

Leading a Discussion

Discussion should not be an isolated activity appended to the final five minutes of class. Ideally, students should feel that they are participating in a discussion throughout the class, even when the instructor does most or all of the talking. A well-planned lecture engages students as actively as a discussion, so that students and instructor are constantly involved in a conversation. In reality, though, it is often difficult to gauge the depth of student involvement during lectures, so creating opportunities for vocal, interactive participation is an important element in a successful class. Otherwise, students may feel their contributions are unneeded or unwanted, and withdraw to watch the instructor as a solo act.

The shape of any discussion class is determined in large part by the kind of class you are teaching or assisting. In some courses — many humanities courses, for instance — lively exchange of ideas is at the very heart of the class, with most of the class time devoted to discussion of assigned readings. In other courses, discussion performs a less central but no less important function. Many times the discussion class is an adjunct to a larger lecture class, allowing students to investigate crucial points in more depth. In between these two poles is a whole range of approaches that make use of discussion to a greater or lesser degree. Not all subject matter lends itself to discussion, so instructors should use their judgment and experience in deciding when to initiate a classroom discussion.

One way to cultivate a discussion-friendly environment is to schedule some class time specifically for student-led discussion of an issue or problem, where the instructor takes a hands-off approach, refusing to step in quickly to answer questions or settle disagreements. This is not to deny any role to the instructor, just to assign a different one as facilitator or delegator rather than as expert or information source. Temporarily adopting these roles forces students into an “active learning” posture; they cannot simply listen to the expert and occasionally jot down notes, but must instead initiate and sustain the conversation.

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TAP Resources

As the semester swings into full gear, consider making use of the following resources offered by the Teaching Assistant Project.

Ask TAP and the TA Hotline

TAP is offering a new service on our website (<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>). The service, called “Ask TAP,” allows TAs to submit questions about instructional issues and other aspects of TA life. Once received, the questions will be answered promptly by members of the TAP staff. In the forthcoming months a list of “frequently asked questions” will also be posted on the website. If you prefer to speak to someone at TAP about a teaching issue or problem, call the TA Hotline at (732) 932-11TA. Callers may remain anonymous if they so wish.

Videotaping & POP

TAP offers two services designed to help TAs improve their teaching skills through informal evaluation sessions. The Peer Observation Program (POP) pairs TAs together to watch and comment on each other's teaching styles. TAP will also videotape your class, recitation, or

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Student discussion promotes active learning not only during discussion, but also before and after. Students will begin to listen and study more attentively if they know that the material being presented will help them participate in the upcoming class discussion. Having participated, a student has taken a stand in the debate and will thus be looking for ways to relate new material back to the discussion. Student discussion can also provide neutral ground on which sensitive issues can safely be broached and students can hear viewpoints from different backgrounds and perspectives.

Because some TAs do not feel equipped to lead discussions, they either avoid them or, enter spontaneously into a discussion when they decide that it is appropriate. Improvisation sometimes yields great results, but can also prove problematic. Discussions may wander aimlessly or fail to gain momentum, or a few students may dominate the conversation, pushing their own agendas while leaving everyone else feeling left out,

bored, or offended. If discussion is unsuccessful, students often hold the instructor responsible. They argue that they pay tuition to learn from an expert, not their fellow undergraduates; while the idea of “active learning” suggests that the situation is more complicated than this, these students are right insofar as it is the instructor’s responsibility to see that discussion is educationally fruitful and fair.

A carefully planned discussion guarantees consistency, but it also requires just as much work as preparing a lecture. TAs must think deliberately about the questions the class should discuss, and select significant themes and problems that will stimulate conversation. Students themselves can be assigned to write discussion questions, and if possible, these should be selected. The exercise will start the students thinking actively and allow the instructor to pick questions that at least some students find interesting.

Class make-up must be considered when selecting a format for discussion. A section of 25 students requires a very different structure from a class of 75. Smaller classes are ideal, of course, and allow flexibility. For instance, in small classes students can be assigned to lead discussions on popular or important topics. In large classes, this is not as feasible,

but discussion is still possible. The class can be split into smaller clusters of five to six students to discuss an issue for five minutes before reconvening for a class-wide discussion. Trying out their ideas in a small group not only gives students more confidence to speak up in the large group discussion, but will provoke more thoughtful replies.

