Student Motivations to Attend Class

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January, 2017

The incoming generation of students in higher education, continue to face more and more distractions while trying to learn. Unfortunately, these distractions make stimulating student interest in subject matter a very difficult task for you as an instructor. Yet, the problem is not just engaging students while they are in the classroom, but actually motivating them to attend the lecture in the first place. The underlying mechanisms that motivate students to attend a lecture is complex, influenced by several interconnected factors, some in which you can control, and many in which, you cannot.

A trend in which you may recognize is the timing of the semester. At the very beginning, students are highly motivated to attend class so they will achieve high grades, and eventually find a good job (Mearman, Pachecho, Webber, Ivlevs, & Rahman, 2014). Yet, such motivation begins to decrease as the semester continues ultimately reducing attendance rates (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011), especially after a holiday break or reading week (Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd, & Thomas, 2008).

> ### Factors Influencing Attendance: Summary
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> Motivation to attend class can be influenced by:
> - **Timing:** attendance tends to be lower later in the semester and after holidays/reading week
> - **Competing Priorities:** other assignments, studying, part-time work, etc.
> - **Psychological Impacts:** stress, avoidance, anxiety, etc.
> - **Level of Difficulty:** easier material often associated with lower attendance
> - **Access to Materials:** having access to lecture material often associated with lower attendance
> - **Fostering a sense of community** within the classroom by including more **active learning** opportunities (i.e. personal response systems, group work, etc.) may enhance attendance.

Although it is quick, and quite frankly, easy, to attribute this low motivation to laziness, there is much more to it than that. There are so many competing priorities that students have to face on a daily basis, and deciding which of these competing forces should be top priority, is not always a simple task for a young adolescent. Prioritizing part-time work was one of the most salient reasons for students missing class (Kelly, 2012; Westrick, Helms, McDonough, & Breland, 2009). A very real concern as the cost of tuition continues to rise.

However, students also have to prioritize competing classes, projects, and midterms, often choosing to skip class in order to finish the aforementioned tasks (Persky, Kirwin, Marasco, May, Skomo & Kennedy, 2014; Moore, Armstrong, & Pearson, 2008). In such cases,

students are considering the short-term success of a higher grade on the assignment, rather than the long-term learning and achievement of the final exam. Evidently, there isn't the same sense of obligation to attend class to pass, as there is for completing other course requirements. In fact, students are more likely to prioritize difficult courses, attending those lectures more frequently than those they perceive as 'easy' (Clay & Breslow, 2006). Unfortunately, by prioritizing one and not the other, students begin to fall behind, do poorly, and experience less confidence (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011) and more stress and anxiety (Moore et al., 2008). Such psychological impacts may result in physical illness (Kinlaw, Dunlap, & D'Angelo, 2012) or even the coping mechanism, avoidance, which to you, as an instructor, is seen as absence.

If you are looking to improve attendance there has been several solutions proposed by researchers. However, prior to implementing these solutions, it is important to consider the implications, and the culture of learning you would like to promote in your classroom. For instance, if students have legitimate reasons for missing class, some instructors choose to post materials online. This choice has resulted in lower attendance rates (Mearman et al,, 2014; Persky et al., 2014; Leadbeater, Shuttleworth, Copuerthewaite, & Nightingdale, 2013), as some students believe they can be just as successful learning independently. Yet, not providing students with these resources is a potential ethical issue, as students should be entitled to having resources that will strengthen their learning (Worthington & Levasseur, 2015). A similar ethical consideration surrounds attendance policies. Enforcing attendance polices that penalize students that don't come to class has shown improvements in attendance rates (Snyder, Lee-Partridge, Jarmoszko, Petkova, & D'Onofrio, 2014; Self, 2012). However, such policies treat students as children rather than adults, removing student's judgment and autonomy in their own education (Macfarlane, 2013). In fact, having such policies is against the University of Windsor's Bylaw 51 ("Memorandum Subject: Awarding marks for attendance not permitted under bylaw 51", n.d.), where rewarding participation marks is permitted, but marks for attendance, or in other words, penalties for absence, is not.

Some researchers suggest taking a different approach by fostering a sense of community within the classroom, providing equality, collaboration, mutual respect, empowerment, and supportive relationships (Nyamapfene, 2010). In practice, this might mean implementing more active learning exercises by using in-class group work (Persky et al., 2014) or personal response systems (DePaolo & Wilkinson, 2014; Heaslip, Donovan, & Cullen, 2014; Armistead, Marchand, & Morris, 2013; Braun & Sellers, 2012; Shapiro, 2009), both of which increased student engagement and class attendance. Fostering this supportive environment will not only help prepare students for class, but also help them not fall behind (Braun & Sellers, 2012), which will positively influence their psychological well-being, and likely, their academic success.

References

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