

From Being a Graduate Student to Becoming a Teacher

The transition from being a graduate student to becoming a teacher is often rewarding and exciting. After all, many of us were inspired to come to graduate school by a particularly engaging and effective teacher whom we wanted to emulate. Unfortunately, being a good graduate student does not necessarily prepare us to be the good teachers we would like to be. Graduate study is research-intensive, immersing us in a world of highly specialized knowledge. By the time we've passed our qualifying exams and started writing our dissertations, we can rehearse and explain the nuanced debates of our fields, apply advanced methodologies, and make and defend controversial arguments with the use of relevant data. In short, we've become single-minded, argumentative, and totally out of touch with reality! While these are considered positive and maybe even essential traits in the average graduate student, they may inhibit us as teachers.

The following are some tips on how to make the transition from thinking like a graduate student to thinking like a teacher a little easier.

Realize who your students are. Think back to when you were an undergraduate. Even if you were a teacher's dream, college undoubtedly meant much more to you than just going to class. Similarly, the diverse Rutgers student body attends and values college for a wide variety of reasons. Maybe their parents want them to go to college, or maybe they are preparing for a particular job. Most work at least part time or participate in extra-curricular activities. From the point of view of your students, then, your class is but a small part of "college." Finally, remember that there are also a wide variety of reasons your students are taking your particular course. Some will be there because they are excited about your subject, but some will be there because they needed a class on the Livingston campus during second period. This should not be misread—You should, without a doubt, challenge your students and set high expectations, but also try to view your class from the point of view of your students.

Focus on the big picture. Graduate study is all about specialization: Our programs train us to be experts in a

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Fall Teaching Colloquium Offered

The TA Project and the Graduate School - New Brunswick announce **The Fall Teaching Colloquium: A Practical and Professional Development Series**. This new colloquium, open to all graduate students who are currently teaching, will introduce you to critical issues in pedagogy; help you consider and hone your own teaching style; assist you in enhancing your practical classroom skills; and help you develop a teaching portfolio.

Participants will develop two general and one discipline-specific workshop, as well as one elective session. Participants will also be observed by a peer or videotaped, and will be required to administer mid-semester evaluations to a current class. A certificate of participation will be issued to all graduate students upon completion of the series.

Required sessions will take place Wednesdays from 11:30 to 12:50 on the College Avenue Campus. Students are encouraged to bring their own lunches. The introductory workshop is scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 2, in Scott 115.

For details and to register, send an email to:

tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu

Becoming a Teacher...

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corner of a sub-field of an already specialized field. Sometimes in immersing ourselves in the details, however, we lose sight of the big picture. One of the most common mistakes college teachers make at the beginning of their careers is giving their students too much information. Think back to when you were an undergraduate again. Even for the most precocious, the implications of different approaches to studying the genetic composition of amoebas was the last thing on your mind—you weren't even sure amoebas had genetic compositions! Explaining to your students what your field *does* agree about is the first task at hand, and you might never get to discuss the debates of the field with your students (that is what professional conferences are for). Within a given class period, make your main point clear and come back to it often. Similarly, throughout the semester, remind your students of the overall purpose of your course. Not only will this help your students, but you might find that you are becoming much more clear about your own area of study.

Translate it! Most likely, you have developed a specialized language for dealing with your field, but your students have not. Without sufficient translation, your class might sound to your students as if it is being conducted in a foreign language. (For many of our students, in fact, English is already a second language!) Remember that the vocabulary and basic concepts that have become familiar to you probably need to be defined or re-defined for your students. (What *is* "gender," anyway?) Start with the basics, avoid using jargon, and use examples and analogies liberally.

Relate it to the real world.

Of course, you find your chosen field of study intrinsically fascinating and important. But students will often wonder, "how is this relevant to my life?" Or, "why do I need to know this?" While at first you might feel annoyed by such questions—after all, your students are asking you to justify your existence—it is actually a legitimate line of inquiry. Providing context is often helpful. Why did people start asking these questions? What have these ideas been used for? Alternatively, convey enthusiasm by reminding yourself of what first drew you to your subject. What do you find so compelling that you've devoted your life to it? Next, you might think about why what you're teaching *is* important to the "real world." In teaching Marxist theory, for example, you may want to research

current poverty statistics or raise questions about your students' experiences with class. Finally, remind your students, and yourself, that reading, writing, and thinking skills are applicable in all areas of life.

