

High Enrollment Labs & Lectures

TAs assigned to High Enrollment Labs or Lectures must utilize particular strategies and teaching methods to insure that their students will not be penalized by the size of the class. When asked, most students and teachers agree that low enrollment courses where teachers and students are able to interact spontaneously provide the most effective learning situations. This belief does not mean, however, that students in larger classes and labs are being cheated. Teachers who are flexible and willing to adapt their teaching methods to the environment can be equally effective in a large or small class. Teaching behaviors that may work well in a smaller classroom can be the downfall for students in a larger section, so it is essential that teachers in large sections scrutinize all aspects of their teaching performance that may have an impact on the ability of the students to learn well.

Obvious, perhaps, but necessary to mention, teachers must be capable of projecting their voices so that they are audible in all corners of the room. Students in the back of the classroom are not able to see the face of the teacher clearly, and words may be lost if the teacher speaks too quickly or indistinctly or, of course, too softly. Ten or twelve students sitting around a seminar table will have no difficulty understanding basic conversational tones and following more rapid speech; however, thirty-five students in a lab, with its attendant background noises, or one hundred students in a lecture hall, scattered to all four corners, will need a somewhat amplified voice with precise diction. TAs who are very soft-spoken or who tend to speak quickly, running words together, should practice speaking more effectively. Some teachers write reminders to themselves in their lecture notes to speak up or slow down. Most importantly, tell students that they should let you know if they are having problems hearing you, and do not act annoyed if they do.

The teacher who only rarely uses the blackboard or overhead projector in a smaller classroom must be prepared to make greater use of these classroom aids. There are more opportunities in a large room for students to misunderstand what the teacher is saying, to miss a key word or phrase. Unless teachers reinforce what they are saying

(continued on page 2)

Maintaining a Teaching Portfolio

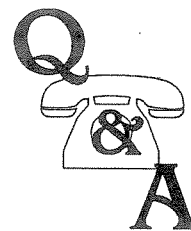
The value of maintaining a teaching portfolio to document one's achievements as a teacher becomes more and more apparent as the job market becomes more and more competitive. For many TAs, teaching is a new experience. Their method of teaching a class during the first semester differs radically from the way they will approach it the following year. Learning which strategies are effective and which are counter-productive will help the TA to develop a style and to shape a philosophy that is the result of hard work and hands-on experience. To plot a teacher's development from the beginning is to provide an indicator of a person's capacity for growth and potential for progress as a faculty member at an institution.

The Future Faculty Program of the Teaching Assistant Project has developed a teaching portfolio that offers a structured method for charting a person's evolution as a teacher. Currently, the portfolio is being tested by several graduate programs in a pilot effort to evaluate their usefulness.

(continued on page 3)

High Enrollment Labs and Lectures

(continued from page 1)



by using the blackboard regularly, almost certainly students will miss important class matters.

Students rate those teachers with whom they feel a personal connection most highly. Establishing rapport with a few students in a small class is really just a matter of time; learning their names presents no problem, and discovering their individual talents and abilities occurs naturally as the semester progresses. A larger class or busy lab makes this more difficult but not impossible. Expecting teachers to learn the names of all the students in a lecture section of three hundred is unreasonable; however, it is not unreasonable for a teacher to encourage all students to participate in some way, even if they are called on blindly from the roster. When students come to talk to you before/after class or in your office, ask them their names and make an effort to remember them. Some teachers suggest that students communicate with them through e-mail, encouraging them to write in their questions and comments. Responding electronically is often a quick and

easy way to address individual problems and reassures students that they are receiving the personal attention of the teacher.

Alterations in one's teaching style may be the most difficult to effect, simply because individual teaching styles are so much a reflection of a teacher's personality. What is demanded, however, is not so much a change of personality as an expansion of it. Actors know that performing for television requires different methods and techniques than movies or theater. Teaching is also a kind of performance and teachers should recognize that what works in a small seminar room or intimate lab will not always translate well in a larger classroom or laboratory. Obviously, the teacher who is comfortable sitting behind a desk and speaking casually to his/her students in a small classroom situation may feel awkward in getting out from behind the desk; moving away from the desk, especially in front of a large audience, may seem frightening at first, but it is an absolute necessity if the teacher wishes to connect in a meaningful way to a large group of students. Even in the largest classroom, it is possible to convey a sense of intimacy: begin the class with a brief anecdote or story; relate classroom topics to topics of more immediate interest to the students; find ways to promote discussion in the class, perhaps by having the students work in groups occasionally or by setting aside time on a regular

The semester is just beginning and students are already coming to me with excuses for missing classes--the weather, family problems, illness, etc. My attendance policy is that students are expected to attend all classes; how far can I go in enforcing it?

