

When the “Real World” Intrudes on the Classroom

This October, as the TAP staff planned the current issue of *TAPTalk*, two major, but very different events happened on the Rutgers campus in a single weekend. On the weekend when the student group NJ Solidarity had been planning to hold a national student conference on “the Palestinian Solidarity Movement,” a controversial conference that was cancelled when the group failed to meet the University’s planning requirements for holding a large event, another student group, Hillel, sponsored a celebration of Israel. Thousands attended “Israel Inspires” events, while hundreds of students protested for Palestinian rights. That same weekend, in an unrelated incident, two students were seriously injured in a late-night altercation at the Squamish house on College Avenue. The concurrence of these events, each of which touched large numbers of students in different ways, served as a reminder that our students are in no way isolated from the larger world, and that sometimes things outside the classroom impact their ability to focus on their coursework.

Students will always need to find ways to balance the demands of class work with other demands on their time and energy. Students routinely face pressures from their non-academic lives, be it from work, family responsibilities, political activism, religious activity, athletics, or their social lives. Sometimes, however, students are confronted with pressures that go beyond the usual, from occurrences that disrupt the life of a single student, to larger events that touch significant numbers of students. When the “outside world” encroaches on your classroom, preventing your students from focusing on course materials or from completing assignments and meeting class requirements, you may need to make some adjustments to your curriculum or to your assignments and due dates.

If a student comes to you with a problem, don’t dismiss him or her peremptorily and insist that every student in the class must stick to the requirements of the course as listed on the syllabus. Even if you have a clearly stated general policy that no extensions will be given or no make-up exams allowed, there may be occasions when an exception is justified. Hear your students out, and, if the circumstances seem to warrant it, do

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Introduction to College Teaching

Spring 2004 16:186:855:01

Wednesdays 4:30-6:30 p.m.

Douglass Campus

The *Introduction to College Teaching* seminar, sponsored by the Graduate School - New Brunswick and the TA Project, will explore a wide range of issues pertaining to higher education and college teaching. This seminar will help prepare you for your roles as a future faculty member. This experience will enhance your employment marketability and strengthen your pedagogical skills and your knowledge of higher education. Some readings will be required, along with attendance and participation. The 0-credit seminar will be graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory and will not incur additional fees. It will meet during the first twelve weeks of the semester.

Weekly topics include: an overview of higher education in the United States; developing a philosophy of teaching; multiple roles of the faculty member; course design; motivating students; testing and grading; assessment and outcomes; technology in the classroom; teaching large classes; and other contemporary classroom issues.

Call 732-932-7747 or email
tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu for special
permission numbers.

Real World...

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your best to be flexible and accommodate their needs. If it is impractical to have a student make up a particular assignment, like in-class group work or a quiz, you may be able to substitute one type of class work for another.

Should you feel you have reason to doubt a student's story, or you fear he or she is trying to take advantage of you, you can ask the student to get a letter from his or her dean verifying the situation.

Note that you don't need a dean's permission to give a student an extension or to make other kinds of allowances for extenuating circumstances, but you can use the services of a dean's office to confirm a student's situation if you wish.

If you are teaching one section of a multi-section course, you may need to discuss any change in assignments or due dates with the professor in charge of the course. If you are teaching your own course, any accommodations you make for students are usually at your own discretion. If you are in any doubt, consult with your department chair.

If you have decided to make

TapTalk is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School–New Brunswick.
Editor: Melissa T. Brown
Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901
(732) 932-7747
tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu

adjustments for students facing personal crises, have a discussion with them about how they can meet the course requirements and *when* they will meet them. If you tell a student to finish the work for the class “whenever he feels ready,” you may be doing that student, and yourself, a disservice. Establish a timeframe for when work will be completed, and consider meeting with the student again before the new deadlines to check on the student's progress.

You can help your students out in a variety of ways, but if a student seems seriously troubled, do not attempt to play counselor or psychiatrist. Encourage the student to seek qualified help. The University has counseling centers across the New Brunswick/Piscataway campuses, as well as peer counseling programs. Let students know that counseling is available to them for free and is absolutely confidential. You may want to let them call a counseling center from your office phone, or walk them over if possible. If you are worried about a student and unsure of what to do, consult with one of the counseling centers or enlist the aid of a dean.

