



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## Electronic Feedback at Work

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CS 201 is a demanding class required of majors in Computer Science, Systems Engineering and Electrical Engineering. Because the material is quite difficult and learning it can be time-consuming for many people, it is a class in which there's a risk of "spreading crises of discontent."

After talking to Kirk Martini (Architecture and Civil Engineering) about his use of anonymous feedback in his classes, I decided to provide the students of CS 201 with a web-based feedback mechanism. We use the web extensively in CS 201, so the necessary social context was already in place. I added a link to the CS 201 web page at <http://www.cs.virginia.edu/cs201>. Clicking on the link brings up a form. Text typed into the form is sent to me as an e-mail message without attribution. A Computer Science student wrote a small program that uses our Unix system's e-mail program to send the message to me. Subsequently, Gabe Robins (Computer Science) adapted this approach to provide a department-wide anonymous feedback form that anyone can use to send a message anonymously to any professor in the CS department.

My experience to date has been unambiguously positive. The load is almost negligible. I receive no more than a message every week or two from a class of 150-200 students. I reserve the right not to respond at all to a message, and I exercise this right occasionally when I get a message that doesn't merit an answer. Almost invariably, though, the messages address legitimate issues of importance to the students. I have been impressed with the seriousness with which the students use this tool. (They have not always used unmoderated

newsgroups as responsibly. I combine a moderated newsgroup with anonymous feedback to discourage irresponsible broadcasts to the entire class while also giving students a mechanism to register their thoughts.) I have found that responding publicly to a few important anonymous messages each semester increases students' satisfaction with the class significantly.

To cite one example, I postponed an assignment in response to a message that alerted me to an unusually heavy load of exams in other classes. I announced in class that I was postponing the assignment because of a student's suggestion. I was astonished at the reaction. The essence of the students' response was, "Wow, you listened to us! No one has ever done that before." A very small amount of feedback along with a little responsiveness seem to go a long way to keep the culture positive and productive in a difficult, required class.