

## He Said/She Said

Recognizing individual learning styles is crucial for effective classroom teaching. Just as all teachers have a unique style of teaching, students have different ways of learning. Teachers able to identify the diverse learning styles of their students can capitalize on individual differences and help all in the class to succeed. Problems arise when teachers do not perceive a need to vary the format of a class to capitalize upon the individual strengths of the students. This may seem like an impossible task, given the fact that classes are made up of such a variety of learners; however, by making some general distinctions among students, teachers can begin to treat students more as individuals, less as "generic" students.

Sensitivity to gender- or culturally-defined differences in the use of language is one area that cries out for more attention. The gender factor, for example, has been found to be an important variable in the ways that people learn. A recent book, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, by Deborah Tannen, explores the different ways that men and women use language in our culture. According to Tannen, men and women have distinct styles of communication that may, for women, mitigate against their success in a classroom. Although Professor Tannen's theory seems at times to fall back a bit heavily on traditional male/female stereotypes, it may be usefully applied in a general way to what happens in a typical classroom.

Educators have questioned why women who attend all-female colleges are oftentimes more successful than women who attend coed ones; what happens in a classroom that is composed totally of women that does not happen in mixed sex classrooms? According to a number of studies (verified by observations of numerous teachers), male students tend to dominate classroom discussions--not always, of course, but more so than women. Tannen attributes this outspokenness to clearcut differences in the ways that men and women learn to use language as children in their sex-separate peer groups, with boys operating primarily in hierarchial groups, girls more typically in one-to-one relationships. Boys uses language in a public way and as a means of gaining power in a group while girls use language more privately and to bond single rela-

## Creating a Teaching Portfolio

TAs looking ahead to the day when they will be going on job interviews should consider putting together a teaching portfolio so that they are able to demonstrate to prospective employers not only that they have taught but that they have taught *well*. In a tight job market, candidates who can provide extra evidence of their teaching skills have an edge over those who can't.

The teaching portfolio should provide a profile of you as a teacher. Include sample syllabi and lesson plans that you have created for various courses to demonstrate your ability to organize material and focus it in an interesting and useful way. Handouts you have created to supplement courses are also valuable indicators of your method of approaching a class.

Evaluations of your teaching by others should also be included in this package. If you have never been evaluated, ask a faculty member to observe your class and then write an evaluation. TAs who directly assist a faculty member in a large lecture should ask that teacher to provide an evaluation at the

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tionships. In an article in the June 19, 1991, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Teachers' Classroom Strategies Should Recognize That Men and Women Use Language Differently," Tannen describes the two major conversational styles she discerns in Americans: "Many women bond by talking about troubles, and many men bond by exchanging playful insults and put-downs, and other sorts of verbal sparring."

How does childhood behavior translate into classroom strategies? First, teachers whose classes are based on a student's ability to read material and critique its weaknesses may be biased in favor of male students. Many women would resist "attacking" an author's ideas because they perceive this kind of discussion as hostile. (It should be stressed that such patterns of behavior may also be culturally specific, so TAs with foreign students in their classes may find that such reticence in open discussion is not only gender specific but is

also culturally determined.) Secondly, for men, speaking out in class and arguing with each other is a way of gaining power over the group, of asserting one's position in the hierarchical structure of the class, and thus gaining acceptance if not leadership. According to Tannen, this "ritual opposition is antithetical to the way most females learn and like to interact. It is not that females don't fight, but that they don't fight for fun. They don't *ritualize* opposition."

One way teachers can begin to address this issue is by observing patterns of participation in all of their classes. If there seems to be an equal balance of participation between men and women, TAs may not have to do much more than consider how to involve the few shy students of either sex who are not participating in the class. If, however, after analyzing the dynamics of a classroom, a teacher discovers that there is an obvious imbalance between the level of male and female response, it is time to change methods a bit. One way of encouraging female students to participate more openly and fully is to break the class down into smaller groups. Many students who feel uncomfortable expressing their ideas to large groups will feel more relaxed, less threatened, in a smaller group. TAs might want to experiment with same-gender groups or even same-culture groups to see if the

quality and type of student response varies.

Consider the way that discussions work in your classroom. What kind of behavior do you encourage, either through verbal or non-verbal cues? Do students raise their hands before speaking or do they just shout out the answers? Too casual participation often inhibits the quieter students; when students just call out answers, more aggressive students are rewarded. In a classroom where discussion is more conversational than confrontational, where ideas are not strongly and immediately challenged, Tannen suggests that women would be more likely to speak up; where class discussions become sharp debates, men will most likely dominate. (As always, try to be aware of your own prejudices; take care that all students are treated fairly, that you do not subtly indicate that you value contributions from one sex or ethnic group more highly than others.)

