

Teaching a Class for the First Time

The eighth annual Teaching Assistant Orientation, which took place on August 31st, offered a full day of workshop sessions for TAs in all disciplines and with all levels of teaching experience. Ken Richman's workshop, "Teaching a Class for the First Time," addressed the needs of TAs teaching their own classes. Richman, an experienced TA who has taught courses in both the Philosophy and English Departments, provided a number of suggestions for TAs facing their own class for the first time. Below are a few of his suggestions.

- TAs should not feel insecure about their qualifications. TA appointments are offered to those students who are qualified. Assume your place in front of the class with ease and confidence.
- Check out the classroom before the first session. Make sure you know where it is and that it has what you need. If you find out that the seating arrangement is not the way you'd like it, ask your students to help you rearrange the seats when they come into classroom. (If the room is totally inappropriate, call 445-2572 to try to have the location switched.)
- Keep the students for the entire session on the first day to set a serious tone. The time can be used for reviewing the syllabus aloud, describing the required readings, explaining background material, and going over the history of the topics and problems that will be central to the course.
- Spell out all course requirements and detail the grading policy as explicitly as possible on your syllabus. Include a few sentences to define and warn students about plagiarism; explain the proper procedures for citing works in your discipline. Inform your students that they are responsible for keeping copies of their papers to minimize the problems that arise when student work is, or is claimed to be, lost. If grades are based primarily on papers and essay work, try to include a more objective component, through a few quizzes and tests, to reassure your students and yourself that you are grading fairly. Students *will*

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TA Workshop Series Scheduled

A series of workshops, "Issues in Teaching," has been scheduled for the month of October. Experienced TAs from several disciplines will be leading the discussions each week. Areas to be addressed include race and gender issues, academic integrity, alternative teaching methodologies, and TA/student relationships. All TAs, GAs, and PTLs are welcome to attend. Each session is designed to provide opportunities for TAs to discuss their current questions and concerns with each other and to discuss strategies for more effective teaching.

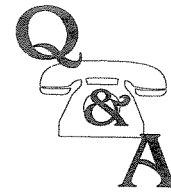
The moderators for the sessions are Stephanie Beardman, with teaching experience in Philosophy and the Gateway program, Chip Hamlin, with teaching experience in Political Science and the CASE program, Ken Richman, with teaching experience in Philosophy and English, and Kang Wei Woo, an experienced TA in Physics.

Pizza will be provided by TAP; bring your own soft drink. A

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Call
932-IITA

challenge grades—do not be too harsh but be firm and professional in these encounters. Finally, enunciate a firm policy on deadlines for assignments. (If you don't, you may find yourself grading throughout the entire semester!) Consider lowering the grade on a student paper one full letter grade for each day that it arrives past the deadline.

- All teachers are required by Rutgers University to hold office hours for *at least* two hours per week on the same campus as the class they are teaching. Make it clear to your students that you are available and committed to their academic success. Announce your office hours, along with the methods—e-mail, telephone, department mailbox—by which students can contact you. Try to be flexible but sensible about where and when you will meet with your students. (When students come to your office, make sure the office door is left open.)

- Come well-prepared for class. Lectures do not have to be completely pre-written—this consumes too much time, and, invariably, bores many students—but they should be clearly organized and well thought out.

- One way to keep your authority is to give up absolute control over your class. For example, in order to teach the skill of revising one's work, Richman asks students to come to class with an outline of an argument. Some of the students write their outlines on the board, and then the class offers comments and critiques. If discussion is an element of your class, try to foster discussion *between* students, and not just comments addressed to you for your response. Occasionally, you can have the students break up into small groups to discuss questions you have asked. Among other things, this helps the students to figure out what they don't know, a process that is rendered more difficult if the teacher always tries to keep total control.

Richman was able to demonstrate qualities of good teaching which he did not mention explicitly. His presentation was well organized; he began by laying out the topics he would cover, and then proceeded methodically to do so. Moreover, he varied the pace

I want some feedback from my students about how my class is progressing. Although I hold office hours, few students come, and because my class is somewhat large I don't have one-to-one contact with many of them. How can I find out how students are feeling about the class?

