

## Evaluate Early, Evaluate Often

Most TAs conduct formal, end-of-semester evaluations. These can help a TA improve his or her teaching performance in future classes, but they come too late to help the students filling out those evaluations. Instead of just learning what you could do differently if you were teaching the class over again, you can identify ways to improve the course while there's still time to do so. If you are concerned that a class isn't going well, mid-semester evaluations can help you get it back on track; not only will the evaluations point out specific problems that you may be able to fix, they will also demonstrate to your students that you are interested in their opinions and suggestions and will try to respond to them. This may turn around a difficult relationship with your students. Even if everything seems to be going well, evaluations can help you fine-tune a course and let you know if students in the class are having problems of which you aren't aware.

### Mid-semester Evaluations

Mid-semester evaluations can be simple or elaborate, depending on your available time, the size of your class, and how much feedback you want from your students. The TA project website has a sample mid-semester evaluation form that you can use as-is or customize by adding your own questions to the ones suggested. The form can be accessed from TAP's homepage (<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>) under the "Services & Tips" heading. Some instructors find it useful to ask their students three basic questions: what things am I (the instructor) not doing that I should start doing, what things that I'm doing should I stop doing, and what things that I'm doing should I keep doing? The idea is to find out how your students are responding to your teaching methods. Instructors should also give their students the chance to let them know if they are communicating clearly. Students may want you to speak louder, or write information on the board, or remind the class of assignment due dates. Some small, easily made changes such as these can make a big difference in how much your students benefit from the course.

## Posting Student Grades Online

Students clamor for instant access to grades, but instructors are no longer allowed to post grades using a student's social security number or even any portion of it. In response to this problem, the New Brunswick Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) has developed a way to distribute grades quickly while protecting student privacy. The FAS Gradebook is a web-based system that allows students to log in and view grades that their instructors have posted. Instructors and students both need Rutgers NetIDs to use the system.

The system can be accessed at <http://gradebook.rutgers.edu> or by clicking on the "FAS Gradebook" link on the FAS homepage (<http://fas.rutgers.edu>). If you want more information about the FAS Gradebook or encounter any problems with it, documentation and troubleshooting information are available at <http://fas.rutgers.edu/computing/gradebook>.

## Evaluations...

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Instead of handing out a formal evaluation form midway through the semester (or in addition to it), you may want to get regular feedback from your students. You can hand out index cards every few weeks or after tests and major assignments. Have the students answer specific questions about the coursework, or occasionally ask them something general, like “is there anything you want me to know about how this class is going for you?” Whatever questions you ask, allow your students to write down their answers anonymously, so that they will feel free to answer honestly.

Make it clear to the class that there are some things about the course that cannot be changed, either because your department requires them, or logistics make the changes too difficult, or simply because you believe that they are necessary to the course (the evaluations may show that you need to do a better job of explaining the purpose of particular assignments). If, however, your students make reasonable suggestions, do your best to actually

implement the changes. Acknowledge and respond to their concerns. If you hand out evaluations but ignore your students’ responses entirely, they may become understandably upset. Don’t be afraid to experiment with new ideas that come out of student evaluations. You can always revert to your original methods and course plans if you need to.

## Videotaping and Peer Observation

In addition to student evaluations, there are other ways to assess your teaching performance over the course of the semester. The TA Project offers two services—videotaping and the Peer Observation Program—that can help TAs gauge their teaching effectiveness.

The TA Project can provide a technician to videotape one of your classes. Watching the videotape will allow you to see yourself literally from a student’s perspective. You can learn a great deal from this about how effectively you are communicating with your students. The videotape can also be reviewed with a faculty member or a member of the TAP staff, who can help you identify your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and who may be able to point out details that you’ve overlooked.

