

On Taking Attendance

January 01, 2007

Dr. Bob: I can't believe it! I am so frustrated lecturing to a half-empty room. What's wrong with students today? Why don't they show up for class? Why don't they want to learn?

Dr. Mary: Hmm, my class is usually full. What percentage of the student's grade is based on attendance in your class?

Dr. Bob: None, I don't believe in taking attendance. It's up to the students to decide whether they will attend class or not. I don't believe I do any good by forcing students to come to class.

Dr. Mary: Well, that's one way to look at it. My way is to offer that little extra motivation to get to class and then to make them see that it's worth their time. Maybe shift that extrinsic motivation to intrinsic...

Undoubtedly this type of conversation has occurred on numerous college campuses over the last 100 years. I do not purport to resolve this debate, as much of it is based on personal and organizational philosophy. However, there is a wide range of literature on attendance in the college classroom that I will use to continue the dialogue. I will begin by discussing the arguments in support of attendance policies and then move to those against taking attendance in psychology courses. In my concluding section, I will share my personal thoughts on attendance policies and discuss some suggestions on implementing an attendance policy if you choose to do so.

Arguments For Taking Attendance

Increased Attendance and Learning

Perhaps the question most germane to this debate is whether taking attendance impacts student learning. At an intuitive level it seems al-most self-evident that increased attendance would positively impact learning, but perhaps we professors give ourselves too much credit! Luckily the research literature indicates a significant relationship between attendance and student grades (e.g., Hancock, 1994; van Bler-kom, 1992). Of course, one may wonder if there is a link between attendance and grades given that some instructors award points for at-tendance. However, Shimoff and Catania (2001) report that merely taking attendance (without awarding points) increased attendance and improved grades, even on material

covered in the text but not in class. Overall, it appears that students are more likely to attend — and to succeed — in courses where attendance records are maintained. Despite the importance of these findings, this may not be the only reason why it is worth taking attendance in your classes.

May Reveal Academically Challenged Students

The research above suggests that attendance may have a causal impact on grades. However, Jones (1984) suggested that lower grades may also lead to an increase in class absences. In essence, he reported a downward spiral where absences led to poorer grades, which led to more absences, which led to even poorer grades. Thus, attendance patterns might be a useful diagnostic tool for identifying at-risk students. Even in the absence of test grades, students may perceive that they are doing poorly in the class (e.g., they feel that they just don't "get" the material). Thus, they may become frustrated and begin missing class more frequently. Noticing this change in attendance may provide the instructor with the opportunity to intervene and help students before too much time has passed.

Reduces Academically Dishonest Behavior

People like to be recognized and to feel important. Yet, in some larger introductory undergraduate courses it is fairly easy to feel like nothing more than a student ID number. By taking attendance — and, perhaps more importantly, contacting those who are not attending — you are indicating that you recognize and care about students as individuals. If this notion sounds too touchy-feely for you, there may be more pragmatic reasons for reaching out to students and affirming their uniqueness. The social psychological literature is rife with examples of deindividuation leading to generally negative social behaviors. Thus, it would not be surprising to see an increase in negative behaviors like cheating and plagiarism in classes where students felt deindividuated (Houston, 1976; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). Recognizing and highlighting your students' individuality could reduce the temptation to be academically dishonest.

Provides a Model of the "Real World"

As I prepared to write this article I asked my colleagues whether they had an attendance policy and if so, why? One compelling argument was that professors have the responsibility to prepare students for the world of work. My colleague continued, "If you don't show up for work, you don't get paid and you may very well get fired." Thus, his argument revolved around the idea that good attendance is a skill that we can help develop along with the other skills we work on with students. This argument can be viewed as a facet of Goal 10 (Career Planning and Development) of the APA's Undergraduate Psychology Learning Goals and Outcomes (Halonen, Appleby, & Brewer, 2002).

Arguments Against Taking Attendance

Although the arguments for using an attendance policy are compelling, there are many instructors who provide equally compelling arguments against attendance policies. I turn to this viewpoint next. Arguments against attendance policies range from the philosophical to the pragmatic.

Motivation, Attributions, and Responsibility

The prevailing philosophical argument made by those who disagree with attendance policies is the belief that it is ultimately the students' responsibility to attend class and learn the material. This basic argument has a number of variants. Pintrich (1994) ties motivation to a sense of control. He argues that compulsory attendance may reduce students' perceptions of control over the environment, in turn leading to reduced motivation to attend class. This argument is in line with the cognitive dissonance research on education. This body of research indicates that strong rewards are likely to diminish the internalization of the desire to learn (e.g., Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). Thus, by taking attendance and rewarding those who would normally attend of their own volition, we may mislead them to attribute their attendance to the policy and not their own internal motivation.

Another variant of this argument uses the same "real world" logic mentioned above, while coming to the opposite conclusion. The argument is that we are providing a model for the real world, where there are no attendance policies and no benevolent souls calling you to remind you to attend work. Instead, there are expectations that you will show up at your workplace and that you will produce quality work. If you do not fulfill these expectations there are serious consequences (i.e., you will be fired). Thus, if we truly want to prepare our students for the real world, we may be better off asking them to be responsible for their own behavior.

