



**Teaching
at the
University
of Virginia**

Teaching at the University of Virginia

A Handbook for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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FOREWORD



As teachers at an American university whose founder was also one of the founders of American democracy, we speak often of freedom, usually the academic variety. Academic freedom, as it concerns the teacher, enables her or him to express scholarly views no matter how controversial. Academic freedom, as it concerns the student, enables what John Dewey calls “a freed capacity of thought.” It is the freedom that education confers on the educated.

Jefferson argued that education liberates students when he wrote, “Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.” According to Jefferson, to be educated is to be intellectually and morally autonomous. An educated person is freed of the tyranny of received but unexamined knowledge, otherwise known as “indoctrination.” Education teaches how to reason. Reason implies the capacity for intellectual and moral autonomy, and provides a means to resist oppression of any kind.

In this equation, then, the teacher, the one who leads the student to reason, liberates the student’s intellect. The best teachers recognize the gravity of this role and commit thought, time, energy, and effort to the work they do in the classroom. Because the teacher works to instill in students autonomous habits of mind, teaching is a dialogue, even when lecture is its format. Students always have the right to respond to their teachers’ statements, even if the response is not part of the classroom regimen. Students will write you essays and exams, and

they will argue with you mentally and in absentia with others standing in for you.

This dialogical relationship requires much of both teacher and student. Of the teacher, it requires the imagination to anticipate and prepare for student responses, the capacity to entertain points of view different from one’s own, and a largeness of spirit that allows the teacher ultimately to cede control of thought to the student. For, when a lesson is complete, it no longer is the teacher’s sole possession. It has passed into the student’s control and the student’s realm of intellectual responsibility.

Plato’s Socrates, the master of the educational dialogue, points out that “the direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life.” This handbook will help you help students find that direction, locate their intellectual orientations. It will guide you to ways to teach so that your students may discover what they think about what you have taught them. In your work, strive to cultivate your students’ capacity for independent thought so that they will be free to go make a place for themselves in the world. All of us dedicated to academic freedom know that the world will be better for that freedom they have gained in your classroom.

John T. Casteen III
 President
 University of Virginia

INTRODUCTION



To introduce the TRC's new handbook I want to reflect briefly not on the practical issues about teaching contained within its covers, but rather on what the TRC's full name

and mission imply. In mulling over the meaning of the phrase "Teaching Resource Center," I found myself focusing particularly on the word "resource." "Resource" itself came into English from the Latin word *resurgere* ("to rise from a recumbent position"; "to take up arms again"). That etymological connection led me, in turn, to the related French word "source" with its primary meaning, "the point at which subterranean water emerges from its hiddenness and rises to the surface"—thereby enspiriting and refreshing everything that lives by its energy. What specifically, though, do "resource" and "source" have to do with the remarkable work of our TRC at the University of Virginia?

Most concretely, the resources the TRC provides are to be found in the many programs the Center makes available to our faculty: the Teaching Portfolio Workshop, the Teaching Analysis Polls, the Classroom Observation Program, the workshops that begin every semester at U.Va., the work with international TAs on teaching American students, the programming for our Teaching + Technology Initiative Faculty Fellows, and much more. A principal focus of the TRC in orchestrating activities like these is on practical strategies for enhancing teaching performance, making the classroom experience for ourselves and our students more effective, enriching, and stimulating. Another less tangible but equally important

focus of such activities is to encourage us as faculty to talk among ourselves—and especially across disciplines—about what we do as teachers. The TRC stimulates us to formulate our teaching philosophies, and to think more deeply about what we do in the classroom, with as well as for our students.

