

On Evaluations

No one enjoys being evaluated. Students, with an eye to their GPAs, fear tests and think of them merely as devices for ranking the members of the class. Most teachers agree that, however imperfect a tool, testing is an integral part of a course. Tests allow both teachers and students to pinpoint what students have learned well and what they have not learned and encourage students to think through course issues that they may have passed over superficially. They help a teacher to fine-tune a course and enable the students to determine what they have understood and decide what remedial measures they might have to take to succeed in the course. Even final examinations can serve to underline the central questions and problems of the course and help students integrate the topics in a final burst of studying and writing.

Teachers, however, are often not quite so sure of the value of end of semester evaluations for *themselves*, and, just as students feel anxious as a test approaches, teachers, especially inexperienced ones, may come to dread the moment that evaluations are distributed to students. Just as students taking a test do, TAs sometimes wonder about the efficacy of evaluations, questioning what it is that they truly evaluate. Do they give a fair measure of performance, reflecting the instructor's knowledge and capacity to convey that knowledge? Or, are they popularity contests, where those teachers who "play" to their audience, presenting simplified content in an entertaining way, are rewarded, while those who lack theatrical flair or teach difficult subject matter are penalized?

Should teachers take risks in their teaching—experimenting with teaching strategies, for example—when failure will most likely be reflected in poor evaluations, or is it better to stick to more conventional strategies to which they know students will respond? Fear of a poor evaluation should never determine the structure of a course. Refusing to experiment with new and risky teaching strategies for fear of student disapprobation may compromise the course's

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2nd Annual Teaching/Learning Conference Announced

An announcement has been sent to all Rutgers Graduate Students, inviting them to submit proposals to the 2nd Annual Teaching/Learning Conference, which will be held on January 24, 1998, at the Rutgers Student Center, College Avenue Campus. The conference is dedicated to improving teaching at the university and encouraging a dialogue among TAs about the process of teaching and learning. Students who have taught a class or recitation, who have worked as graders or lab instructors are encouraged to participate—to share their insights, to raise questions about their roles, to explore ways of reaching students and of energizing classes, or to discuss the ways that teaching and research intersect.

More than 120 people participated in the 1997 conference. The caliber of the papers was so high that the organizing committee recommended that the proceedings of future conferences be published, so the

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educational goals and is a strategy that is apt to backfire. College students may sometimes be lazy, but they are not stupid: they recognize when a teacher is pandering to them and will have no compunction about taking advantage of the instructor's weakness—but neither are they likely to ignore that weakness when completing the evaluation.

Early in the semester, teachers should give students a clear picture of what will be demanded of them so that they will have a standard against which to judge their impressions of the course. There are many effective ways of teaching and those you choose will, in the end, be based on the demands of the discipline, your own personality, and the learning styles of your students. Demonstrate that you are willing to work hard to help students comprehend the complexities of the subject matter. Take risks; if things don't work out for a class or two, acknowledge the failure.

Teaching evaluations can tell you much about your teaching and help you to develop a style that is comfortable and effective. Students can be brutally honest, certainly, but this honesty can be of great value in revealing which of your techniques work and which may need reconsideration. Some students may merely gripe about the difficulty of a course or their own lack of interest in it, but by paying close attention to the comments of students who are seriously interested in learning—the majority—you will come to know yourself better as a teacher.

Do not wait until the end of the semester for evaluations. By midterm at the latest, distribute your own anonymous evaluation form. Ask the students if the course meets their expectations, what they find helpful, and what they do not find helpful. You may even ask for suggestions on how to proceed with the rest of the course. (The *TA Handbook* has a sample midterm evaluation.) Take the input seriously.

Teachers and students must evaluate each other, but when this process takes place in an atmosphere of collegial learning, tests and evaluations serve as tools, not weapons. Part of the role of a good teacher is to create such an atmosphere.

Questions and Concerns

For how long is a TA required to keep student papers and exams?

The best policy is to hold onto papers and exams for as long as possible, but certainly they must be saved for at least one year. Some teachers feel that five years is a reasonable time to keep students' work on file because most undergraduates do not spend more than five years at the university.

Why is it necessary to clutter up files with papers for such a long time? Occasionally students challenge grades after the fact and the teacher may be obliged to document the reasons for the assigned grade. Sometimes students with incompletes who submit work at a later date may question the final grade they receive. Of course, in situations where a student has been accused of cheating, *all* documents must be retained in an organized file. Teachers should also attach to these files a memorandum of record, describing the incident and how it was handled. Occasionally students will ask you for an recommendation several years after the course, so it is useful to have a sample of their work at hand. A final paper or exam, with your comments about it, will refresh your memory and assist you in writing a more reliable and detailed recommendation.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter
produced by the
Teaching Assistant Project (TAP),
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for articles should be directed
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Eat & Think

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADUATES

The Teaching Assistant Project (TAP) has planned a series of lunchtime workshops for the fall semester. The workshops cover a range of topics of interest to graduate students. Students are invited to bring their lunch. Beverages and dessert will be provided.

