



# TA Connections

Newsletter for Teaching Assistants ♦ Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center  
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## Motivating Students and Creating a Good Classroom Environment\*

Effective teachers realize that teaching is more than simply “laying out the feast of knowledge” and hoping that students will be motivated enough to partake. Teachers can have significant impact on levels of student motivation by stimulating interest and encouraging learning as well as by introducing new information. Instructors who excel in inspiring students argue that creating a good classroom environment for learning is fundamental to their success. James Knight, a former Ohio State faculty member, lists several tips for improving the classroom climate, such as:

**Make Students Feel Important:** Knight argues that instructors who value students avoid condescension, sarcasm and impersonal behavior and cultivate self-esteem through praising good performance and taking personal interest in students.

**Make Students Feel Invited:** In a number of studies of student retention, the presence or absence of a close relationship with an instructor is cited as an influential factor on retention. Instructors who make students feel invited, both in class and outside of class, have a strong impact on motivation.

**Deal with Needed Changes from Positive Viewpoint:** Honest and frequent feedback is essential to good learning, but even very critical feedback can be offered in a constructive way. Instructors can usually find some good point to praise and can suggest specific ways in which to improve unsatisfactory performance.

**Learn To Make Nonverbal Cues:** Good eye contact, smiles and active listening skills such as nodding, help to motivate students.

**Use Student-Centered Instruction:** Student-centered instruction involves planning learning activities that will actively engage students and anticipate the kinds of opportunities and challenges that will be present in a specific area.

**Be Enthusiastic:** Most instructors find their discipline compelling, but sometimes it is hard to recapture excitement about a familiar topic. Trying to look at the familiar in a new light or to present things in fresh ways are strategies instructors use to maintain their enthusiasm. It is said that enthusiasm shows - so does its absence.

**Personalizing the Class:** Integral to any discussion on motivation is “personalizing” the classroom. Using instructional strategies that enable some individualization of instruction or small group work helps to develop personal investment and interest in learning. Similarly, talking about such things as their own life experiences related to the subject and their personal difficulties in mastering certain concepts can create a warmer classroom climate.

In summary, effective instruction entails paying attention to the “people” dimensions of the learning situation. Instructors who make some effort to get to know their students and to establish a good relationship with them will find that the efforts are well rewarded in the quality of learning that results. For more information, please consult the Instructional Guide for University Faculty available at <http://www3.niu.edu/facdev/resources/>

\*Adapted from *Teaching at The Ohio State University: a Handbook* (1994). Columbus, OH: The Office of Faculty and TA Development, Ohio State University.



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## **Video/Pizza/Discussion with Teaching Assistants**

*"The Art of Discussion Leading,"* **Wednesday, January 28, 2004**

*"Making Larger Classes Work,"* **Wednesday, February 11, 2004**

*"How to Speak: Lecture Tips from Patrick Winston,"* **Thursday, March 4, 2004**

*"Sharing Learning Expectations: What Students Want from College Teachers,"* **Tuesday, April 20, 2004**

**12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.**

This video series will be presented each month during the Spring Semester. Participants will have the opportunity to watch a selected video while enjoying pizza and refreshments, followed by a discussion moderated by Chigozie Achebe (Faculty Development) on aspects of the video that might enhance classroom teaching and learning practices. Advanced registration is required.

## **Finding Funding for Graduate Teaching Assistants**

**Monday, February 2, 2004 from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.**

Join Kristian M. Veit from NIU's Graduate Student Grants and Fellowships Office for a hands-on demonstration of how to search the Illinois Researcher Information Service (IRIS), a user-friendly online database of over 8,000 external grant and fellowship opportunities. Participants will receive training on keyword searches of this extensive database, including how to set up their own email funding "alert" system through IRIS. Advanced registration is required.

## **Blackboard Overview**

**Friday, February 6, 2004 from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.**

In this hands-on workshop, learn the basics of creating and developing a course in Blackboard, NIU's web course management system. Participants will be provided with an overview of course layout, navigation and an opportunity to place materials in a sample course. Knowledge of web browsing is necessary. Advanced registration is required.

## **Designing Effective Group Activities**

**Thursday, February 19, 2004 from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.**

This workshop is designed to examine the forces that foster social loafing (uneven participation) in learning groups. Participants will identify four key variables in order to create a group environment that is conducive for participation and learning. This session will offer tools to evaluate the effectiveness of group assignments in a variety of instructional settings and subject areas. Advanced registration is required.

