

Of Teaching and Testing

For most teachers, testing and grading are necessary evils. The university expects grades to be assigned at the end of the semester and so faculty must comply, but grades are certainly not the be-all and end-all of the class. What happens in the class--how quickly and thoroughly the students are able to absorb the material, how fully they are able to develop the ideas presented, how eager they are to continue to explore the subject--are of primary importance. For the students, however, this is not usually the case. Testing and grading are felt to be the central concerns because, quite simply, they are the aspects of the course that seem to have the most immediate impact on the student. Although teachers may be discouraged by this focus, they should try to be sympathetic to their students' concerns and aware of the anxieties and pressures to which their students are reacting.

So that the final grades assigned are fair ones, care must be exercised in designing tests. Deciding how many tests and what kinds--true/false, essay, or multiple choice exam--are not the only decisions an instructor must make. The teacher must also decide exactly what it is that he or she wishes to test and then design a test that truly does just that.

Good test design and efficient and fair grading go hand in hand. For example, unless an instructor has decided beforehand what exactly is meant to be tested, his or her attempts to grade an essay exam may result in a multitude of problems. When writing essay questions, it is a good practice to write a sample answer first and then write the question, making sure that the question is focussed enough to generate all of the information you are seeking. This sample answer can be used as a standard against which to grade the students' papers. If the question is too general, your students have more opportunities to give incorrect answers--and more room to challenge a low grade for that incorrect answer.

How often should a teacher evaluate students? Final grades should be the result of an ongoing process of evaluation. Throughout the semester the teacher gives a number of quizzes and tests, solicits feedback from students on the coursework and how it is going, and uses office hours to evaluate the students' progress and, by

Video Equipment Available to TAs

Most TAs put a great deal of thought over the semester into evaluating their students, knowing they must look ahead to the end of the semester when final grades are compiled. TAs might also think about evaluating themselves, as a way of preparing for their next semester of teaching. One simple way to see--quite literally--how you are doing as a teacher is by videotaping a class. Videotaping allows that rarest of opportunities--to see yourself as others see you.

Why add another burden to your already heavy schedule, especially since it is not required? Do it for yourself. The videotape is a tool that can help you to analyze and improve the way you teach, and the way you are received by your students. This is not something that you are graded on or are compelled to do. You can just do it because you care about improving your teaching skills.

Giving Exams that Permit Students to Show Understanding

1. **Permit your students to bring in one page of notes to use during an exam.** Several faculty members have found it useful to allow their students to take an 8 1/2 X 11 sheet of notes into midterm or final exams. This decreases students' anxiety about having to memorize formulas. Preparing these legal "crib" sheets helps students focus their studying. Restricting students to one page of notes forces them to synthesize the most important aspects of the course.

2. **Include an "extra credit" question on your midterms and final exams which asks students to write an exam question rather than an exam answer.** One version of this question:

Almost inevitably instructors fail to ask you in an exam all those things for which you so

carefully prepared. As it happens, writing good questions is almost as difficult as writing adequate answers. Thus, to give you your turn on the pitcher's mound, if you have the time and inclination, write an original exam question. You will receive between 0 and 10 points depending upon the quality of your question. JUST THE QUESTIONS PLEASE; DON'T SUPPLY THE ANSWER.

This technique helps establish good rapport with your students, gives you additional information on their sense of what is important in the course, and becomes an excellent source of future exam, quiz, or discussion questions for the course.

3. **Hold review sessions before the midterm and final exam.**

Many excellent teachers hold reviews in all of their undergraduate courses, but it is especially important in lower division courses where many students are still unsure about the performance levels expected of them.

4. **Balance the difficulty of test items.**

One professor distributes test items as follows: about 25% are reasonably easy questions that nearly everyone gets correct. About 50% of the questions require a little more sophistication but can be answered by students who have kept up with the course material. About 25% of the items are quite challenging and generally are answered correctly only by the top 5-10% of the class.

5. **Hand out study and review questions before the midterm and final.** The benefits: "This helps relieve test anxiety, especially in a lower division course where students are less sure what to expect."

6. **Prepare test questions that are similar to those used in quizzes, homework, or discussion.** Questions on midterms and final exams should not be something entirely new for the students.

[Excerpted with permission from: The Library of Teaching Improvement Packets (TIPS) for Preparing Personal Teaching Improvement Guides: 24 item edition, University of California, Berkeley.]

