**Using Class Behaviour Modification Assignment to Reduce Lecture Absenteeism among Masters Management Students**

**Abstract**

I am describing and discussing a new class assignment aims to reduce student absenteeism while allowing students to engage in a realistic consultancy-like intervention. Student absenteeism from university courses has been acknowledged as a major problem for many institutions and has been an increasing challenge in the X Graduate School of Business, where I teach. The intervention is centred around a student led, class-wide semi-structured consultancy project that sought to assess, identify and reduce students’ absence from classes. The project was very successful and resulted in meaningful process and record high level average class attendance.

Keywords: absenteeism, behaviour modification, consulting

**Introduction**

Absenteeism is a problem that isn’t confined to the workplace: it has been a serious challenge in modern higher education. Voluntary absence of students from classes (i.e., one that isn’t caused by hard to avoid external events such as illness, accident or bereavement) has been a problem for many years and may have even increased in severity due to various socio-technological developments in most societies. No definitive statistics for the phenomenon could be identified but figures cited by several authors indicate that typical absenteeism rates in undergraduate classes are estimated to range from 18.5% - 70% (Crede, Roch & Kieszczynka, 2010; Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Friedman, Rodriguez & McComb, 2001; Wyatt, 1992). Class absenteeism constitutes a serious problem as it results in several undesired consequences: compromised learning at the class level, lower attainment and performance at the individual student level (e.g., exams, GPA) and diminished motivation among lecturers and those students who are present (Dollinger, Matyja, & Huber, 2008; Dobkin, Gil & Marion, 2010; Park & Kerr, 199). Crede, Roch and Kieszczynka (2010) conclude from their meta-analysis that “These relationships make class attendance a better predictor of college grades than any other known predictor of academic performance, including scores on standardized admissions tests such as the SAT, high school GPA, study habits, and study skills*.*” (p. 272).

The intervention described in this paper is within the context of teaching a course in Management Consultancy Masters programme offered by a large graduate school of business in a major research university in Ireland. The Management Consultancy (MC) programme enrols typically 35-55 students per year and is comprised of mostly younger (most students are in early to mid-20s) full-time, and internationally diverse (30-40% non-nationals from about 10 countries) cohort. The programme blends more theory-based courses such the Organisational Behaviour core class that was taught by the author with courses that emphasise more practice orientation, taught by organisational consultants.

The problem of voluntary absenteeism has been steadily increasing in the graduate school of business in general and in the MC programme, specifically. The trend in recent years has been that class attendance drops progressively from around the middle of the term. By the end of the term, which is comprised of 12 weeks, it is not uncommon to have barely half of the students attending classes. The problem has been exacerbated greatly by the career orientation of many MC students who engage in career oriented activities (e.g., information meetings, interviews and other selection activities) and the international characteristic of this student cohort.

The ***Class Behaviour Modification*** project has been developed by the author and used for the first time, in an experimental fashion, with the aforementioned student group during 2017. The main goals of the activity are to reduce absenteeism in classes by using a student-led assignment that provides students with a relevant learning experience. The basic principles behind this activity are not confined to management consultancy classes and would be of interest and relevance to a wide range of subjects and classes within management disciplines and could be used with undergraduate and graduate students alike.

**Theoretical Foundations**

While the research on class absenteeism in higher education is not extensive, studies point out that major causes include external factors such as employment needs and family responsibilities, student behaviours (such as alcohol consumption), educational context (elective vs. mandatory courses; class size), student-lecturer interactions and personal characteristics. Among the major personal characteristics that were found to predict absenteeism are personality dimensions (e.g., conscientiousness was negatively related to absenteeism rates). In a couple of studies, existing GPA was found to be negatively related to absenteeism rates. In addition, boredom or unengaging teaching style has been reported as contributing to students’ absence from university lectures (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Friedman, Rodriguez & McComb, 2001; Wyatt, 1992).

The literature dealing with effective ways to increase student attendance is rather immature and characterised by fragmented conceptual threads and very few rigorous empirical studies. Among the factors mentioned as effective are monitoring mechanism of sorts (either by the lecturer, a teaching assistant or an electronic system), some of which are tied to rewarding students for attendance or for a proxy of attendance (writing a brief essay in class, unannounced quizzes) (Dobkin, Gil & Marion, 2010). It is worth noting that Crede, Roch and Kieszczynka’s (2010) meta-analysis reported only a weak positive relationship between mandatory attendance policies and decreases in absenteeism. Other means include keeping morale high, fostering high engagement and personal connection with the class, and informational disincentives to miss classes (e.g., providing handouts only in class while not posting them electronically) (Sheridan R., 2012).A rare example of a quasi-experimental design that was set to examine this issue is a study conducted in an UG physics course, where authors found that using teaching methods based on *Deliberate Practice* concepts (which emphasised problem solving of realistic problems by students) resulted in students’ increased class attendance (and engagement) (Deslauriers, Schelew & Wieman, 2011).

