

## Mid-Semester Evaluations

Most TAs find that teaching well requires extensive preparation and hard work. Teaching, especially during the first few weeks of a semester, can be a humbling experience; the novice soon realizes that truly effective teaching lies somewhere in the future, the result of trial and error coupled with a commitment to honing one's pedagogical methods and approach. It requires finding out *how* others teach and *why* they teach the way they do. TAs have to be flexible and willing to experiment and learn (see announcements of upcoming workshops for TAs in *TapTalk*). One significant way to improve teaching is to take advantage of evaluation procedures. TAs can ask other TAs or professors to observe one of their classes and then afterwards discuss their perceptions of the class and their advice about how to proceed. Students can also be the source of valuable constructive criticism; while TAs are usually required to administer end-of-semester student evaluations, they should also consider making up their own evaluation forms that correspond more precisely to the specific concerns of the course they are teaching.

Particularly helpful to beginning instructors are mid-semester reviews. Why wait until the end of the semester to find out that a routine course activity or requirement is resented or thought ineffective? An opportunity to modify assignments or paper topics may make the second half of the semester work more smoothly than the first. Asking for reviews mid-semester, however, can be a risk. If the evaluations are harsher than expected, one's confidence might be shaken. Also, having to shift gears mid-semester requires additional thought and work. Overcoming these difficulties, however, can be worthwhile since the more feedback a TA receives, the quicker he or she will learn how to teach well. Certainly, the end-of-semester evaluations will reflect the extra effort a TA has applied to the course. An important step when handing out evaluations is to assure student anonymity.

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## Upcoming TA Project and GS-NB Workshops

The Teaching Assistant Project's workshop series, "How to Teach a Class Solo for the First Time," began on February 26th with a session called "Establishing Goals and Designing a Syllabus." All teaching workshops take place at the Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, CAC, at 12 p.m., and they are being run by experienced TA and TAP staff member, Beth Griech-Polelle (History).

The second workshop, "The First Class: Establishing Authority," will be held on March 13th and will explore the ways in which TAs can manage to be both liked and respected and can exercise the necessary authority without being either a push-over or a tyrant. The workshop scheduled for March 24th, "Effective Teaching in Large Courses," will suggest ways that TAs can foster student discussion and participation in courses whose size seems to preclude such exchanges.

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# Mid-Semester Evaluations

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Obviously, students will not be entirely honest if they feel that their grade will be jeopardized by frank comments regarding their teacher's inadequacies or failings. One solution is to let students take an evaluation form home so that they can type up their responses and thus feel secure that their handwriting will not be identified. Or, an evaluation form that only requires students to circle answers—multiple choice style—is another solution. A further option is to have an outside person administer the evaluation and collate the results; students can be informed that their TA will never see the actual evaluations. This outside evaluator can also speak with the class as a group about the TA's teaching.

What are the right questions to ask? What sorts of questions will elicit useful

critique? The first thing for a TA to do is to figure out what he or she wants to know. Evaluations can include questions about particular assignments and what students think about them, or, as is found on the sample evaluation on page three of this newsletter, a more comprehensive evaluation can be administered. This sample evaluation covers the following: students' feelings about their ability to successfully fulfill course requirements (and be rewarded accordingly); their judgment as to the worthiness and relative difficulty of these requirements; their estimation of the TA's overall teaching style and effectiveness of methods; their suggestions for course improvements.

The student evaluation form on page three is a sample that can be used as it is, or it can provide a model upon which to build. Unless a TA chooses the multiple choice route, an evaluation form should encourage students to be as specific and detailed as possible in their responses. For example, the first question on the sample evaluation asks students to *explain* their judgment regarding the difficulty of the course. If many students find the course "easy," is this because the instructor is

deemed brilliant or because he or she is underestimating his or her students' abilities and should consider making the course more challenging? If most students find the course difficult, is this because they are unable to fathom the course's aims or because they are being fruitfully challenged? If learning something specific is a high priority, target the issue with a variety of questions which broach it from different angles.

