Using Office Hours Effectively

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Ah, office hours. Some faculty actually enjoy holding them while others practically have to be forced to. Where you fall in this spectrum can be noted by your own reaction to the title of this article (insert dramatic pause here for a moment of self-reflection . . .). Using office hours effectively benefits both the student and you, the faculty member, in numerous academic ways (advising, clarifying course content, etc.). However, it also encourages student-faculty contact, the first principle for effective undergraduate teaching (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). On a practical note, being available to students during office hours increases both communication with them and opportunities for rapport-building, both of which are related to higher teaching evaluations (Kerssen-Griep, Gayle, & Preiss, 2006).

Please note the word "effectively" and not "efficiently" is used in the title of this article. As a faculty member, you must often weigh the advantages and disadvantages of effective versus efficient use of time. This is especially true when working with people, and Stephen Covey (1990) reminds us that we should think "*effectiveness* with *people* and *efficiency* with *things*" (p. 170). In order to be as effective with students as possible, it is imperative that you first reconceptualize the work that you do in office hours.

You can cognitively restructure "office hours" as the student's time just as absolutely as being in the classroom. Keep in mind that your interaction with the student during office hours may be the only interaction of this type, or one of a very few, that this student will have (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2006). The impression you leave during the visit may represent your institution to that student. What type of impression do you want to make?

Why Students Attend Office Hours

While there are many varied reasons that students visit office hours, they can be sorted into a few basic categories. Students visit their professor to:

Clarify course content. There may be a misunderstanding that arose during class, a disconnect (perceived or real) between readings and lecture, or material may have been missed due to absence or inattentiveness. Some students have questions or need further clarification.

Do make-up work. There is an excellent Teaching Tips column dealing with this issue (Perlman & McCann, 2005) with suggestions for dealing with students who miss tests and in-class work.

Figure out their grades. The student may not understand the basis for determining a grade, may want to review old tests or quizzes, or may need to calculate what grades must be earned on remaining coursework to earn the desired grade in the course.

Get advising for scheduling courses or for their future career. This part of the student-faculty

relationship is one of the most important (Davis, 2001) and was addressed in a very helpful Teaching Tips column (Ware, 1999). Failing to be effective here can have undesirable consequences to the student's academic progress or retention.

Ask questions about upcoming coursework or tests. Clarifying assignments, turning in early drafts, and understanding the testing scope and format are steps all students can take to be successful in your course.

Socialize/connect with their professor. The student might be seeking an academic connection (in anticipation of recommendations, research opportunities, or other such mentoring) or a personal connection (social camaraderie). Both types of connections are appropriate and both enhance student academic and cognitive development, as well as student retention (Kerrsen-Griep et al, 2006). However, see Royse (2001) for a description of warning signs that a student-faculty relationship is becoming unethical.

How Students Feel When They Visit Professors

Most of us remember how we felt approaching our own professors in college. For some it was easy and natural, whereas for others it was nerve-wracking (warranted or not). Of course, the exact emotion a student has when visiting his/her professor also depends on the reason for the visit, and a student may feel several emotions during the same office visit. Here are some of the students you may meet along with tips for dealing with them more effectively:

The Nervous Student. This student is typically very shy, may put off visiting office hours, and is easily dissuaded from seeing you (i.e., you are late, you appear to be busy, etc.).

- Being friendly can go a long way to helping the nervous student feel at ease, but idle chit-chat may not help because shy students sometimes lack social skills.
- To be more effective, ask specific questions (ex. "were you absent during oral presentations because you were nervous about speaking in front of the class?").

The Anxious/Apprehensive Student. This student feels apprehensive for a particular reason, like anxiety about an upcoming test or paper, having just received bad news about a failing grade, financial aid eligibility, or other academically related issues.

