

Long-Term Learning

Most colleges courses are just faint memories only a few short years after graduation. If prompted, students might be able to recall something they learned in a particular class, but without specific hints they often remember only trivia. Against this generally hazy background, however, the memory of certain courses stands out in sharp relief. Perhaps not all of the specific details are remembered, but the basic themes can be easily recalled, the central concepts still understood. What about these courses sets them apart—leaving students with a particular respect or a lifelong curiosity for the subject, or a fresh perspective on the familiar—and how can teachers insure that *their* courses make such a lasting impact on students? Although every great teacher has a unique way of making material memorable, and much depends upon the ingenuity of the individual, there are general guidelines for enhancing long-term retention of which everyone who teaches should be aware.

Two keys to building lasting memory are (a) to provide a solid conceptual framework so that students fully understand the material and (b) to show students why they should care about what they are learning. With this conceptual and valuational groundwork in place, students can expand their factual knowledge in new directions and will not be in danger of forgetting the material shortly after the final exam. What can teachers do to insure that students are provided with the requisite conceptual structure for long-term learning?

Foundations. Students listen selectively; quite literally, they hear and consequently learn only what makes sense from their own point of view. For students to learn and to remember what they learn in terms of a new concept, its connection to what they already know must be demonstrated. Teachers must first tie the new concept to one that is already understood, by defining the topics they are introducing in terms of concepts the students already have. If this is impossible because the idea is too technical or complicated, start with

Videotape Your Class Now

TAs who have been thinking about having a class videotaped should act now. The semester is half over, with spring break just around the corner, so the time is right to step back and evaluate how you have been teaching. Contact the TAP office (932-1182) to make an appointment. A technician will come before the class begins to set up the equipment to avoid disturbing the class. TAs usually inform the class beforehand that the videotaping will take place and explain why they have chosen to be videotaped.

TAs can view the tape with a faculty member or a member of the TAP staff to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching. Among the factors that may be discussed are class goals and whether they were achieved; body language and eye contact; use of handouts and chalkboard; enthusiasm and ability to motivate students; asking questions; voice; use of humor and examples; and other relevant subjects. Through an honest dialogue on points such as these, TAs can feel confident that they are doing all they can to improve their teaching skills.

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more basic ideas. Before students can truly comprehend the new concept, the chain linking the old to the new must be forged.

Even though the ideas may be abstract, the examples explaining them must be concrete. Suggest both good and bad examples—some that fit the concept and some that do not; explain the conditions necessary for the application of the concept to a particular case. Whenever you introduce a new idea, get immediate feedback to see if the students are following. Students should not only give examples but also explain how their examples apply. Teachers should not shy away from requiring students to memorize fundamental definitions: better that they memorize definitions and concepts than simply store away facts. The new concepts are a powerful learning tool that can permanently change the way students think. A little memory work at this

stage goes a long way towards building a lasting body of knowledge.

Values. Great teachers are able not only to explain concepts to students in familiar terms but also to relate the value of the material to already familiar values. Teachers do not forget what they truly care about, but they may not be conveying this to their students because they are not sure how to do so. The method will differ from subject to subject, but a common strategy is to propose a thesis that forces the students to think in terms of the new concepts. Students should be able to explain what the thesis means and what would support or undermine it. Ask whether the thesis is true and what significance it has. Periodically, teachers should ask themselves why the students should care about the material they are being taught—and then they should give the students the best answer.

The Facts. Only when teachers have prepared students to think about the material should they be given extensive and detailed information. Even at this stage, students should be questioned regularly on why the information they are learning is important. Once the new thesis is tied to familiar concepts and values,

Questions and Concerns

What can a TA do with students whose writing abilities are sub-standard?

To gauge students' writing abilities, TAs should assign a brief writing assignment early in the semester. If students' writing problems seem likely to hamper their ability to succeed in the course, TAs should make sure that they get the necessary assistance.

If a student writes well generally but persistently makes a certain kind of writing error—run-on sentences or comma splices, for example—a brief explanation of the problem and a recommendation of a style guide can be quite helpful. Some teachers find it useful, after returning the first written assignment, to spend fifteen minutes going over two or three of the problems that plagued a large number of papers (i.e., organization, perhaps, or sentence structure), inviting students who have further questions to come to see them during their office hours.