Having experimented with some mechanisms such as participation marks in the past, I have decided to discontinue using them as I didn’t see them fitting my educational ideology, especially as it applies to graduate students. There have also been substantial indicators that students find my classes interesting and, generally, there is a good level of engagement in them. Addressing the class directly on this issue and emphasising to them the importance of attending classes did not seem to yield noteworthy results. Moreover, the issue appeared to be programme-wide and, to a large degree, encountered by many other colleagues in the graduate school. Thus, I have been reflecting in the past couple of years on mechanisms for increasing attendance without resorting to monitoring, punishing or rewarding individual attendance. This dilemma led me to create the project assignment described in this paper.

**Learning Objectives and Exercise Overview**

The learning objectives of the project, which was part of the Organisational Behaviour class (module), a core element of the Management Consultancy MSc, were mainly two:

1. To have students engage in a real-life consultancy project that involves behaviour modification in an organisational context. This required students to reflect on the issue, to conduct literature research on the topic using an evidence-based approach, to collect data and monitor group behaviour, to design an intervention and to evaluate its effectiveness.
2. To work independently on a semi-structured class-wide graded project, which presents unique challenges of coordination and large-scale collaboration, supplementing graded elements at the individual and small group levels.

Here is the excerpt from the syllabus, describing the project guidelines:

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**Class Behaviour Modification**

This assignment is aimed to be performed at the class level and will provide you with an opportunity to practice a real-life behaviour modification intervention and leadership under task conditions characterised by low structure and high level of autonomy.

All students, as a class, are tasked with tackling a classic organisational problem occurring in many profit as well as non-for-profit organisations: ***Absenteeism***. I have encountered this problem myself in recent years in the OB module (and, no doubt, so did other lecturers elsewhere in Smurfit). Absenteeism brings about various threats to organisations and, hence, poses a problem that is worthy of consultants’ intervention. As a class, you will be expected to:

* Decide on a work process; for example, you may want to divide the class into sub-groups or you may choose to let students contribute and work as individuals. Similarly, how the team is lead is up to you.
* Study the issue, both in the field (the classroom) as well as in OB literature.
* Propose an implementable intervention
* Make a short class presentation in week 5 explaining your suggested strategy.
* Negotiate and agree on a goal (target) with your lecturer by the 6th class
* Implement your strategy in class and monitor results
* And, finally, by end of week 12, evaluate your intervention in terms of how closely you met your goals. I will ask the class to submit a 1 page report summarising the outcomes.

Grading will consist of 2% going to process quality, which I will assess through class communications with me and, majorly, through the proposed intervention presentation in week 5. The other 2% will be awarded on how closely the target is met (assessed at the end of the term). All students will receive the same grade for this assignment.

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As the instructions above indicate, I encouraged students to pay attention to the process, which they did very well (see Appendix 1 for a document reproducing students’ PowerPoint presentation on week 5 of the semester). Every week, a student sent me an email message after the class indicating how many students attended that day. At the end of the term, students sent me a report, which included summary and outcomes of the intervention.

From every perspective, this pilot project experiment was a strong success. The presentation was delivered professionally, both in content and in form. The final report was above my expectations and included sophisticated data analysis which gave us insight into absenteeism dynamics during the term (see Appendix 2). Finally, the outcomes were highly satisfactory: while in the past couple of years attendance dipped to 55%-70% in average in the second half of the semester, this year average attendance for the same period (weeks 6-11) was over 91% (!), with one week (week 7) having perfect attendance, which is a rather rare occurrence when students do not get individual incentives to attend. Consequently and, having fully satisfied the assignment requirements, all students received the full 4% allotted to this assignment.

**Session Description**

There are two options to conduct this session, depending if it runs for 30 or 60 minutes. If we go ahead with the 30-minute slot for this session, my general plan is to take up to 15 minutes to describe the problem, the designed intervention, the implementation process and its outcomes and then to leave the rest of the time for Q&A and brief discussion.

Based on discussions with colleagues (the issue of students’ absenteeism was brought up in several teaching & learning fora) and on my readings around the topic, absence from classes at all levels is a major issue that academics from various business disciplines are grappling with. There are likely also unique issues that lecturers in graduate business schools experience due to the emphasis on and availability of career opportunities for this student population. Thus, I believe that the session could evolve into a fruitful and engaging discussion on ways to tackle absenteeism, where colleagues share their experiences raising questions and debating approaches. Therefore, a second format option would see the session lasting 60 minutes, where the format would be presenting some basic research on absenteeism and describing the intervention above, followed by a Q&A session, which would lead to an audience-wide discussion of about ½ hour around the topic. I am happy to facilitate this discussion if the conference evaluation committee finds it suitable for the program. Otherwise, I am happy with the more minimal format of a 30-minute session.

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**Appendix 1**

**Absenteeism Project Process Report**



**Appendix 2**

**Absenteeism Project Final Report**

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