

The group discussed four problems in the classroom: poor attendance, lack of preparation, inappropriate behaviour, and late assignments. One major stumbling block in finding a solution to these annoyances is that there are two perceptions toward achieving a degree. One view is that education is a means to an end (often better job opportunities) and is in itself of little use or interest. The second attitude is that education, although it will lead to better opportunities, is a worth-while and rewarding pursuit in its own right. This school should not have penalties for the first three problems listed above, attacking them instead in a positive spirit, but it should have a mark penalty for late assignments. With this policy, we can do justice to both attitudes toward students' stay at UPEI.

The underlying cause of poor attendance, lack of preparation, and inappropriate behaviour is human nature in general. This is particularly true of inappropriate behaviour in class. At this school, there are NO requirements to attend class, so why do uninspired students go, then disrupt class? The answer is the sense of obligation that we all have toward events we consider boring: for some it's church, for others it's social engagements, yet others it's classes. Using negative tactics such as reducing marks is not the answer to solve these problems; it would only strengthen the feeling of guilt, drawing more uninterested people, making a bad situation worse. The key is to change the attitude that causes the sense of obligation: make students WANT to attend class.

The critical factor that decides whether a class is boring (and something to be endured) or entertaining and enlightening (and something to look forward to) is the professor. In every discipline at a school, there is at least one professor who, through personal qualities and effective techniques, makes the subject come alive and inspires discussion. Most of these capable professors receive awards, and their classes are the first to be filled: they are well-known to both students and other faculty members. The other faculty members should talk to these teachers and students to find out what qualities and techniques work to make a lecture more enjoyable, then try these techniques in their own classes. For example, there was much discussion at the meeting about questions in class, particularly the phenomena of a single question from a courageous student precipitating many more questions and an enlightening dialogue between the class and the prof. An excellent way for a teacher to create this sense of freedom in class, rather than waiting for it to happen, is to ask the class simple questions -- not to a specific person (that only creates fear among the others) yet expecting an answer. These primer questions draw the students from a monologue state of mind to one of dialogue and entices the first brave question (which often is about something early in the lecture, showing the rest of the class that there are others not getting it either). Similarly, professors should analyze their classroom persona, and try to find ways to make their lectures more exciting. As an example, by lightening the tone of a lecture, being more approachable -- being NICE -- professors can achieve much more in a course than beforehand. The reason for the increased productivity is again human nature: people do not want to disappoint someone they care about. (Yes, CARE about -- there is a natural tendency to reciprocate both kindness and hostility toward everyone, even professors.) Often a boring professor makes the easiest material difficult to students because there is no incentive to try to absorb it. Conversely, people will strive harder for a prof they admire.

There is an argument that a professor is not an entertainer and his personality is not relevant to capability, but I disagree. To be a successful salesman, a person must be energetic; people prefer a doctor with a comforting bedside manner; a perfectly honest politician is one out of work: the point is that a JOB often has facade requirements. Being a professor is a job, and one should fulfil that responsibility anyway he can, particularly if he wishes to solve the problems our school has.

Clearly, making classes more interesting (particularly lightening the tone of lectures), will benefit both those here for a degree and those here for an education: students will want to work and will learn, despite their reasons. Perhaps some will not do outside reading during the following summer, maybe some will never get a job and apply their knowledge, but for that course --that 3 hours a week -- everyone will get something out of it (except those here for a good time and no work at all).

We should be lenient on docking marks for not attending class and inappropriate behaviour because punishing people this kind of apathy is not the answer: removing the apathy is more effective. However, I draw the line for late assignments. There should be a penalty of 5% a day (at most) for late homework. I look at it from this perspective: if I were to hand in an assignment a few days late, by no means should I receive the same mark as someone who either managed his time more efficiently or suffered a late night. I doubt if I'm any busier than that person. I simply chose to use my time for other pursuits and I should suffer the consequences. The catch is that I think everyone should be treated the same: if, on the next week, that other person fails to complete his work in the allotted time and I do, what is the point of meeting the deadline? A penalty for late assignments forces proper time management, which is useful for both people who view education practically and philosophically.

The key to solving the problems of poor attendance, lack of preparation, and inappropriate behaviour in class is to remove the reluctance and resentment people have toward school by making it more enjoyable. The essential factor that makes a course entertaining (and enlightening) or boring is the attitude of the professor -- not toward the subject -- but toward people. People in general, and students in particular, like to be liked, and resent haughty or condescending attitudes. Professors don't have to change their lifestyles to be more effective at their job, just their persona in front of the class. Students must be accountable for something, however, and in my opinion late assignments are one thing for which a student must pay a price. If a deadline is toothless, where is the respect for it??

The ideas presented here -- strong communication between faculty and students, a constant evaluation of the process, and a positive attitude --will benefit those here for a degree, those here for an education, and the professors who teach them. People who enjoy doing what they are doing and who are part of a process are always more successful than those who are forced to do something they don't enjoy in the first place.

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