The Peer Observation Program (POP) gives

interested TAs a structure for observing each other teach. POP can assist you in organizing a program of mutual observation with other TAs. Having a faculty member sit in on your class and evaluate it can be very useful to the novice teacher, and this is an option you may want to discuss with faculty in your department or the department chair. Many TAs, however, particularly inexperienced ones, may find it less stressful to be observed first by other TAs. Another Teaching Assistant, who is having experiences similar to your own, will be able to offer constructive criticism. In addition, the act of watching someone else teach and giving them feedback may give you a new perspective on your own classroom practices.

To arrange for videotaping, call TAP at 732-932-1182 or sign up on the TA Project website (<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>). You can also visit the website for more information on the Peer Observation Program.

Assessing your teaching performance early in or midway through a course, whether by student evaluations, peer observation, or videotaping a class, doesn’t require a great deal of work, but it can bring immediate benefits to you and your students.

**Get In Touch!**

**Tap Office:**

**<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>**

**Graduate School – NB:**

**<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>**

**TA Helpline: 932-11TA**

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## Technology and the TA: The Internet as a Classroom Resource

*Editor's note: This month, TapTalk is inaugurating a new column on technology and the university. We will provide ideas on how to use technology to enhance your teaching, and update you on new software packages and equipment that can aid you in your duties as an instructor. If you have suggestions for article topics or comments about this column, please feel free to email the editor at [tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu).*

Many instructors want to find some way to use technology to invigorate their classroom practices. If you want to integrate technology into your teaching methods, but you don't feel ready to invest a lot of time, one easy way to start that can be highly useful to your students and can get them actively involved in the course is to have your students use the Internet to find material to use in your class. The Internet can become a supplement to your textbook or regular reading list, offering the most recent information and a wide diversity of opinion.

Some of your students may assume that they can get all of the information they ever need online and that there's no longer any reason to crack open an actual, physical book. Others may feel uncomfortable using the Internet as a research tool and know little about how to begin. While your students may have no

problem using email, downloading music, or surfing the web, that doesn't mean they know how to do research using the Internet.

Instead of assigning a major project involving Internet-based research, allow your students to become comfortable with and proficient at doing research online through smaller, less-stressful assignments to ease them into this practice. Short, Internet-based homework assignments can become the basis for class discussion. You can have students look up specific information or have them explore opinions and ideas. Since it can be hard to find trustworthy, factual information on the Internet, you may want to discuss with your students strategies for identifying reliable Internet sources. By studying multiple websites, students can have a great time discovering just how widely opinions range. Start them off with a topic and let them see where the links take them. Encourage students to take notes and print out selections from the pages they found most useful or interesting, to share with the rest of the class.

You may have specific suggestions for your students on where they should get started. If not, the Rutgers library website ([www.libraries.rutgers.edu](http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu))

is a great resource. On the main page, under "Resources," is a link to "Electronic Reference Sources." From there, your students can click on "Web Searching Tools" for a list of search engines, or they can follow links to websites on a broad range of topics. Your department may also have a website with links that will be relevant to your class.

Remind your students that when using the Internet, all the rules about plagiarism and academic integrity apply. (You can find a copy of the Rutgers policy on academic integrity at <http://teachx.rutgers.edu/integrity/index.html>.) This won't be much of an issue when they are doing a homework assignment that requires them to "find interesting websites related to topic X," but if they start writing papers based on materials they find online, the temptation to cut and paste from the Internet may be great. Have a discussion with them about this temptation and about the differences between paraphrasing, quoting, and plagiarizing. Your students (and you!) may have no idea how to acknowledge online sources. On the "Electronic Reference Sources" page on the library website, click on "Citation Manuals" for links to websites that will explain proper ways to cite material accessed electronically.

Coming next month: a checklist for evaluating Internet resources

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

## TAP Calendar

October 8	12:00 - 1:30 pm	TA Tips for Humanities and Social Sciences	RSC GSL*
October 9	12:00-1:30pm	TA Tips for the Sciences	BCC GSL#
October 30	4:00 - 6:00 pm	Women in Academe Panel Discussion	BCC GSL#

Call 732-932-7747 to register for any of these events

\*Rutgers Student Center, Graduate Student Lounge

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### 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

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