

VII. OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

The following sections of Rishel's book should also be read at this point:

- Jobs, Jobs, Jobs
- Case Studies: VIII, IX

Aside from class preparation, a TA's responsibilities outside of class consist mainly of routine work including maintaining office hours for students, grading quizzes and examinations, record keeping and student complaints and appeals involving grading. Review sessions for the class are also an option that some instructors might wish to consider on a voluntary basis.

Keeping in touch

Although we have already discussed the importance of maintaining communication with the instructor or coordinator of the course(s) you are teaching, this is important enough to be restated as the first point regarding activities outside class. Check your mailbox and electronic mail regularly. At least once a day is strongly recommended, once every half day is much better, and it is preferable that you also check your mailbox before you go to teach (as noted before, there may be some important last minute information or papers returned at the last minute). If you are going to be off campus for a half day or more, you should seriously consider checking your electronic mail from some other location. In particular, if for some reason you expect to be away from campus for a half day or more on a regular basis, you might want to invest in a home computer with a modem through which you can reach your electronic mail. A less costly way of getting electronic mail at remote locations is to subscribe to one of the free electronic mail services offered by sites like

www.hotmail.com

or **yahoo.com**; these can now be accessed at most public libraries.

Office hours

We have already said a considerable amount about do's and don't's for conducting office hours, and there really isn't much left to say. One point not yet mentioned is that altering your office hours after the first week or so should be avoided. Aside from the inconveniences and aggravation to students that such changes will probably cause, they also can lead students to think you aren't very well organized and might not know what you're doing. Finally, for the record we note that instructors are not to receive extra compensation from students in their courses for help during office hours or other times. In order to avoid any appearance of conflict, it is probably best to interpret this broadly as applying to all students taking some section of a course with the same number as one of yours and not only to students in your section(s).

Review sessions

Sometimes instructors might want to hold extra review or help sessions for their students. In principle such extra sessions are fine, but since they are outside of regular class time ***new material is not to be covered in such sessions***. Similarly, since students are likely to have other commitments at any hour of the day or night, making up cancelled classes at other times is inappropriate.

Record keeping for your classes

We have already discussed this to some extent. If you are teaching a discussion session, check with the primary instructor about whatever rules he/she might have, and forward copies of your records every two weeks or so in order to have a backup for your own records. The use of standard grade sheets is highly recommended because such sheets make it easy to locate and tabulate scores. It is required that your grade records be accurate, neat, legible, photo-copyable and up-to-date. Storing grades on a computer can be very convenient, but it is your responsibility to keep backup records (either on a backup disk or as hard copies) because computer systems can fail and invisible forces can render diskettes unreadable. TAs in discussion sections should provide their primary instructors with hard copies of grades every 2 to 3 weeks. Official instructions for turning in grades are issued at the end of each quarter by the Department or the primary instructor. If you are teaching your own class but will not be employed or in residence the following quarter you should turn in complete grade records and final examinations to the Department if so requested. Otherwise keep all these items a few weeks into the next quarter until the students' deadline for filing appeals has passed. At the end of the semester you will receive a class roster with the names of all students officially registered for your course. ***Please contact the Department staff if there are any errors or discrepancies*** (for example, students whose names you do not recognize or students in your section whose names do not appear on the list). The instructions that come with the class rosters include regulations for posting student grades. It is important to observe these, for they are designed to avoid violations of laws governing the privacy of student records.

Grading quizzes and examinations

We have already discussed grading quizzes, and there are not very many differences for grading exams. Once again, the basics of good grading are accuracy in measuring the quality of the students' work, consistency in assessing the work from the first paper you grade to the last, and providing the students an opportunity to learn from their successes or mistakes and to know why they receive the grade they were given. Of course, if you are teaching a discussion section the primary instructor will set the policies for assigning partial credit and letter grades, and in the interests of fairness to students these should be followed pretty strictly. Don't forget to keep a copy of the grading key. Responses to student complaints are discussed below. The section of *The Next Step* on grading tips (pp. 94–100) gives numerous suggestions for doing the job more efficiently and effectively.

The meaning of letter grades

The section on teaching and grading philosophies (pp. 45–48) in *The Next Step* discusses the most basic points on this topic, and it contains several questions that you should ask yourself about your own views on teaching and grading. The grade that a student receives will be used in the future to assess the student's strengths and abilities. For this reason, it is important that the grades you assign have meaning. A grade is something that a student earns, and in particular it is not good practice to grade extensively on the basis of demerits (everyone starts with an A, then points are subtracted at various times throughout the quarter to determine B's and C's and other grades. Here are some commonly accepted standards for letter grades.

