



TA Connections

Newsletter for Teaching Assistants ♦ Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center
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Student Ratings for Effective Teaching

The following article is a compilation of educational resources on the use of student ratings to assess effective teaching. Some of the references cited are listed at the end of the article.

Faculty attitudes about student ratings have not always indicated that they are a source of effective standards of assessing teaching. Thanks to a number of research studies on the topic, student ratings are now considered to be valid instruments for assessing effective teaching. These findings could be particularly helpful to teaching assistants who plan to become college teachers.

A key to effective teaching assessment is to collect data from multiple sources (triangulation), making sure that all education-related activities are rated by the people best qualified to rate them (Felder & Brent, 2004). Activities could include peer review by faculty observers; student ratings collected over a period of several years; summaries of teaching-related materials, including the redevelopment and review of innovative instructional methods. For this triangulated approach to be effective, it is recommended that data from various sources should overlap.

Formative assessment is conducted to improve the teaching of the instructor. If this is regularly undertaken during the teaching assistant experience, it is likely that subsequent summative reviews will be favorable by the time the TA's career has progressed to the faculty level. Summative assessment provides data that can be used to make personnel decisions and selection for award nominations, although some problems with this function have been identified. One problem is that many of these rating forms ask questions that may be "potentially prejudicial i.e., questions about the teacher's personality or the appeal of the subject matter" (Scriven, 1995).

"Studies have shown that student ratings are higher in courses where student achievement is higher (as measured by students' performance on final exams). However, the ratings are not necessarily consistent among all items that may appear on an instructor's evaluation form. In general, ratings of the course or instructor on overall items ('Overall this is an excellent instructor' 'Overall this is an excellent course') show a consistent positive relationship to achievement." (Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, 2006).

However, ratings asking about specific skills such as organization, enthusiasm, and clarity may not necessarily apply to student achievement. As a result, most researchers recommend that results of specific questions be used as feedback to help instructors improve their teaching.

The following recommendations are offered to help TAs benefit from the use of student ratings:

- Grade fairly, consistently, and give students realistic expectations about their grades in order to receive lower student ratings
- Don't be afraid to discuss the results with a colleague or teaching professional in order to derive the greatest benefit from your student feedback
- If you suspect a "gender effect" in your student ratings consult with staff at the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, faculty in the College of Education, or colleagues in your own department
- Design and distribute your own formative course rating forms in order to rate effective teaching or to make improvements

Adapted from the following sources:

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT), University of Michigan (2006)
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/crlttext/studentratingfaqtext.html>

Felder, R.M. and Brent, R. (2004). How to evaluate teaching." In *Chemical Engineering Education*, 38(3). American Society for Engineering Education. pp. 200-202.

Scriven, M. "Student ratings offer useful input to teacher evaluations." In *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* electronic journal, 4(7). Retrieved February 7, 2006 from <http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=4&n=7>



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FEBRUARY

Presidential Teaching Professor Seminar
Real-Life Examples: Connecting Learning and Research in Practical Applications
Heritage Room, Holmes Student Center, 11:30 am – 1:30 pm (No registration needed)
February 21, 2006

Blackboard Communication Tools
Wednesday, February 22, 2006

Blackboard Overview for GTAs
Friday, February 24, 2006

MARCH

Creating Your Teaching Philosophy
Thursday, March 9, 2006

Getting Started with Blackboard
Tuesday, March 14, 2006

Mastering the Control Panel in Blackboard
Wednesday, March 15, 2006

Teaching-Related Video/Discussion Series
“How to Speak: Lecture Tips from Patrick Winston”
Monday, March 27, 2006

Networking Meeting/Luncheon for GTAs
Thursday, March 30, 2006

APRIL

What Can We Learn from Student Feedback?
Thursday, April 6, 2006

Blackboard Assessment Tools
Wednesday, April 12, 2006

Web Accessibility: Instructional Implications
Tuesday, April 18, 2006

Teaching-Related Video/Discussion Series
“Making Larger Classes Work”
Thursday, April 20, 2006

Effective Presentation Skills for GTAs
Monday, April 24, 2006

Mark your calendars and plan to attend the Fall TA Orientation on August 22, 2006!

