

To Attend or Not Attend Class:

That is the Question

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Abstract

Once students get to university attendance is no longer mandatory as it was in their secondary classrooms. This leads to students being able to make their own decisions regarding attendance and it is important, as instructors, to understand the reasoning behind their decisions to attend or not attend their classes. In an informal survey of 33 international students, during the pandemic, I asked students to articulate some of the reasons why they attend class and also some reasons that keep them away from attending class. I have found, over the past year, that some students are always in class and other students pretend to be in class by logging on but then disappear so when called upon they are not there to answer questions. The answers varied among students, as expected, but there were some similarities attached to their reasons for attendance and non-attendance. The most common reasons for attending had to do with the students desire to learn and be up to date with the information presented in class. They stressed that attending class allowed them to ask questions of their instructors in real time. The reasons for non-attendance revolved around illness, work commitments, other assignments due, lack of interest in the topic, and the fact that some of their lecturers did not engage the students in discussions making the class boring.

To attend class or not to attend class? My apologies to Shakespeare, but that is a question asked by millions of post-secondary students around the world every day. The answer varies, depending on the student, but the fact remains that many students choose not to attend their lectures for a myriad of reasons. As a university instructor, I am always curious as to why some students make the decision not to attend class despite the benefits that are afforded students who take the time to go to class and participate in the debate that is a vital part of learning. Learning is the dialogue between what Vygotsky (1980) calls the learned other (the instructor) and the students who come to class wanting to expand their knowledge and thinking abilities. In Vygotsky's (1980) hypothesis, a zone of proximal development explains how children learn; he posited that it is the social interactions with people who are more knowledgeable that can help facilitate the learning process for children. He further stated that it is the process of talking to adults and peers that enable learners to advance their own learning as they come to realize that numerous points of view about subjects exist. Students can begin to understand, through class discussions, that others may not have the same opinions as they do and it is these discussions that help make people critical thinkers.

Without the ability to be critical thinkers, students stop asking questions due to their egocentric view of the world, which Vygotsky (1980) hypothesized means that the child does not bother with looking for alternative points of view since he or she is convinced that his or her view is the only correct one. When post-secondary students do not attend class, they run the risk of remaining in the egocentric stage where they will not bother trying to reason but will just accept. It is the understanding that others might not always agree with them that makes up the learning process and no better place can be found to learn this than in a post-secondary classroom. Then why do some students not see it as an advantage to attend class? Is it a matter

of not understanding the advantages that are part of the learning process? Do students think that learning is the process of acquiring knowledge without the understanding and the analysis that goes along with that learning?

Students cannot learn in a vacuum, which is what happens when they make the decision not to attend class and do not become part of the culture of learning that is afforded to those who attend class and learn from their instructors and peers. If we posit, as Vygotsky (1980) did, that all knowledge is socially constructed and that social construction is the backbone of all learning in a classroom, then we can begin to understand the importance of attending class; it is unfortunate that not all classrooms are the same. Students will only benefit from in-person classes if their instructors encourage interactive activities such as discussions—whole class and small group. The discussions must be controlled by the instructor so that the students have a goal to accomplish and are not just left to wonder what the purpose of the discussion is, which can lead students to become discouraged and disengaged. To facilitate learning, the instructor in the position of a facilitator of learning must provide feedback to each group and help students see the big picture of what they are learning. It is this dialogue that helps students develop decision-making and problem-solving skills. When students get to listen to others' points of view and give their own point of view, they develop the skills that will help them see what others think and how others perceive their ideas. They learn to pay attention to the reactions of others, and they can change and adapt their own thinking based on what is socially acceptable.

The fact is that many instructors, when speaking to each other, often complain about the attendance rate of their undergraduate students but they don't often take the time to try to discover why some students attend class and others do not attend. In his study, Baderin (2005) proposed that it was necessary for instructors to understand why students miss class from the

students themselves as they are the ones who can give insight into their attendance rates. This idea of learning from students is also echoed by O'Sullivan et al. (2015). Similarly, Gbadamosi (2015) said, "there is growing general concern about the levels of students' attendance, both at lectures and seminars in higher education" (p. 196). Sloan, Manns, Mellor, and Jeffries (2020) found that the declining attendance levels should be a cause for concern [among instructors] considering the research has shown that attendance is clearly connected to student performance. Mearman et al. (2014) stated that "students skipping class appears to be an increasingly common phenomenon, and its prevalence is worrying due to potential negative impacts on not only the student, but also their peers, teachers, and even wider society" (p. 1). Likewise, O'Sullivan et al. (2015) discussed the fact that the literature states that the most important factor in student success is attending class and that "learning is a collaborative and social process" (p. 15), which lends credence to Vygotsky (1980) and his theory of socially constructed knowledge. Similarly, Sloan et al. (2020) stressed that students might be able to pass assignments and exams without attending class, but that their educational experience would be incomplete because they miss out on the peer support and discussion that is so important to learning. Attendance issues not only affect students, as O'Sullivan et al. (2015) reported, but it can also be "experienced as demoralizing by faculty but is largely seen as a private concern or dismissed as an inevitable feature of contemporary student culture about which nothing can be done" (p. 16). It appears that, even though faculty members are affected by the attendance, they try to justify the students' actions as not being related to anything they do in the classroom or as something that just happens.

