Attendence and Access: How Course Policies Can Balance Equity and Rigor During In-Person Classes

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1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

- When I began teaching, I underestimated difficulty of attendance
    - In setting attendance policies, I felt a tension
    - Noticed a wide array of policies
    - As students missed class, I dealt with more complex situations
    - My evening in-person class vs. asynch online class
- Like any researcher, I started reading
    - But like any instructor could say $\rightarrow$ no one "right" way
    - Always an edge case that throws the best-laid plans
- My desire to uphold a high level of accessibility and access in my course(s)
    - Still finding value and purpose in in-person classes
    - Sharing that purpose with my students

1.2 Purpose / Learning Objectives

- Frank, honest, and productive discussion on some strategies …
    - … and recognizing limits on said strategies
- Use as a starting point for changing departmental/course policies …
    - … or just individual instructor preferences
- Continued reflection on our styles, policies, and form to engage changing expectations
- I'll start by highlighting the Background and Starting Point for understanding attendance issues, and transition into Working Towards Solutions.

2 Background and Starting Point

2.1 Benefits of Attending

Being present in class is a *good* thing for students (and instructors)
- Better course grades and overall GPA (Credé et al., 2010)
- Evidence of relationship with instructor evaluation (Davidovitch & Soen, 2006)
- Some activities or plans benefit from/require attendance
    - Especially many active learning activities!
- Less time-consuming to deal with re-hashing content
    - Professors are busy people! (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004)

2.2   Complexity in Motivation to Attend

Student motivation and "choice" to attend is *complex*
- Not as simple as, "they just don't want to come / they are lazy"
  - Think about all the "excuses" you have heard, some surprising
- Student's individual traits and personality doesn't always explain attendance (Van Blerkom, 1996)
- Student's primary motivation may relate to a utilitarian view of what they get out of being present (Fjortoft, 2005)
- Various mobility, safety, transportation issues

2.3   Attendance Can Make or Break Relationships

Student's attendance situation, and instructors' reactions to those circumstances, can *strain or strengthen* relationships
- Student-faculty relationships already fraught with transactional issues
  - See flaws of student evaluations of faculty - (Langbein, 2008)
- Want to be encouraging and inviting, while also being mindful of boundaries (Owen & Zwahr-Castro, 2007)
  - Asking for personal details may toe the reasonable line, for some
- Tension in wanting to be seen as warm, but not overly permissive or authoritarian (Bassett et al., 2013)
- Recognizing the potential positive academic and professional from cultivating positive relationships (Ingraham et al., 2018)

2.4   "Attendance" and Access Doesn't Stop at the Door

Policies related to access to materials outside of class play a role too
- Learning management systems (LMS) serve as vital storage tool for sharing
  - Do they help outcomes? Sometimes … (Rubin et al., 2010)
  - Some faculty can find it difficult to embrace the learning curve (Gautreau, 2011)
  - Students may not always *like* LMS (Horvat et al., 2015), but are accustomed
- Instructors choose balance of *how much* to share exclusively in-class vs. how much to share via the LMS
  - Is our course almost entirely shared online?, part of it?, very little? (Machajewski et al., 2019)
  - We make additional decision on the *types* of materials to share or require,
    - ∗ May impact student perception and access; e.g., OER textbooks (Hilton, 2016)

2.5   Recap of Background

So where does that all leave us? Confused? So was/am I
- Clearly, having students in class is largely beneficial - but getting them there isn't always easy
- Students sometimes miss for complicated reasons - how do we try to address these things while not damaging our relationships?
- When students do miss, what do we provide on the LMS, and what do we intentionally withhold (if anything at all)?

3   Working Towards Solutions

3.1   Goals of These Solutions

Encourage better in-class attendance (duh), while…
- Addressing common scenarios/issues instructors face
- Accounting for circumstances outside of student control
- Promoting rapport between instructors and students
- Maintaining a high level of access to learning materials when possible

It is *not* to completely de-value an in-person education!

3.2   Preemptive Limitations

I'm not a miracle worker
- Clearly, any solution to the myriad of nuances described before is going to be complicated - this presentation won't solve all our woes!
- This process of revision and reflection will be long
- No one size fits all; tailor to your classes and skills
- Not all research on absences is likely to apply equal to college students
    - They have more independence than middle/high school students

3.3   Overview of Common Issues

Each of these will be addressed in the following sections
- Poor Class Attendance
- Demonstrating Class Value
- Dealing with "Excuses" with Absences
- Designing Flexible Content that Works Inside and Outside of Class
- Embracing the LMS (and All of It's Problems)

3.4   Poor Class Attendance - The Problem

Simple - not enough students attending class regularly
- As discussed in the [Background], there are many valid reasons this may happen, but it is still an issue
- While the following sections will deal with responding to poor attendance, we still want to focus our attention on getting more students in-class each time
- Does having a "mandatory" attendance policy work? Is that all we need?

