

Fostering a Dialogue

The student/teacher dialogue can be an intellectually stimulating and highly rewarding experience for both parties. Students who are encouraged to enter into a dialogue with teacher, text, and classmates, who learn to think critically about a subject, and who are shown ways of expressing and deepening their knowledge will, at the end of the semester, have much more to take away than just a few memorized facts and a grade for the course. The role of the teacher is to begin a dialogue, not to preempt one, to show the students how, not what, to think.

Creating a dialogue goes much deeper than merely having an occasional discussion class. Student involvement can never be taken for granted. The teacher must set an example, by communicating well--openly, coherently, and enthusiastically--and involving all students in confronting the issues of the course. Students must learn to speak to each other, to respect and consider the ideas of their classmates as well as the teacher.

Students should be encouraged from the first day to be active participants in the class. For some teachers, this can mean making the class a forum for informal discussions. Others encourage more formal participation, assigning each student a report on a topic of interest. This does not necessarily have to consume vast amounts of time. If, for instance, you will be spending a week or two on a novel or a chapter from a text, assign individual students to look closely at certain key terms or unfamiliar concepts; then, when the class is about to begin the discussion on this point, have the student give a brief report--sometimes one or two minutes will be enough--and then have the rest of the class question the presenter. If the topic is one that has aroused much controversy, assign different students to report on the arguments of each faction in the dispute.

Brief written assignments on topics relevant to the class are useful but limited in their usefulness *unless* the teacher responds to the student's effort. This entails more than a grade. Challenge

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Alexander Library Closings

The Alexander Library will be closed for renovations during the winter intersession, between December 22nd and January 18th. The Douglass and Kilmer libraries will be open between January 4th and January 17th, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and materials from the Alexander library will be available by requesting materials at one of these two libraries. If you have any questions, contact Kevin Mulcahy, Head of Reference at Alexander (7041).

Students may also use Princeton's Firestone Library, but they may not borrow books from it. In order to acquire an access card to the Firestone, students must bring a Rutgers I.D. and a photo I.D. to the Access Office, Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. For further information, call (609) 258-5737.

Alexander will also be closed from March 12th through March 22nd (spring break) and from May 31st to June 13th. Keep this in mind as you prepare your syllabus for next semester.

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lazy ideas and sloppy logic. Give the students alternate arguments and have them respond to these arguments. One philosophy TA has students write out their own argument for a problem, such as the possibility of the existence of God. He then responds personally to each student, pointing out weaknesses, sending the students to other writers who support or reject this argument. The student must then reply again, using the sources suggested by the teacher. Usually, before the semester ends, student and teacher have had three or four exchanges of ideas. The teacher has a good notion of the way the student thinks, reasons, and writes, and the students learn to be critical of their own accepted ideas and understand how to construct a coherent argument. This is, of course, time-consuming but rewarding in the end.

Tests and exams certainly seem more dictum than dialogue to students, but tests should also

serve to further the dialogue. A brief comment like "good work" or "this is much improved" gives the student encouragement but does not really tell what is good and what is not. Choose one problem or answer and show in detail what worked well and what could benefit from a different approach. Rewrite a paragraph to show the student other ways of constructing the argument. The time spent in grading this test will probably be rewarded by the improvement on the next one.

The perfect opportunity to expand the dialogue between you and your students is during your office hours. When students raise issues in class that are interesting but off the topic, invite the student and others who are interested to come to your office to pursue the point. Demonstrate your interest in the issue, convey your own enthusiasm, and try to get the students to take the issue out of the classroom.

Encourage active reading. Don't just assign a chapter to be read. Have the students submit questions on or criticisms of the ideas presented. A student's one or two line comment on a diagram or an illustration will give you an indication of what the student finds of interest or what problems they are experiencing with the text. Encourage students to

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[EVERY MONTH IN THIS SPACE A QUESTION OF GENERAL INTEREST RECEIVED ON THE TA HELPLINE (932-11TA) WILL BE ANSWERED BRIEFLY.]

What do I do if I suspect students are cheating on an exam?

Unless you are **sure**, you should not confront the students, but neither should you ignore them. Prevention is best. Make it extremely difficult for students to cheat. Separate them as far as is possible; put strict limits on what they may bring into the exam with them. Do not reuse old tests. Make up several different versions of the exam, with questions in different order. Tell students before the exam begins that anyone caught cheating may fail.

