Making Things Work

It is already October, so most TAs have by now settled into their basic routine for the semester—that is, work, work, and more work. Most of the time, all is manageable, but when a problem arises in one area—teaching or coursework or private life—it is bound to affect all three. Take some of the pressure off yourself this semester by developing strategies early on that will ward off problems before they develop.

1. Don’t let problems get out of hand. If you feel that your students are not responding in the way you would like, if you feel that you are having difficulty in communicating with them, don’t just go on hoping that things will improve. Take steps to see that they do improve. Prepare a brief questionnaire for your students, asking how they feel about the course; ask them to answer honestly and anonymously. This gives them a chance to describe their perceptions of the class and gives you some input on what is working for them and what isn’t. Or, ask another TA to sit in on your class to observe it. An objective observer may be able to diagnose the problems that you can’t see yourself. Some honest feedback at this point in the semester will help you to make any adjustments necessary to insure that the semester is a success.

2. Find out now what faculty member in your program you can go to with problems. If possible, meet with this faculty member or some other TAs on a regular basis to discuss your class. Listen to all suggestions and incorporate those that seem useful to you. Further help can be found through the TA HELPLINE (932-1182); call this number with any questions or problems you may have about pedagogical strategies or university policies—lecturing, grading, academic dishonesty, disruptive students, sexual harassment—and someone will help you find the answer. No question is too trivial or too complex, and you don’t have to give your name if you choose not to.

What's New with TAP?

In response to suggestions made by teaching assistants in the past, the Teaching Assistant Project has established a new service—the TA HELPLINE. This telephone line is designed to give TAs answers to some of the questions they face in the classroom or lab, as teachers and graders. TAs who have questions that relate to any aspect of their teaching assistantship—from planning the course to making decisions about testing and grading, from assisting undergraduates with problems to finding help for their own problems—can call the HELPLINE. Of course, the HELPLINE is not meant to take the place of faculty members in advising TAs—they still remain one of the best resources the university has for all TAs—but rather should be viewed as an additional resource. For those times when the faculty member is unavailable or busy, or those questions that you are hesitant to approach the faculty advisor with, call the TA HELPLINE.
Some Questions for Consideration

On Thursday, August 30, the third annual TA Orientation was held on the College Avenue Campus, with approximately 250 newly-appointed TAs and VPLs attending this full-day program. At the beginning of the day, the TAP staff asked those attending to formulate questions they would like to have answered during the orientation. Some of the respondents received answers to their questions before too much time had passed, as administrators, faculty, TAs, and undergraduates shared their experiences of Rutgers and of teaching; some questions should have been answered during the first week of classes (For example, How do I find out my assignment?); other questions, however, touched on issues that warrant perennial reexamination, especially at the beginning of a new school year.

Although a few of these issues will be treated in greater length in future newsletters, it may be useful at this time to consider briefly some of the questions below.

Should I have my students address me by my first name or more formally? How familiar should a TA become with students, i.e. first name basis, see them socially?

Most TAs will have answered the first question--for better or for worse--at this point in the semester. However, the problem of what to have students call you is not a trivial issue and is directly related to the second question posed, that of the social relationship between TA and student.

YOU must determine how your students should address you. If you decide that a formal title--Mr., Ms., etc.--makes you feel more comfortable than use of your first name, make this clear on the first day of the semester. The worst way to handle this problem is to let the students decide--then you will be called by your first name or last, as Professor or Doctor, whatever the individual student feels most comfortable with. Using your first name will, of course, contribute to a more informal atmosphere in your classes.

Problems arise when students begin to consider you more as a contemporary and friend than as a teacher. If you and your students become too close it may be difficult to remain objective when final grade time arrives. Fairness to all your students demands that you show no favoritism, treating all students equally.

What are some ways to get undergraduates to participate, i.e., discuss, volunteer answers, ask questions?

Motivating undergraduates to participate in class is a necessary battle, one that all teachers must be prepared to fight. Before students will raise their hands or speak...

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TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by TAP, the Teaching Assistant Project, The Graduate School-New Brunswick. Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:

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TA HELPLINE
Call
932-11TA
(932-1182)
Monday-Friday
8:30-4:30
Questions . . .

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out in class, the overall climate established in the class must be a comfortable one; if students trust you and feel that you are genuinely interested in their intellectual development, they will not be afraid to participate. You can help students to become participants by asking the right kinds of questions in class. The best kinds of questions are open-ended ones, questions that are capable of eliciting a variety of answers. Listen carefully to all students' responses, and ask them to clarify points that are not clear. Comment on the response—kindly and honestly—and encourage other students to do so.

What should we expect from our department in terms of preparation and/or training? What can I do if my professor offers very little guidance?

TAs who speak to TAs in other programs know that there is no one answer to this question. Levels of support for TAs vary widely from program to program. If you feel that you need more assistance with your TA duties, ask for it. Some faculty members expect teaching assistants to be more independent than others but are more than willing to give aid where it is needed.

Most programs by now have developed some kind of discipline-specific training for their TAs. If you feel that you would like your program to do more, speak to the faculty member in charge of TA development and discuss your perception of the needs of TAs in your program. In many programs, where TA training is a relatively new activity, faculty members welcome suggestions from their TAs.

Making Things Work

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3. Keep up with your own work during the semester. Maintain a balance between your TA duties and your graduate work so that you are able to perform well in both. If you are having trouble meeting deadlines, getting your own work done, finding the time to grade student papers, get help now.

4. Schedule wisely. Everyone has limitations and so do you. Exceeding these personal limits can have a profound effect on all aspects of your life. Don't, however, underschedule relaxation. Take at least one day a week (one evening, at least) just for enjoyment.

Notes From the Field

Much of interest was said at the TA orientation about the mission of teaching; below are the words of a few speakers.

Learning is a social activity. Encourage your students to talk together, to work together . . .

Paul Leath
Provost

There never was a distinguished researcher or scholar who did not first come alive intellectually in someone's undergraduate class . . . this year let your own classroom or lab be that place for some Rutgers undergraduate . . .

Teaching and research are not fundamentally at odds; they are part of a single process of creating and transmitting and then transforming knowledge . . .

Richard McCormick
Professor of History
Dean FAS

Be aware that what you say and how you act in class can either reinforce or work to destroy harmful stereotypes.

Mary Hartman
Dean, Douglass
What's New . . .
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The number to call for the HELPLINE is 932-1182 (that's 11TA), and it is available from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. If we cannot answer your question immediately, we will find someone who can and get the answer back to you as soon as possible. All calls will be considered confidential.

In addition to adding the TA HELPLINE, TAP has also produced and distributed a wallet-sized telephone card listing campus telephone numbers that may be of use to TAs in working with undergraduates. Any TA who has not yet received a phone cards, check with your departmental secretary or stop at 25 Bishop Place to pick one up.

NOTICE
Proof of immunization for measles, mumps, and rubella is required for all students by the end of the semester. Any students who do not submit this information to Hurtado Health Center will be de-registered.

OCTOBER

14 Columbus Day
23 - Nov. 26 Requests for course drops must be approved by the Office of Academic & Student Services and must be accompanied by a letter from the instructor of the course indicating grade and/or academic status of the student in the course as of that date. Students are subject to receiving failing grades at the discretion of the instructor during this time.
31 Nov. 2 Last day for registering for Nov. 18 foreign language exam.

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