Registration Information: These programs are open to all graduate teaching assistants at NIU. To pre-register for a program please contact Chigozie Achebe at Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center by phone at 815-753-0614 or email at tadev@niu.edu and provide your full name, department, email address, phone number, and the title of the program you wish to register for. Program locations will be made available when you register. If you register for a program, please make every effort to attend. If you are unable to attend, please notify the Center at least two working days in advance so that others on the waiting list can be accommodated. Visit our website at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/> for a current schedule of TA programs and other information.

Teaching Resources for TAs! Do you know our Center has a number of instructional videos that TAs can view in our Teaching Resource Room or check out for their class use? Check <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/videos.htm> for a list of videos. Email tadev@niu.edu in advance to view a video or check it out for class use.

The purpose of the TA Orientation is to introduce graduate teaching assistants to basic principles of teaching, share information about campus support resources, and provide networking opportunities with both new and experienced TAs at NIU. This mid-year orientation follows up on topics presented at the Fall TAO and offers advanced topics suggested by participants of the August session. Twenty-six graduate teaching assistants attended the spring 2006 Teaching Assistant Orientation, coordinated by the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (FDIDC), on January 13, 2006. The following sessions were presented throughout the morning and early afternoon:

- *“Initiating and Maintaining a Climate of Civility in the Classroom”* by Tim Griffin
- *“Plagiarism and You: Consequences for Teaching”* by Brad Peters

Afternoon sessions covered the following topics:

- *“Using Concept Maps to Organize Instructional Material”* by Karen Carrier
- *“Campus Assistance for GTAs” Panel Discussion with Gail Jacky, Leanne VandeCreek, and Jerry Wright*



Spring '06 TA orientation attendees engaged in a group activity during one of the sessions

Participants who attended the mid-year TA Orientation engaged in three interactive presentations, in addition to an informative panel discussion by NIU staff members. The morning sessions began with “Initiating and Maintaining a Climate of Civility in the Classroom,” by Tim Griffin, University Ombudsman. He encouraged the use of preventive and proactive techniques to address undesirable behavior in the classroom. The participants engaged each other using a variety of problem-solving strategies such as reflection and role play throughout the two-hour session.

Brad Peters, Associate Professor from the Department of English and Coordinator of the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, spoke to the TAs about “Plagiarism and You: Consequences for Teaching.” Peters’ frank advice was based on Best Practices recommended by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. He began the presentation with a quiz that highlighted the types of assignments that may or may not encourage students to plagiarize. Participants gained additional awareness by drafting a brief plagiarism policy statement that could be used in a syllabus. They were able to draw from resources such as a handout that specified definitions of plagiarism, copyright infringement, and NIU policy on the subject.

Karen Carrier, Assistant Professor from the Department of Literacy Education, presented a session on “Using Concept Maps to Organize Instructional Material.” She used a variety of hands-on activities to familiarize participants with the benefits of concept mapping. Following a short lecture, the participants were encouraged to think about how this strategy could benefit them in their classrooms and worked in small groups to create their own instructional materials. Some of the benefits of this course design strategy includes the ability to make thinking visible, focus on key concepts using both hierarchical and critical thinking skills, and as the user becomes more familiar with the concept it becomes easier and faster to use.