Once again, these are generalizations that are useful insofar as they offer a new perspective from which to view a class. Teachers have a responsibility to evaluate and judge the dynamics of each class individually, to consider ways the class could be better conducted, to determine acceptable levels of student response for that class and to work so that all members of the class meet that level.

*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 Tuesday, February 4th, the Department of Geography held a round-table/dinner discussion about cheating in geography courses, and methods to use to combat it. Professors Neil Smith and Fritz Nelson were the leaders of the discussion.

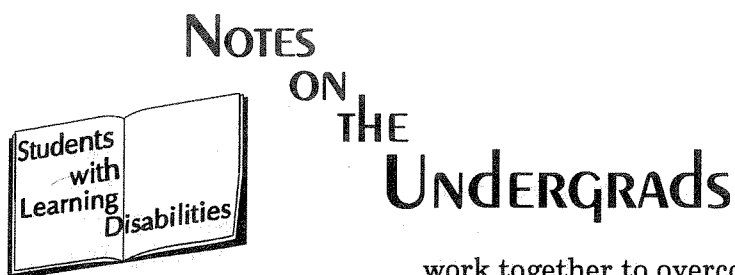
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On Wednesday, February 19th, the Graduate Program in Economics offered a session conducted by Dr. Paul Hart, Assistant Dean, Office of Residence Life, Rutgers, Newark. This program was intended to familiarize TAs with developmental issues that our students deal with day to day.

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The Language Labs, the department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, and the department of Spanish and Portuguese sponsored a workshop, "Teaching with Technology: Technology and its Uses in the Foreign Language Classroom," on Saturday, March 7th, from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the College Avenue Language Lab.

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Today, any institution that receives federal funding must make its programs accessible to those with disabilities, so Rutgers, as a recipient of such funding, is obligated by law to comply. TAs, therefore, have a responsibility to see that all students in their classes have an equal opportunity to succeed. In many but not all instances, TAs will be able to visually identify students who have a physical disability that may require some special accommodation; in other cases, most notably students with learning disabilities, TAs will have difficulty in determining a problem unless the students themselves inform you. It is important, therefore, to try to elicit this information at the very beginning of the semester.

It is essential to foster an atmosphere in the classroom that makes it easy for the students to come forward with information about their disabilities. At the beginning of every semester, TAs should offer a general invitation to all students, urging them to come see them in their office if they feel that they may have any problems at all in keeping up with the class. Tell them to come and speak about the worries they might have--class participation, test-taking, note-taking, etc.--so that you can

work together to overcome these problems. Students must understand that you want them to succeed and feel comfortable in seeking your assistance and cooperation.

If a TA suspects that a student's problems in the class are because of a learning disability, he/she should discuss this with a faculty member or a staff member who has experience with such disabilities. TAs should not take it upon themselves to diagnose the student; leave this to the experts.

When students do come for assistance, treat them sensitively and helpfully. Many of their requests will be simple ones. They may only need your permission to tape-record the class, or they may require more time than other students to complete labs or exams. If the student needs some special accommodation, you should contact the student's collegiate coordinator for Disabled Student Services. Every undergraduate college has its own coordinator, and you can find out his or her name by calling the dean of the college or the school, or by contacting the Office of Student Rights Compliance. With the strong support of the TA, students with disabilities should find the university a less threatening, more hospitable place.

## Portfolio

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end of the semester. Another method of evaluation is to have your class videotaped (call ext. 7034 and ask for Beth or Jim to set up an appointment) and ask a faculty member to view the tape with you, discuss it, and then provide a written evaluation. You may also want to

include student evaluations of your teaching if your program conducts such evaluations.

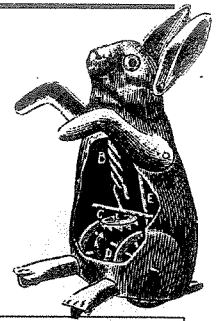
If you attend any workshops, give papers, or complete any courses related to teaching, include proof of this in your packet. Strong evidence of an on-going interest in teaching may make you stand out as a candidate.

In programs that do not yet have a process for organizing student portfolios, TAs may wish to work with fellow TAs to come up with the best system of evaluation for that program, or work with the TA coordinator in that program to devise the most practical way of involving all TAs and faculty members in this process.

**TA Helpline**  
**Call 932-11TA**

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

Coming  
in  
April



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| 2  | Last day for filing a diploma application for a May degree.                                |
| 5  | Daylight Savings Time begins   |
| 12 | Palm Sunday  |
| 14 | Requests for course withdrawals, including changes to "audit status" will not be approved. |
| 17 | Good Friday  |
| 18 | Passover begins  |
| 19 | Easter Sunday  |
| 22 | Secretaries Day  |

### Teaching Assistant Project

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