

## The Participation Question

Student participation, or the lack thereof, is a frequent concern at the beginning of the semester. The dual task of conveying crucial material *and* encouraging the formation of university-level skills seems insurmountable and even contradictory. TAs often assume that the ideal class session is a thorough lecture *followed* by student input (time permitting), and when the quality or quantity of such input is insufficient or disappointing, a common reaction is to criticize one's own delivery of the material. A more productive strategy is to examine the structure and function of student participation and to adjust the classroom dynamic accordingly.

The lecture-based approach, where students listen and take notes, works against the kind of engaged and informed student participation that most teachers solicit. Placing the student exclusively in the role of listener fails to foster creative and critical thinking and is a poor way of promoting retention. While the lecture format might deliver more raw information than other methods, the information is useless unless students can understand it, remember it, and put it to use. To give students a comprehensive command of the subject matter, consider implementing active learning strategies.

To some TAs, giving students more time seems equivalent to relinquishing control. Comments can veer wildly from the main topic. A confused but persistent student can derail the class; an arrogant, belligerent student can intimidate and silence others. Group work often seems to waste time and diffuse the momentum of the class. The question of whether most students *want* to participate at all is perhaps the most compelling one and can best be addressed by suggesting to the class the connections between participation and success in the course.

When students are asked why they do not participate, they often respond that they lack a sufficient understanding of the material and are unsure of their ability to formulate

## Teaching/Learning Conference Call for Papers

The third annual Teaching/Learning conference is scheduled to take place on Saturday, January 23, 1999, at the Rutgers Student Center. The conference is dedicated to exploring the relationship(s) between pedagogical technique and the learning process, and all Rutgers graduate students are encouraged to participate by sharing insights gained from classroom experiences or research on related issues.

The conference welcomes submissions, in a variety of formats, on any topics related to the conference theme. Interested students should submit a one-page proposal by **October 16, 1998**, to:

Teaching Assistant Project  
Teaching/Learning Conference  
Graduate School - NB  
25 Bishop Place, CAC  
Email submissions:  
[lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu)

For more information visit our website:  
<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>

## New Teaching Awards

Four unique courses will be offered to Rutgers undergraduates this coming year. They represent the initial products of the new Dissertation Teaching Awards, created by the Graduate School-New Brunswick to provide advanced graduate students with the resources to design and implement original and innovative courses. Recipients are granted a summer stipend of \$3000 in order to allow them to develop an upper-level undergraduate course in the general area of their dissertation research. The course is then offered, under the auspices of the recipient's nominating department, in the following spring term. Recipients for the 1998-99 academic year are: Anne-Catherine Aubert-Smith (French); Dominic Murphy (Philosophy); Brian Scholl (Psychology); Bradley Walters (Ecology & Evolution). Watch for announcements in the spring concerning the application process for next year's awards.

*TapTalk* is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.

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## Participation

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appropriate questions. Before speaking, students must feel confident that their questions are relevant and worthy of attention. An important first step, therefore, is to structure the lecture as a dynamic framework for discussion rather than as a static finished product against which students feel singularly unprepared to respond. Invite questions or comments (on specific and important issues) at frequent intervals, and pause for a response or call on individual students. Force students to think constantly about the material. Try to incorporate student responses into the flow of the lecture; demonstrate how similar critical thinking has contributed to the very issues under discussion. Determine if particular responses are representative of general concerns and misunderstandings, and if it seems useful try to adjust the conversation accordingly. If a response cannot be "recuperated" (for reasons such as clarity, logical cohesion, or relevance), suggest in polite but terse language that the conversation get back on track. For difficult concepts, try dividing the students into groups for short periods (10 to 15 minutes) and assign them specific, highly-structured projects. Once students are comfortable in peer groups they will be more likely to participate when the entire class reassembles.

## Questions and Concerns

Do your students require extra help? Wondering where to send them? Try the Learning Resource Centers, whose services are completely free and open to all Rutgers students. The LRCs offer individual and group assistance, drop-in tutoring in numerous courses, workshops on learning strategies and effective study techniques, and special support materials such as computer-assisted instruction. For more information visit the LRC website at <http://lrc.rutgers.edu>, or contact your nearest LRC for details:

**CAC-Kreeger LRC**  
(behind Brower)  
(732) 932-1443

**Cook/Douglass LRC**  
Loree 124  
(732) 932-1660

**Busch LRC**  
ARC 332  
(732) 445-4183

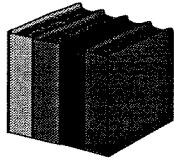
**Livingston LRC**  
Tillet Hall 111  
(732) 445-0986

### Get Online!

TA Project:  
<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School-  
New Brunswick:  
<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

## TA Bookshelf



Here is a short survey of notable items from some recent pedagogical journals.