Passing grades

- A.** This should represent a high level of achievement, and the student should have an excellent understanding of the subject, with the ability to apply it reliably at many levels. Such a student tends to be committed and motivated.
- B.** This should represent an above average level of achievement, and the student should have a good understanding of the subject with the ability to apply it at some levels.
- C.** This should represent an average, adequate level of achievement. The student should have at least a marginal grasp of the subject, possibly with more skills in test taking than in learning. Often this grade represents a lack of interest, motivation or time rather than a real lack of ability.
- D.** This represents a low level of achievement. The student has an understanding of the subject that is close to the minimum standard, and possibly little or no interest in learning more. This grade may also indicate a problem with learning or study skills, in which case the student should be referred to the Learning Center.

Failing grade (F)

This represents a level of achievement for which there is little or no evidence that the student was ever exposed to the subject matter. Once again, there is probably a combined lack of interest and motivation and/or skills at the root of the problem.

Complaints and appeals regarding grading

Most of us have probably done this at least once in an undergraduate mathematics course, and there probably will be complaints as long as there are grades. Unlike an upscale department store, in the education business the customer is not always right, and small concessions to students can easily lead to demands for larger concessions. Therefore it is important to stick with the predetermined grading scheme, discouraging appeals unless there is a grading mistake or an error in the addition of points. In the same spirit, no change should be made on the basis of reassessment of the quality of a student's work. One way of handling appeals without getting into endless arguments with students is to

require that requests for regrading be submitted in writing. For example, students who wish further consideration of one or more problems could be required to return their exams with “Regrade [*list problem numbers*]” written on the front. Some instructors might even wish to go one step further and allow the students to write a sentence or two to explain why they are asking for reconsideration, but in such cases it's also advisable to tell them to stick with the issues, avoiding argumentative statements like “I feel that I have been ripped off.” Since few of us really want to commit a grading scheme to long term memory, the reconsideration of a problem long after the original grading is likely to be inconsistent with the original scheme, and for this and the avoidance of appeals at the very end of the quarter it is strongly recommended that a deadline for requesting reconsideration of a grade be established. My standard deadline is one week after the examination was returned to the student(s). Students who are dissatisfied with the results of a request for regrading should be directed to the primary instructor if you are teaching a discussion section and to the Department office if you are teaching your own class.

It is important to avoid changing grades mainly in response to hard luck stories from the students, no matter how much pressure they exert or how compelling their stories may seem. Aside from the inherent unfairness to the other students, all too often the students' stories are misleading or downright false. Every university has offices to handle student problems, and they are genuinely concerned about getting students through a degree program if at all possible (high attrition rates are not good publicity!). You should refer students to the appropriate Dean's office for undergraduate student affairs or to the Department Administration if either you or the students do not feel that the course grade is a fair measure of the students' performance.

Record keeping for yourself

Teaching a class generates an enormous amount of paperwork, much of which has little value after the course is over and final grade records have been compiled. However, TA jobs only last a few years, and eventually you will have to find another job. Therefore you need to keep papers and records that will be useful later on, and you should start doing this right away. The professional records you should keep include employment and assignment notices, teaching evaluations, letters from students praising your work, etc. Such information will probably be useful when you are applying for jobs and requesting letters of recommendation. You should also start keeping a teaching portfolio including copies of the written material you produce during the term. Make sure everything is dated. This can be extremely helpful to those who write letters of recommendation, and it is a good habit to develop for later — in some institutions a compilation of this sort is needed for promotions or salary enhancement files.

VIII. SPECIAL PROBLEMS ARISING IN CLASS

A little will be said on discipline problems here to give a basis for coping with urgent problems, but there will be a much deeper look at disciplinary problems next quarter. In the meantime, if there are problems that you feel could get out of control, please see an appropriate person in the Department as soon as possible so that things do **NOT** get out of control.

Questions outside normally expected ranges

Sometimes a few students keep interrupting the flow of the class by asking questions about prerequisites or steps you skip (like simple algebra manipulations that are suppressed in calculus courses). Frequently these students have not mastered or forgotten the prerequisites. In the beginning you should spend some time filling in the gaps and not skipping too many algebra steps. However, students need to become sufficiently familiar with such manipulations that they can fill in some of the more elementary missing steps by themselves. If a few students are systematically unable to do so, you might want to ask them to come to an office hour for help, and in your office you should make it clear that you cannot and will not keep answering such routine questions in class. If in addition the students are doing very poorly in the course, you might want to tell them to speak with their academic counselors. Sometimes students want to ask questions about homework that is not due yet. If you are teaching a discussion section you should check with the primary instructor about his or her feelings on this matter. Some instructors might want to do problems that are similar to those that are assigned if time permits, and some of the strategies for situations with no homework questions are also applicable.