3.5   Poor Class Attendance - A Starting Solution

Many strategies proposed in the literature
- Unsurprisingly, I am not the first person interested in this area, a small sample of empirical research:
  - Railsback (2004)
  - Moore (2004)
  - Al-Shammari (2016)
- The first area to address is the mandatory attendance policy, where some degree of absenteeism results in compounding and automatic grade deductions. Success in various areas:
  - Pharmacy (Winkles et al., 2025)
  - Medicine (Subramaniam et al., 2013)
  - Economics (Marburger, 2006)
  - Problem solved, right? Well, somewhat; maybe works at the average level, but individuals may find it taxing
- In summary, it probably is wise to have *some* type of mandatory attendance policy, but there are several ways we can supplement this suggestion…

3.6   Demonstrating Class Value - The Problem

The value of being in-person should be made apparent and explicit
- Metaphor: "Why do we need to be here?" $\rightarrow$ "This meeting could have been an email" - A feeling we all know too well
- Some, but not all students, have an intrinsic motivation to care about each subject
- I've had students who, humbly, explain part of my class does not show this value, because I've asked for feedback
  - This isn't *always* fair, be discerning in what advice to consider

3.7   Demonstrating Class Value - A Starting Solution

Make the language clear

- Try to make it clear what value a class provides when it meets in-person instead of just being recorded
    - Don't assume students inherently recognize this!
- I write some reasons into the syllabus, e.g., easier to pay attention, ask questions when confused, get clarification from peers/groups, get more off-the-cuff examples for concepts
- Use with caution: make in-class activities worth points that cannot be made up elsewhere
    - Some students see points as indicating value
- Similar, with caution: Clearly indicate how an activity plays into the larger picture
    - E.g., "this will be on the exam/quiz"; "you need to do this same process for your paper"

3.8   Dealing with "Excuses" - The Problem

Instructors as an absolute arbiter in regard to absences? *Un-ideal*
- Opens up to bias in granting or rejecting
- Requires additional time (and cognitive load) for professors
- Incentivizes "convincing" or pleading the case

3.9   Dealing with "Excuses" - A Starting Solution

When possible, proactively set aside a "reasonable" numbers of absences without penalty in regard to access or points
- The exact extent of reasonable depends on the course
    - E.g., labs and practicals may have less than lectures
- Consider the theoretical point-of-no-return
- Consider the rough percentage of class that can be "made up" via materials on the LMS
    - This will play into the next problem of Designing Flexible Content
- Set concrete, explicit consequences for absences past the "reasonable" amount
    - Likely written in the syllabus, E.g., "After missing X classes you…"

3.10   Designing Flexible Content - The Problem

When students miss, what do they stand to lose?
- Interactive discussion, demonstrations, and many forms of active learning may be especially hard to translate to out-of-class activity
- Are lecture slides, notes available or is it just "get notes from a friend"?
- Are practice activities done in class still effective at home?

3.11   Designing Flexible Content - A Starting Solution

Within reason, ensure that content is *mostly* available via the LMS or other methods (even the activities)
- If not confidential, try to post slides and/or lecture notes prior to class
- Make sure activities are not just verbally administered in-class, but written down somewhere for those who are online (may also help students who are hard-of-hearing)
- If demonstrating something in the course, see if an alternative YouTube video may be posted to the LMS that shows the same phenomenon or procedure
- When not possible to provide certain materials, try to explicitly and clearly state why
    - E.g., "Exam answers are only available in-class or during office hours in order to protect the security of the test"

3.12   Embracing the LMS - The Problem

I'll be the first to admit: Blackboard can challenge me sometimes
- It can be difficult to manage, move, copy, and edit a large amount of content
- Hopeful expectation for high accessibility scores can be difficult to meet
- Hard to speculate what will make the most sense for flow in student's eye
- More time in LMS means less time working on content and talking with students

3.13   Embracing the LMS - A Starting Solution

Spend time with the functions and settings in a sandbox; get feedback from students
- GVSU's eLearning Team can set up template courses to play around in prior to posting in the "real" course
- Use the "Student Preview" function regularly to check and make sure content appear as expected
    - Try "roleplaying" as a student who missed class, is it intuitive to find relevant materials?
    - In that same vain, model using the LMS in class early on or briefly during each class period (or during recorded lectures)!
- Use a Mid-semester Interview in Teaching (MIT) via Pew FTLC or otherwise solicit feedback via survey on LMS structure BEFORE the end of the semester
    - I've learned that many students greatly prefer a largely chronological flow, rather than categorization by type, i.e., less scrolling when completing work for the week
- Use hierarchy of learning modules and folders to stay organized

4 Conclusion

- I've tried to give many anecdotal ideas and examples of what I see working to make in-person classes more appealing and approachable to students
- Some of these ideas also help make the class more accessible when students find themselves missing due to reasons outside of their control
  - Unfortunately, we are limited in the circumstances we can change
- At the core of many of these efforts is a sense of *grace*, showing some leeway and trusting students to not take a mile
  - I understand why this is a difficult thing to always trust in

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