College students' attitude toward the attendance policy in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Many researchers have reported a significant correlation between college students' class attendance and course performance. As a result, colleges and universities worldwide have various absence policy regulations on class attendance. In Taiwan, poor attendance will result in undergraduates losing or failing their conduct report score (a behaviour grade) which is followed by dismissal from the school. Strict attendance policies are imposed in the current researchers' school and classes, yet many students still fail to attend classes/school activities on time. The current researchers surveyed 166 students' attitude toward the class attendance policy at Wenzao and hope to understand the attendance rules students might set if they were the teachers to maximize students' attendance frequency. Literature related to college students' class attendance will also be discussed.

Key words: Class attendance, motivation, college students' class attendance.

INTRODUCTION

Student absenteeism is a major concern for educators, teachers, schools, and researchers in higher education. Many of them have tried to find the best means to increase college students' attendance frequency. The researchers agree with Rodgers (2002) that there is a strong association between attendance and academic performance. The researchers' school is very strict with their class attendance policy. After all, class attendance should enhance learning because that is why we offer classes (Moore, 2006).

In this research, we hope to understand college students' attitude toward Wenzao's class attendance policy and how students would set the attendance policy if they were the instructors. The first author of this research also wishes to learn about her students' views on the attendance rules so she can better meet the needs of her students.

We hope to find a better and fair way of dealing with the attendance policy that will be a win-win for students and school/teachers. According to Devados and Foltz (1996), no teachers would want to be teachers who asked students to come to classes through penalizing them by reducing scores.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this part of the literature review, the researchers first discussed the existing literature on reasons for attending classes and reasons for not attending classes. Studies conducted on the effect of attendance on students' exam and grade performance are also included. Finally, the methods that have been utilized for teachers to increase the attendance frequency found in the literature is also added for researchers’ reference.

Reasons for attending classes

Motivation has a strong positive effect on students' attendance (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996). Attendance is a voluntary behaviour that reflects motivation (St. Clair, 1999). There are many reasons why students attend classes. According to Moore (2006), students attend classes because they want to get an academic credit. Yet, Gump (2004) proclaimed that giving a credit is not a great
motivation for attending classes.

According to Paisey and Paisey (2004)’s study, the reasons for students attending classes include believing their own notes are better than others, worry about learning from scratch or want to have full set of notes to study from at the end of the semester. In addition, students attend classes because they believe the lectures help them to understand the work, they will have useful tips about tests and exams given in class, and they can learn in class (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010).

In addition, students’ attendance rate might be higher if the teacher has a teaching award(s) (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996). In fact, class attendance and students’ evaluation of teachers are related. Davidovitch and Soen (2006) collected 9636 questionnaires from 634 classes at the College of Judea and Samaria, the largest undergraduate public college in Israel. They found the higher class attendance rate, the higher students’ evaluation of their instructors.

Furthermore, students who support themselves financially through work and loans while pursuing their education appear to attend class more regularly (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996). Accordingly, self-financing students know the value of their money, realize the importance of going to school, and take their education more seriously by more frequent class attendance (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996: 504). This is in agreement with the study of Neef et al. (2007) who showed that the night section’s attendance is higher than the afternoon section. Absolutely, we cannot deny the fact that attendance does associate with students studying. It is especially true for medical school students. Simply, Zayapragassarazan and Dharanipragada (2018) argued that students need to be present to learn about patient care skills and competencies.

**Reasons for missing classes**

There are many reasons for students to miss classes. It may be divided into voluntary absence excuses and non-voluntary absence excuses.

Most students miss classes for non-voluntary absence excuses. Illness (Bowman, 2009; Van Blerkom, 1990; Grabe et al., 2004-2005) and family emergency (Launius, 1997) are voluntary absences. Excuses such as need to complete other tasks (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010; Van Blerkom, 1990) and competing academic commitment (Grabe et al., 2004-2005) might also be considered as voluntary absence excuses.

While students’ main responsibility is to study, many students have to work to pay for their school. In fact, many poor students are leaving college with debt and no degree, worse off financially than when they arrived (Howard and Levine, 2004). Thus, work (Paisey and Paisey, 2004; Grabe et al., 2004-2005; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010), hours worked on jobs (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996), and part-time job (Paisey and Paisey, 2004) were voluntary absence excuses found in the literature. One participant in the Paisey and Paisey (2004) study has to work on Saturdays and Sundays. He/she does not have time to do the work for Monday class and as such, he/she decided not to come. Similarly, another participant in the Paisey and Paisey (2004) study has to work on Saturdays and Sundays, so he/she missed the Monday morning classes because he/she was very tired. Furthermore, there was a student who works backshifts at Yorkhill Hospital from 5 PM to 12 midnight. He/she has to be at work at 5PM, but when no one could cover, he/she has to leave the class at 4:30 PM or decided not to attend the 4 to 5 PM lecture (Paisey and Paisey, 2004). It is especially true when rush hour at 5 PM makes he/she get to work late (Paisey and Paisey, 2004).