## **Interacting Effectively with Students and Colleagues with Disabilities**

**Tuesday, March 2, 2004 from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.**

The Office of Affirmative Action and Diversity Resources will present a workshop designed to increase awareness, raise comfort levels, introduce strategies, and reinforce effective communication between students and colleagues with disabilities in academe. This session will include interactive exercises and discussion, and is open to faculty and teaching assistants. Advanced registration is required.

## **Mastering the Control Panel in Blackboard**

**Friday, March 5, 2004 from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.**

This hands-on session provides an overview of the various Control Panel features and offers participants an opportunity to work within their own courses. The Control Panel in Blackboard is the key to adding course content, managing discussion, setting up groups and many other course management functions. Blackboard Overview or equivalent is required. Advanced registration is required.

## **Building an Accessible Blackboard Course: Recommended Settings and File Formats**

**Thursday, March 18, 2004 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.**

This hands-on workshop is the third in a series offered by Information Technology Services on Web Accessibility. Participants will learn how to make a Blackboard course accessible to students with visual or hearing disabilities. Blackboard Overview or equivalent is required, and registrants should have access to a Blackboard course in order to test settings and document samples. Advanced registration is required.

## **Teaching Exhibits: A Poster Session**

**Monday, March 29, 2004 from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Capitol Room, HSC**

Learn about the innovative teaching techniques NIU faculty engage in their classroom at this poster session. The session will include teaching exhibits from academic departments as well as academic support units. Exhibitors will be present to explain their posters and teaching techniques and academic support strategies. No registration is required. Co-sponsored by the Office of the Provost.

## **Integrating Digital Images to Enhance Your PowerPoint Presentations**

**Friday, April 2, 2004 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.**

This workshop is intended for participants who would like to revise their electronic presentations delivered in class or online with images that enhance and improve the educational material. Activities will consist of discussing the rationale/pedagogy of including a variety of images, reviewing the mechanics of scanning, and providing examples. Advance registration is required.

## Blackboard: Assessment Tools

Wednesday, April 7, 2004 from 1:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The survey and testing features in Blackboard offer a variety of useful options for online assessment. In this hands-on workshop participants will have the opportunity to explore the various testing tools, create quizzes and grade book functions, and practice some short cuts in creating Blackboard quizzes. Blackboard Overview or equivalent is required. Advanced registration is required.

## Presidential Teaching Professor Seminar

Thursday, February 12, 2004, HSC Heritage Room, "*Critical Questions About Teaching*"

Wednesday, March 17, 2004, HSC Heritage Room, "*Assessing Student Learning*"

Tuesday, April 13, 2004, HSC Sky Room, "*Strategies to Enhance Interest in Learning and Student Performance*"

11:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Refreshments, 12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. Presentation and Q&A

This series of sessions offers stimulating questions and ideas from Dr. Jule Scarborough, one of NIU's Presidential Teaching Professors from the Department of Technology. Participants are encouraged to actively engage in these sessions by asking thoughtful, provocative questions. Sponsored by the Office of the Provost. No registration required and everyone is welcome.

## Designing Your Classroom Teaching with PowerPoint

Thursday, April 15, 2004 from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

In this hands-on workshop participants will learn the basic principles of how to integrate PowerPoint into their classroom teaching. Activities will consist of selecting PowerPoint slides for individual topics, providing examples, and using them to create and enhance presentations. Participants should have a basic understanding of Microsoft Windows software. Advanced registration is required.

**Registration Information:** Please contact Chigozie Achebe at the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center at 753-0614 or email at [cachebe@niu.edu](mailto:cachebe@niu.edu) by giving your full name, department, email address and phone number to pre-register. If you register for a program please make every effort to attend, and if you are unable to attend it please notify the Center at least two working days in advance so that others on the waiting list could be given the opportunity to attend that program. Please check <http://www3.niu.edu/facdev/ta/tasupport.htm> for other TA programs and information.

