

Enhancing Class Attendance

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Absences hinder learning by students who miss class and detract from a dynamic teaching-learning environment, adversely affecting the overall well-being of the class. When choosing to miss a class, a student takes into account only his/her own benefits and costs of attendance and ignores the impact of attendance on the overall well-being of the class. Because individual decisions lead to actions that are not best for the class, teachers have a responsibility to encourage attendance. A variety of regulations and rewards can be used to help achieve a desired level of attendance.

With the fast pace of modern society college students are involved in many activities and are simultaneously pulled in many different directions. Academics are only one dimension of the dynamic and complex college life. Thus it should not be surprising that some students may occasionally place other activities such as current jobs, seeking employment for future careers, socializing, sports, traveling, etc. ahead of academics. Being overly attentive to non-academic activities may be manifested in poor grades and/or poor attendance in classes. The problem of poor attendance in classes is considered in this paper. Not only do non-academic activities conflict with class attendance, even those academic activities associated with one class may conflict with attending another class. For example, students may miss classes in order to attend field trips or judging trips. Furthermore, students may skip some classes in order to concentrate on other classes. What are the consequences of frequently being absent from class?

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Agricultural Science. However, these women have been able to find other positions with the degrees and certifications that they received.

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The objective of this paper is to examine the issues surrounding class attendance, drawing implications for managing class attendance. Specific objectives of the paper are as follows. The roles of attendance are examined, with some roles being rather obvious and others not being obvious. A framework for attendance decisions, which has implications for managing attendance, is developed and analyzed. Empirical evidence of an experimental strategy to manage attendance is examined.

The Roles of Attendance

Understanding

The basic goal of higher education is to improve students' understanding. Courses provide the fundamental mechanism through which knowledge is transmitted by teachers to the students. However, good teaching involves much more than simply passing information from the teacher to the students. A good teacher would provide insights on the materials, models and relationships, indicate the significance of this information, and help students take ownership of these ideas so that they can understand and apply them.

If students fail to attend class, they are not fully cooperating in the teaching-learning process. Even when these students copy notes from students who attended class, this behavior is not directed toward achieving a real understanding of the materials. Instead, they can generally only memorize and repeat the information from the notes. Their learning thus becomes learning by rote, which minimizes understanding and thus defeats part of the purpose for being in the course in the first place (McKeachie).

Reliance on notes from a student who attends class is a type of student-to-student tutoring program. The literature indicates that formal programs of student-to-student tutoring can be effective (Kelly and Swartz). In these formal programs, top students are identified, trained for tutoring and given incentives, such as the right to exempt exams, in order to tutor other students who need help. In contrast to these formal programs, students who fail to attend class, relying on other students to help them get the material, are faced with an informal and entirely different student-to-student tutoring program. In this informal program, the tutor is selected on the basis of willingness to help rather than academic ability. No training is given these students to help make them effective tutors. Furthermore, they have little incentive to provide any information to the student who missed class.

Students who choose not to attend class, even sporadically, may not comprehend what they are giving up in terms of understanding the material. Nonattendance results in less understanding of the material. It is difficult for students to quantify the impact of nonattendance on understanding,

which explains why it is often ignored. Also, many students focus more on grades than on understanding on the premise that there is a direct relationship between grades and understanding, albeit an imperfect relationship. Using notes from other students in an attempt to make up for missing a class may help keep grades up but student understanding may still suffer from nonattendance.

Energy

Teachers and students possess energy which can be expended during a normal class period. The teacher expends energy by teaching and can cause students to expend energy by drawing them into the teaching-learning process. It is obvious that students expend energy when they are directly participating in the teaching-learning process through such activities as asking questions, answering questions, solving problems, discussing issues, working in groups, etc. However, students can also expend energy by observing and responding to what the teacher is doing by such things as laughter, allowing their emotions to be touched, or being mentally stimulated. In order for the teaching-learning process to be successful, energy must flow from the teacher to the students and flow back to the teacher again (Staub).

The significance of the energy concept can be understood by considering the actor-audience relationship in theater. In contrast to television and movies, the unique nature of theater arises from the fact that the performers are in the presence of the audience. Walter Kerr described the actor-audience relationship as follows:

“(Actors) are in our presence, conscious of us, speaking to us, working for and with us until a circuit that is not mechanical becomes established between us, a circuit that is fluid, unpredictable, ever-changing in its impulses, crackling, intimate. Our presence, the way we respond, flows back to the performer and alters what he does.”

The audience might mentally enter into the feelings or spirit of characters on the stage or react violently against them (Wilson). The classroom can be thought of as a theater with a relationship between the teacher and the class of students that is similar to the relationship between the actor and the audience.

As the role of the theater audience is to observe and respond to the performance, students have a similar role in the classroom. Students should observe and respond to what the teacher is doing. By fulfilling their role, students help complete the energy circuit, contributing to a successful teaching-learning process. Failure to attend class breaks the energy flow. Consequently, student attendance is a critical element in maintaining the energy flow and building a strong teacher-class relationship.

Decision Framework for Attendance

A framework for considering attendance decisions can be conceptualized in terms of benefits and costs. For those days on which the costs of attending class are greater than the expected benefits, the student would rationally choose not to attend.

While the monetary costs of attending an additional class

are minimal, the perceived costs in terms of discomfort, inconvenience, or conflict with other activities may be high. The teacher often has no influence on these perceived opportunity costs.

Major benefits to the individual students, which are derived from attending the class, should include good grades, successfully completing the course, and understanding the material. Other nontangible benefits from class attendance might include enjoyment, a sense of belonging, a sense of accomplishment, etc. Teachers can directly influence all of these benefits. By keeping the benefits from attending class high, the teacher can encourage high attendance.

