

Teaching/Learning Conference

The 3rd Annual Teaching/Learning Conference, sponsored and organized by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP) and the TA Liaison Committee, took place at the Rutgers Student Center on Saturday, January 23rd. The day began with a faculty panel on mentoring; the panel was moderated by Barbara E. Bender (Associate Dean, Graduate School-New Brunswick), and included Paul Leath (Physics & Astronomy), Sarah Blake McHam (Art History), and Lea P. Stewart (School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies).

Professor Stewart started the presentation by suggesting that the mentoring relationship follows a three-part progression: initiation (characterized by the establishment of the relationship and the socialization of the student into the intellectual and professional requirements of his/her discipline), cultivation (characterized by an increased level of interaction between faculty and student, a deepening of the professional bond, and a growing degree of autonomy for the student), and redefinition (characterized by the emergence of a true peer relationship between the two parties). Professor McHam followed up with a discussion centered around her own personal experience as a teaching assistant and graduate student. She argued that the mentoring relationship should be based on interest in a common area of research and should be characterized by a mutual expression of enthusiasm and respect. Finally, Professor Leath discussed the specifics of the mentoring relationship as it operates in the sciences. He stressed the collaborative nature of most research projects and thus the real importance of the student to the faculty member. He was also careful to distinguish between theoretical and experimental projects; as part of the latter the graduate is often a member of a much larger team (potentially several hundred researchers scattered around the world), while as part of the former the student is more often engaged in a one-on-one relationship with his or her mentor. These different models of collaboration require different understandings of the

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Helping Transfer Students

TAs who taught first-year students in the fall semester are already sensitive to the needs of students who are new to the university. Sometimes forgotten, however, are the numerous students who transfer to Rutgers for the spring term, often from community colleges. These students must deal with the same transition to university life as fall semester students, but they usually do not enjoy the same initiation and orientation opportunities. TAs who are aware of the resources available to transfer students will not only help their adjustment to Rutgers but will undoubtedly notice better classroom performance.

A good general resource for new undergraduates is the Campus Information Service (CIS). CIS coordinates several programs (such as the Rutgers Information and Referral Center and the Off-Campus Housing Office) and provides information concerning the local community, public transit, driving directions, campus maps, library & computer facility hours, etc. CIS is located at 542 George Street on

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mentoring relationship, a fact of which both student and faculty member should be aware. The panel members all advocated the idea of "group" and/or "selective" mentorship as a useful alternative to more traditional one-on-one relationships. Graduate students who have active, involved committees (whether at the dissertation stage or earlier) and who can make use of the relative strengths of several mentor-figures will benefit from a broader intellectual framework and may avoid some of the interpersonal pitfalls of mentorship.

A constructive question-and-answer period followed the panel presentations. Professor Stewart was asked about "idiosyncratic credit," the term she used to describe certain intangible factors (activities unrelated directly to one's academic work) that can potentially contribute to the success of the mentoring relationship; she agreed that

the line separating professional obligation from exploitation requires constant monitoring. Panel members were also asked about the differences between the mentorship of a *graduate student* and the mentorship of a *teaching assistant*, particularly important as TAs nationwide have assumed an increasing amount of the teaching load. This was addressed as another situation in which a group approach seems useful; if one faculty member cannot offer both intellectual and pedagogical guidance, students should identify the specific functions with which they need help and seek out appropriate supplementary mentors.

The conference continued with two concurrent sessions of papers by Rutgers graduate students. Session topics included: "Challenges in Laboratory Teaching," "Course Design & Motivation," "Pedagogical Strategies," "Models of Interactive Learning," and "Teacher-Student Relations." The final session, "In Retrospect: One Semester, Three Stories," featured three students from SCILS who discussed their varied experiences as first-time TAs. The proceedings of this year's conference, together with those from the 1998 conference, will be published in text form and on the TAP web site later in the semester. Watch these pages for further details.

Transfer Students

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the College Avenue Campus; they can be reached by phone (932-INFO) and by e-mail (cis@communications.rutgers.edu), and they also have a web page describing the full range of their services (www-cis.rutgers.edu).

College resources can also be of use to transfer students. On the TAP web site (tapproject.rutgers.edu) is a link to a list of the Rutgers undergraduate colleges. From these sites students can contact Dean's offices (most colleges have a Dean or coordinator specializing in transfer student issues) and find information concerning academic programs and requirements, student life, and special events that are specific to their college.