For students who have serious difficulties, however, brief comments on a paper will not be effective. These students need more in-depth assistance, which should not be the role of the TA but of a campus writing center tutor. The role of

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"Teachable Moments" Workshop Scheduled

How can TAs work to promote and encourage a dialogue about diversity in the classroom? In what ways can TAs take the lead in encouraging students to examine their own beliefs and prejudices? How can such dialogues be structured so that they are meaningful learning experiences, not merely rehashes of preexisting prejudices and misconceptions?

The Teaching Assistant Project and SCILS will be sponsoring a workshop for graduate students to discuss such questions as these. The panel discussion, "Teachable Moments: The Role of the TA in Cultivating Civility in the Classroom," will be held on April 16th at 4:30 p.m. in the Graduate Student Lounge. Four graduate students will present their ideas on this topic and then open the session for discussion.

A buffet dinner will follow the workshop. All graduate students are invited. To register, call 932-7747 or e-mail: lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu.

TA Helpline

Call 932-11TA
for answers
to your questions
about teaching.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADUATES

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities may require varying levels of accommodation to participate in a class. Students are responsible for making their needs known to the university and the instructor as early as possible, so that appropriate arrangements can be made. Teachers should expect their students to provide documentation of their disability, along with a form indicating the name of their campus coordinator.

The students themselves know what kinds of assistance they require, and the TA and the student must work together for all to go smoothly. An informal meeting with the student can establish the guidelines within which TA and student can work together.

Some students may be shy, hesitant to approach the teacher until there is a significant problem in their class performance, so teachers should encourage students—both on the syllabus and in class—to make appointments to discuss any academic concerns or problems. Teachers should *never*, however, ask the student if he or she has a disability—the student must volunteer the information.

Some issues can be easily rectified. One student may need more time for a test or

for review of materials; another may need lectures to be videotaped. For some students, however, the building in which the class is scheduled may not be accessible. Such situations require swift and early action so that the semester will not be disrupted for the student in question or the rest of the class.

Some general pedagogical practices can make an enormous difference. Be organized and consistent; give students a clear idea of what is to be covered. Repeat directions, and speak slowly and clearly. Present course material in more than one way—use handouts, an overhead projector, a chalkboard, or a multimedia presentation, in addition to the lecture—so that if students have difficulty with one method of communication, they can still learn the material. Vary the type of tests given—multiple-choice, essay, short answers—for the same reason. These techniques are not merely helpful for disabled students but have proven to be successful strategies for all learners.

Campus coordinators can provide information and help obtain necessary services, such as rescheduling classroom space and identifying tutors. They can also give specific advice on the appropriateness of certain accommodations as needs arise.

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students are more able and willing to tackle raw information, because they will now view it as evidence supporting an important theory, rather than disconnected facts which they must memorize to get a passing grade.

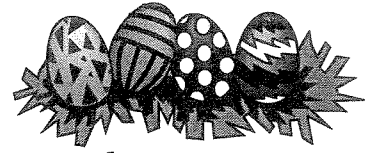
Teachers should not fear presenting new concepts and ideas but must lay the groundwork to be successful when doing so. With a carefully structured approach, your course may be among your students' brightest academic memories.

Questions . . .

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the TA is to warn the student of the impact his or her lack of writing skills will have on overall class performance and encourage the student to get help.

Allowing a student with serious writing problems to slip through a course only worsens the student's situation in the long run. Make it clear to the student that his or her writing is unacceptable. Insist that the student get help if he or she is to do well, not only in the particular course that you are teaching but in all the others that the student will take.



March

10	Career Options in the Humanities, 6 p.m., Rutgers Student Center
	Commonwealth Day (Canada)
17	Spring break begins
	St. Patrick's day
20	Spring begins
21	Last day to register for April 13th foreign language exam
	Naw-Ruz (Baha'i New Year)
28	Good Friday
30	Easter

COMING IN APRIL

2	Career Options in the Social Sciences, 4 p.m., Douglass Student Center
16	Teachable Moments 4:30 p.m., Graduate Student Lounge

Teaching Assistant Project

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