Non-voluntary absence excuses include hangover (Paisey and Paisey, 2004), interference with students’ social life, discouraged by class (Van Blerkom, 1990), laziness (Paisey and Paisey, 2004), too close to tests and exams (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010), influence by the timing of classes (Paisey and Paisey, 2004), boring class (Gump, 2005; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010; Van Blerkom , 1990), holiday (Paisey and Paisey, 2004), prefer self-study, attending classes is a waste of time, the role of the lecturer (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010), not want to wait a long time between classes and staying away shortly before tests and exams (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2010), quality of teaching, and nature of class lectures (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996).

Transportation difficulty was an excuse for not coming to class (Launius, 1997). In Cohn and Johnson (2006) study, they found that students who attended high school in South Carolina are more likely to attend class than out of state students. It might be because they generally required less time to travel to the university. It was hard to believe that an adult dropped out of college because he/she could not afford the bus fare to go to college (Howard and Levine, 2004).

While technology can facilitate teaching and learning, many studies have found that it has a negative impact on class attendance. Students in Grabe et al. (2004–2005)’s study also indicated that access to online notes played a very significant role in their voluntary absence. Similarly, Traphagan et al. (2010) found that class attendance is lower in the webcast section than in non-webcast section. Students who view more webcasts more frequently had more absences. In addition, availability of additional course materials in the PowerPoint slides and lecture notes has more of a negative impact on class attendance than webcasting (Traphagan et al., 2010).

However, Bowman (2009) in his study of 148 students enrolled in Cognitive Psychology or Research Methods across two semesters (Spring 2005 and Spring 2006) focussed on the effect of posting PowerPoint presentations on WebCT on the class performance or attendance. The results
showed that no differences could be found in the course grade earned or attendance when making PowerPoint presentations available to students on WebCT. After all, some students may use online notes to cover for voluntary class absences (Grabe et al., 2004-2005) or watch webcasts to make up for a missed class, understand lecture content better and review course content before exams (Traphagan et al., 2010). Bowman (2009) concluded that instructors should use their own discretion to make their PowerPoint presentation available online without feeling pressured by colleagues or students.

Finally, in addition to the above referred reasons for missing classes, there are other influential factors such as self-financing by students, motivation and prior GPA (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996). Yet, similar to those students in Gerald and Brady (2019) study, there is no need for professors to make the attendance mandatory if their classes are interesting and well taught.

**Attendance and grade**

Many literatures have shown that students’ performance is inversely correlated with absenteeism. Educators would agree that students need to be in class in order to learn. On the other hand, students who skip classes are less likely to be a high achiever. Many people also believe that students’ individual testing achievement is associated with class attendance. For example, Cohn and Johnson (2006) studied 347 students enrolled in principles of economics course’s class attendance and performance during the period of 1997-2001. Their study results are in line with that of Devadoss and Foltz (1996) who pointed out that students with high GPA have higher attendance. However, students with higher SAT scores have lower attendance (Cohn and Johnson, 2006; Devadoss and Foltz, 1996).

Attending class does improve exam performance (Marburger, 2006). Furthermore, students who commit to regularly attending class also produce better quality assignments than those who failed to come to class (Launius, 1997). Van Blerkom (1996) and Moore (2006) found that class attendance was correlated with final grade achievement in classes. Yet, compulsory class attendance polices are not related to academic achievement (St. Clair, 1999). In a study by Jacobson (2005), higher attendance did not relate to learning outcome in course examinations. Perhaps, the effect of attendance on exam performance will only be correlated after a student had missed four classes during a semester as it was found in the Allen and Webber (2010) study. That is, students with few absences did better in their overall final grade (Gump, 2005). However, attendance did have an impact on quizzes when the material was from lectures (Shimoff and Catania, 2001). That is why absence and final grade are related where there were discussion sections, pop quizzes which were part of the grade in Gump’s (2005) study.

However, physical presence and intellectual involvement are quite different phenomena (Rodgers, 2002: 265). On the other hand, quiz and attendance might not always correlate. For example, some students who did not attend study sessions because they were able to study effectively on their own. Thus, there was no difference found between attending the study session and the quiz performance in the study by Neef et al. (2007). St. Clair (1999) had a good point on class attendance. He/she proclaimed that if students do not attend classes and they pass the class and earn the grade, it will ruin the school’s reputation.