Referring students to other resources

The section of Rishel's book titled "Problems of and with students" contains a somewhat different perspective on this issue and can be read again at this point.

Occasionally you might have students in your class who require or ask for help with problems not directly related to the course. These include medical problems, language problems, immigration and naturalization problems, academic counseling, psychological counseling, human relations problems, financial problems, legal problems and general learning problems involving reading, writing and study skills. You should be very careful in handling such matters; since you are not a counselor, there is only so much you can do. Helping such students on your own can be very time consuming and draining, and besides your actions might not be in the students' best interests. The Counseling Center and the Student Affairs Offices of the various colleges are normally the appropriate places to which such students should be referred, with the latter as the default choice.

OVERVIEW OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

This information is presented as a sequence of lists. Although discipline problems are often equated with student misbehavior, there is a difference. Any behavior that interferes with classroom dynamics or atmosphere should be viewed as a discipline problem, even if the students are doing nothing intrinsically wrong (for example, asking a host of questions about material from prerequisite courses). On the other hand, even though cheating is a serious offense, it usually does not cause disruptions during class. As noted before, a more detailed discussion of discipline problems will be given next quarter.

Some examples

- Students coming late or leaving early.
- Students (usually just one or two) interrupting with a lot of irrelevant questions to the extent of interrupting the regular flow and annoying a fair number of the other students.
- Students talking to their neighbors.
- Students turning in their homework whenever they feel like it.
- Students running/controlling the class.
- Students actively annoying other students (*e.g.*, pulling hair), yawning loudly or passing notes back and forth.
- A lot of students being hostile.

Why are they happening?

- The student has a need to impress the rest of the class.
- The student is at an age where he/she wants to challenge authority.
- The student feels insulted/humiliated that he/she has to take the class.
- The student does not want to be in class but has come in order to turn in the homework and/or take the quiz.
- The student is new to campus, feels lonely, wants to make contact with his/her peers.
- The student is bored; he/she has seen it before.
- The student is lost.
- The instructor is not dealing with the students' questions or difficulties.
- The instructor copies what is in the book, is not sufficiently prepared, or does not care.
- The student has problems that have nothing to do with the instructor or the course.

Suggestions for dealing with discipline problems

Often depends on why the problem is happening — more on this next quarter.

- Avoid being confrontational.
- Talk to the student and stay calm. Be specific as to what behavior you want to stop.

- An appeal to the student' s sense of fairness is often helpful.
- Reversal of roles (*e.g.*, “How would you feel if you would try to understand the instructor but could not because someone is talking?”) is also often effective.
- Try to get the class on your side.
- Avoid getting dragged into an argument or having the problem escalate.
- Do not show anger or frustration.
- Do not make threats that you cannot carry out.
- If a large portion of the class becomes unruly, silence is often the most effective response. Standing there, looking annoyed, saying nothing and waiting until you have regained the attention of the class generally works within five seconds.
- ***Ask for advice before you lose control of the class!!!***

*The most important things to remember are to **STAY COOL** and to use your role as an authority figure to maintain as much control as possible (but remember that a too heavy handed approach can backfire).*

IX. EVALUATIONS

There are at least three levels of evaluation; namely, evaluation of students' performance, evaluation of your performance in the classroom, and evaluation of this course.

Evaluating the students

We have already discussed quizzes and record keeping. If you are teaching a discussion section, the primary instructor is usually responsible for preparation of the examinations for the class. If TAs are to participate in the grading of examinations, it seems appropriate that they be given a grading key and instructions on how to grade the exams, and it also seems appropriate that the instructions include a fairly detailed scheme for assigning partial credit (*e.g.*, 3 points for using the chain rule to find the derivative, 3 points for coming up with a correct expression for the derivative, 2 points for setting the derivative equal to zero, and 4 points for finding the roots of the derivative). It is strongly recommended that you grade question by question or page by page, for this allows you to remember more easily how partial credit is assigned and promotes fairer grading. As noted before, giving feedback on the exams is very helpful, but it can also be time consuming. Avoid just recording the number of points deducted without making any other marks. Circle or otherwise indicate mistakes in students' work; this also makes cheating by correcting one's work much harder. Brief comments and suggestions for students to come to office hours or speak with the primary instructor are also worthwhile in many cases. Chapter 12 of *Teaching Techniques* discusses many issues related to the mechanics of grading and general standards for assigning specific letter grades.

