

Guiding Diversity Discussions

At a university as diverse as Rutgers, multicultural teaching is a challenge to everyone who stands in front of a classroom. Although some classes put questions of diversity at the center of the curriculum, other courses may seem far removed from these concerns. All instructors, however, should be prepared to address multicultural issues when they arise, even if they are not apparently the central focus of the class or discipline. Unless students get preparation at the university level to deal with issues of diversity, they will find it increasingly difficult to function in the interdependency of today's world. In most classrooms, students with very different backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities are brought together and expected to interact with each other. When questions of diversity arise, however, students often feel silenced because they do not think a forum for discussion exists in the classroom, or they are not sure of the permissible limits of such a discussion. Teachers need to prepare themselves with techniques to help guide these discussions in order to build a greater sense of community and to foster an environment based on intercultural understanding.

TAs should reflect on how to best establish the kind of community that they wish to cultivate in their classes. To create an environment which is comfortable and supportive, where students feel their ideas are taken seriously, is not a task that can be achieved in a day or a week. Rather, it is the work of many weeks, the culmination of many small gestures, words, and actions, that determines the climate of a class. The TA must be the leader in setting a standard of civility for the class. Encourage all students to participate in discussions, but allow everyone to enter the conversation at the level at which they feel comfortable. Never denigrate students or treat their comments with contempt; a single ill-advised word may undo many weeks of effort. Get to know the students so that they feel they are recognized as individuals in this class.

Whether a discussion is planned or spontaneous will have an enormous effect on the role assumed by the TA. In planning a discussion on a potentially explosive topic, the TA is able to anticipate many issues that might arise. By having a clear goal in mind for the discussion and a definite direction in which to steer it, the TA is usually able to exercise the necessary control

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Videotape a Class

Whether you are a beginning or an experienced TA, a videotape of your teaching could be of great benefit, providing one of the most comprehensive sources of feedback about your teaching. A video offers an excellent opportunity to identify teaching techniques that work as well as those that could be improved.

Videotaping a class allows teachers to take an objective look at how they present themselves to students. In viewing the tape, you can assess such things as whether you are using the board effectively or speaking clearly and writing legibly. A videotape can reveal how you interact with students. For instance, it quickly becomes obvious whether you are hearing your students correctly when they struggle to make a point or ask a question. By carefully observing how certain situations develop in your class, you can develop better strategies for avoiding or reinforcing them. You may also become aware of a distracting habit, such as moving too often from one side of the room to the other or speaking to the blackboard rather than the students. You

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over the entire process. This is not to say that the discussion should be so tightly orchestrated that students feel they are being told what to think but only that the teacher will be more alert to areas that will be non-productive or inflammatory and so be able to guide students back into safer ground. Unplanned digressions into highly controversial areas, however, require a sure hand and a calm head. Sometimes an issue seems to dominate campus life for a while—students are talking about it in their residence halls, in the dining halls, and in other classes—and their emotional engagement with the issue spills out in the classroom during a tangentially-related discussion. A decision whether to allow the digression or to get the class back on track at once must be made quickly. If the TA allows the class to explore the topic, he or she must be confident that the discussion will *advance* the students' understanding, not merely allow them an opportunity to repeat tired old arguments.

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Students will often have conflicting opinions which can become very personal and emotional. By establishing some guidelines for discussion at the beginning of the semester, TAs can help students to remember that all of their comments should be grounded in mutual dignity and respect. Make it clear that no matter how heated the discussion becomes, personal attacks and inappropriate or biased remarks are not acceptable. By establishing a standard of honest and reasoned debate, students will be more willing to take risks in articulating their thoughts without fear of harrassment, and learning can be more productive.

Do not be afraid of conflict in the classroom. For the most part, trust your students to work through the issues themselves and to get beyond the tense moments; consider it part of the learning process. If the class is getting too raucous, however, and tempers are flaring, break for a few minutes. Ask students to consider what has been said and to write down their reactions to the words and the emotions that have been expressed. This will give the class an opportunity to cool down and refocus while giving you the chance to evaluate what has been going on and consider strategies for using the excitement and energy in a positive way. Individual students who overstep the bounds of civility should be

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Where can I get information about teaching strategies and pedagogical styles in my discipline?

