



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## Central Ground: The Teaching Mantra

by Bill McAllister, Faculty Consultant, TRC (History)

I think everybody who teaches employs a short, "default" assumption that guides their teaching-related decisions and reactions. Instructors routinely process problems, failures, and successes through a personalized interpretive filter. I call this the "Teaching Mantra" (TM), which I define as a bumper-sticker sized statement that animates our teaching interactions. Whether or not we are aware of its existence, the TM informs our reactions when something goes wrong, or right, in our classroom.

My current Teaching Mantra, "**Blame students last,**" emanates from a bad experience I had a number of years ago when teaching a fourth-year History seminar. A bright student in this small, senior-thesis-type class submitted a mediocre paper. I graded her accordingly, and she in turn became upset and complained bitterly. A previously happy working relationship turned sour, and in subsequent months I puzzled at length over what had gone wrong. It would have been easy to conclude that this woman represented the oft-discussed spoiled U.Va. undergrad who expected faculty to cater to her own overblown assessment of her work. As I mulled over our interactions that semester, however, I recalled several instances where I *thought* I communicated my expectations clearly. She *said* she understood, but had she really? Did I truly comprehend my own criteria sufficiently to explain them to a neophyte, or had I retreated to the amorphous land of "awk," where my ability to articulate was reduced to imprecise notes in the margins expressing sentiments such as, "Well, this doesn't *feel* like an 'A' paper." I decided to reconsider

whether I could be more coherent in explaining my expectations, and how I could construct the semester's work in a way that would avoid another disaster.

After tinkering with my syllabus over several semesters, I believe I have concocted a much better way to move students through the process of creating their own historical text. I now require students to check in frequently with portions of what will become their final paper; I collect writing samples very early in the semester to spot problems; I have borrowed from a rich literature on critical thinking to help students structure meaningful questions; and I articulate much more clearly my goals for the semester. I believe this approach has produced good results, and it is based on my decision to take a very hard look at how I contributed (unintentionally, of course) to creating conditions that diminished my students' capacities to produce high-quality work.

Last semester I taught the Pedagogy Seminar for Teaching Assistants in the Engineering School. I asked the graduate student participants, most of whom are novice teachers, to articulate their own Teaching Mantras and add a short paragraph explaining their default assumption. I found many of their responses both thoughtful and thought-provoking. Succinct, pithy statements include "**Be nice to your students, because one day they could be your boss**" (Alex Nice, Civil Engineering) and "**The main thing is not to panic**" (Tim Wenk, Civil Engineering). With direct honesty, Chad Cole (Electrical and Computer Engineering) notes "**Patience IS a virtue**" and explains, "Sometimes you just want to scream, but instead step back, take a breath, and realize that at one time you were just as dumb as them."

Other insightful Teaching Mantras from Engineering TA's include these:

**Pursue Aha**

Bob Rockwell, Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering

To “pursue aha” is to strive constantly to help the student reach a deeper understanding of the material—to help them move from simply regurgitating what is in the textbook or lecture toward really understanding the principles and relevance of whatever is being taught. As a TA, this requires patience in dealing with students who just want an answer they can put on their homework, but it also requires patience in letting students work some things out for themselves. You can't force *aha* on a student, you can only guide them toward it. The reward is being part of that moment when a student's face lights up in understanding, or they give a particularly insightful answer, or even when they ask a particularly insightful question. If it weren't for those moments, and knowing that they're out there, I'm not sure what appeal teaching would have.

**Push them; they will push back.**

Todd Summers, Electrical and Computer Engineering

If you challenge students to do better, they will rise to the occasion. Without some stimulus, students will instinctively put in the bare minimum of effort.

**Where's base camp, what gear do we need, and what routes can we take?**

Sue Kazanjian, Materials Science and Engineering  
Students build their knowledge on their own unique foundation. It's my job to provide tools, materials and techniques. My TM reminds me to identify a student's level of understanding so that I can supply the appropriate means for educational growth.

**Keep explaining it until they smile like kids in a candy shop.**

Phil Varner, Computer Science

The purpose of teaching is to convey information you know to the students. If the students don't or can't understand it, it's not fun. If they do understand it, it's exciting, and they're happy (well, at least happier). Happiness is an externality of learning, so our objective has been met.

**We don't really teach students; we create opportunities for them to learn.**

Zhongkai Wang, Systems Engineering

The important thing for a good instructor or TA is to motivate students to learn, not to force them to learn. You should help students to discover the interest of learning. In order to achieve that goal, you create opportunities for them. Furthermore, teaching and learning are interactive processes. You teach while you also learn at the same time, because students will keep you thinking about and updating what you are teaching through their questions. You can benefit from students' feedback.

**Inspiring instead of pouring.**

Hai Zhang, Electrical and Computer Engineering  
Guide students to think; prepare something stimulating and tricky for students.

Have you figured out *your* Teaching Mantra? You've got one, whether you realize it or not, so why not articulate it clearly? Your students would no doubt like to know, and your colleagues could profit from it as well. If you'd like to share your Teaching Mantra with the University at large, send it to the TRC. We'll consider publishing submissions in future editions of *Teaching Concerns* and on our website.