Evaluating TA performance

Most courses use student evaluation questionnaires to obtain feedback on teaching by both faculty and TAs. Lists of the questions in the forms used at UCR for faculty and TAs are given below. At some institutions the evaluations are set up so that the only thing noticed is the average or median response to a so-called bottom line question of the form. "What did you think of this instructor's teaching?" but the evaluation feedback at UCR is structured to discourage this shortcut; in part this is done in the way that the numerical results are displayed, but a more important point is that unedited typed transcripts of the student comments are returned and placed into the personnel files along with the numerical data. Both Department officials and higher level administrators in the University inspect all the information in the file.

For each item below, the mean and median scores together with the standard error are tabulated.

FACULTY EVALUATION

1. What is your overall rating of the instructor?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(1 = poor, 7 = excellent)

2. What is your overall rating of the course?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(1 = poor, 7 = excellent)

3. Did the instructor present the material in an organized, understandable manner?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(1 = never, 4 = occasionally, 7 = always)

4. Was the instructor concerned that students learn and understand the course material?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(1 = poor, 7 = excellent)

5. 5. Have you learned something you consider valuable?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(1 = definitely not, 4 = to some extent, 7 = definitely yes)

TEACHING ASSISTANT EVALUATION BY STUDENTS

[The scale is 1 to 7, where 1 = rarely/poorly and 7 = always/extremely well; there is also a blank marked N/A for use if an item is viewed as not applicable]

Organization

1. Provides goals and objectives in his/her presentation.
2. Is well prepared and clearly organized.

Knowledge

3. Thoroughly understands the subject matter.

Classroom Instruction

4. Explains the relevancy of the material.
5. Clarifies lectures and readings.
6. Encourages my participation through questions and/or classroom activities.
7. Creates a classroom atmosphere where I feel free to ask questions.
8. Respects the role of each student in a diverse environment.
9. Uses language appropriate to the level of the course.
10. Speaks clear, understandable English. *(Not applicable in foreign language sections.)*

Rapport

11. Motivates me to do my best.
12. Is accessible and helpful during office hours.
13. Is approachable ### his/her demeanor encourages interaction.

Grading

14. Gives useful feedback on graded assignments and exams.

Summary

15. Overall, is an effective teaching assistant.

There are strong arguments for and against the value of numerical evaluation data, but the numerical results of evaluations are widely used to determine whether one performance was in a broad normal range.

IMPORTANT

The TADP and Graduate Division here have adopted a score of 4.0 as a cutoff point for

question 15. When ratings fall below this mark, a teaching assistant is required to take the remedial action prescribed by the TADP. In particular, this includes attending the training and evaluation program run by that office. **Continued evaluation numbers below the 4.0 threshold can lead to termination of a teaching assistantship.** Generally the Department is committed to doing what it can to help teaching assistants perform in a satisfactory manner and will work very aggressively to present all positive evidence at its disposal (as it has in many cases during the past few years), but the final decisions in problem cases are not made at the departmental level.

Classroom visits

It is also profitable in many cases to have a faculty evaluation of TA performance through classroom visits. One example of an evaluation form for such visits was given previously. Here is the format of the evaluation form at UCR.

TEACHING ASSISTANT EVALUATION BY INSTRUCTOR

[The scale is 1 to 5, where 1 = bad and 5 = excellent]

1. Was the TA easy to communicate with? For example, did the TA show up on time for appointments, answer e-mail and so on?
2. Did the TA do what you wanted done in your discussion sections?
3. Were the students in the class satisfied with the TA as far as you could tell?
4. Were you satisfied with the TA' s performance in the grading of exams?
5. Would you want the same TA again for a similar assignment if you had a choice?

[Comments are solicited in the space beneath the questions.]

Interim evaluations

Many instructors find it useful to conduct an informal evaluation early in the course before student evaluations are run. In principle, this is a good idea and is recommended, but measures should be taken to guarantee the students' privacy rights and to ensure anonymity. Contact an appropriate person in the Department if you have any questions along these lines.

Evaluating the primary instructor's management of assistants

As noted before, questionnaires are circulated at the end of the quarter. For each TA working for a given primary instructor there is a separate form. These forms are not shown to the primary instructors although the results will be passed along as appropriate. The questionnaire asks for the number of students and lists the following questions:

1. About how many times during the quarter did the primary instructor update you on what he/she had covered in the lectures?
2. On a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best) how timely and complete was the information?
3. About how many quizzes did the primary instructor want you to give?
4. To what extent did the primary instructor assist in the grading of examinations? An approximate percentage of his/her share would be useful.
5. On a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best) how accessible was the primary instructor to discussion section leaders?
6. Do you have any further comments?