Finally, if your students are in School 01 (Faculty of Arts and Sciences), make them aware of the FAS Transfer Student Office, located in the Allison Road classroom building on Busch campus. The office provides general information, academic advising, links to other support services, and will help find and/or organize study groups. Transfer students can register with the office by contacting one of the two coordinators of the program: Elizabeth Vogel, 445-3496, and Lisa Galloway Evrard, 445-3442. Both coordinators can also be reached by fax at 445-0643.

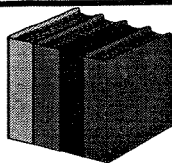
TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.

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TA Bookshelf



The Winter 1998 issue of *College Teaching* has a special section, entitled "Writing Out of Bounds," that offers suggestions for innovative and non-traditional approaches to teaching. Alice S. Horning ("Helping Students in Trouble: What They Didn't Teach in Grad School") addresses the changing demographics of the student body in the last 20-30 years, and suggests strategies for dealing with the various psychological and medical emergencies, and complex social situations that may arise in the contemporary classroom. John Michael Atherton advocates a "persona approach" in which students writing papers in an introductory philosophy course are encouraged to "adopt" the persona of a philosopher by creating a "temporary, imaginative union of the self and the other." The students then respond to assignments by anticipating and engaging with the persona's response to a particular issue or problem. Atherton sees the exercise as offering students the opportunity to "build a world view" without necessarily subjecting them to an intellectual indoctrination. In other words, it invites students to simultaneously identify with *and* critique major intellectual and historical figures, and does so "by employing both cognition and emotion." Thomas Deans and Zan Meyer Goncalves

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Tapped Out – The Diary of a New TA

by Rupert Peals*

In my "private" life I'm not one to make New Year's resolutions, but as a Teaching Assistant (and in particular a first year TA) it seems foolish not to review the experience to date and to consider how I can change and/or improve my work in the classroom. I wouldn't say that I'm completely "comfortable" in front of a class (which is probably a good thing—a little anxiety works wonders in the motivation department), but I think I've reached a stage where every day doesn't seem to require the complete reinvention of the craft of teaching and every student doesn't appear to be an unfathomable mystery that I have to crack.

Given at least a baseline level of comfort, then, perhaps the single biggest factor I would like to work on is the flexibility of my class. Specifically, I have to loosen the direct relationship I perceive between the success or failure of any particular class meeting and the success or failure of the entire course. I teach a course which is very routine-oriented; the pedagogy is well established and allows first-year teachers to be inserted relatively painlessly into an already existing process. At times, however, I feel very external to this process; if a particular exercise or assignment doesn't produce the expected

*Rupert Peals is a pseudonym

results, panic can easily set in as I imagine the entire structure unraveling around me and the name Rupert Peals becoming synonymous with teacherly incompetence ("class really bombed today—I pulled a Rupert"). Fellow TAs who are particularly good at what they do seem confident experimenting with the organization of their classes and with their own pedagogical personas. It's not that they don't experience moments of apparently colossal failure (often signaled by boredom, confusion, or outrage in the student population) but that these moments don't necessarily have to reverberate up the scale and permanently damage the integrity of the class. It is this skill, this composed and flexible relationship with the classroom and with the students who inhabit it, that I would most like to cultivate.

Having announced a desire for increased flexibility, however, I must remember to consider the efficacy of any of

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Get In Touch!

Tap Office:
<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

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TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TA Bookshelf

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("Service-Learning Projects in Composition and Beyond") discuss planning an introductory composition course designed to combine community service with academic work. Similar to some of the CASE programs here at Rutgers, the course requires students to assist in writing material (brochures, newsletters, press releases, etc.) for local community agencies. The authors conclude that the project helps students to realize that "reading and writing are more than a packet of skills" and that literacy is an effective way of "acting in the world."

Tapped Out

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the "experiments" I may engage in. I'd like to think that I'm open enough to explore teaching techniques that I never appreciated as a student (group work, for instance; Rupert has never really "played well with others." I have come to see its benefits, however, both in increasing "horizontal" communication among students and in adding variety to the flow of the class) or that don't seem, at first glance, to be particularly promising. I'm not even, at least in principle, against dancing around the front of the class like a buffoon—as long as I'm a buffoon trying to get a point across.



February

- 14 Valentine's Day
- 15 President's Day
- 16 Chinese New Year (Year of the Hare)
Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 10 a.m.

COMING IN MARCH

- 1 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 1 p.m.
Workshop: Preparing a CV
Art History 100, Douglass
Campus, 6:10-7:30 p.m.
- 17 St. Patrick's Day
- 30 Dissertation & Thesis Workshop
25 Bishop Place, 1p.m.

Teaching Assistant Project

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