**How to increase class attendance rate**

How to increase class attendance rate has been a long discussion for many teachers. Generally, freshmen have higher attendance rate than junior or senior students (Cohn and Johnson, 2006). For example, in Davidovitch and Soen (2006) study, freshmen have better attendance than second and third year students. The most common one for increasing attendance would be recoding the attendance as Shimoff and Catania (2001) proposed. An attendance requirement resulted in a 12.7% higher attendance rate in Devadoss and Foltz (1996)’s study. However, Van Blerkom (1990) commented that with 90 plus students in Introduction Psychology class, keeping track was hard.

Other teachers give quizzes at the beginning of every class period to increase the attendance (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996). In fact, when quizzes were in place, the attendance did increase (Gump, 2005). For example, giving extra credit quizzes increased attendance by 10% (Wilder et al., 2001). After all, attendance and exam performance does have a significant positive correlation (Launius, 1997). By requiring written to make-up for missed class material, summary of missed class material are also used by other teachers to increase the attendance rate (Devadoss and Foltz, 1996).

Interestingly, Jacobson (2005) used e-mail to keep track of students’ attendance. That is, when students were not in class, the teacher would e-mail students. According to Jacobson (2005), it does increase the attendance rate because students would feel ashamed of themselves for having teachers send them an e-mail regarding their absence. The only issue for this might be network delay problem, return e-mails because of invalid e-mail address or full e-mail box (Jacobson, 2005).

However, there are students who believe they are customers and it is the seller (their instructor) who is obligated to make the product (the class) appealing to attract them to come to class (Gump, 2004). Students attended the class because it was interesting (Gump, 2004). Gump (2004) made a good point that students are more likely to come to class if they find the teacher/material interesting. On the other hand, to improve the attendance rate is to ask teachers to make the class interesting (Gump,
Getting a credit for attending class was a good way to reward participation (Van Blerkom, 1990). Attendance influence whether students will get academic credit for attending class or not (Moore, 2006; Launius, 1997). Students in the Van Blerkom (1990) study were discouraged from coming when they know attending class has little effect on their grade. Launius (1997) surveyed 257 students and 70% said teachers should give credit for attendance. Allocating a certain percent of the total score for attendance does help with attendance (Devdass and Foltz, 1996). After all, if there is a credit given for attendance, it will help their overall grade if students did badly on exams (Launius, 1997).

Finally, in the Paisey and Paisey (2004) study of students’ reasons for non-attendance and the effect on academic performance at a Scottish University, the best attended session for seminars was 1-3 PM. Morning classes were most poorly attended. In addition, they also found 10AM to 4PM is the best time for having classes (Paisey and Paisey, 2004). Thus, if 10AM to 4PM is the best time for having classes, then maybe schools can try to arrange the class schedule during this time slot.

METHODS

To assess college student’s attitude toward the attendance policy at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, the researchers adopted a qualitative survey in this study. The survey contained three questions designed to understand students’ attitude toward Wenzao’s class attendance policy, their opinion about the first author of this study’s attendance policy, and how they would set the attendance policy if they were the instructor.

The participants consisted of 166 students enrolled in the first author’s class. Yet, only 131 students responded to the survey. As soon as the data were collected, they were analysed accordingly. The first researcher analysed the data first and then discussed the result with her co-author to increase the validity and reliability of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Here, the researchers categorized the responses according to students’ written answers of each survey questions. The first research question asks the students in this study to share their attitude toward Wenzao’s class attendance policy. The second survey question asks the students in this study to express their opinion about the first author of this study’s attendance policy. Finally, the last survey question asked was wish students would share how they would set the attendance policy if they were the instructor.

Students’ attitude toward Wenzao’s class attendance policy

Most of the students in this study like the attendance policy set by the school. Participants believed that it is students’ responsibility to come to classes on time. Furthermore, students know that the rules are set to their best interest. After all, a participant in this survey wrote, the tuition is expensive and it is a waste of his/her family’s money if he/she did not come to classes.

However, there are students who disagree with the attendance policy at Wenzao. Twenty-two students in the survey use the word "strict" to describe the attendance policy at Wenzao. Some students in the study believed they should be treated like college students. Simply, doing the roll call makes them feel like they are still in junior high or high school. After all, attendance at most colleges’ classrooms is not mandatory (Marburger, 2006). One participant in the survey wrote that school should not set the attendance rule. It should be left to the instructors. After all, for students who want to learn, they will go to classes. If students chose not to go, it is their loss.

In addition, some students have to eat out during the lunch time or they have to do the morning campus cleaning. In reality, there might be a short walk between buildings or parking lots. Thus, it would be hard for them to make it to class on time. It is especially true when students are lined up in the cafeteria or food vendors on/off campus. Besides, waiting for lifts is another reason for lateness written by students in the study.