In some cases, rather than dealing with a single student who has problems, you will be faced with a campus or world event that affects large numbers of students. This may require that you make adjustments for individual

students who are most directly affected, but you may also want to make a few changes in the course, adding material related to the event or discussing it in class. You may be able to find ways to connect a discussion of these occurrences to the themes and concerns of the course, but even if you can't, it still may be worth addressing important events in some way. Last Spring, for example, many instructors and students felt that the war with Iraq was too important to ignore in the classroom, even if the course in question seemed unrelated to events in the Middle East. If your students are concerned with an issue and want to talk about it—if they bring it up during class or approach you before or after—you may want to set aside some class time for a discussion even if it is a big departure from your usual subject matter. If some of your students are distracted by or galvanized by an issue or event, (for instance, if they were among the students deeply concerned about and involved with Israeli/Palestinian politics this semester) allow them, if possible, to integrate their concerns into their coursework, maybe through research assignments or class presentations. Whenever possible, try to turn “disruptions” from the outside world into teaching opportunities; take advantage of any chance to show how the issues addressed in the classroom and the larger world interconnect.

Technology and the TA: Evaluating Internet Resources

Some instructors try to prevent their students from using the Internet for research because they see it as a pit of misinformation, bad information, and biased information. Instead of trying to keep your students off the Internet, which is a hopeless task, you can teach them how to evaluate a website and judge whether it is appropriate to use for a class assignment; you'll be giving them a valuable skill which will be useful to them long after the course has ended. TAPTalk is reprinting here a checklist to pass along to your students. Some of these questions may seem obvious, but they may not have occurred to your students. Use these basic questions as a starting point for a discussion about the reliability of information on the Internet. This checklist was created by the Infopeople Project, a federally-funded grant project administered by the California State Library. You can find copies of this checklist online at <http://www.infopeople.org/howto/bkml/select.html>.

Evaluating Internet Resources: A checklist

Unlike most print resources such as magazines, journals, and books that go through a filtering process (e.g. editing, peer review, library selection), information on the Internet is mostly unfiltered. So using and citing information found over the Internet is a little like swimming without a lifeguard. The following guide provides a starting point for evaluat-

ing the World Wide websites and other Internet information.

Authority

- Who is the author of the piece?
- Is the author the original creator of the information?
- Does the author list his or her occupation, years of experience, position, education, or other credentials?

Affiliation

- What institution (company, organization, government, university, etc.) or Internet provider supports this information?
- If it is a commercial Internet provider, does the author appear to have any connection with a larger institution?
- Does the institution appear to exercise quality control over the information appearing under its name?
- Does the author's affiliation with this particular institution appear to bias the information?

Currency

- When was the information created or last updated?

Purpose

- What appears to be the purpose for this information?
 - Inform
 - Explain
 - Persuade

Audience

- Who is the intended audience?

Compared to what?

- What does this work/site offer compared to other works, including non-internet works?

Conclusion

- Given all the information you determined from above, is this Internet site appropriate to add to your bookmark?

Adapted from Consolidated Listing of Evaluation Criteria and Quality Indicators.

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Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School – NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA
Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30 am - 4:30 pm

TAP Calendar

11/03	12:00-1:30 pm	Procrastination:Why You Wait	CAC*
11/11	12:00-1:00 pm	Academic Integrity	CAC+
11/17	4:30-6:30 pm	Careers at the Intersection	BCC~
11/20	12:00-1:00 pm	Teaching Your Own Class	CAC+

*Call 732-932-7997 for information or to register.
+Call 732-932-7747 for information or to register.
~Call 732-445-6127, ext. 0, for information or to register.

Want to be a Movie Star?

Get your class videotaped!

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>
Call 932-11TA for details

Sign up for the Peer Observation Program!

Having a class observed by a peer can be a great way to gain valuable feedback about your teaching. The Teaching Assistant Project offers the Peer Observation Program to any interested TA. You will be put in contact with a fellow graduate student teacher and provided with helpful materials for giving constructive criticism. For details, or to sign up, visit the website!

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html>

Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean
Graduate School-New Brunswick
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181
(732) 932-7747