Careers in Academe
October 14, noon
Graduate School-NB
25 Bishop Place, CAC

Time Management
October 22, noon
Graduate School-NB
25 Bishop Place, CAC

Uses of a Teaching Portfolio
October 30, noon
Graduate School-NB
25 Bishop Place, CAC

Finishing a Dissertation or Thesis on Schedule
November 14, noon
Graduate Student Lounge,
Rutgers Student Center
CAC

If you have questions about any of these workshops or would like more information, call the TA Project, 932-7034.

TA Helpline
Call 932-11TA
for answers
to your questions
about teaching.


Confidentiality

Rutgers University, as an institution that receives funds from the U.S. Department of Education, must abide by the regulations of The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (usually known as FERPA or the Buckley Amendment). Under FERPA, the confidentiality of a student's educational records is protected, although FERPA does allow the university to release "directory information" in situations such as verifying that the student is enrolled at the university to potential employers, credit agencies, and others, or to include in the student directory and on the Rutgers internet "white pages." Directory information includes name, campus address and telephone number, permanent address and telephone number, school of attendance, major field of study, class year, dates of attendance, current credit load, credit hours earned, degree(s) received, and dates of degree(s).

What does this mean for TAs? Primarily, it means that TAs are legally bound to honor the confidentiality of their students. They are not permitted to discuss the student's educational performance or disclose their grades to others except to

Rutgers officials with legitimate educational interest. Simply put, TAs should consider the relationship between student and teacher a highly confidential one. Most TAs would not think of discussing one student's grades or classwork with another student but might not hesitate to discuss class matters with another TA or with their fellow graduate students. To do this, however, would be in violation of the student's right to privacy. TAs must further safeguard students' privacy by making sure that they do not circulate class rosters for attendance because the students' social security numbers would be revealed. Grades cannot be posted by either name or social security number; special identity numbers must be assigned to students beforehand if grades are to be posted.

TAs can, of course, discuss their students' progress with the faculty member in charge of the class or with the supervisor of the course. The department chair may sometimes have to be consulted about a particular student. All of this is part of the legitimate educational interest of the student. The bottom line, however, is that the student/teacher relationship must be respected.

<p>Learning Resource Center</p>	<p>Teaching/Learning Conference . . .</p> <p><i>(continued from page 1)</i></p>																					
<p>Attention TAs: The Learning Resource Center works with students to improve their learning strategies and performance in areas such as note-taking, time management, test preparedness, and writing assistance (in courses other than English 098-103).</p> <p>For further information, call the Kreeger Learning Resource Center . 732-932-1443.</p>	<p>papers presented this year will be collected and published in spring 1998.</p> <p>Students who wish to present a paper or poster session, or to organize a panel, workshop, or roundtable, should submit a one-page proposal by October 31, 1997, to the Teaching Assistant Project, Learning/Teaching Conference, Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus. Proposals can also be submitted by e-mail to: lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu.</p>	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>11</td> <td>Yom Kippur</td> </tr> <tr> <td>12</td> <td>Columbus Day Thanksgiving (Canada)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>13</td> <td>TA Liaison Meeting 25 Bishop Place, noon.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>14</td> <td>Workshop: Careers in Academe 25 Bishop Place, noon.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>22</td> <td>Workshop: Time Management 25 Bishop Place, noon.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>26</td> <td>Daylight Saving Time Ends</td> </tr> <tr> <td>30</td> <td>Workshop: The Teaching Portfolio 25 Bishop Place, noon.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>31</td> <td>Deadline: Proposals for Teaching/Learning Conference Halloween</td> </tr> </table> <hr/> <p><i>COMING Events</i></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Nov. 14</td> <td>Finishing a Dissertation or Thesis on Schedule</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Jan. 24</td> <td>Teaching/Learning Conference</td> </tr> </table>	11	Yom Kippur	12	Columbus Day Thanksgiving (Canada)	13	TA Liaison Meeting 25 Bishop Place, noon.	14	Workshop: Careers in Academe 25 Bishop Place, noon.	22	Workshop: Time Management 25 Bishop Place, noon.	26	Daylight Saving Time Ends	30	Workshop: The Teaching Portfolio 25 Bishop Place, noon.	31	Deadline: Proposals for Teaching/Learning Conference Halloween	Nov. 14	Finishing a Dissertation or Thesis on Schedule	Jan. 24	Teaching/Learning Conference
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