

Encouraging Student Attendance

BY MERRY J. SLEIGH AND DARREN R. RITZER

When I took my required public speaking class in college, the professor repeatedly admonished us to 'know your audience.' This rule of thumb served me well during my college class and thereafter. As I have prepared and taught my own classes, I try to make my messages understandable and meaningful to those who will hear them. Of course, this rule of thumb assumes there is an audience. Unfortunately, as teachers, we often spend less time cultivating an audience than we do preparing for that audience.

WAYS STUDENTS BENEFIT WHEN THEY ATTEND CLASS

Most teachers would agree that class attendance facilitates learning in a variety of ways. The auditory presentation of material supplements reading assignments. Multimedia classroom presentations, that provide an auditory/visual supplement to reading assignments, target a broader range of learning styles than textbooks alone. Also, students who are in class hear discussion and elaboration of important concepts, including the teacher's perspective on the material, and teachers often offer more current information than that found in the textbooks. In addition to learning from the teacher's explanations of class material, students who are in class hear questions and comments from others, and share their own.

Teachers can use class discussion to enhance students' critical thinking skills. They can ask them to explain the material in their own words, pose questions that require students to make connections between different elements of the class material, or challenge students to relate class material to other areas of psychology or to realms outside of the field. The more students examine and analyze material, the better their retention will be. In general, class attendance also influences course grades (Buckalew, Daly, & Coffield, 1986; Simpson & Nist, 1992) and the development of academic skills (Terenzini, Theophilides, & Lorang, 1984).

The development of academic skills transfers to other realms. For example, to take quality notes, students must prioritize, organize, and synthesize the material being presented, and skills developed in one classroom generalize to other courses. Also, regular class attendance requires discipline and time management. These tools are beneficial no matter what career path students follow. In a

broader sense, attending class increases students' personal interaction with a variety of faculty members, raising the likelihood of finding mentors and role models who can help guide their academic, career, and personal development.

WAYS FACULTY BENEFIT WHEN STUDENTS ATTEND CLASS

Good attendance is cost effective to faculty. Most faculty put a great deal of effort and time into their teaching. It is students who provide the intellectual and interpersonal stimulation from being in front of, and with, a class. Only with students can faculty tell whether their ideas are being understood, and whether their questions are evoking good thinking. When parts of a class are missing, it simply does not function as well.

Student feedback is critical to modifying and improving faculty teaching. The presence of students in the classroom is, therefore, a learning opportunity for the teacher. Teachers need student feedback in order to gauge their level of understanding and thus improve how they meet students' needs and help them learn course material. The classroom is a faculty's chance to share and renew enthusiasm for psychology. When teachers share excitement about a topic, students often reflect back the same level of enthusiasm. In addition, contact with students allows faculty to get to know those who are struggling, talk with them, increase rapport, schedule meetings with them out of the classroom, and help them improve their course performance. With good attendance, faculty receive a positive return on their investment.

IS ATTENDANCE IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS?

Students seem to agree that class attendance is important. We surveyed over two hundred students, both upper-level and lower-level, at George Mason University. Only 8 percent reported that getting class notes from a missed class is as useful as attending class. Those who thought borrowed notes were as good as attending class had significantly lower reported grade point averages than those who valued attendance more than borrowed notes. Most students also reported a strong relationship between number of absences and the final course grade.

Although the majority of students reported that at-

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tending class is important, about two-thirds indicated that they would miss more classes if they could get the missed notes from a professor. Students miss class for a variety of reasons, most frequently because they need to complete other course work, find the class boring, are ill, or have social obligations (Van Blerkom, 1992). Although we have limited control over some of these situations, we do have control over the structure and content of our classrooms. These elements deserve further attention.

IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Teachers have little to lose and much to gain by implementing strategies for motivating students to attend class. Keep in mind that what you do to increase and maintain attendance may differ for courses with primarily lower- versus upper-level students, and for large and small courses.

Class Structure and Content

One approach is to structure class so that those who attend experience obvious benefits, such as better grades, personal growth, and "informative entertainment."

◆ Test on material covered in class. All material presented, including class discussion, video clips or guest speakers, should be fair game, conveying that class time is of value, whether the instructor is lecturing or not. In a recent survey in our classes, the number one factor that influenced student attendance was the amount of in-class material that would be on the test (Sleigh, Ritzer, & Casey, in press).

◆ Avoid repetition of the textbook or assigned readings. If students have access to the same material covered in class, they often perceive little reason to be there.

◆ Notes provided to students from a remote location, such as a website, should not be a transcript of class.

◆ Recognize that being informative and being entertaining are not mutually exclusive. Using performance skills to convey information captures students' attention and interest. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Mester and Tauber (2000).

◆ When the subject matter is made personally relevant, understanding and comprehension are deeper and more meaningful. Students will be more motivated to attend lectures that reflect elements of their background, interests, or future.