- Provide specific information about steps the student can take to help the situation, including contacting appropriate individuals (see below). The student should generate some or most of the ideas him/herself. Remember not to take ownership of the student's problem.
- Refer the student to appropriate individuals who can help (such as tutoring services, financial aid representative, counselor, adviser, etc.) and help him/her recognize other sources of help, like the student's own social support network.

The Upset/Angry Student. This student may blame you for failing grades, difficult assignments or tests, or other problems. It may now be "your fault" that s/he is placed on academic probation or is no longer eligible for financial aid.

- Remain calm and professional, no matter how the student expresses his/her emotions. For good advice on handling angry students, see Lucas and Bernstein (2005). Be sure to take appropriate steps if necessary, including calling security or referring an unbalanced student to proper campus professionals.
- Do not allow the student to make you responsible for his/her low grade(s) and consequences thereof. Set the tone early in the class that students *earn* grades (grades are not "given") and place responsibility clearly on the students for these grades.
- Explain each grade the student earned and how the student lost points. Lucas and Bernstein (2005) also provide examples of forms that can be used for students who want to dispute grades on papers or tests. Such a system virtually eliminates frivolous arguments about grades while providing recourse to students with legitimate concerns.
- Most problems of this type can be avoided by clear instructions on assignments and clearly explained grading procedures.

The Conciliatory Student. Students may seek to reconcile with the faculty member after a perceived slight.

- Sometimes students want to apologize for receiving a bad grade. A student who did poorly on a test once told me, "I don't want you to think I don't study for your tests!" Students who feel that they have let you, or themselves, down may feel disappointed or embarrassed.
- Students who took offense at an offhand remark may desire the opportunity to clarify their feelings. Explain any misunderstandings, and apologize, if appropriate.
- These students are likely coming to office hours to forge or maintain a connection with the faculty member and likely just need to be reassured.

The Defensive Student. Whatever the reason for the visit, some students have a defensive demeanor and seem to take everything you say as some sort of personal criticism.

- Realize that (unless this happens every time with every student) it is not personal, and communicate clearly with the student about the reason for the visit.
- Be sure to discuss the student's behavior or performance, not the student's personal attributes (ex. "We need to work on your writing skills" rather than "you are not a good writer"). See "how to give praise and criticism" below.

Considering how the student is feeling during the visit will help you communicate clearly with him/her. How students feel during the meeting will affect what they get out of the meeting. For example, if the student is nervous or angry, understanding may be affected. Emotional arousal can interfere with memory and so it is advisable to jot down a few notes for the student or have him/her create a list of suggestions or things to do. Have you agreed on another meeting? Due date? Both of you should make a record of this when it is agreed upon. Having a template ready for this type of information might be helpful.

Office Hours: The Basics

Whether you are a new faculty member or an experienced faculty member who has just reconceptualized office hours as belonging to students, there are details to be decided.

How Many? Some institutions have specific requirements for how many office hours to hold per week per course. If your institution has such requirements, you should be sure to hold at least the minimum, and possibly more if the requirements are minimal. At institutions without specific requirements, faculty tend to rely on rules of thumb, with a common one specifying about two office hours per week per course (Bernstein & Lucas, 2004).

Where? Undoubtedly the most popular place to hold office hours is in one's office (hence the clever name!). For most faculty this is the most convenient location and makes the most sense. However, consider the impact of holding at least *some* of your office hours in a location more accessible to students like the cafeteria or another common area frequented by students. First, students may find it easier to get to you in a common area than in your office. Second, your physical presence makes you harder to ignore and also serves as a reminder of your course, making unplanned visits more likely. As students stop to say hello or to chat, some of them will take advantage of the opportunity to ask a question or to enjoy your company. Third, seeing their professor in a less formal setting than the classroom or the office makes you more approachable to some students. Finally, you may find that you enjoy meeting with students on their "turf." Seeing students in a less formal setting will remind you that they are individuals with their own lives outside of your class. You might be surprised at what additional information you will learn about them.