Begin by looking for journals that focus on teaching. Some journals like *College Teaching* are useful for general information about teaching at the university level. Others, however, are more discipline-specific and so may be more useful; ask the faculty members in your program which journals they consider most valuable. Talk with faculty members also to get advice about teaching a specific course, to find out what techniques they find effective. Be willing to discuss some of your ideas so that you can get feedback from an experienced teacher on your own approach the class. Other TAs are also a valuable resource. Start a TA group in your program where questions and problems can be addressed by fellow TAs. Others probably have some of the same concerns and would welcome the opportunity to talk about them in a group setting. The TAP office is another resource for a wide range of information on teaching and being a TA. Finally, remember that teaching is an individual endeavor which improves over time. Try different techniques until you learn what you are most comfortable with and how to reach your students most effectively.

IN THE PROGRAMS

On November 17th, Professor Roy Licklider, **Political Science**, will be leading a workshop for TAs, "Simulations in the Classroom," on the use of computer games and simulations in undergraduate political science classes.

On October 28th, a TA training session, "Teaching and Testing in Foreign Languages," was sponsored by the graduate programs in **German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese**, the Graduate School-New Brunswick, and the **Language Lab**. Featured speakers were Dr. Keith Mason, Princeton University, and Dr. Carlos Raul Narvaez, Rutgers.

The graduate program in **Economics** held a TA Training Program on October 20th. Professors Blair, Rubin, and Tsurumi presented "How to Utilize the Newspaper in the Classroom to Advantage." They also provided some tips on "How Best to Organize a Recitation and/or Class."

On September 8, the graduate program in **Cell and Developmental Biology** offered a TA training day. A highlight of the day was a discussion of ethics in science, led by three faculty panelists, Dr. Covey, Dr. Moyle, and Dr. Ward.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

Unbiased Teaching

Students are quick to pick up on subtle manifestations of bias and insensitivity in the classroom. TAs must be models of civil behavior, with unbiased communications skills and an appreciation of differences among people, so a special effort should be made to understand which forms of action students may perceive as exclusionary, offensive, or insensitive.

Remarks and practices which are interpreted by some as offensive or alienating can occur in any class. Although it is often glaringly obvious, sometimes it is difficult to perceive when an incident of bias has occurred, so TAs must be alert to clues the students give. For example, are students withdrawn and reluctant to participate? Have they complained about the texts chosen for the class? Do they respond with ridicule when others speak? Can they relate to the examples used in class? Do they think that the material is worth learning?

Of course, other factors can contribute to a disengaged and dissatisfied class, but if students sense even a trace of bias in the teacher, they will be less motivated to speak freely and participate. TAs should seriously consider the possibility that, however unwittingly, they may be contributing to an atmosphere of resentment,

intolerance, and fearful or antagonistic communication and should examine honestly their own behavior. By recognizing their own biases, facing them, and making a firm commitment to leave them at the classroom door, TAs will take a step towards creating a nurturing classroom environment.

Sometimes a great deal of attention is necessary to recognize and respond to students who feel alienated. Be aware of which students speak in class and when they speak, and analyze your own reactions to these students. Are you more encouraging of some because they validate your own beliefs? Work out examples used in class beforehand to make them inclusive of a range of perspectives and experiences—the class will be more engaging and alive for everyone. Never treat a particular student as representative of an entire group; each student should be treated as an individual and evaluated on his or her own merits in class. Since different people have different styles of learning, TAs should try to vary the teaching techniques and evaluative measures used in class. Most important is to keep an open mind about *all* students and accept the challenge of relating to each and every one as a unique and teachable human being.

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dealt with immediately. If a student begins to shout, ask him or her to take a time-out, to calm down and think before rejoining the *conversation*. Stress that it is a conversation. More difficult is the student whose comments are totally unacceptable. Some teachers take the student to task immediately; others ask the student probing questions about the remark in an effort to help the student understand why it is unacceptable. This strategy requires more skill and effort but gives the student a chance to reflect upon the remarks in a less emotional manner, and, perhaps, learn from it.

Videotape . . .

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can also identify in concrete terms what it is that you do well.

TAP will videotape a class for you at your request (call 932-1182). Afterwards, watch the tape with either a faculty advisor or a qualified person at TAP, someone who can view it with an objective eye. It is natural to be nervous, both during the videotaping and during the evaluation of the tape, but your teaching is too important to let that stop you from getting information which will certainly benefit both you and your students.



NOVEMBER

- 7 Election Day
- 10 Early registration deadline.
- 11-12 Birth of the Baha'u'llah
- 11 Veterans' Day
- 21 Thursday classes meet.
- 22 Friday classes meet.
- Final, on-time registration deadline. After this date \$50 late fee charged.
- 23 Thanksgiving recess begins.
- 26 Thanksgiving recess ends.


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