Consumer Model

One model of higher education is that students are consumers. They have paid for the right to attend an institution of higher learning and may do with that as they please. For instance, if I buy a new CD and realize I do not enjoy it, I am not compelled to keep listening to it. It may be that students do not feel that they are receiving sufficient value from attending class, thus they choose to spend their time doing something more valuable (St. Clair, 1999). For example, perhaps students have discovered that the class is designed so that they can do just as well on exams by reading the textbook as they could by attending class. Thus, they may choose to spend that class time studying for another class. Further, viewing attendance from the perspective of the consumer allows professors to receive feedback on how they are doing. If students consistently skip a certain part of your course (or the whole course!) it may be time to rethink what you

are doing (Sperber, 2005). One offshoot of this theory is that the onus is on professors to make class worthwhile if they expect students to attend class.

Organizational and Instructional Headaches

Taking attendance each class day can be extremely time consuming (Forsyth, 2003). If the professor calls roll (which undoubtedly is a good way to learn the names of the students in the class) this could easily take anywhere from 2-15 minutes depending on class size. Most faculty members would argue that they cannot afford to consistently lose this much time each class. However, if professors pass around a list that students are expected to sign, they run the risk of students signing in absent friends. Occasionally calling the roll after passing around and collecting the sheet could limit such behavior.

Further, if professors take attendance each day and include it in the calculation of students' grades that means they will also need to sift through the mountain of excuses that are offered for absences. These excuses will range from the mundane to the inane and it may at times be difficult to tell which is which! Many faculty do not want the added responsibility of acting as judge and jury concerning the legitimacy of a student's excuse (Royse, 2001).

A strict attendance policy can lead to classrooms filled with disinterested and unprepared students (Forsyth, 2003) who may become a distraction to those interested in the lecture or in contributing to the discussion. Extending this logic, these students may change the normative environment of the classroom from one of excitement about learning to one of apathy. Although it may seem silly to us, many of our students are still concerned with appearing "cool." If there are students in the class who appear disdainful and resentful, better students may participate less to avoid appearing as if they are "brownnosers" or "uncool." Referring to this change of ambiance, Sperber (2005) reflects that he would prefer to teach a smaller number of volunteers than a large army of conscripts.

Conclusions and Advice on Attendance Policies

Before I delve into my personal philosophy, let me emphasize that the most important rule to consider is whether your university has an attendance policy. Many universities have attendance policies influenced by state funding guidelines and financial aid considerations. If there is a policy, you need to adhere to it to protect yourself and to be fair to the students who do not have an option to "revise" the policy as they see fit.

However, if you do have latitude in instituting an attendance policy in your classes, I suggest a flexible policy based on the maturity level of your classes. That is, I believe a middle ground can exist between the attendance-policy and the no-attendance-policy camps. I teach a range of courses — from "Introduction

to Psychology” to upper-level graduate seminars — and use an attendance policy in my introductory class, but have no official policy for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses. Many entry-level college students are generally experiencing freedom for the first time and have numerous temptations that probably seem more compelling than coming to class. Thus, I believe that providing some extrinsic motivation to attend class is appropriate. Even so, I do not take “roll” every day. Instead, I have students complete 13 in-class assignments (e.g., practice quizzes, group assignments, surveys) during the semester (approximately one per week). If they are in class and complete the assignment they receive 1 percent toward their final grade. Thus, one absence does not significantly impact their grade (everyone misses class now and then) but receiving 13 percent of their grade by merely showing up provides a substantial “carrot.” Davis (1993) argues that grades should be based on a student’s mastery of course material and not on non-academic factors such as attendance. However, I believe this option, again, provides a middle ground allowing one to account for attendance while assessing the quality of the students work.

Practical Issues

Encouraging Attendance. Although I believe my system works at encouraging attendance, it certainly is not the only teaching practice that can be used to reach this goal. Some faculty deduct points for each missed class, while others do not begin to deduct points until a fixed number of classes is missed (Weimer, 1993). An alternative approach is to reward students by providing bonus points for a high percentage of classes attended or attendance on randomly selected days (Weimer, 1993). Nilson (1998) offers the following suggestions: (1) base part of the course grade on class discussion; (2) cover different material in class than that in the readings; (3) do not allow commercial production of your lecture notes; (4) conduct cooperative learning group activities that include a peer evaluation of performance.

Even in the absence of an attendance policy there may be some days where you feel attendance is particularly important (e.g., returning exams, guest speakers). One way to increase attendance is to design your syllabus so that there are required in-class writing assignments on those particular days. Another possibility, although somewhat less effective in insuring attendance, is to have homework assignments due that day. This strategy is likely to increase attendance over that of a typical class, but some students may just send their assignment along with a friend.

Taking Attendance. As discussed earlier, both taking attendance by calling roll or passing around sign-up sheets have their potential short-comings. What are some alternatives for those not blessed with a teaching assistant? One possibility is to design a seating chart with required seating for students. Of course, those troubled by the restriction of freedom inherent in mandatory attendance will find this solution equally disturbing! Another possibility for

those who can consistently arrive at class a few minutes early is to take attendance as you greet students at the door of the classroom. An additional benefit of this strategy is that you will increase interpersonal contact with students. However, one potential downside is accounting for students who arrive late to class. Finally, one can extend my strategy of random in-class assignments to daily in-class assignments that can be completed in a very short time.

Closing Thought

The question of whether to take attendance is truly a complex issue. There are many logical and compelling arguments both for and against attendance policies. Further, the issue of needing to take attendance is ultimately tied back to the larger issue of whether we are doing our job well. As Forsyth (2003) argues, if we make our classes so educationally rewarding that students want to attend, then the issue of attendance policies is moot.