Having carefully selected and settled on a format, TAs must focus on their role as facilitator. Begin by posing questions, then wait for responses until it becomes unbearably awkward. Many students are unaccustomed to active learning, and might not be comfortable at first. If they realize that you will not let them relax and merely listen, someone will eventually start the dialogue. Once the discussion begins, work on setting and maintaining the proper tone. The most successful discussions are not freeform, but those that encourage spontaneous thought within a defined structure. Concentrate on spreading time around equally and getting everyone involved. No one should remain wholly passive during a discussion: students should have a sense of engagement regardless of who is talking, even in large lecture-based classes. Set a positive tone by praising students for insightful contributions and rephrasing their comments in constructive ways (or even, if

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Professional Development: The Teaching Portfolio

Nearly all faculty members teach undergraduates, and, although research accomplishments are of great importance in obtaining an academic position, many institutions also look at a candidate's teaching experience and pedagogical skills when making hiring decisions. Job candidates who are able to demonstrate to prospective employers not only that they have taught but that they have taught well, and who can provide concrete evidence of their teaching skills, have an edge over those who cannot. When graduates enter the academic job market they need to communicate a commitment to undergraduate instruction and show how their Rutgers experience has prepared them for the challenge of college teaching. TAP provides a Teaching Portfolio Guide to graduate students to help them prepare a strong teaching portfolio that will effectively demonstrate their commitment and preparation.

Although teaching portfolios are highly individualized

documents that vary from person to person and from discipline to discipline, they should all contain a teaching statement and a packet of supporting materials drawn from course records (samples of course syllabi, lesson plans, evaluations, supplemental handouts, bibliographies, etc.) The teaching portfolio should provide a profile of you as a teacher, and thus should be as extensive as possible.

Keeping accurate course records for each course taught will have many uses throughout a professional career. Collecting and maintaining accurate records simplifies future course preparation. Reflecting on teaching experiences and evaluations helps to improve teaching performance. Selectively organizing for presentation in a portfolio indicates a concern for teaching to prospective employers, and compiling complete records of one's teaching accomplishments is a good preparation for any faculty review process.

Evaluations of your teaching by others should be included in this package. If you have never been evaluated, ask a faculty member to observe your class and then write an evaluation. TAs who assist a faculty member in a large lecture should ask that professor to provide an

evaluation at the end of the semester. Another method of evaluation is to have your class videotaped (note: TAP offers a videotaping service - visit our website for information), ask a faculty member to view and discuss the tape with you and then provide you with a written evaluation. You may also want to include student evaluations of your teaching if your department conducts such evaluations.

The TAP Teaching Portfolio Guide contains recommendations for keeping thorough and accurate records, a set of guidelines for writing an effective teaching statement, and templates for documenting various information for each course you teach.

For information about starting and maintaining a teaching portfolio, contact a member of the TAP staff: (732) 932-7747, <http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>. TAP teaching portfolio folders are available from our office at 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus.

Get In Touch!

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

Graduate School - NB:
<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

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laboratory session, and arrange to review the tape with you. For information, or to sign up for either program, visit the TAP website (<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>) or call 932-7747.

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appropriate, into a more refined scholarly language — this allows students to see their responses introduced into academic discourse). Redirect the discussion if it becomes stalled or follows an irrelevant tangent.

The benefits of a well-run student discussion should not be underestimated. Students who get involved listen and read more actively. More importantly, they feel a certain responsibility for and control over their own education.

TAP Calendar

- 2/5 Tax Workshop for Graduate Students
Graduate Student Lounge, CAC 7:00p.m. - 9:00p.m.
- 2/6 Seeking External Funding in the Social Sciences and Humanities:
4:30p.m. - 5:30p.m.³
- 2/8 *Dissertation and Thesis Workshop*: 1:00p.m.¹
- 2/9 Seeking External Funding in the Sciences: 12:30p.m. - 1:30p.m.³
- 2/13 Applying for NSF Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Awards in the
Social Sciences: 4:30p.m. - 6:30p.m.³
- 2/14 Public Speaking and the TA:
Improving your voice in the classroom²
- 2/16 Applying for the AAUW Dissertation Fellowship: 12:00p.m. - 1:00p.m.³
- 2/20 *Dissertation and Thesis Workshop*: 10:00a.m.¹
- 2/21 Workshop: Grading Papers and Exams²
- 2/27 Applying to the SSRC Graduate Student Programs: 4:30p.m. - 6:30p.m.³
- 3/5 *Dissertation and Thesis Workshop*: 1:00p.m.¹
- 3/21 *Dissertation and Thesis Workshop*: 10:00a.m.¹

1. Please call (732) 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at sirman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you plan to attend a workshop.
2. Workshops at 12:00 noon at the Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, CAC. Please call (732) 932-7747, or email Alex Bachmann at abachman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you would like to register for a workshop.
3. Presented by the Center for Humanities and Social Science Research (CHaSer). For details and to register contact Teresa Delcorso: (732) 932-2705 or delcorso@rci.rutgers.edu.

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