

Teaching Styles

Many TAs, particularly those in their first semester in the classroom, are so focused on keeping up with the workload and learning some basic teaching techniques that they have little time to consider their teaching styles. To think about "style" is to address several key questions: how do you understand the student-teacher relationship? Based on this understanding, how do you carry yourself in front of the class? How do you successfully merge your own personality traits with your pedagogical and professional obligations? How do you balance formality and friendliness in the most productive way?

The first thing to remember is that you already have a teaching style, whether you know it or not; what's important is that you are aware of your own presence in front of the class and what you might do to change it. Developing a teaching style depends, first of all, on the kind of teaching in which you are engaged. TAs who work with a faculty member as part of a larger course will undoubtedly have different considerations than TAs who are solely responsible for an entire class. In the former situation one works necessarily within parameters established by the supervising instructor, and there is generally less room for improvisation or personal touches. If your style contradicts or undermines that of the supervising faculty member, difficulties may arise. In the latter situation there is usually more freedom to experiment, and, of course, more responsibility.

There are numerous written and online resources available to advise TAs on how to adopt a useful and comfortable teaching style. Most tend to advocate a position that falls somewhere between the "adopt-a-persona" strategy and the "just be yourself" strategy. Both strategies point to issues critical for the question of teaching styles. Teaching is, in many respects, a performance; for eighty minutes you have to be "on," to be confident, articulate, enthusiastic, and able to manage the classroom, and the ability to take on a role or identity somewhat removed from your everyday self can be helpful in this

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The Techno-File: E-mail follow-up

Last month's article addressed the use of e-mail for instructional purposes, and concluded with some strategies to deal with a potential overload of student-generated e-mail. There are further resources available that make processing and managing large amounts of e-mail much easier. If you use desktop e-mail software (like Pegasus), online e-mail services (like Hotmail), or read your mail through Netscape or another web browser, you can make use of filters that will separate incoming messages by various criteria (subject heading, sender address, etc.) and place them in designated folders. After asking students to write the course number in the subject heading of their messages, for instance, you could set up a filter to place all incoming course-related e-mail in a specific folder. Filtering allows for easy organization, lessens the chances that a message may be "lost" or overlooked, and consolidates your course-related e-mail into one manageable block. You might use similar filters to organize mail related to research, administrative duties, etc. Filtering options can also be used to block

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endeavor. The persona strategy becomes detrimental when it increases your anxiety or discomfort or when it becomes a barrier behind which you hide and/or refuse to accept direct responsibility for the class.

Strategies that advocate “just being yourself” often invoke terms such as “natural,” and “honest,” which are both useful guidelines to consider when developing an effective teaching style. Students can easily sense a faked or forced personality, and may interpret it as disingenuous or manipulative. The accompanying danger is that in “being yourself” you forget or ignore institutional realities; if your own attitudes don’t necessarily accord with the task at hand, an awkward situation may develop. Better, then, to present the version of yourself that can best fulfill your duties and responsibilities as a TA.

Another approach to the performance/self question is addressed quite effectively by the critics Jane Tompkins and

Gerald Graff in their contributions to *Changing Classroom Practices* (NCTE, 1994). Tompkins suggests that academics often feel compelled to perform their own intellectual prowess in the classroom, a practice that often alienates the very students we want to engage. She advocates a teaching style in which the instructor “remove[s] [her]self from center stage and get[s] out of the students’ way, to pay more attention to them and less to [her]self” (178). Graff counters by arguing that “we go through a hard process of struggle to create an intellectual identity for ourselves in our professional and publishing careers—why, then, should we have to hide that identity when we teach” (180)? While TAs are generally still in the early stages of developing the identities and careers at stake in this debate, the main theme under discussion is useful to consider in thinking about teaching styles: how much, and in what format, should we import our own specialized skills and expertise into the classroom? This discussion also points to a corollary consideration, namely the relationship of teaching styles to learning styles. Some students, for whom Graff is advocating, learn through absorbing and reflecting the well-presented and well-argued material that a strong thinker and teacher can provide. Others may profit from a more

decentered pedagogical strategy that asks the students themselves to articulate and work through the crucial issues; Tompkins’ position clearly envisions such a model. No matter what style you decide is the most effective for you it will undoubtedly clash with certain learning habits possessed by students in your class, recitation, or lab section. For this reason, it’s always a good idea to remain flexible — a consistent teaching style need not mean a single teaching method.

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much of the unwanted mail (called “spam”) that has become such an internet nuisance.