It is always a good idea to end an evaluation form with an open question, such as the one found on the sample. Because it is not really possible to anticipate all student concerns, students should be given the opportunity to address issues that their instructor has not. Of course, choosing to administer mid-semester evaluations is a challenge. Criticism is never easily digested, no matter how constructive it is, and the fact is that there may be a few cruel and unusual criticisms or observations in the bunch. But the benefits outweigh the momentary chagrin—the more feedback a TA gets, the faster he or she will improve in teaching.

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

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The Quarterly Journal: *College Teaching* is published by Heldref Publications (a division of a nonprofit educational foundation), 1319 18th St., NW, Washington DC 20036-1802; annual subscription rate for individuals is \$33.50 (\$60 for institutions); for subscription orders call toll-free 1-800-365-9753.

Most articles in *College Teaching* present the fruits of hands-on teaching experience. The contributors, almost all college instructors, describe and discuss specific methods and innovations in teaching which they find to be particularly useful or effective. *College Teaching* is an excellent resource for TAs wishing to enhance or expand their teaching skills or methodological repertoire. Contributors range across disciplines, so the journal is a worthwhile investment for most instructors. The journal periodically devotes an entire issue to a special subject (Spring 1997's theme is *Giving First-Year Students What They Deserve*); but, most often, it contains articles from a variety of perspectives. A sampling from recent issues are "Quantitative Reasoning: Argument with Data," "Sonnet Writing and Experiential Teaching," "Breathing New Life Into Research Papers," "Cultivating the Arts of Engagement," and "Classes are Groups: Thinking Sociologically About Teaching."

## Sample Questions for a Mid-Semester Evaluation

The mid-semester evaluation is a useful way of discovering whether you and your students have the same impression of how the course is going and gives you an opportunity to make adjustments if they are needed. Leave lots of white space to encourage students to answer at length.

By answering the following questions in as much detail as possible, you will help me improve the remaining weeks of the semester. Please answer as fully and honestly as possible, and use the back of this form if necessary.

1. Do you find the subject matter of this course easy, average, difficult? Explain.
2. At this point, what grade do you expect to get in this class? On what do you base this expectation?
3. Have you been able to keep up with the reading assignments in this class? If not, approximately what percentage of the readings have you been able to complete?
4. How much time do you spend preparing for this class outside of regular class hours?
5. Do you feel that you can ask questions or make comments in this class? Explain.
6. Is the class material presented in a well-organized manner?
7. Can you relate the lectures to the outside readings?
8. Are you able to understand what I am saying? Do I enunciate clearly? Do I speak too rapidly?
9. What suggestions could you give to improve the class?
10. Add any additional comments you would like to make about the class. Use the back of the form if necessary.

## Workshops

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Finally, at the April 3rd workshop on "Motivating Students," Griech-Polelle will discuss the problem of motivation which entails an understanding and convergence of instructor and student goals.

In addition to the above, the Graduate School-New Brunswick will host a tax workshop on March 12 which will be especially useful for graduate students holding fellowships or assistantships. This workshop takes place at the Graduate Student Lounge, CAC, from 7:00 p.m.

to 10:00 p.m., and it will be run by Philip Mischner of H&R Block. The tax advice in this workshop will be directed towards United States citizens and Permanent Residents; the International Center will present workshops for international students on March 4th and March 31st (call 932-7015 for times and places).

Students who wish more information about any of these workshops should contact the Teaching Assistant Project at 932-7747.



## March

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| 12 | Tax Workshop for Graduate Students<br>7 p.m. Graduate Student Lounge, CAC |
| 17 | St. Patrick's Day   |
| 13 | The First Class: Establishing Authority<br>12 noon, 25 Bishop Place, CAC  |
| 24 | Effective Teaching in Large Courses<br>12 noon, 25 Bishop Place, CAC      |
| 26 | Fulbright Information Meeting, 4 p.m., Call 932-7747 to register.         |

### COMING Events April 1998

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| 3 | Motivating Students<br>12 noon, 25 Bishop Place, CAC |
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## Teaching Assistant Project

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