The official university policy regarding attendance reads as follows: "Students are expected to be present at each meeting of their classes. Exceptions to this rule may be made in the case of illness and in such other circumstances as seem justified to the instructor." This gives the instructor quite a bit of leeway in determining how to deal with student absences. Given the bad weather, the flu, and other such nuisances, teachers should try to be flexible and not penalize students for unavoidable absences. Students should, however, be required to make up whatever work they missed.

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:

Linda G. Schulze

TapTalk

25 Bishop Place

New Brunswick, N.J.

08903

(908) 932-7034

TA
Helpline

Call 932-11TA

Monday-Friday

between
the hours
of

8:30-4:30

(continued on page 4)

IN THE PROGRAMS

All TAs in **Science and Engineering** disciplines are invited to a brown bag luncheon on Wednesday, February 23rd, from 12:00 noon to 1:30 p.m. in Room 120A of the Busch Campus Center. This informal lunchtime discussion will focus on areas of concern for TAs and will include such topics as: current teaching issues; preparing for a job search; getting necessary help with teaching, scholarship, and career planning. TAs should bring their own lunch; beverages and desserts will be provided by the Teaching Assistant Project.

Portfolios

(continued from page 1)

Portfolios are also available to TAs who wish to begin keeping such records of their teaching in anticipation of a future job search. Portfolios will be distributed to interested graduate students at a workshop, "The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Workshop," to be held on Friday, March 25th, at 1:00 p.m. If you have any questions about the portfolio or if you wish to register for the workshop, please call Beth Griech at 932-11TA.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

Mentoring

Although the relationship between TAs and undergraduates often differs from the more formal relationship between undergraduates and faculty members, TAs should not lose sight of the fact that, for most undergraduates, they are very significant role models. Undergraduates often identify closely with TAs because of their youth or their student/apprentice status in the university, but they also recognize their achievements and admire them as people not unlike themselves who have succeeded. The respect that undergraduates hold for TAs places them in a position of influence, and the role of mentor should not be taken lightly.

Many undergraduates have not yet formulated a clear idea of what they wish to do in the future beyond getting a job or making money. In many cases, students do not really know the varieties of careers available to them. TAs can introduce students to options that, perhaps, they would not otherwise have considered.

For starters, TAs can speak to students occasionally about their own field and the career options that exist. Students may like a subject but not see any way that it fits into the real world. Let them know what an

academic job entails--many people have misconceptions about the role of a faculty member, thinking that all they are expected to do is teach. Educate them on the variety of roles that a faculty member at a university is expected to fulfill. Don't just talk about academic jobs, however, but describe how people in that discipline fit into the business world or government. Do a little research yourself. You may be surprised at the number of interesting career options available--useful information not only for the undergraduates but also for TAs especially in a tight job market.

When you come across students in your classes who seem especially talented, speak to them privately about attending graduate school. Encourage them to explore different graduate programs and try to give them a clear idea of what graduate studies entail, the kind of commitment that is required and the sorts of financial resources available.

In the end, the most important thing for a TA to remember is that students do, indeed, welcome information, support and guidance from them. By taking this role seriously, TAs can help their students to make educated choices about their futures.

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(continued from page 2)

basis for students to discuss a particular topic informally.

The dynamics of the smaller class, however, where the teacher and students are able to discuss freely the issues at hand, do not hold in a larger classroom. First, students in large lecture classes feel less pressure to participate actively in the classroom; it is unlikely that the teacher knows who they are, and they may not be willing to shed their protective anonymity. Teachers must work to make their students feel relaxed enough to participate in their class but must also guard against too much informality: the casual

atmosphere which may work in a small section could cause chaos in a larger one. Interruptions and digressions that may be acceptable in a group of twenty cannot be so easily permitted in a class of one hundred and twenty.

Even after teachers examine their classroom performance and make adjustments for the larger classroom, they must remain observant and flexible, for only by watching themselves and their students, and working to strengthen the connection can students be assured of a worthwhile classroom experience.



- 14 Valentine's Day
- 16 Dissertation and Thesis Workshop, 10 a.m., 25 Bishop Place, CAC. Call 932-8122 to make reservations.
- 23 Brown bag luncheon for all TAs in Science & Engineering, 12 noon, Busch Campus Center, Room 120A.
- 26 Foreign Language Exam.

Coming in March

- 5 *Preparing for the Job Market--a video workshop. Call 932-11TA for information.*

Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean
 Graduate School-New Brunswick
 25 Bishop Place
 New Brunswick, N.J. 08903
 (908) 932-7034