*The Teaching Professor:* The featured article in the **June/July 1998 (Vol. 12, No. 6)** issue is "Good Teaching: The Top Ten Requirements" by Richard Leblanc, an award winning teacher from York University. Also of interest is an article examining the relationship between student ratings of classes and various institutional and personal factors (elective vs. requirement, class size, workload, instructor rank, etc.), and an article advocating tape-recorded (as opposed to written) responses to student papers. The **August/September 1998 (Vol. 12, No. 6)** offers some highlights of Alexander Astin's collection of 30 years of data on American college students, and suggests reasons why such statistical analysis is "meaningful to the teaching professor." In addition, a particularly helpful article suggests some practical and efficient

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### TA Helpline

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

## Tapped Out – The Diary of a New TA

by Rupert Peals\*

With this month's column begins the odyssey of a new TA sent out to confront that complex conglomeration known as the Rutgers undergraduate population. Some of the "insights" found in these lines may strike *TapTalk* readers as familiar and unoriginal, but part of the process of becoming a successful (a euphemism for "still standing") TA is the realization that one's confusion, frustration, anxiety, and exhaustion are not individual phenomena but are produced and reproduced by the institutional and pedagogical demands placed on teachers, new and old alike. Please bear with me as I struggle towards that realization.

The above having been said, I submit that the first stage of teaching is an overwhelmingly narcissistic one. For me the process began with helpful orientation (or "indoctrination," as some of my more cynical colleagues might term it) sessions provided by the TA Project and by my academic department. At this juncture, any knowledge about my students was necessarily abstract: they would likely talk and act in such and such a way; they would likely produce work ranging in quality from X to Y; I would evaluate them by applying the following rubric. I had no real understanding of how to deal with actual

students, nor did I have a "feel" for the classroom yet.

Not suprisingly, then, the first day of class possessed an almost surreal quality. This was undoubtedly due to the clash between my hypothetical notion of the student body and the particular student bodies that stirred uncomfortably before me in their undersized desks. The weight of my *responsibility* towards each student struck me with unanticipated force, and it resulted in an episode of intense self-consciousness. I spoke, and simultaneously listened intently to the quality of my own voice; it sounded tinny and unimpressive, as if we were listening to a cheap recording of some moron reciting a list of utterly ridiculous statements. I scanned my audience for indications of how I was being received, and when no such indications were forthcoming I offered up my own insane interpretations: the man in the big pants seems depressed; the woman with the "Friends" haircut clearly wants me dead, etc. I drank water constantly in a vain attempt to wash away the foul sludge that seemed to be accumulating on the roof of my mouth. By the end of class I was frantically trying to recall the "5 warning signs of angina" discussed on a recent newscast.

The anguished self-examination produced by my initial

\* Rupert Peals is a pseudonym.

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## TA Bookshelf

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ways of using Powerpoint in the classroom

### College Teaching:

The **Summer 1998 (Vol. 46, No. 3)** issue contains a special section on Science and Math. The featured article, by Sue V. Rosser, explores the consequences of ignoring gender and race when assigning group work. Notable among articles outside of the special section is Marlowe A. Miller's "Death Gets a B: Addressing Personal Disclosures in Students' Writing," which deals with the difficulties of having students successfully incorporate personal experience into their writing.

## Tapped Out

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teaching experience was duly deflated by the next class meeting. In lieu of derision and mockery I was greeted with mostly blank stares; some students were new, but those who weren't had almost no recollection of the previous class. In fact, most of them had lost the syllabus and/or forgotten my name. It was the first week of college and they had more pressing concerns than critiquing the minutiae of their instructors' performances. They knew how to be students, and they were fairly certain that I was a teacher. Having cleared my first existential hurdle, I was ready to engage in the task at hand.

## October



- 6 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop  
25 Bishop Place, 10am
- 12 Columbus Day  
Thanksgiving (Canada)
- 16 Deadline for Teaching/Learning  
1999 Conference proposals
- 21 Workshop: Preparing a CV  
RSC 411, 6pm
- 22 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop  
25 Bishop Place, 1pm
- 25 Daylight Savings Time ends
- 28 Workshop: Careers in Academe  
25 Bishop Place, noon
- 31 Halloween

### COMING IN NOVEMBER

- 9 Dissertation/Thesis Workshop
- 12 Workshop on Academic  
Integrity: Issues for TAs
- 24 Dissertation/Thesis Workshop

## Teaching Assistant Project

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