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Linda G. Schulze
TapTalk
25 Bishop Place, CAC
New Brunswick, N.J
08903
(201) 932-7034

Of Teaching . . .

(continued from page 1)

inference, their own as teachers. Classes that rely on a mid-term and final exam or on a single paper for a grade place enormous pressure on the students to do well on that one major assignment, and do not encourage involvement with the course material as a whole.

Testing is a double-edged sword. It can be a means not only of evaluating the students' performance in a class but also your own. If the majority of students in a class fail a test, even those students you have already singled out as motivated and engaged, then you may have to interpret this as a failing grade for yourself also. Did your test lack content validity? That is, did your test inadequately reflect the content of the course thus far so that even students who prepared well were unable to pass? Did you focus on arcane knowledge in the test while concentrating on larger issues in the class? At least consider the possibility of having constructed a bad test. If you're not sure, show the test to a faculty member for his or her opinion.

Work to make tests a positive experience for both you and your students, an opportunity to demonstrate all that you have achieved over the semester.

Improving Lecturing Skills

Listed below are a few of the points that Linda Lederman, Associate Professor, Communications, made during her recent workshop, "Teaching as Performance."

- People always like to hear about themselves: including the audience in the presentation will help make materials come to life. Try to get a sense of who your students are so that you can make your lectures relevant to their lives.
- Concentrate on your audience, not on your own fears. Think about what *they* are experiencing rather than your own anxiety.
- Build some repetition into your lecture; everyone won't get it the first time.
- When preparing a lecture, ask yourself: What am I trying to accomplish? What points do I need to make to accomplish this?
- Make an effort to vary the speed, pitch, and loudness of your voice.
- Always remember: you're talking to real human beings, creating a relationship between you and them.

Notes From the Field

This month we asked undergraduates to comment on what they would like their TAs to consider when designing a test.

Tell students what you're going to cover on the test. Don't pull things out of left field . . . if a teacher gives notes in a class, the exam should be based on these notes.

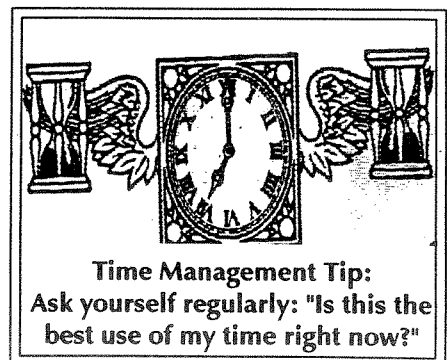
Debbie Cardillo
Livingston College
Social Work

Before the test, they should tell us what to expect. Many teachers don't give enough insight as to what's going on, don't let us know what's important in the notes or the text.

Michael Hartman
Rutgers College
Journalism/Mass Media

Make it clear from the beginning what you expect from your students. Don't feel that you have to be a tough grader to be a good teacher.

Lori Worcester
Livingston College
English



Time Management Tip:
Ask yourself regularly: "Is this the best use of my time right now?"

Video Equipment . . .

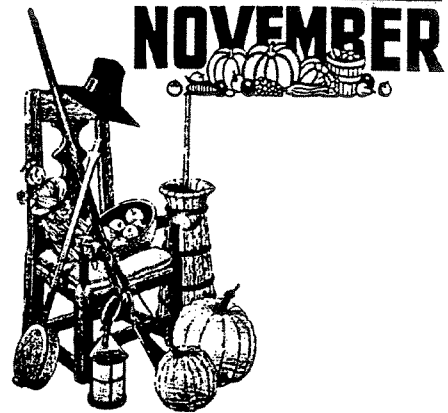
Asking a faculty member to view the tape with you can provide you with valuable feedback, a more balanced and realistic evaluation of your teaching skills than you might arrive at on your own. You will only see what you did wrong in the tape; a fair and honest evaluator will tell you what you did right.



The equipment to tape your classroom performance can be borrowed from the TAP staff at the Graduate School-New Brunswick. The equipment is light in weight, therefore easy to transport, and simple to use. A ten-minute lesson will make you a video expert--or at least competent enough to set up the equipment in your class.

If you would like more information on borrowing this equipment, please contact Carol Hartman, Office of the Graduate Dean, The Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place (7034).

DATES TO REMEMBER



1	Testing and Grading Workshop
7	Election Day
11	Veterans Day
19	Language Exam
21	Thursday Classes
22	Friday Classes
23	Thanksgiving Day

Teaching Assistant Project

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