

On the Ethics of Grading

Assigning a grade to a student entails making distinctions that, very often, have underlying ethical implications. Most teachers would agree that the single most important factor in any grading policy is fairness, but consensus is not always readily reached about the fairest way to proceed in a specific situation. The ethical dilemmas that most TAs will face are not major incidents with immediate and dramatic consequences but rather involve small, private decisions that directly affect only one or two people, but these are the decisions that may haunt a conscientious teacher for years to come.

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between unethical behavior and irresponsible or slipshod behavior. Most teachers would agree that it is unethical for a faculty member to assign grades in a biased manner. To raise or lower a student's grade because of personal likes/dislikes would violate any basic code of professional conduct. Other less clear-cut situations, however, where decisions are made in haste, carelessly, or within the context of a busy schedule, may lead to ethically questionable practices, some of which may seem accepted policy. Is it ethical to give student papers only a cursory glance before grading? to assign grades without giving students an idea of how to improve their work? to leave all grading to a graduate assistant with little or no supervision? Is it ethical for a faculty member to tell a TA not to fail students?

Some ethical predicaments arise from the empathy that teachers develop with their students. Consider, for example, the teacher who has extraneous information about one of the students in the class--some difficulty that s/he is experiencing in life. Perhaps the teacher has learned through the student's papers or has heard from one of the other students that someone in the student's family has been diagnosed with a serious illness. As the semester progresses and the situation at home for this student worsens, the quality of the student's work plummets--from "A" early in the semester down to where the student is in imminent danger of failing. Should the teacher give this student a "gift" at the end of the semester, a passing grade that will allow the student to sal-

(continued on page 2)

List of Workshop Topics Compiled

The Teaching Assistant Project has compiled a list of possible workshops for discipline-specific TA training. This list, recently mailed to all program directors, contains suggestions for more than sixty workshop topics that faculty or administrators at the university have agreed to present. The TA Project can help organize discipline-specific training programs by matching a chosen workshop title with the name of a presenter.

The range of topics suggested is wide, from "How to" sessions (how to plan a course, handle difficult students, evaluate student performance, etc.) to discussions of ethical issues (ethics in science, academic freedom, use of animals in testing, etc.). A number of workshops on creative teaching techniques have been suggested (helping adults learn, dealing with a large lecture hall, the case method, leading an exciting recitation, etc.).

Anyone interested in obtaining the full list of workshops may contact Beth Griech at 25 Bishop Place, CAC (ext. 7034).

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(continued from page 1)



vage the semester? Is it fair to the other students, some of whom may also be experiencing difficulties at home but difficulties which the teacher has not discovered?

Other ethical crises may arise when our students' ideas in some way violate our very strong personal feelings. Consider a class where, for the final paper, students are required to research a social issue and present both sides of the argument. The students ask if they may be allowed to present their own opinion at the end of the paper without penalty to their grade. The teacher, assuming that the opinion will be informed by the weight of scholarship that the student has read and evaluated carefully, agrees. If a student writes an "A" paper but then ends the paper with a virulently racist diatribe, what can the teacher do? If it is the final paper, there is generally not enough time to guide the student to additional sources that will demonstrate to the student his/

her misconceptions nor is there time to engage the class as a whole in a discussion of the issues. To lower the student's grade because his/her opinions are offensive seems patently unfair, yet to give the paper an "A" seems somehow to sanction the ideas it contains. The teacher may decide in the future to give stricter guidance to students who wish to add their voice to the discussion or avoid having personal opinions aired in papers altogether. How best could a teacher deal with the immediate situation? What is proper and ethical?

Students who challenge the teacher after grades are assigned may make the teacher uncomfortable and uncertain of how to proceed. What should a teacher do about students who come to the office with an exam or paper begging for a grade change? What if students threaten suicide if you fail them? How can a teacher know when to take such students seriously enough to get them the necessary help? Can a teacher in good conscience change the grade just to get rid of a troublesome student?

Clearly, some of these situations are easier to make a judgment about than others. The best solution, of course, for TAs confronting such ethical decisions is to consult with members of the faculty in their own program. They will be

I just found out that I'll be teaching my own class next semester. I have never had this kind of responsibility before, and I want to do a good job. Where do I begin?

Probably the best place to begin is to speak to someone who has already taught the course. An experienced TA or faculty member should be able to give you information that will help you select a text and plan the syllabus. Try to find out about the kinds of students that typically take the class--are they majoring in the field? what kind of preparation do they have? what is their level of commitment to the class?