When? Most faculty schedule office hours at their convenience, but it is also important to consider students' schedules when planning office hours. In most cases it will be possible to schedule office hours at times that are convenient to both you and students. Offering some time on as many different days and times as possible will minimize conflicts for students, enabling them to visit you more easily.

Virtual Office Hours? Many faculty are now offering students virtual office hours by electronic mail or through a real-time chat interface. Although it is inadvisable to hold *all* office hours this way, offering students some choice may increase the number of students who will "visit" you. Shy students with questions may appreciate the opportunity to ask them electronically rather than face-to-face. Students with demanding work or family schedules (especially non-traditional students) may need the flexibility of virtual office hours.

Principles for Effective Use of Office Hours

Just as students are individuals, faculty are as well, each with their own strengths and limitations. Some faculty are good at small talk, others are humorous, still others are formal and business-like. To be most effective, work to your own strengths as a person. Students like and respect teachers who interact with them using almost any interpersonal style, when it is genuine (Lucas & Bernstein 2005). Here are some common practices of faculty who use office hours effectively (for rules specific to academic advising, see Ware, 1999):

Be There. It is important to be present during your office hours. No one likes to be stood up, and students rate faculty who are not in during their advertised office hours as one of their biggest annoyances (Lucas & Bernstein, 2005). Similarly, make sure to keep appointments with students, and, if possible, notify students if you must cancel office hours.

Avoid Interruptions. The more interruptions there are, the less will get accomplished, the longer it will

take, and the more time is wasted. Can you avoid interruptions by other students? Other faculty? Email/telephone? Show that you are focusing on the student by listening and responding in appropriate ways. Students appreciate the respect you show them by focusing on them during the visit. Although it is true that students may not always respond in kind (ever had a student answer a cell phone while in your office?), it is important to model appropriate behavior in your interactions with students.

Body Language. Most of our emotional language is non-verbal (Hanna, Suggett, & Radtke, 2008). Watch for non-verbal signals from the student, and also be mindful of the non-verbal signals that you might be sending. Body posture and facial expression especially can send messages that we don't intend. Does the student have crossed arms? Pursed lips? Is the student fidgety or agitated? Does s/he avoid eye contact? These are important clues to how the student is feeling. What about your own body language? Are you sitting or standing? Are you multi-tasking or focusing on the student? Practice attending to your body language and making sure it is not sending signals you don't want to send (e.g., "I'm bored," or "I'm annoyed").

Communication. Remember that what you say first will set the tone for the meeting, and what you say last the student will remember. Make sure to communicate clearly, listening to and understanding what the student says and making it easy for the student to listen to and understand you. Beware of one-way communication — some faculty are so busy making sure the student is listening to them that they forget to listen to the student!

Be direct. Typically, an honest and objective appraisal of the situation stated in direct terms is more helpful to the student than sugar-coating it in an attempt to "soften the blow." State clearly and directly what steps need to be taken and why. Clarify instructions to avoid distortion and overload. Keep in mind that students often hear what they want to hear, and any unclear communication is likely to lead to misunderstandings. Making notes or using a template to specify the next steps will help.

How to Give Praise and Criticism. Do not forget to point out the positives. Be sure to identify strengths and compliment the students' abilities and successes. For the most effective feedback, provide specific, focused comments about the behavior, not the person. Start positive, describe the behavior and situation, give reasons for the criticism, and end with what you expect (Hanna et al., 2008). For example, "Your first draft was well done. Your sources were appropriate and you cited them correctly throughout. However, there were several places that were unclear and disorganized with some repetition of ideas. This left me wondering what the main point of the paper was. Your paper will be much more clear if you reorganize it and take out the repetition."

Conclusion

Effective teachers use office hours to reinforce the tone they set in their classes — sending the message that they are accessible, approachable, caring, and ready to listen and give assistance. Using office hours effectively extends the opportunity to enhance teaching and learning, and also makes holding them more enjoyable! ?