

Taking Charge: Guiding the Student/ TA Relationship

The first weeks of the semester can, in many ways, determine the course of the rest of the semester. Like any new relationship, the one between student and teacher can take some time to crystalize, so teachers should guide the relationship from the beginning to insure that it takes the form they wish. At the start of the semester, most teachers inform students of their expectations for quality of work and classroom behavior, explain in detail what they wish them to take away from the course by the end, and set the general tone for the rest of the semester. For the wise teacher, however, the early weeks of the semester also provide an opportunity for getting that same information from the students: what their expectations are, what they hope to learn in the class, what they feel they can contribute to it. By discovering common ground and also those areas where their ideas about the class diverge, teachers can work *with* their students rather than *against* them.

What can teachers do to establish the kinds of relationships that position them to work most effectively with their students? To begin, the teacher must be viewed by the students as an ally. Students must be convinced that the teacher sees them as individuals, capable of learning, who bring their own individual experiences and valuable knowledge. Also, if true learning is to take place in the classroom, teachers must nurture and encourage their students, giving them the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and talents.

To nurture and encourage does not mean that teachers must coddle students. It mean only that students are treated with respect both within and outside of the classroom. Teachers should never belittle students; they should listen to them, answer their questions, respect their beliefs, be polite and kind to them always. Tell them when they perform well, and, if they stumble, do not write them off; rather, offer them helpful suggestions on how they can improve. Invite them to come to your office to discuss the difficulties they are having and when they come, be welcoming.

(continued on page 3)

Graduate Student Teaching Conference Announced

Writing for publication and participating in conferences are two goals most graduate students know they should pursue while in graduate school. Listing such activities on an academic *curriculum vita* can be an important factor in establishing one's reputation not only as a researcher but also as a teacher. Prospective employers can see that the candidate is active both as a contributor to the knowledge base and as an educator in the classroom.

The Teaching Assistant Project's Teaching Assistant Liaison Committee is currently organizing a conference for graduate students in New Brunswick. The conference, *Learning/Teaching*, has as its theme and purpose the fostering of a dialogue among graduate students about methods and techniques of teaching and learning. Since many graduate students plan on an academic career, this conference provides an opportunity for Rutgers graduate students to share their experiences and demonstrate

(continued on page 2)

Graduate Student Teaching/Learning Conference

their interest in what will certainly be a large part of their future professional activities—teaching.

The conference is scheduled for January 25th, 1997, at the Busch Campus Center. *Learning/Teaching* invites former and current teachers—from the physical and biological sciences, social sciences, and the humanities—to explore the intricacies and importance of being an educator and researcher. The format of the conference sessions is open. Students may submit proposals for papers, panel discussions, demonstrations, poster panel exhibits—whatever format is appropriate for the information they wish to discuss.

Proposals that relate to any of the conference themes are invited. Among the possible topics are: innovative lab technique; using new media technology; balancing/connecting teaching and research;

(continued from page 1)

pedagogy; the ethics of teaching; issues of gender, race, class; testing and grading; working with students; working with faculty; confrontation in the classroom; service learning; teachers as learners; collaborative teaching; strategies for teaching and learning; the future of the professoriate. Proposals on all related topics are welcome.

All presentations and papers are limited to graduate students, but faculty and staff may participate as respondents and moderators. One-page abstracts of papers or proposals for panels should be submitted by October 15th, 1996, to the TAP Office, Graduate School-New Brunswick, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus. All those who submit papers will be notified by the end of November whether or not their paper has been accepted. Completed papers must be submitted the week before the conference.

Registration forms for the conference will be mailed to all TAs, GAs, and Graduate Program Directors early in November. For answers to questions or further information about the conference, contact the TAP Office at 932-7034 or e-mail lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu.

Questions and Concerns

I am a new TA and I have found a few of my students to be very disruptive in the classroom. They take a long time to get settled at the beginning of class, whisper while I speak or during class discussions, and speak out of turn. I think my students can sense that I'm not completely confident about my teaching yet, but even so I do not feel as if they should be behaving like this.

