

Using Teaching Portfolios to Improve Teaching

One of the most effective ways to document a commitment to teaching is through the use of a teaching portfolio, which records and displays one's teaching accomplishments. Although a fairly new concept, the teaching portfolio is likely to become increasingly important in both hiring of new faculty and later in submitting packets for tenure and promotions. Graduate students on the job market who present a coherent teaching portfolio stand out from the masses seeking academic teaching positions. It is common to hear a job candidate remark, with surprise, that the interviewers "didn't want to hear about my dissertation at all; all they wanted to talk about was my teaching!" Needless to say, the applicant who is not prepared to talk intelligently about teaching is not going to shine.

The portfolio, however, is not merely a tool to help a teacher negotiate a job search or secure a promotion. After all, TAs and faculty members alike are professional educators, and should want to develop their teaching skills. To this end, portfolios can be extremely useful. As Professor Carolyn Williams (English Department) stressed at a recent workshop on teaching development, the portfolio is a means of externalization, which helps teachers to step back from their own experiences and see themselves clearly as teachers—what they do, what they could do better, what they have not done that they should do. The function of the portfolio, then, is twofold: it presents evidence of teaching effectiveness and performance to evaluators, and it provides a structure for a self-reflective look at one's own work as a teacher.

The most difficult part of compiling a teaching portfolio is getting started. Once a TA has the basic files in place, however, updating them each semester is a simple task. Since portfolios are tailored to the needs and experiences of individual teachers, there are no hard and fast rules about what they should contain. The TA's goal should be to present a comprehensive and coherent portrait of him- or herself as a teacher.

Among the general items that should be included are a paragraph or two describing yourself as a teacher: your philosophy, general goals, style of teaching. Include, too, a list of workshops

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Midsemester Evaluations

TAs often find it useful to hear what their students think of their classes. Indeed, first-time teachers are often surprised to discover that their students actually find them to be effective and pleasant instructors. All students complete course evaluations at the end of the semester, but this feedback comes too late to be immediately useful. TAs should therefore consider having their students complete a midsemester evaluation form. This can be a good way to get the feedback you need to make the often minor adjustments to reading lists, course structure, or pedagogical style that can lead to a better learning experience for your students, and a better teaching experience for yourself. Below are the kinds of questions that you might ask your students:

1. Do you feel comfortable asking questions or making comments in class? If not, explain why.
2. Is the material presented in a well-organized manner?

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Teaching Portfolios

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and teaching committees in which you've participated; do not hesitate to ask a participating faculty member for a letter describing the work you did. If your program runs a series of workshops, lectures, or brown-bag discussions, include a description of these.

For each class taught, the TA should collect all relevant documents. Use these documents to demonstrate your progress as a teacher. For example, the syllabus should be annotated as the semester proceeds to illustrate your ideas about what worked well and what needs to be rethought. Teaching notes, handouts, paper topics, exams, study questions, etc. should also be similarly annotated. Keep a record of the new methods that you try and evaluate them as honestly as possible. It would not be expected, of course, that all of this material be presented to a hiring or tenure committee; you must be selective in what you present. The greatest benefit from maintaining these records would be gained when

preparing to teach the class again.

Although self-evaluation is quite useful, so too are outside evaluations. If no formal system for faculty evaluations exists in your program, it is up to you to solicit statements from faculty about your teaching abilities. Ask a faculty member to observe and evaluate your class and provide you with a written statement, or have a class videotaped and review it with someone willing to write a response for your records. (Increasingly, colleges are asking job applicants for teaching videotapes; many schools can no longer afford to fly candidates in to deliver a campus talk. Call TAP at 932-7034 to arrange a videotaping session.) Some TAs find it useful to have a faculty member review a batch of graded papers and comment on them also. Don't neglect student evaluations and thank-you notes from students. Keep a list of the names of students who were particularly enthusiastic about your teaching; have the names handy in case you need letters of recommendation from students.

TAs should not wait until they are just about to go on the job market before beginning to compile a portfolio; they should begin with the very first class they teach and continue throughout their career. The goal is to be a better teacher and to document your progress as it is

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My students do not seem to be keeping up with the reading even though I have told them that they are responsible not only for what we cover in class but also for the readings listed on the syllabus. When I ask a question on the reading, I get no response. How can I motivate my students to do these assignments?

