired skills, and to be realistic, students haven't necessarily learned these skills before they reach your class. You can help them increase their reading efficiency and comprehension many times over by putting a few simple strategies in their tool boxes. Skimming a text for its main ideas and conclusions before embarking on a careful reading is essential. Similarly, students need to be

*(continued on page 2)*

## GetSkills All Employers Want

Register for a new course this Spring, offered by English but open to all graduate students: **16:32:504:01 Reaching Other Audiences: Web Authoring for Humanities Graduate Students.**

No prior web skills required.

"Reaching Other Audiences" will not only help you acquire the digital literacy necessary to survive in the knowledge economy, it will also help you make your newly acquired literacy skills visible to your future employers--be they academics or members of other professions. To achieve these goals, "Reaching Other Audiences" will provide you with both technical training in web design and a forum to examine issues raised by the movement from a print-based literacy to a screen-based literacy. To that end, the final project for this course will ask you to create a personal homepage, a project-centered and information-rich website, or a web-based professional portfolio that presents your intellectual labor and accomplishments in a form designed to communicate with larger audiences outside the academic community. Contact:

Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau  
[mpsr@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:mpsr@rci.rutgers.edu)

## Teaching Learning Strategy...

(continued from pg. 1)

taught to pay attention to headings and subheadings—as we try to speed through a reading, it is all too tempting for our eyes to skip over these important clues. Also, remind your students of the obvious: Phrases such as “I argue that” or “in conclusion” are cues to pay careful attention. Finally, looking up unfamiliar words, and then re-reading a sentence, is crucial to real understanding.

Try modeling some of these strategies in class as you read out loud, or instruct your students to skim an article for its main ideas as an in-class exercise. If you ask a student to identify a main point, also ask how she found it. If you come across a less-familiar word in discussion, ask if anyone has looked it up. Give a definition, and re-read the sentence.

**Outlining.** Generating an outline can be an important complement to careful reading, not only because it forces the reader to identify main points, but also because many students are tactile or visual learners who absorb material much more effectively when they write it down. If you

give a reading assignment, encourage your students to outline the essay. What are the main points and sub-points? How does the author use evidence to support them? How do the pieces fit together? You might consider collecting outlines (reading notes) from time to time, or have students build outlines as a group activity.


**Writing.** The subject of teaching writing skills could fill an entire corpus. As such, I will mention only a few brief points for consideration. If you want to emphasize the importance of writing in drafts, build this into your syllabus. (This also has the positive side effect of limiting the temptation to plagiarize a long assignment.) If improvement is your goal, consider requiring re-writes. If you want to make sure your students read your comments, offer extra credit if they return a paper having dealt with your questions or suggestions.

**Long-term projects.** Students often find completing a long-term project difficult and anxiety-provoking. In “real life,” many students will pursue careers that will require them to complete such a project at one time or another. If your syllabus includes a long-term project, use this as an opportunity to teach them how to create and use timelines and to set short-and long-term goals. Have them fill in a calendar marking short-term goals, and then collect revised versions periodically.

## How to study for a test.

Unhappily, effective learning strategies don’t spontaneously and instinctively flow out of our brains. With tests, the learning strategy we often try first (and then become totally frustrated with) is the rehearsal (repetition) of information, often in isolation from related ideas. Just think: even though you’ve repeated and even dialed the number of your favorite pizza place on untold occasions, don’t you still have to look it up? Students need some tips on how to study for a test to get the most out of their time and to encourage long-range retention. Putting information in context, or relating it to something already known, can be extremely helpful. Some students have great success with putting things into song or inventing acronyms. Some may benefit from mapping out a problem, like a puzzle, so that they can see the relationships among individual pieces, the larger sections, and the whole.

**Guidelines.** Finally, knowing when to seek help is also an important learning skill. Help your students by setting guidelines. If they aren’t meeting basic expectations, they should visit you during your office hours or take advantage of one of the various learning resource centers on campus.

