Making the Grade

When teachers discuss grading, they are usually able to agree on three basic guidelines: first, teachers have a responsibility to be clear at the beginning of the semester on what is expected; second, the evaluations of students' work must be fair and unbiased; third, teachers must be articulate in pointing out the pros and cons of any assignment so that students are able to improve their work. What teachers do not so often agree on, however, is a general standard upon which grades are based, leading some factions to charge grade inflation while others countercharge grade tyranny. Questions arise as to whether the distribution of grades is solely the responsibility of the individual teacher and, thus, wholly immune to outside criticism, or whether there are university- or department-wide standards to which all are obliged to conform. Closely related to this is the question of students' expectations in terms of grading and the degree to which grade inflation is really a problem.

Although most teachers will have their own answers to these questions, their responses rarely share common ground. For example, will faculty in the math department share the same philosophy about grading as the faculty in art history? Will they agree that the other's method is fair and valid? Can consensus be reached, even on the basic question, i.e., whether or not grade inflation is a problem at Rutgers?

In a recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Jan. 6, 1993), Dr. William Cole, an instructor at Harvard, worries that the practice of inflating grades is prevalent and acts to discourage excellence. Students see that their peers who invest little effort or thought into a class are rewarded with high grades and so feel little inclination to do their best work: why bother if all will receive "A"s just for being there? Cole says that "the existence of absolute, objective, and quantifiable measures of quality have somewhat stymied grade inflation in the sciences" but, he suggests, lacking such subjective standards, grade inflation is rampant in the humanities.

Few people will argue with Cole's assertion that there is a significant difference between grading practices in the humanities and
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either as a grader or lab or recitation leader, the problem can be a complicated one. The faculty member may have definite ideas about grade distribution that vary sharply with the abilities of the students in the class. Is it ever politic for TAs to question faculty grading policy?

What about the undergraduates? Do they have a right to complain if the majority of students in other sections of a course get “A”s while the average grade in their own section is a “C”? Should students be penalized because they were assigned to one section rather than another? Should students get a passing grade just for showing up in class regardless of their performance in that class? Should others be penalized because their grades don’t conform to a teacher’s desired bell curve? What are the rights of the undergraduates in this debate?

These questions are not trivial. Until teachers articulate the philosophy behind their grading practices, no coherent policy can emerge. Without some basic agreed-upon standards, everyone’s grading practices are open to criticism. TAs, especially those teaching one class of a multi-section course, should meet with their colleagues to discuss their expectations and grading methods for the course so they will feel confident that their students are being treated fairly.

Although he tries hard, one of my students is doing very poorly. He comes to my office weekly for help; this did not present a problem before, but more students are coming for help now, so I am not able to give him as much time. Also, he is always asking me for extra-credit assignments to bring up his grade—should I create special assignments for him?

It is apparent that this student needs help—how much help the TA can or should offer is the question. TAs are obligated to work as closely as possible with their students in the classroom or lab and to be available for consultation outside of the classroom, but they must think about all of their students, not just one or two demanding ones. If your office hours are being monopolized by this student, explain that in fairness to others you must limit the time you spend with any individual. Suggest that he go to one of the Learning Resource Centers immediately to sign up for tutoring.

Before giving this student “extra-credit” assignments, consider the fairness issue. Are you willing to do the same for every other student in the class? If not, it would be wrong to do it for one. Moreover, he would probably be better served by devoting more time to the required assignments.
On Wednesday, March 3rd, the Graduate Program in Economics presented a program for its TAs on "Developing Course and Lecture Plans, Exams, and Grading." Professor Jeff Rubin, Director of Undergraduate Studies, was the speaker.

On Saturday, February 27, 1993, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., an interdepartmental teaching assistant workshop, "Innovative Approaches to the Teaching of Reading and Writing in Foreign Languages," was held at the Continuing Education Center at Douglass. This program was sponsored by the Departments of French, Germanic Languages and Literatures, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, the FAS Language Laboratories, and the Graduate School-New Brunswick. Marva A. Barnett, University of Virginia, offered a hands-on workshop dealing with "Approaching Writing in the Foreign Language Classroom," and Elizabeth B. Bernhardt, The Ohio State University, led a workshop, "Facilitating Reading Comprehension in a Second Language."

Teachers are usually pleased when students are able to relate that which is being taught in class to other interests they have, to the world outside of the classroom, because it suggests that they are making connections, thinking actively about the content of the class. Not so welcome, however, is the student who tries to connect some single, specific personal interest to every discussion that arises in a class, often straying far from the original topic.

Consider the following examples: a student who quotes Scripture to answer every point; who challenges every statement as racist or sexist; who constantly offers personal (and generally irrelevent) anecdotes as responses; who blames one group for all the problems of the world (Democrats, Republicans, Atheists, Organized Religion, the University Administration, etc.). Although these students may occasionally have valid points, more often they distract the class at length with their discursive responses.

How can a teacher control this sort of disruption without embarassing the student or becoming embroiled in a lengthy discussion that has little to do with the course? The question is not whether this type of behavior ought to be stopped but how to do so quickly and effectively.

Lay the groundwork at the beginning of the semester; establish rules to be followed in class discussion. Encourage students to participate but explain that given the enormous amount of material to be covered and the short amount of time in which to do it, limits must be imposed.

Although it may be difficult to cut off a student, sometimes it is necessary. If the student persists, trying to explain the relevance of the remarks, suggest that s/he see you after class, but be firm that no more class time is permitted for that line of discussion. Refocus the class, bringing it back to the original argument.

It may be necessary to take students aside and insist that class discussion rules are honored. Offer students the opportunity to expand on their ideas in a paper, but let them know of the risks--that you think that the line of inquiry is fruitless or off the topic and explain why. Make students understand that you will let them have their say and read the papers with an open mind, but if the paper is not well argued, relevant, and convincing, their grade will suffer.
TAP Essay Contest
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essay. Entries not under consider-
ation for this publication will be destroyed.

All entries must be typewritten and should be approximately
300-450 words in length. The
deadline for entries is May 1, 1993. Essays should be sent to
TapTalk Editor, Office of the
Dean, Graduate School-New
Brunswick, College Avenue
Campus. Along with the essay, please provide us with your
name, program, campus ad-
dress, home address, and tele-
phone numbers where you can be reached.

Teaching Assistant Project

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