## Spring 2004 Teaching Assistant Orientation Highlights



Chigozie Achebe (Faculty Development) moderates the "Experiences in Teaching Inclusively" panel discussion

The Spring 2004 Teaching Assistant Orientation held on January 9, 2004 was attended by a sizable group of graduate teaching assistants. Morning sessions included the following concurrent presentations on two teaching topics and workshops on two technology topics:

- "Tutoring and Interacting with Students One-on-One," by Bill Koehler, School of Music
- "Balancing Students' Learning Styles with Teaching Styles," by Jenny Parker, Kinesiology and Physical Education
- "Overview of Blackboard," by Dawn Karlovsky, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center
- "Teaching with PowerPoint," by Carol Scheidenhelm, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center

After complimentary lunches in the HSC food court, afternoon concurrent sessions covered the following teaching topics and repeat of morning's technology topics:

- "Teaching Inclusively," by Brad Peters, NIU Writing Center and Department of English
- "Experiences in Teaching Inclusively: A Panel Discussion" by Chigozie Achebe (Faculty Development), Lametra Curry (Department of Counseling, Adult and Health Education), Brenda Hodges (Faculty Development), Michele Kimbrough (Chicago Public Schools), and Wayne Wilkinson (Psychology),
- "Overview of Blackboard," by Dawn Karlovsky, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center
- "Teaching with PowerPoint," by Carol Scheidenhelm, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center

The orientation could not have been possible without the support of all the presenters who volunteered their time to share their expertise and experience with graduate teaching assistants at the orientation.

The following participants won \$25 gift certificates from the NIU Bookstore in door prize drawings conducted between each session, and in a separate drawing attached to the TA Orientation feedback form:

*Kheang Leang*, Foreign Languages and Literatures  
*Kristin Mack*, Department of Teaching and Learning  
*Janice Denney*, Department of Teaching and Learning  
*Jen Guesst*, Department of Teaching and Learning

*Sandi Caldrone*, Women's Studies  
*Siew-Sim Chin*, Women's Studies  
*Prathyusha Narra*, Department of Technology  
*Mary Walker*, Department of Biological Sciences

In the door prize drawing attached to the TA Orientation feedback form, Srie Ramli, a TA from the Political Science Department, received a SHARP Personal Organizer courtesy of Carol Scheidenhelm (Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center).

There are a few copies of the handouts from the Spring 2004 TA Orientation still available and those TAs who could not attend the program can contact Chigozie Achebe at the Center to obtain a copy.

## Someone You Should Know

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Is there something you really have a passion for? Chigozie Achebe, the Teaching Assistant Coordinator at the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, enjoys lifelong learning so much she wanted to be a teacher/trainer. Her dream came true just a few months ago when she applied for and landed a new position at NIU, her alma mater. Leaving the warm weather of Atlanta, Georgia was not easy but she was drawn back to Illinois by "something bigger." Now her responsibilities as a staff member at the FDIDC include developing professional development programs and workshops for graduate teaching assistants, something she delights in because she has lived through the TA experience and now has the opportunity to give something back.

"This job seems tailor-made for me just because I survived many of the trials and tribulations, as well as the joys of being a graduate teaching assistant at NIU. I was a 'non-traditional' GTA prior to a formalized Teaching Assistant Program at NIU, so I have a first-hand understanding of many of the basic needs and real issues that TAs have to face without institutional support," she says. "Having the professional support of the FDIDC, which now offers the TA program, sends a strong message that the University takes the development of teaching assistants seriously. In addition, it is vital to maintaining an open line of communication with some of the hardest working students on campus."

Currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education, Achebe most recently was Assistant Director of Continuing Education at Clark Atlanta University. Prior to that she was a part-time instructor at DePaul University's School of New Learning. "I just kept the faith and continued to work towards my goal and purpose in life," she says. "My life experiences have definitely prepared me to be in this place, at this time, advocating for GTAs."

The services formerly provided by the Office of Teaching Assistant Training and Development (TATD) were transferred from the Graduate School to the FDIDC on July 1, 2003, due to budget challenges within the University. In addition to hosting the annual Spring and Fall TA Orientations, the FDIDC also provides a GTA electronic listserve, a "Teaching Assistant Support" website at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/ta/tasupport.htm>, a GTA Resource Library, a full schedule of professional development workshops throughout each semester, individual consultation, and the TA Connections Newsletter. "I welcome TAs to stop by my office in Gilbert 248 to say hello and introduce themselves," Achebe said. "My office hours are Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. till 4:30 p.m. and my door is always open."

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**TA Connections** is published every fall and spring semester by the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, Gilbert Hall 240, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois 60115. Phone: (815) 753 0595, Email: [facdev@niu.edu](mailto:facdev@niu.edu), Fax: (815) 753-2595, website: <http://www.niu.edu/facdev>. For more information about upcoming events, faculty development programs, or featured articles, please contact: Chigozie Achebe, Teaching Assistant Coordinator, at (815) 753 0614, [cachebe@niu.edu](mailto:cachebe@niu.edu), or subscribe to the GTA Listserve.