

## Evaluating Early, Evaluating Often: Covering All Bases

Whether you're a new TA or a seasoned veteran, evaluations are essential to good, solid instruction. Often, the TA (new or old) will have reservations about his or her own teaching ability, and lack of input from students and others does little to alleviate these fears. Many students, as well as many instructors, tend to reserve their opinions on the course until the semester has finished. While end-of-semester evaluations are a useful tool, they cannot help the current students enrolled in the course. Unfortunately, some undergraduates regard end-of-semester evaluations as a waste of time, having no real relevance. Instructors may also consider negative reports from students at the end of the semester to be simply a result of bitterness about poor grades. There are, however, many ways to avoid these problems and ensure that any improvements that can be made to a course will be done in time to benefit the current students.

### Mid-Semester Evaluations

Mid-semester evaluations (administered one third to one half of the way through a course) function much the same as end-of-semester evaluations, and provide information that can directly effect the class currently taught. Mid-semester evaluations not only inform your students that you are interested in their opinions and suggestions, they allow an instructor to fine-tune the course so that students receive the greatest benefit. More importantly, however, mid-semester evaluations are not just for the TA neonate. All classes have their own culture and personality, and one cannot assume that what works for one class one semester will work for another. While the curriculum may undergo minimal changes, the TA should always be on the lookout for how to improve instruction. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

Consider passing out index cards at regular intervals to get constant feedback from your students on the progress of the class. Usually, handing these out after tests and major assignments will give you a good idea of how your students are

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## College Teaching Course to be Offered in Spring

The Introduction to College Teaching seminar 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, strengthen your pedagogical skills and your knowledge of higher education. Some readings will be required, as will attendance and participation. The seminar will appear on your transcript, but you will incur no additional fees and will not be graded. It will meet the first twelve weeks of the semester for two hours.

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

**Introduction to College Teaching  
Spring 2002  
Wednesday, 4:30-6:30 p.m.  
College Avenue Campus**

Permission numbers and details will be available November 2001. Please contact Amber Carpenter:  
[acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu) / 932-7449.

## Evaluating Early...

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responding to the instruction as well as how they react to the testing and implementation of the material they are learning.

Consult the Teaching Assistant Handbook for a sample evaluation (pg. 87). If you do not have a copy, you can obtain one from the TA Project Office at 25 Bishop Place or through the web at <http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

### Faculty/Peer Observations

Input from the students is a great way to gage the effectiveness of your teaching; however, it is just one perspective to be explored. Faculty and peer observation can give you valuable insight from those who have had far more pedagogical training (faculty) and from those who are undergoing the same experience as you (other TAs). Your department may already have in place a faculty observation program. If so, contact your department chair to set up a session. If not, ask one of the faculty members in your program to meet with you, discuss your class and syllabus, observe your teaching, then meet

afterward to offer suggestions. The TA Project has a Peer Observation Program ([http:// tapproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html)) that can also give you helpful tips on how you and your fellow TAs can organize a mutual observation plan. Having your friends and colleagues observe your performance and offer suggestions is a much less stressful way of improving your instructional skills. An added benefit is that the process of peer observation helps all involved- observer and observed.

For faculty observations, consult your department chair.

For peer observation help consult the POP website (<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html>)

### Videotaping

Finally, the TA Project offers a videotaping service for TAs. The service is free, but if you want to keep the tape, you must provide your own. Not only does the TA Project videotape one of your classes, but a great deal can be learned by simply watching yourself teach. Little things like audibility, eye contact, and paying attention to the entire class can often be taken for granted by an instructor. Watching yourself teach gives you a student's perspective and may help to highlight some areas needing improvement, which otherwise may have been overlooked. In

addition, an experienced observer can go over your tape with you, thereby catching some things you might miss.