This brings me to a second resource and source of excellence in teaching recognized and celebrated by the TRC, one that bears on the nature of teaching at a research university. That resource is nothing more or less than the faculty's own love for and engagement with our disciplines, our research or scholarly projects, and our collective commitment to cultivating the life of the mind. The practical strategies for teaching are extremely important. Yet ultimately they will have the best long-term results in enriching our students' lives if they serve a special passion for ideas and intellectual discovery. It is this that has drawn each of us to academic life in the first place, and to teaching at a great research university. Whether we are faculty members or graduate teaching assistants, modeling this passion, together with the intellectual discipline and precise thinking that flow from it, can inspire and enliven students, even if it doesn't go hand-in-hand with polished pedagogical performance. This is an important point to keep in mind in terms of the resources we bring to our students, especially when we walk away from a given class thinking "I didn't think that class went very well." Indeed, teaching as engagement with an academic discipline and as a passion for pushing knowledge forward may not always have the appearance, in the classroom, of great "performance" in a superficial sense. The effective teaching of break-

through ideas may take the form of hesitation, an apparent inconclusiveness, or a lack of clear direction—and these characteristics may seem opposed to ideas about the polished, clever, exciting lecture. Yet most of us, thinking back to our own education, would know that at least some teachers we now regard as the “best” would never have won teaching awards or received acclaim in popularity polls.

One final resource—and source —of excellence in teaching I must mention is our students. Their eagerness, their intellectual curiosity, and their life-experience are incredible gifts to us, and enable us, if we pay attention, to teach at our best. So long as we keep on listening and responding to them, they can inspire us to change and grow both as scholars and as teachers. We are greatly helped in our attention to listening by the good offices of those staff members in the TRC who organize the several kinds of student feedback that help us stay tuned to our students’ needs and aspirations as learners.

As teachers, our goal, it seems to me, is not only to be engaged in learning and practicing pedagogical strategies, though these are important aids to classroom effectiveness. In a more global sense, we need to be continually “re-sourcing”—rising again and again to our calling as teachers— with just the kind of energy I associate with the surge and freshness of natural well-springs. This “re-sourcing” comes to us as we actively participate in the professional discourse that pushes our own intellectual lives and our particular disciplines forward. We also draw great energy for renewal by talking with each other about, and working on, pedagogical strategies of the kind you will find both in this handbook and in the stimulating discussion the TRC’s many programs generate across the Grounds of the University.

Barbara Nolan
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Vice Provost for Instructional
Development and Innovation,
July 1994-June 2002

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PREFACE

Through *Teaching at the University of Virginia: A Handbook for Faculty and Teaching Assistants*, accomplished U.Va. professors and TAs share with you, both faculty members and graduate student teaching assistants, some of what they've learned from others and from their own fruitful—and less than fruitful—experiences. We have intermingled philosophy and hands-on advice and have kept our suggestions fairly general, remembering that they will be read by an audience as diverse as engineers, artists, physicists, historians, and psychologists, all with different needs, personalities, student populations, and goals. You should find useful ideas, whether you have taught for years or never before. Although the primary focus is on undergraduate teaching, many *Handbook* recommendations apply to teaching graduate students as well. Please note that telephone numbers and web site addresses were accurate at the time of publication but may have changed since then.

Why a Handbook?

The many instructors' experiences and many researchers' written discourse that have contributed to the preparation of the *Handbook* (some of which appear in our "Further Reading and Videotapes" appendix) confirm that teaching is a skill you can learn and improve, just as you have learned to read analytically, to write, or to speak in public. Certainly, no handbook can substitute for classroom teaching experience. But first-time instructors with a handbook can draw on multifaceted experiences of other teachers; without a handbook, they have their experiences as students and, with luck, a friend, colleague, or supervisor to consult. Even experienced instructors with many successes behind them may benefit from a fresh idea, a new technique, another's perspective.

Although scholarship, research, and teaching are all vital aspects of acquiring and sharing knowledge, graduate study does not always prepare the professional academic equally for all three. Here's how one Harvard professor put it:

Holding forth in a public forum frightens almost everyone who has to face the experience. Veteran actors endure butterflies on opening night, and hardened lawyers find their palms moist before offering summations in big cases. But nobody has better reason to fret than the average college

teacher. Actors and lawyers, after all, are trained to perform before large and sometimes hostile audiences. Professors are trained only as scholars and then thrust in front of the classroom to play the role of teacher. To say that this transition in roles can be a learning experience is to indulge in understatement. (Fraher, in Gullette, 1984, p. 116)

In the hope of subduing butterflies, drying palms, and inspiring more students, we offer a few pointers and encourage you to try them, keep the ones that work for you, and delight in your own teaching style as you cultivate it.