Stress again to your class how important it is that they do the assigned readings and tell them that from now on they can expect a quiz based on the readings at least once every week. This test need not entail much work or consume too much class time. Asking one very specific question that requires a brief answer—maybe a few words, maybe one or two sentences—will quickly reveal whether the students are keeping up. Not surprisingly, after one or two such quizzes, most students will be motivated to do the reading.

Sometimes students cannot see clearly how the reading assignments connect to the material that is being covered in class and so resist doing the readings. Your job is to help them see the connection. Make an effort to demonstrate the relationship between what they are supposed to be reading and what you are teaching in class.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School—New Brunswick. Linda G. Schulze, Editor
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Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk

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IN THE PROGRAMS

The Teaching Development Committee of the **English** department has announced a series of workshops that will be presented in the spring semester. Among the topics explored will be: "How to study your professors teaching (you) while you can"; "When cultures collide in the classroom: Multicultural Pedagogy"; "How (we imagine) our students see us"; "Working with large classes"; and "Methods of preparing for a class".

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA

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

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

Even TAs who have established firm and clear guidelines at the beginning of the semester about absences, make-up exams, and late papers are sometimes confronted with a student who asks for special consideration. How far must a TA go in accepting excuses students give and in accommodating their requests for special treatment?

TAs know very well that life does not come to a standstill just because a student is in college. Many students have legitimate excuses for missing a class or a test and should not be penalized. (Excessive absences, however, even if justified, could make it impossible for the student to complete the course satisfactorily.) What can the teacher do to insure that the excuse the student offers is a legitimate one?

When students miss an exam because there is a death in the family, some teachers require the student to submit a copy of the death notice from the newspaper before they can take a makeup exam; others feel this is too harsh and take the student's word for it. TAs must decide for themselves how to handle this situation, but they must be consistent, applying the same standards to all.

Conflicts sometimes arise for religiously observant students when an exam is held on a religious holiday. The policy of the university is "to excuse without penalty students who are absent because of religious observances and to allow make-up of work missed because of such absence." Given the diverse population at Rutgers, such conflicts could arise with some frequency. Although the university circulates a list of religious holidays each year to help teachers plan their semester, that list may not include every holiday students observe. In these matters, it is best to err on the side of tolerance and allow the student take a makeup exam.

Students who miss a class due to illness are expected to make up the work. It is not unreasonable to request that a student obtain a note from a doctor for a prolonged illness. In such cases, you will have to work closely with the student to insure that all the work for the semester is completed; sometimes it is necessary for the student to take an incomplete, but this option should be reserved for serious cases.

TAs should listen carefully to their students, and strive to be compassionate, fair, and consistent when dealing with student absences.

Evaluations

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3. Can you understand what I am saying? Do I speak clearly? Do I speak too fast?
4. Does this class seem too easy, difficult, or about right?
5. What suggestions could you give to improve this class?

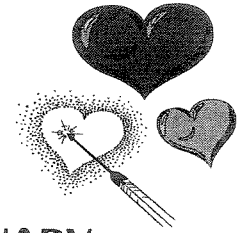
Ten or fifteen minutes is all that it takes for students to complete the evaluation, and the information you collect will almost certainly make the semester a better one. A more detailed midterm evaluation can be found in the *TA Handbook* or the *Teaching Portfolio Guide*.

Portfolios

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made. By being a better teacher you will also be a better candidate on the job market and a more likely prospect for tenure and promotion.

TAs wishing to start a portfolio should obtain the *Teaching Portfolio Guide* that is available from the TAP office (25 Bishop Place, CAC). This Guide is designed to help TAs develop their own teaching portfolios and contains a number of sample documents and suggestions for maintaining the portfolio.

**FEBRUARY**

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| 1 | Beginning of the Month of Fasting (1st Ramadan), Islamic |
| 12 | Lincoln's Birthday |
| 14 | Valentine's Day |
| 16 | Ethics Focus Group for the Sciences |
| 20 | President's Day |
| 22 | Washington's Birthday |
| 27 | Lailat-Ul-Qadr (Eve of the 27th of Ramadan), Islamic |

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