To arrange for videotaping service, call the TA Project at 932-1182 or visit the website at [http:// tapproject.rutgers.edu/services.htm#Videotaping](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu/services.htm#Videotaping)

What may seem like a lot of work is actually quite easy and requires little time. Should you take advantage of the faculty/peer observation, videotaping, and mid-semester evaluations (or all three) early in the semester, not only will you as an instructor benefit but your class will too. It is too little too late to discover after the semester ends that your students had legitimate concerns about your instruction. Sure, you may be able to address those concerns for the next class, but as long as methods are available that will help you with your current classes, you should take advantage of them. A pat on the back is nice when it comes from one's self, but it is even better when it comes from a classroom full of thankful students.

## Get Online!

Tap Office:  
[http:// tapproject.rutgers.edu](http://tapproject.rutgers.edu)  
 Graduate School - NB  
<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

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## TAPTALK Talks about Classroom Discussion

To many, the classroom is simply an environment where information is transferred and, one hopes, absorbed. Typically, when students ask questions, they do so for purposes of clarification. Student participation in the form of discussion may be seen by some as an unnecessary distraction from the material. A properly run discussion, however, allows both student and instructor to elucidate the material already covered and foster an intellectually comfortable atmosphere where students can employ critical thinking, thereby gaining new insights into the material. Too often, unfortunately, discussions become disorganized. These discussions quickly become tangential, are monopolized by a few students, or simply decay into student-run chat sessions. While all classes should offer some form of active learning rather than passive absorption, the instructor needs to be careful that the discussion doesn't hamper learning. The easiest way to avoid the uglier side of class discussion is to have a clear set of rules beforehand. Below are some tips that, if followed consistently, will go a long way toward ensuring that your classroom discussions go as smoothly as possible.

Make clear to students that you are in charge and that you will call upon them to participate. Do not let students interrupt one another. Do not let a few students

monopolize the discussion. Other students will feel ostracized if you continually look to a select few students for questions or answers.

Make sure that students know that you will call upon everybody at some point in the discussion. Some students will arrive ill prepared if they think that they will not be asked to answer questions or offer criticisms and comments.

Some students may tend to ramble, offering elongated answers that can take up much of the discussion time. Should this occur, help them along with their question or politely interrupt with such phrases as 'So, you mean that...' or 'Are you trying to say that...' You can also politely cut them short by summarizing what they have said or attempted to say, and continue the discussion or move on to a different point.

Some discussions can become heated, and often students may get flustered and angry. Should you see this happening, immediately regain control of the discussion either by turning to an unrelated issue or by summarizing, in a calm way, the dispute, and then ask other students for their input.

Finally, try to understand the student's perspective. If all you offer is criticism, students will find discussions

threatening and will become wary of offering ideas only to have them put on the chopping block. To be sure, criticism is helpful, but without stressing the good elements of the point made or question asked, students will cease to view discussions as beneficial.

### The Pedagogical Insight Corner for the Curiously Minded TA

A child of five would understand this.  
Send someone to fetch a child of five.  
*-Groucho Marx*

The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn.  
*-Cicero*

Cudgel thy brains no more about it.  
*-William Shakespeare - Hamlet*

Some people talk in their sleep.  
Lecturers talk while other people sleep.  
*-Albert Camus*

We tend to scoff at the beliefs of the ancients. But we can't scoff at them personally, to their faces, and this is what annoys me.  
*-Deep Thoughts by Jack Handy*

### Get In Touch!

Tap Office:  
<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School - NB:  
<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TapTalk October 2001

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

**Want to be a Movie  
Star?**

*Then get your class videotaped!*

Call 932-11TA for details

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>

# TAP Calendar

10/9	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00 a.m. <sup>1</sup>
10/22	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00 a.m. <sup>1</sup>
11/1	<i>International Teaching Assistant Workshop: Policy Issues: Harrassment, Academic Integrity, Confidentiality, TA/student relationships, Professional responsibility</i>	12:00 noon <sup>2</sup>
11/6	<i>Dissertation and Thesis Workshop</i>	10:00 a.m. <sup>1</sup>

1. Please call (732) 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at [sirman@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:sirman@rci.rutgers.edu), if you plan to attend a workshop.

2. Busch Campus Center. Please call (732) 932-7747, or email Alex Bachmann at [abachman@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:abachman@rci.rutgers.edu), if you would like to register for the workshop.

## Teaching Assistant Project

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