The final session, a panel discussion on “Campus Assistance for GTAs” featured three NIU staff members discussing services that TAs can use not only to inform their students but also themselves. Gail Jacky, Director, NIU Writing Center, encouraged TAs to use the Center’s professional services to conduct in-class presentations about specific writing projects as well as to help students understand and navigate the writing process. Leanne VandeCreek, Area Specialist, University Libraries, discussed the resources available to TAs as both teachers and students. She emphasized the various services provided by subject specialists within 43 academic units, in-depth reference assistance, reserve items in print and electronic formats, and free interlibrary loan. Jerry Wright, Director, Student Support Services, informed TAs on how his office serves underrepresented students from low-income families. He encouraged them to take a closer look at their students to determine if they could benefit from Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) tutoring and other services that help foster a campus climate that is supportive of all races and cultures.

The TA Orientation could not have been possible without the support of all the presenters who volunteered their time to share their expertise and experience. Each participant who registered and attended the daylong program received presentation materials, lunch and refreshments, and Certificates of Participation.

GTA Listserv! Are you receiving our Graduate Teaching Assistant Listserv messages with program announcements and other useful information? If not, please send an email to tadev@niu.edu to subscribe to this listserv.

Q: How can I change my email address in Blackboard?

A: For reasons of security, email addresses cannot be changed by the user in Blackboard. Students' email accounts default to the NIU campus address while faculty email defaults to Groupwise. This is a change in policy since the May, 2005 upgrade. Users may have their NIU email forwarded to their preferred email account. Instructions are on the ITS website at: http://www.its.niu.edu/its/helpdesk/webmail_students.shtml.

Q: Can I change the way my Blackboard page appears?

A: After logging into Blackboard, all users have the ability to customize the layout and look of their NIU tab. One can control which courses are displayed and how they are displayed, add or remove links to favorite websites, change the color scheme, and many other functions. Check online for complete instructions for customizing tips: <http://www.blackboard.niu.edu/blackboard/customize.htm>

Q. Is it possible to get updates on programs without going to the TA section of the Faculty Development website?

A: RSS, commonly known as Really Simple Syndication, is a popular method for sharing content without requiring readers to continually visit a website to see what's new. GTAs can subscribe to several new RSS feeds to received updates of new GTA workshops as well as updates and tips for teaching with Blackboard. For more details, visit: <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/rss>.

Q. My department posted the spring TA programs and there are several I would like to attend. How can I register?

A: Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center has an online registration form for all TA/GA and RA programs offered by the Center, as well as a complete list of programs offered for the semester. Students can also call 753-0614 or email tadev@niu.edu to register. Users will find a listing of programs and the online registration form at: <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/forms/taprogreg.htm>.

Call for Nominations, 2006 Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant Awards

Purpose: The purpose of these awards is to acknowledge and recognize outstanding graduate teaching assistants for their contributions to the teaching mission of Northern Illinois University.

Awards: Three awards will be given and each recipient of the award will be presented with a plaque and recognized at a reception held at the end of the spring semester. At least one of the awards may be presented to an outstanding teaching assistant pursuing a master's degree.

Eligibility: To be eligible for this award, each candidate must:

1. be enrolled as a graduate student in good standing at NIU during the semester the award nominations are due;
2. have been employed as a graduate teaching assistant for one or more semesters, excluding the semester of nomination, during the past 2 years at NIU;
3. have been responsible for teaching a course fully or teaching-related support (example: leading discussions, tutoring, recitation, laboratory development/supervision, etc.) which involved student contact as part of the graduate teaching assistant employment;
4. have not previously received this award at NIU.

Nomination Submission: Each academic or academic support unit that employs graduate TAs for teaching and related activities is invited to nominate one outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant from its department for the award. Five copies of each nomination should be submitted to "Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant Award Committee, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, Northern Illinois University" by **March 10, 2006**.

TA Connections is published every fall and spring semester by Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, Adams Hall 319, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois 60115. Phone: (815) 753 0595, Email: tadev@niu.edu, Fax: (815) 753-2595. Visit our website at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/> for a current schedule of TA programs and other information or contact: Chigozie Achebe, Teaching Assistant Coordinator, at (815) 753 0614, cachebe@niu.edu, or subscribe to the GTA Listserv.