If we can embed learning strategies into our curriculum, then with any luck, students will still know how to learn long after they’ve forgotten the content of our courses. They will be able to fish for themselves. 

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

Editor: Jennifer Einspahr

Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk

25 Bishop Place

New Brunswick, N.J. 08901

(732) 932-7747

tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu

# Attendance Policy and Pedagogy: A Happy Synergy?

What is your attendance policy? Why? At some point every college teacher has to decide how to deal with absent students. But your approach to attendance will have everything to do with how you view your role as a teacher and your overall teaching goals. What do you imagine your students gain by attending class regularly? Just as we design our assignments with our larger purpose in mind, there should be a synergy between our teaching goals and our policies. The only thing an attendance policy *must* be is clear and consistently applied.

And what about official University policy? It expects attendance, but "appointed authorities" (deans' offices) can "authenticate" absences in the cases of "illness requiring medical attention, curricular or extra-curricular activities approved by the faculty, personal obligations claimed by the student and recognized as valid, [and] recognized religious holidays." In practice, however, the policy allows for a great deal of discretion since you, the instructor, are the sole enforcer. The following is a brief exploration of the attendance policy continuum, from the laissez-faire to the draconian. Where do you fit along this spectrum?

**Attendance optional.** This may be the most practical policy for very large classes. It has the clear advantage of

saving time (no need to take role) and eliminating paperwork. Pedagogically, some choose this policy because it puts the onus of responsibility on students. You're trusting them to do what is right for themselves, and treating them like adults. Some also feel that this is more fair to students, especially the more advanced, since you grade students on actual output—no one gets a red star just for showing up.

**Attendance required.** In this system, unexcused absences will negatively impact a student's grade. Why adopt this policy? Some think that discipline and punctuality are important life skills to be learned for their own sake, and that students benefit from a tight structure where there is a clear cost for not attending. Further, studies show that students earn higher grades with regular attendance, so enforcing a strict attendance policy might be in our students' best interest. Perhaps most importantly, this policy fosters certain teaching goals: consistent attendance is a necessary precondition of oral participation, and it underlies the building of community and trust necessary for a successful discussion-based course. A possible downside to this policy is that it may cause students anxiety, and you may become overwhelmed by keeping

track of all the excuses. You can avoid this drawback by giving students a certain number of "freebies" to be used at their discretion.

**Attendance required plus.** Some believe so strongly in mutually reinforcing attendance and participation that, in addition to attending every class, they require students to bring a daily assignment with them to get in the door. This sends a strong message that this will be an active classroom, and that they will be held accountable. There are no "free riders" in this classroom. The motto here is that "if you aren't in class, you can't participate, and if you don't participate, you won't learn." The drawback? Aside from those mentioned above, you might have to put up with some of your students thinking you're an ogre—a risk to be laughed off by the truly hard-core.

In sum, consider carefully what kind of policy best fits your teaching goals. Then make it clear to your students, and follow through with fairness and consistency.

**Get In Touch!**

Tap Office:

<http://>

[tapproject.rutgers.edu](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu)

Graduate School – NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

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

## TAP Calendar

10/30	Teaching Your Own Course	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/6	Careers in Academe	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/6	Business and Dining Etiquette ( <i>dinner included</i> )	CAC	6:00-8:00pm‡
11/13	Issues in Academic Integrity	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/15	Teaching Careers for the Non-Certified	CAC	6:00-7:30pm‡
11/20	Public Speaking and the TA	CAC	11:30-12:50†
11/20	"Out at Work"	CAC	8:00-10:00pm

*Employer panel for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. No sign-up required.*

† At Scott Hall 115. For information and to register, call 732-932-7747

‡ For information and to register, call 732-932-7997

**Want to be a Movie  
Star?**

*Get your class videotaped!*

Call 932-11TA for details  
<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>

*Interested in Peer Observation  
of your Classes?*

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html>

### Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
25 Bishop Place  
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181  
(732) 932-7747