If a student appears to be looking at notes or at another student's exam, move closer to the student and watch carefully. Make the student aware that you are watching. If you are certain that the student is cheating, take the exam away from the student and ask him/her to leave. Also confiscate any notes or other illicit materials. Report any incidents of cheating to the course supervisor or the department chair.

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

On January 29, 1993, TAs in Engineering will attend an afternoon workshop, "Aspects of Communication: A Practical Workshop for TAs in Engineering." The workshop will focus on ways of improving interaction with students to maximize their learning potential--in the lab, in the classroom, when designing tests and commenting on them, during office hours, and in other teaching situations. The event will employ a panel and videotapes; audience participation will be encouraged.

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On November 5th and 12th, groups of TAs from Political Science met with Miles Yoshimura at the Alexander Library to learn how to use the library as an undergraduate teaching tool by working to integrate the library's resources into their teaching. Mr. Yoshimura discussed the library needs of undergraduates and the limits of their knowledge about the library. He offered suggestions to TAs on how to plan a library research project for the class and stressed the fact that the only way for undergraduates (or, indeed, anyone) to learn how to use the new electronic research tools is through hands-on experience.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

Learning Disabled Students

According to federal law, universities must make reasonable accommodations for all students with disabilities. This does not apply only to students with obvious physical disabilities and so cannot be solved just by building some ramps or providing transportation. For students with learning disabilities, such reasonable accommodations can range from permitting the use of a tape recorder in class for taping lectures to extending the amount of time allowed for completing an exam.

Students who have learning disabilities should notify their teachers early in the semester. It is useful on the first day of class to suggest that students who may have difficulties keeping up with the class, for whatever reason, come and discuss the possible problems with you early in the semester so that together you may work out a way of dealing with the problem. Encourage students to come and speak to you. (Be ready. Students may take this opportunity to inform you of other responsibilities, such as family or work, that could interfere with timely completion of work or of a physical, emotional, or mental problem that causes them difficulties at times. Be as understanding and supportive as you can.)

If a student tells you that he or she has a learning disability, you should ask if the problem has been documented. Some students (mis)diagnose themselves, others base their belief on an off-hand comment by a grade school teacher. Unless the student has some recent documentation, you should be wary of claims of learning disabilities. If you have questions about this, it is best to contact the dean of the student's college to find out how to proceed. The student may need to be referred to someone in the Graduate School of Education who is an expert in learning disabilities to determine whether the student really does have a problem.

If students have problems in certain areas, such as note- or test-taking, they might benefit from some of the programs at the newly-opened Learning Resource Centers. Although their programs are not focused directly on students with learning disabilities, the Learning Resource Centers do offer assistance that may be of great value to students with learning disabilities, such as study skills, test taking, or stress reduction. Because the Learning Resource Center adjusts sessions to the rate of the individual learner, all students can benefit from attending these workshops.

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA

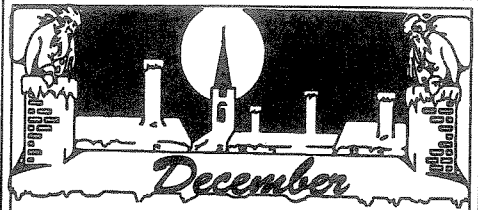
Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30-4:30

Dialogue

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challenge the text, to take the ideas of the text one step further. Some teachers have students keep a journal as they read, asking them to write down their response to the readings, positive or negative, and, everyday, a few students read out their responses before the class begins. Make connections between the required texts and others that students may find of interest.

By working to open up all lines of communication with students, a teacher can feel confident that every student will have a chance to participate in this dialogue of learning.



- 10 Regular classes end.
Monday classes meet.
11 Reading period
14 Fall exams begin.
21 Fall exams end.
Change of Incomplete
for fall term, 1991, must
be received by the Office
of Academic & Student
Services by this date.
25 Christmas
31 New Year's Eve

*January
1993*

- 1 New Year's Day
18 Martin Luther King, Jr.'s
birthday celebrated.
19 Spring term begins.

Teaching Assistant Project

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