Why Care About Teaching Well?

For a few academics, the call to publish or perish has generated wonder about whether it's really necessary to teach well at all. Why agonize over lecture notes or reread the poem to be discussed on Wednesday? The answer must come from our students, future citizens of the United States and the world. When you read students' reactions to their courses and their *Cavalier Daily* editorials or when you listen to them talk in Pav XI, you learn that teaching affects nearly their entire perception of the course, that a fine teacher can interest them in a subject they never cared about before, that they have changed the course of their lives because a teacher inspired them. Teaching carries with it a serious *responsibility* and, equally importantly, a great *privilege*.

Moreover, as scholars, you are inherently committed to mastering your discipline and to extending knowledge about it. Your personal interest in what you study can excite students to want to learn as much about the subject as they can. By inspiring them to accept the challenges you and your topics pose, you can awaken their curiosity about and respect for scholarship in general.

Research and teaching are for me the yin and yang of academic life. Without research I would not have the confidence needed to create clear explanations of complex phenomena. Without teaching I would not have the necessary practice explaining clearly to stay sharp. Teaching allows us to show students by our example how people go about discovering the hidden regularities that underlie the chaos of everyday life in the physical world.

—Steve Schnatterly, Physics

What Do You Teach Students?

As teachers, you most obviously and easily impart information. But more than simply informing students, you must develop their cognitive abilities, including their power to solve problems, think logically and creatively, analyze, and question. With these skills, your students can grapple with the wide range of personal and moral issues they should encounter in college—central questions of philosophy, politics, science, art, religion—and begin to determine their own convictions. Beyond college, people who think clearly work better and can learn independently throughout their lives.

Along with imparting knowledge and developing thinking skills, you motivate students to want to learn what you teach. What many would call the ideal student, the one who naturally seeks knowledge and examines it and who would do so despite your efforts, is rare. Most college students, whether bright and energetic or discouraged and lethargic, need some motivation from you.

As scholars, you have exciting perspectives to share, so why offer only digested solutions to problems already solved? By sharing the genesis of your ideas, including some of your wrong steps, you promote creativity, insights, and judgment. When teaching and research invigorate each other, each becomes more valuable: what you teach should lead you to further investigation, students' queries should provoke your inquiries, and what you discover through research should enhance students' learning. Chris Christensen, Professor Emeritus at the Harvard Business School, says that there is "magnificence in *all* teaching":

We enjoy the privilege of lifelong learning, a constant link to youth, growth, search, and the world of ideas, and the knowledge that our work has fundamental worth to others. The potential of our daily routines to create impressive results—some of the moment, the most intriguing of the future—makes our work a service of ever-unfolding fulfillment. We are part of something great. (*Education for Judgment*, 1991, p. 34)

Using This Handbook

We write to both experienced and inexperienced faculty members and teaching assistants teaching undergraduates. At the University of Virginia, "TAs" are graduate students teaching in many capacities: as assistants to a professor, as independent instructors in a multi-section or single-section course or lab, as tutors or consultants for problem-solving sessions, and as graders. The "Specific TA Concerns" section highlights the TA's role; we suggest that both TAs and faculty working with TAs read it because TAs' success depends on the care and effort expended not only by TAs but also by the supervising professor.

Recognizing that our audience comes from every discipline, we have emphasized universals and defer to the recommendations of your departmental handbooks and supervisors where they conflict with ours. We have also deliberately kept our remarks brief, opting to give you basic concepts and recommendations; for more details, consult works listed in the "Further Reading" appendix. This handbook will be most helpful if you read individual sections as you need them; to help you navigate through, we offer frequent references to related sections. To help you find the most immediately relevant sections, we have provided a detailed table of contents. References to specific U.Va. offices are explained in Appendix II.

We have taken your comments and suggestions into account as we revised this handbook, and we continue to appreciate your input for future editions. Please feel free to share your insights with us (trc-uva@virginia.edu). Most importantly, remember that we offer our ideas as suggestions, not as requirements, and as a beginning. We hope you go beyond this handbook to discuss your classes with your students and colleagues, to observe other instructors teaching, to experiment with new techniques, and to continue to develop your personal teaching style.

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