Another important benefit of attendance accrues more to the class than to the individual. Attendance by an individual can contribute positively to the energy flow of the class. By contributing to the energy flow in class, a student may influence the overall well-being of the class without fully recognizing it. Thus his/her attendance produces benefits to the teacher and other class members in terms of a collective good. However, the individual generally does not consider this form of benefit associated with attendance, because it accrues to other people. Thus, given a choice, the individual student would often fail to attend class, which works to the detriment of the energy flow and the overall well-being of the class. Traditional policy prescriptions for encouraging individual actions which benefit the collective good include regulation and subsidies. In the case of attendance, it appears to be appropriate to require attendance and/or reward attendance. These policies should result in greater attendance than the individual would otherwise choose, but the result would be more consistent with actions that are best for the overall class.

Analysis

Students in my agricultural policy classes at the University of Georgia were asked to complete a survey on attendance in 1991 and 1992. The survey asked students how many absences they had in the class during the quarter and what impact absences had on their grades. The survey asked how much support they received from other students to make up for absences and how much support they gave to other students to make for absences. Also, the survey asked whether attendance should be required. Both courses were offered during the same quarter of the year and the same period of the day, which should help make the results from the two courses comparable. Results of the survey are reported in the following sections.

Survey Results

In this section, the combined results for the two courses are discussed. The results are reported in the first data column of Table 1. The 79 students completing the survey averaged 5 absences each over the 50-day quarter. Each student was asked what his/her exam average would have been without any absences. Students thought their average exam score would have been 85.2 without absences. The actual score of 82.2 is reported as the exam with absences but with tutoring from other students to make up for the absences. If students had not received tutoring from other

students to make up for the absences, they thought their average score would be 76.9.

Without tutoring, each absence would have reduced the average exam score by 1.7 percentage points. With tutoring, each absence reduced the average exam score by .6 percentage points. These figures represent a collective assessment of how the students thought absences affected their grades. In summary, the students thought that absences would lower their grades, but about two-thirds of the effect of each absence could be dampened by getting help from other students who had attended the class.

Help to make up for absences appeared to be easily accessible. The average student received such help 2.8 times during the quarter. Three-fourths of the students said they had found other students readily available to help make up for absences. Also, three-fourths of the students said they personally would be readily available to help others make up for absences.

When asked about required attendance, 68 percent of the students said that attendance should be required. Students who thought attendance should be required average 3.9 absences compared to 7.2 absences for those students who did not want attendance to be required. The large number of students who wanted required attendance supports the concept of energy flow in the classroom, with absences breaking the energy flow.

Experimental Results

In this section, the results from the two courses are compared. The first class can be considered as a control group with no restrictions on absences. When the second class was taught students were not allowed to have more than five unexcused absences without being withdrawn from the class. Also, five points of the course average were based on attendance. Students with no absences would receive all five points, but one point would be deducted for each absence.

The results for the two classes are reported in Table 1. The first class averaged 7.5 absences, while the second class averaged 3.0 absences. With a t-statistic of 4.85, these means are significantly different at the one percent level. The attendance requirement and grading incentive rewarding attendance significantly improved attendance.

Other comparisons between the two classes can also be made from Table 1. The range between grades without ab-

Table 1. Survey Results

Row	Characteristic	Calculation by Rows	Both Classes	First Class	Second Class
(1)	Number of students		79	36	43
(2)	Absences per student		5.0	7.5	3.0
	Exam averages				
(3)	Without absences		85.2	87.3	83.5
(4)	With tutoring		82.2	82.5	82.0
(5)	Without tutoring		76.9	74.0	79.3
	Points lost for absences				
(6)	With tutoring	(3)-(4)	3.0	4.8	1.6
(7)	Without tutoring	(3)-(5)	8.3	13.3	4.2
	Points lost per absence				
(8)	With tutoring	(6)_(2)	.6	.6	.5
(9)	Without tutoring	(7)_(2)	1.7	1.8	1.4

sences and actual grades was much greater in the first class (4.8) than in the second (1.6). This difference arises because students in the first class had many more absences. The perceived cost of an absence was not much different between the two classes. With tutoring, students thought each absence would lower their course average by .6 percentage points in the first class compared to .5 percentage points in the second class. However, adding the one percentage point lost from the course average for each absence, as stated in the policy statement, increased the total cost of each absence to 1.5 percentage points for the second class. Hence raising the cost of an absence improved attendance significantly in this experiment.

Conclusions

An ideal situation with respect to attendance would be for all students to always attend class without the teacher having to be concerned with attendance. However, the typical class situation frequently deviates from the ideal, with the number of absences being greater than what is best for the overall well-being of the class. Teachers may find that being stimulating, entertaining, and otherwise creative may not ensure a high rate of attendance. Ignoring the problem of a large number of absences may result in a failure by students to adequately understand the material and/or a break in the energy flow of the class. Dynamic energy flow is often a critical element in the development of a successful teaching-learning process.

Teachers can institute policies to cope with absences. Mandatory attendance requirements, sporadic unannounced testing, and attributing part of the grade to attendance are some of the policy options available to teachers. The basic idea of such policies would be to increase the benefits of attendance to the students. Selecting the appropriate policy is dependent on the magnitude of the problem and what the teacher feels comfortable with. Collective action on attendance by all teachers in a department or college appears to be particularly effective, because of spillovers from one class to another. If a student is required to be in one class, he/she is more likely to attend the next class as well.

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