Regardless of your confidence level and typical new teacher insecurities, you and the rest of the students in your course are entitled to a disruption-free class. A good first step is to stop the class proceedings and call attention to the disruptive behavior; tell the students that this is not acceptable in your class. If the behavior continues, or if you prefer to approach these students more privately, then ask them to stay after class. Explain your behavior requirements politely but firmly. Remind them that you are entitled to exclude disruptive students from your course. Most students will get the message quickly; if, however, some students continue to behave badly, you may ask them to leave the class or you may contact their dean and ask them to call the students in, or both. As long as you are teaching responsibly, hold the students accountable for their part of the bargain. You will soon overcome your nervousness.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.

Editor:
Linda G. Schulze
Assistant Editors:
Rachelle Brooks
Carol Dell'Amico

Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor.

TapTalk
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901
(908) 932-7034
lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu

Guiding the Student/ TA Relationship

(continued from page 1)

Rutgers is a large university and many students feel lonely and vulnerable. Problems sometimes arise because students misunderstand a teacher's helpfulness and attention; flattered, they think that the teacher is interested in pursuing a more personal relationship. Be aware of the potential for crossed signals and if a student seems to be looking for something more from you, put on the brakes immediately.

Even in the most congenial teacher/student relationships both parties should maintain an awareness of their own role, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to make this explicit when necessary. Teachers who become friends with certain students risk losing the good will of the other students. It goes without saying that teachers should never permit themselves to become sexually involved with students. No excuse will change the fact that the teacher is an authority figure, whose approval is sought by the student; doubts that the relationship was coercive can never be wholly erased. Further, the university has a strong policy against sexual harassment; teachers who date students run the risk of violating this policy and jeopardizing their career. Teachers who set limits carefully and unmistakably at the beginning make their own and their students' job easier.

Notes On The Undergraduates

In order for students to succeed in a course, they require straightforward knowledge of the expectations and responsibilities their instructor is placing on them. Any ambiguity regarding a course can all too easily turn into frustration and disappointment for both students and teachers. Information about a course is best laid out in the course syllabus, so that students know from the very first day what is required to complete the course and what material the course will cover. Detailed information, such as the number of tests or papers and their due dates, the amount each assignment counts towards a final grade, and the precise way attendance or participation will be factored into a course helps students to make informed decisions about how they will approach a course.

If some of these facts are missing from a syllabus they should be discussed in class, preferably with a handout, as early in a course as possible, ideally before any grades are assigned. It is also important to bear in mind that any changes in the syllabus or the manner in which grades are calculated may not only be an inconvenience to students but may also be unfair to them if they have already made decisions based on earlier information. For example,

deciding to assign a research paper or to eliminate an exam midway through the course can cause problems for students who have carefully planned their semester's work. Such surprises are troubling for students when work, school, and family responsibilities are all competing for their attention.

Enrolling in or teaching a class can be viewed as an agreement between students and an instructor, and everyone concerned should be aware to what they are agreeing. If approached from this perspective it becomes very clear why even minor last-minute adjustments can be very disruptive for a student. The best advice: be clear early on with all expectations regarding a course, and stick to them. This may be the best way to insure fairness for all students in the class and help you to avoid problems at the end of the semester.

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA

Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30-4:30

Directory Information Availability

Some TAs put their home telephone numbers on their syllabus so that students may reach them more easily in the evening or on weekends; others prefer to limit the time students can contact them to their office hours and, possibly, through e-mail. Those who prefer not to circulate their telephone numbers should be aware that their students can easily obtain their addresses and telephone numbers through the Rutgers Info system.

If, for any reason, you do not wish to have "directory information" (telephone number, address, etc.) available to all

students, faculty, and staff at Rutgers, then you must complete a "deletions list form" which you get from and submit to the Registrar's office on Busch Campus, ASB, Room 200L. After this form has been processed, information about you will no longer be available to *anyone* through the computer system. All directory information will be treated confidentially, so should people from outside the university request information about you for a job, for example, they will not receive the requested information. Students must weigh their need for privacy against the inconvenience this refusal to release information may cause.

October

- 14 Canadian Thanksgiving
Columbus Day
- 15 Deadline to submit proposals or abstracts for First Annual Graduate Student Teaching/Learning Conference (see p. 1)
- 31 Halloween



Happy
Halloween

Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean
Graduate School-New Brunswick
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901
(908) 932-7034