◆ Structure class meetings so students who must be in class for one activity, such as an in-class writing activity, also participate in another, like reviewing feedback on an exam.

Policies

Because college students are adults or on the cusp of adulthood, some faculty believe they should be free to decide whether to attend class. Others believe attendance should be mandatory. Regardless of your perspective, expectations regarding attendance should be clearly explained and attainable because students are often more willing to comply with policies when they understand the reasoning behind them. Such communication also conveys a level of adult-to-adult respect between faculty and students. Present your policies in oral and written formats, and follow through with established consequences. Students learn to ignore policies that are not enforced.

◆ Require attendance and attach it to grades. But think carefully before adopting this policy because it can be controversial. First, some schools prohibit attendance-based grading. Second, this level of control may not be appropriate for adults. Third, providing external justification for attendance may diminish a student's intrinsic desire to learn.

If students are penalized for missing class, they are going to want an opportunity to explain their absences. Teachers can find themselves in the position of trying to evaluate the validity of a range of excuses, which can create a difficult situation.

Some faculty with an attendance policy do not try to validate excuses. They ask students to tell them if they are going to miss class or to inform them as soon as possible after missing one. In the working world, one cannot just stay home and not inform someone. They ask students not to lie. The message is that the faculty member understands that life is complex and knows that students cannot always make it to class. But an attendance policy can communicate that a faculty member values student attendance.

◆ Grade class participation. On the positive side, grading participation makes students more conscious of their presence and behavior in class. Students who are concerned about their grade may try to be actively involved in class, which will theoretically facilitate learning. On the negative side, students may dislike this level of control. Forced participation may be less authentic, waste valuable time, and provide false feedback to the teacher. Teachers are then placed in the awkward position of evaluating "quality" of participation. Students who are quiet by nature may be particularly uncomfortable

in a class that rewards extraverted behavior. Finally, it is difficult to keep track of participation in classes larger than about 12 students.

◆ Use in-class quizzes or assignments. We know from the field of learning that unannounced quizzes, on a variable interval schedule, increase attendance. The downside would be students perceiving a lack of control and predictability in the classroom.

◆ Policies that explain the consequences for missed exams or late assignments can encourage attendance. If a faculty allows students to drop one test grade, a missed exam automatically becomes the dropped grade. When policies are in place, students can make informed choices about attendance, and faculty reduce the need for judgment calls about an absence.

Model the Behavior We Wish To See

In teaching, as in parenting, we should examine our own behavior. We may be unintentionally modeling the very behavior that we deem undesirable in students by arriving late to class, being unprepared, and not keeping appointments, including office hours.

Classroom Atmosphere

The atmosphere in the classroom may be more influential in drawing students than the material presented. Students are more willing to spend time in a place where they are comfortable and valued.

◆ Require respect among students and model this behavior by respecting your students. Create a classroom that has a sense of community where each member has something to contribute and where disagreement is tolerated.

◆ Consider creative, fun ways of rewarding attendance. Elementary school teachers know the value of a smiley face sticker for encouraging student effort. You

might translate this strategy to the college population by using age-appropriate incentives. Use attendance as the price to enter a raffle to win a free cup of coffee or soda. These raffles could be spaced across the semester in accordance with the faculty member's budget.

INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Individual accountability is more difficult to accomplish in a large classroom but is worth the effort. We know from social psychology that students are more conscious of their behaviors when they perceive themselves to be individually identifiable and accountable for those actions. One teaching tip that has proven valuable to us is to learn student names as quickly as possible. Calling a student by name demonstrates that you have an interest in the individual as well as the group. Students rate "showing interest in them" and "knowing students' names" as the fourth and fifth most common behaviors teacher can exhibit to develop rapport (Buskist & Saville, 2001). In the same study, students reported that a positive effect of rapport was "to motivate them to come to class more often, and to pay attention in class." While it is difficult to learn students' names in large classes, an earnest attempt and even moderate success doing so, is extremely salient to students.

When you know students by name, you also can reinforce good attendance in ways other than assigning grades. You can provide individual praise and express your concern to absentees. The benefits of this personal attention extend well beyond encouraging class attendance.

CONCLUSION

Teachers can view their role as that of a strict, authority figure and utilize strategies that penalize for absences or may adopt a laissez-faire attitude and not address attendance at all. Perhaps, the best position is between these extremes. In order to reach an audience, there must be an audience present. To have an audience present, teachers must cultivate an audience by creating policies, lectures, discussions and other uses of class time, and environments that encourage attendance. Once the policies for attendance are established, focus on rewarding good attendance rather than punishing poor attendance.

The critical task for teachers is to know



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their audiences well enough to create classes that meet students' needs and to modify their pedagogical approaches to fit the situation. Ultimately, encouraging attendance is a critical teaching task. Without students, there is no need for a teacher. ♦

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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