If you must select and order the textbooks, try to do so as early as possible so that they will be in the bookstore by the time classes begin. And, the sooner you decide upon a text, the sooner you can begin to design the syllabus. When designing the syllabus, keep in mind your goals for the class and make sure that your assignments further those goals. After you complete a preliminary syllabus, show it to people who have taught the class before and ask for their input. Consider all suggestions and revise accordingly. By being prepared and knowing to some degree what can be expected from the students, you will have more confidence when you face them on the first day.

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

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(continued on page 4)

IN THE PROGRAMS

On Saturday, November 20th, approximately fifty-three TAs from all **foreign language** programs attended a workshop on "Video in the Foreign Language Classroom"/"Creative Teaching Strategies." The morning video session was conducted by Franz-Joseph Wehage, Chair of the Modern Languages Department at Muskingum College, New Concord, Ohio. In the afternoon, Marion Yudow, Director of the FAS Language Labs, focused on strategies for effective oral practice of grammatical structures and innovative methods for integrating literature into language classes.

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA

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

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

Undergraduates sometimes complain that their teachers do not understand them. This is not merely a problem of the level of difficulty of the subject, but, according to the students, more a problem of the teacher misreading the class. Teachers make assumptions about the students' level of knowledge, sometimes under- but more often over-estimating their background in and understanding of the topic. Students believe that some teachers are just incapable of speaking to them on their own level.

To avoid this complaint from students, TAs should try to effect changes in their own and their students' behavior. First, they should reflect upon their own behavior towards their students and adjust their attitudes and teaching methods as needed. Second, they must educate their students to ask questions effectively.

In examining their own behavior, TAs should ask themselves a few questions about their attitude towards their students and towards teaching. Are they, in their teaching, trying to help students learn or are they concerned with showing off the depth and range of their own knowledge? Do they welcome questions from students or do they look upon them as intrusions on their lecture? Are they listening to their students'

questions, openly and with respect? Do they search for new ways to explain material, simplifying it when possible, varying the types of examples? An effective teacher, in planning lessons, considers the real students in the class and their various styles of learning; they do not aim at an imaginary ideal class of brilliant and highly motivated learners.

By helping students to formulate effective questions, TAs will be teaching them a skill that will be of value in all of their classes. Try to get the students to ask specific questions. If students ask broad or very general questions, turn the tables and ask the students questions that will narrow down the focus of the question until you can pinpoint the specific area with which they are having difficulties. After answering a question, ask students to explain, in their own words, what you have told them. Do not let them just parrot your explanation. If they are unable to do this, it is your turn to try to find a new way of explaining it to them.

By taking an active role and making question and answer sessions more than perfunctory exercises, TAs can help their students learn and avoid the charge that they are out of touch with their students' needs.

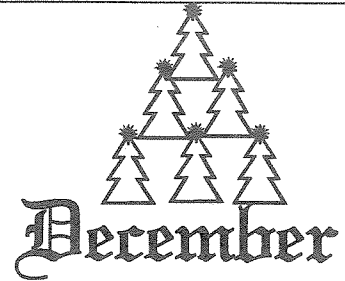
Ethics

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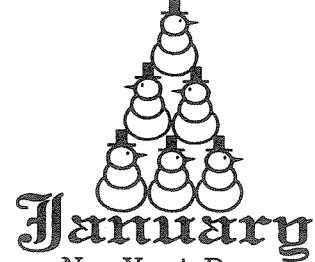
informed about university and departmental policy and understand when exceptions to the policy are warranted. Remember too that most disciplines have their own code of conduct, often published yearly in their major journals, that can act as a guide by giving the principles of conduct expected of members of the group. Professional codes are, of course, not definitive and generally give only basic guidelines, but they are a starting point for creating a realistic ethical code. No two people will agree totally about the proper actions in every situation (or, indeed, as the examples above show, whether something is even an ethical

issue or just a lack of conscientiousness), so TAs should be encouraged to open up a dialogue with others about the ramifications of a given ethical choice.

In the end, however, ethical decisions must be individual and personal matters. Guided by the experience of fellow teachers and their professional code, TAs must stake out their own moral high ground. With honest reflection, sincere respect for students, and a desire to do the right thing, most TAs will be able to find answers they can live with for their ethical dilemmas.



- 8 Hanukkah begins at sundown.
- 10 Last day of classes.
- 14 Fall exams begin.
- 21 Fall exams end.
- 22 Winter Recess begins.
- 25 Christmas



- 1 New Year's Day
- 17 Winter recess ends.
- 18 Spring semester begins.

Teaching Assistant Project

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