Be aware of multiple learning styles.

Finally, graduate students are often independent, analytical thinkers who enjoy working out puzzles in an abstract way. In fact, this particular way of seeing the world is probably partly responsible for your decision to pursue a graduate degree (a Ph.D. is a Doctorate in *Philosophy*, after all). This is only one learning style, however, and what makes sense to you may not make sense to your students. People may learn by seeing, saying, hearing, or doing. In making information accessible to a diverse group, try to engage as many different styles as possible. Make hand-outs or write on the board; ask students to orally paraphrase key points; have them brainstorm or write mini-responses in the beginning of class; or give an assignment that requires practical, concrete application. Consider providing some group activities for your students as well as independent exercises.

Undergraduate and graduate study differ in important respects. Taking your students for who they are—undergraduates—is an important first step in becoming that effective, engaging, and even inspiring teacher that you want to be. ■

TapTalk is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School—New Brunswick.
Editor: Jennifer Einspahr
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

Communicating through Email: Weighing the Costs and Benefits

With increasing frequency, many professors and TAs use email as a way to communicate with students. Using email has many benefits, including flexibility and efficiency, for example: you can answer emails at your leisure, and you may be able to take care of some questions or comments very quickly. But using email can also have unforeseen consequences. It may be a good idea to think about some of the possible drawbacks of email as a teacher's tool *before* you run into problems.

Overuse

Many new teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the volume of email they receive from their students. It is a good idea to let your students know that email is an acceptable form of communication, but that they should limit their emails to things that cannot be dealt with quickly at the beginning or end of class and do not require discussion during office hours. It is best to set these guidelines early in order to avoid being flooded with requests. Similarly, you may want to set guidelines for yourself: How much time will you devote to the composition of emails? How quickly can your students expect a reply?

Misinterpretation

When we write and read emails, the person with whom we are communicating cannot see our facial expressions or hear our vocal intonations.

Keep this in mind in your email communications with your students. Be especially careful with the use of humor or sarcasm, which can be easily misread.

The "e-paper trail"

Thankfully, most teachers will never be involved in a lawsuit or have their ethics questioned. However, you should be aware that email leaves a record that can always be retrieved. Never say something to a student over email that you wouldn't say in public.

To attach or not to attach?

Students find it convenient to submit assignments electronically. Make sure you have a policy for dealing with this request, weighing the costs and benefits. Would the documents have to be submitted in a particular format? Would you accept them after the regular deadline? Would the option be available to everyone? Do you have a way to print out the document? What if a student swears she emailed you her assignment, but you never received it? Can you filter out the viruses your students may unwittingly send you?

Email as substitute for office hours

Finally, research shows that students do their best when

they feel that teachers take a personal interest in them. Many students already experience a feeling of anonymity on the Rutgers campus: don't let email become a substitute for face-to-face interactions and for getting to know your students. Conversely, don't allow your students to hide behind the anonymity of the email. Discussions of excuses or absences, requests for extensions, and personalized tutoring are better suited to office hours. You should discuss your expectations for the use of email with your class.

The benefits of email are many, and negative consequences can be prevented by setting up clear guidelines from the beginning. Remind your students that you are available for office hours, and set limits for yourself and your students. Email can be an efficient and convenient technology or an annoyance—the choice is yours.

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://>

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Graduate School – NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

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

TAP Calendar

10/2	CV/Resume Writing for Graduate Students	Busch	4:30-5:30†
10/4	Job Search for International Students	CAC	9:00-12:00‡
10/9	Employers: Mock Interviews	CAC	1:00-4:00‡
10/9	Salary Negotiations for Graduate Students	Busch	4:30-5:30†
10/10	Employers: "Mocktail" Networking	CAC	6:00-8:00‡
10/23	Careers in the Non-Profit and Gov't Sector	CAC	6:30-8:00‡
11/6	Careers in Academe	CAC	11:30-12:50§

†For information and to register, call

732-445-6127

‡For information and to register, call

732-932-7997

§For information and to register, call

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Teaching Assistant Project

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