Try administering a mid-semester evaluation. Because many students are uncomfortable bringing their concerns and problems directly to their instructor, this is a more anonymous way for them to tell you what they are thinking and feeling. It also gives you the opportunity to make changes in the syllabus or in your teaching before the semester is over.

Rather than using a standardized form, such as is required at the end of your course, you can hand out an informal questionnaire with specific questions about the class discussions, reading materials, course assignments, or your teaching style. Check the *TA Handbook* for some sample midterm evaluation questions. Afterward take at least a few minutes of class time to discuss the responses. Such a discussion lets students know that you care, that others in the class share their concerns, and, most important, it may

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Workshops . . .

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list of the workshop dates, times, and locations follows. Please call the TA Helpline at 932-1182 with any questions.

Thursday, October 12
 "Politics and Emotion in the Classroom"
 Douglass College Center,
 Bunting Room
 6:10-7:30 p.m.

Wednesday, October 18
 "Pedagogical Styles"
 Busch Student Center,
 Room 117
 11:30 a.m. -12:50 p.m.

Tuesday, October 24
 "Beating Cheating"
 Rutgers Student Center,
 Room 454
 6:10-7:30 p.m.

Monday, October 30
 "The Final Crunch"
 Rutgers Student Center,
 Room 413
 6:10-7:30 p.m.

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

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

Many TAs worry about gaining the respect of their undergraduates. Being students themselves, often quite close in age to the undergraduates, they fear they lack the necessary presence to command immediate respect. One approach TAs use to overcome this perceived deficit is to dress the part, appearing as professional as possible while in class. This is a good strategy, especially at the beginning of the semester, but the simple fact is that dress, and, indeed, age difference or a doctorate, will only carry you so far. How you perform in the classroom and how you treat your students will, in the end, outweigh any of the superficial qualities by which you are first judged.

The most effective way to receive respect from your students is to begin by respecting them. A mutually respectful environment in the classroom is essential for effective learning and teaching. Such an environment does not inherently exist in any class; it must be consciously cultivated by the instructor from the very first day. Listen to the students when they speak; do not denigrate them when they make mistakes or dismiss their ideas without explanation.

Demonstrating respect for students is achieved in a number of ways. It is important to be clear on the first day about your expectations and "groundrules." Let students know early on what they should expect from you and what you in turn expect from them, so they will have a greater sense of who you are and how your class will function. When students are not faced with uncertainties or surprises, they will find learning in your classroom much easier. Do not be afraid to make demands on your students, to challenge them. Setting high goals for them is a way of conveying your respect for them and your confidence in their abilities.

Follow through with these plans and goals. This means taking your class seriously and being adequately prepared for each class meeting. Let your students know that they must take the class seriously also, that is, be prepared for and engaged in the class by keeping up with the assignments and actively participating in class discussions.

Think of yourself as a professional, conduct your class as such, and your students will respond accordingly.

Teaching A Class . . . Q&A

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and mode of his presentation. He was articulate and projected his voice so that he could be heard. When possible, he referred to workshop participants by name. He stimulated discussion by asking participants to respond to each other's questions. And, finally, he remained aware of the rhythm of the session, and made sure to end on time.



even generate solutions to problems.

Another option is to get students to visit you in your office. Suggest strongly or require that all students visit you in your office during the course of the semester. Be persistent. Once they come to see you, tell them how they are doing and then encourage them to tell you how you're doing. Do not be afraid of negative feedback; accept any criticism with good grace and learn from it.

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OCTOBER



- 3 Yom Kippur begins at sundown
- 12 TA Workshop: *Politics & Emotion in the Classroom*
6:10 p.m., Douglass College Center, Bunting Room.
- 18 TA Workshop: *Pedagogical Styles*
11:20 a.m., Busch Student Center, Room 117.
- 24 TA Workshop: *Beating Cheating*
6:10 p.m., Rutgers Student Center, Room 454.
- 29 Daylight Savings Time Ends
- 30 TA Workshop: *The Final Crunch*
6:10 p.m., Rutgers Student Center, Room 413.
- 31 Halloween

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