Even though students are allowed to submit their absence excuse form to their teachers, students complain about the troublesome procedures. For example, some teachers required them to present a doctor’s prescription or a visit slip in order to have their signature signed on the excuse form. Yet, sometime students just do not feel well and want to rest at home. They do not think it is necessary to spend money for a doctor’s visit. Furthermore, students found that it is hard to find the class teachers to sign their excuse forms. Besides, part-time teachers only come to campus when they have classes. A student commented that the procedure of completing excuse leave was complicated and troublesome. Before an excuse leave was completed, his/her parents had gotten his/her absent reported which made them worried and irritated.

Furthermore, students pointed out that some teachers do not follow the school rules for taking the roll calls. Students also believed that some classes are basically useless or not helpful to them. Thus, what is the point of coming to the class? For example, a student is preparing for the graduate school entrance exams and the classes he/she is taking are not so helpful with the exam. Thus, coming to class was a waste of time to him/her.

Students’ attitude toward the first author’s class attendance policy

The first author of this study is very strict with the class attendance policy. Basically, when the school bell rings, she would set up a 10 min alarm o’clock. For students who
came in after the school bell rings but within 10 min, he/she will be marked lateness by using a yellow marker on the sign up attendance card given by the first researcher. Thereafter, students who come into the classroom will be marked absent using a pink marker on the sign up attendance card which later will be recorded in the first researcher’s attendance booklet plus the school’s attendance/absence recording system. That is, when a student comes in a second after the alarm rings, he/she will be marked absent. No exceptions. However, some students think the first author of this study is too strict and she should be more flexible. A student in the survey mentioned that there are only two elevators in the building and his/her classroom is on the 7th floor. Thus, it would take her/him sometime to get there, especially when there is a long cue. If he/she will be marked absent after he/she comes in a few seconds or minutes later, then, why not just go and have breakfast first and come back for the next hour class.

Furthermore, students are required and responsible for informing the first author as soon as possible via e-mail, notes, phone, classmates or other means within 24 h of his/her absence. In addition, when students miss a quiz/exam, he/she is expected to make arrangements with the first author in making up for any missed quizzes if permitted. The first author never gives her students a hard time when it comes to avoidable or unavoidable absences; she only expected her students to inform her about their absence. Basically, she does not want to be in class worrying without knowing why her students did not show up.

However, while some students believed the first author of this study is too strict, others found that the first author has her own principle and she practices what she preaches. More importantly, she is fair to all students. Besides, she set the rules and told her students in the first class of the first semester they met.

Finally, students mentioned that the first author did all the excuse leave review online to be very efficient and eco-friendly. In fact, the school launched the online roll call taking and submitting students’ excuse form online two years ago. Sadly, many teachers were reluctant to do it. Besides, it is a whole new system to learn and many teachers found doing the roll call on their were troublesome. Previously, teachers usually assigned a student to do the roll call or the vice-class leader will record the attendance and lateness. Teachers only have to sign the absent sheet recorded by the student. The first author of this study was one of the faculties to get involved at the early stage in online roll call taking which she also found it to be convenient. For example, with the online excuse leave submitting system, students do not need to print out the excuse form for getting her signature. Also, she can do all the excuse leave reviews online. When students failed to inform her about his/her absence, she can just ignore the submission or sent students a note via the system. Furthermore, students will not need to track her down for getting a signature. Everything is just one click away.

Class attendance policy set by students

The last survey questions ask students what they would do if they were the instructor when it comes to the class attendance policy or roll call taking. While 37 students wrote in the survey that they would do the same thing as the first author did and wish the first author keep doing it, others prefer the first author to be more flexible. For example, instead of marking students’ absent 10 min after the class starts, six students would mark student absent 20 min after the class begins, while two students would mark students absent 25 min after the class begins. A participant in this study even proposed giving students three chances to come to class 20 min after the class begins without being marked absent if he/she was the teacher. Another participant would not mark students’ absent unless he/she did not show up to class.

Conclusion

Majority of the students in this study agree with the school’s existing attendance policy, as well as the first author’s attendance rules. Furthermore, students also wish to maintain the same attendance rules the first author had if they were the instructor. Besides, attendance is related to overall course score (Wilder et al., 2001). Class attendance helps foster good work habits, teaches responsibility and improves social skills (Cohn and Johnson, 2006). Even so, there are students who complained that the school’s attendance policy is too strict and they should not be treated like junior/high school students. They also commented that the first author of this study should be more flexible with the attendance rules.

The researchers are aware of the weakness of this study. For one, this study is limited to students within one college and one teacher’s class. For another, students in this study might not truly express their true feelings toward the survey questions asked. Thus, further empirical investigations should be undertaken to identify whether or not what this study found about college students’ attitude toward the attendance policy at Wenzao is also the case across disciplines, departments, universities and countries.

REFERENCES