If you are willing to tackle a less user-friendly resource you may want to try Procmail, a flexible set of mail processing tools. To use the application you need a Unix shell account that supports it (both Eden and RCI support Procmail); visit one of numerous online sites (two suggestions: <http://www.ii.com/internet/robots/procmail/> and <http://www.hrweb.org/spambouncer/proctut.shtml>) for information

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

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TapTalk

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Tapped In – The Diary of a Practicing TA

by Rupert Peals*

In the spirit of the holidays, I am going to abandon my usual angst-ridden, navel-gazing tendencies and engage in a bit of good-natured Grinch-like grumpiness. I have, of late, found myself on the receiving end of a phenomenon for which I have up to now generally been the catalyst: a generation-gap inspired moment of shock and horror, a sinking “I’m getting old” feeling that will not be chased away by herbal tea and soothing classical music. You have undoubtedly encountered the odd, and at times highly frustrating, sense of history that pervades the Rutgers undergraduate population (and perhaps “young people” at large). I’m referring to the division of history into two categories; the first we might call “recent history,” seems to cover something like the last 10 to 15 years, and is often signified by the terms “now” or “these days.” The second comprises, rather unpromisingly, *the rest of historical time*, and is usually signified by the phrase “back then” or its more colloquial

partner, “back in the day.” Thus you may recognize lines such as:

“Back then, women weren’t allowed to vote”

or

“Back in the day, when men wore wigs”

The two periods are often understood to be in conflict or contradiction, with some aspect of “these days” offering a significant improvement on a situation that existed “back in the day.” Conversely, you will occasionally come across a notion of historical continuity that verges on the impossible: “since the beginning of time, Americans have celebrated Thanksgiving,” and so on.

While I don’t teach History, anachronisms like the ones described above have often left me gnashing my teeth and pulling out my hair; I’m now more inclined to revel in their unintentional humor, and I offer them here not to deride my students but to take aim at my own sensitive ego. After all, I remember quite clearly when I had no real understanding of the difference between, say, the 16th and 18th centuries, no conception that there even was a substantial difference between them, and, most importantly, no concern over such an apparently monstrous gap in my field of

knowledge. A sophisticated historical sense is, after all, one of the things our students are supposed to gain out of their undergraduate education, not something they will necessarily bring fully formed to the table. No, what’s bugging me of late are particular patterns that seem to be emerging in the historical narrative provided by the students in my classes. Consider a statement like:

“back in the day, when Reagan was President” [wait a minute — I used to make “Bonzo” jokes with the best of them!]

or

“back then, there was no MTV, CDs weren’t invented, and they listened to obscure bands like Blondie” [hey now - you’re treading on sacred ground with that Blondie slight!]

It is almost unbearably painful to have what still feel like contemporary moments in one’s own life consigned to the vast repository of “the past,” to be rudely shifted from “these days” to “back then.” I know that part of my pedagogical responsibility is to complicate such a simple division, but knowing that has not prevented the emergence of a sense of nostalgia I once vowed never to feel — a nostalgia for when I was fully immersed in the “now,” for when I couldn’t feel nostalgia (if

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and instructions for using Procmal. A final, less involved, strategy for organizing your e-mail is to maintain separate accounts for specific areas of your personal and professional life. If the technical requirements of using filtering options seem daunting, or if time or workload constraints make their set-up prohibitive, this last option is perhaps the best way to manage your course related e-mail.

In pursuing any of these strategies, it's important to configure the appropriate accounts or applications before the term starts; attempting to devise such a

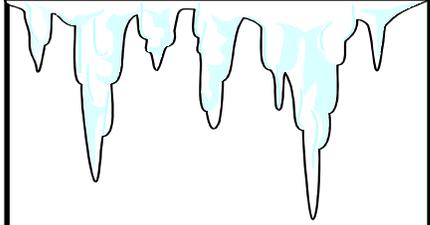
system half-way through the semester might only increase your workload. If you're teaching in the spring semester and are looking for ways to work more efficiently with student correspondence, make use of the upcoming semester break to implement a new e-mail strategy.

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that makes any sense). I dread becoming one of those awkward teachers who relies on students for details about "the scene" and uses terms like "jive," "vibe," and "hip cat" unironically. Despite evidence to the contrary, I still feel very "now," completely attached to "these days," and I'm not quite yet ready to give them up.

December



4	First Day of Hanukah
13	Last Day of Classes
22	First Day of Winter
25	Christmas Day
26	Boxing Day (Canada)

COMING IN JANUARY

1	New Year's Day
18	First Day of Classes
20	Dissertation & Thesis Workshop 25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.*

*please call 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at sirman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you plan to attend a workshop.

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