Scott and Lyman (1968) discussed the two different types of explanations that people use in society to explain their actions. They clarified that an account is something that is socially and

culturally acceptable based on the norms of the society in which it takes place. When interacting with others, a person who is socialized learns what is acceptable to use as an account based on to whom one is speaking; thus students will use different accounts of a situation when speaking to their friends, their families, and their instructors. The authors classified the accounts as *excuses* and *justifications*. Excuses are “accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility” (p. 47) They go on to say that excuses are “socially approved vocabularies for mitigating or relieving responsibility when conduct is questioned” (p. 46). On the other hand, justifications are “accounts in which one accepts responsibilities for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” (p, 47). They further explain that justifications, like excuses, are socially approved vocabularies but the difference is that “to justify an act is to assert its positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary” (p. 51). In other words, acts are justified by saying that the occasion permits the way things were handled even if they are not acceptable in society.

If one looks at the reasons students provide for missing class, it becomes fairly straightforward to classify them as excuses or justifications. In the age of the pandemic, the reasons that students used to use pre-pandemic for missing classes and what reasons they used during the pandemic have changed. Remember that an excuse is one in which students would recognise that what they did was not acceptable behaviour, but they absolved themselves from blame by providing excuses. Some of the most common excuses that I received during the pandemic had to do with problems related to the internet. The students said they couldn't attend class because their Wi-Fi was not working, their laptop or desktop computer had issues that they could not resolve, or the internet kept cutting in and out making it impossible to attend class. Since I could not check the veracity of their claims, I was forced to accept them and, of course,

all of these things do happen when using electronics, so it was socially acceptable to use these accounts when discussing their non-attendance. This excuse would not have worked before the pandemic since all of the classes were held face to face and not being able to access the internet would not have been a good excuse for missing class.

In terms of justification, students' excuses carried even less culpability as they often blamed their employment for affecting their attendance. They explained that they would have come to class, but it was their bosses' fault for scheduling them to work, even though they had given their bosses their class schedules. In other words, they justified why they were not in school by saying it was not their fault as it was outside of their control. Having to work justified non-attendance. Another reason students provided was that they had to get their covid vaccine and the only time they could get an appointment was during class time. Again, this is justified because it was socially acceptable to miss school for something as important as a covid vaccine. The students provided explanations that were not good reasons for missing class; they would not have been able to use these accounts pre-pandemic, but they become acceptable accounts because they were now socially appropriate. O'Sullivan et al. (2015) reported that "more frequent absences were justified rather than excused" (p. 21) and the justifications often involved more of an explanation than the excuses.

It was from reading these articles that I decided to find out why my students did not attend class even though they received low grades and experienced struggles with the assignments. In this informal survey, I asked my students—33 first-year international university students—for some feedback regarding class attendance. Specifically, I asked them (1) why they attend their classes; (2) if they thought that attending class helped them get higher grades; (3) what they saw as the benefits of attending class; and (4) what were some of the factors that kept

them from attending class. It was possible for the students to provide more than one answer, which is why the numbers do not add up to 33 for each response. It is important to note that this survey was conducted when all university classes were being offered remotely. My course was conducted synchronously, so students had a set time to attend the lecture and could, therefore, participate in discussions and dialogue between the instructor and their peers.

Reasons for Attending Class

I am assuming that students who answered this question actually attend class. From my perspective, I know that many of these students who filled in the online survey had not attended regularly due to attendance records that I kept. The most common reason that was given by the students (15) was that attending class gave them the opportunity to ask questions of their professors in real time so that they could clear up any confusion they may have had about the content. They also said that asking questions helped them clarify assignments to the extent that they may not have had before completing the assignment. Similarly, they also said asking questions of their professors helped them interact with their professors. One of the students said this about attending class regularly:

“There are so many things that can be learned or explained in class that would not be explained as clearly in a textbook. I find that if I attend a class where a topic is explained, I can easily understand what is being said and store it in my memory. I can also easily remember it [the information]”.

The next most common answers were that they were (1) attending class because they wanted to learn (7 students). As one student put it, “I like to learn and I find it harder to learn from a textbook, and attending class helps with that”; and (2) attending class helped them stay on

schedule (8 students). The students expressed their belief that if they did not attend class they would fall behind and it would be difficult to catch up.

Other answers that were given included students who said that it was beneficial to attend class due to the fact that they could learn from their professors and their peers, which made the class more interactive and helped them see other points of view on topics (6 students).

“Class sessions have also contributed to easing my anxiety because when I find a task hard, what I usually find once I attend class is that I am not alone and other students were confused as well. This makes me feel less like [it is] my failure to complete tasks and not due to a lack of intelligence”.

“Creating a habit of attending class pushes me to study rather than to rely on recordings. Also, attending class helps in the social interactions with people; [I] have the opportunity to meet peers in similar situations, which will be very motivating. By attending class I do not only get knowledge but also get motivated towards the study to do well in examinations”.

Some students also said that their parents were paying a great deal of money for them to go to school, so they felt they had to attend class (3 students); attending class helped them prepare for exams (3 students); they wanted to pass the course (2 students); and being a student was their job (2 students).

This data is supported by the research of O’Sullivan et al. (2015) who found that students who saw themselves as good students attended class regularly. The students who realized that attendance was necessary for their success were more likely to attend class, as they saw attendance as contributing to higher grades. The study further discovered that good students wanted to attend regularly because they did not want to risk missing important information that

would be presented in class. Longhurst (1999) and Sloan et al. (2020) suggested that, when students were committed to their education, they were more likely to attend class than students who lacked motivation to attend their classes. In their discussion, Schalkwyk, Menkveld, and Ruiters (2010) stated that students who attended lectures regularly provided the following reasons for their attendance: the students said that “the lectures helped them understand the work . . . [the lectures] provided useful tips about tests and the exam were given in class . . . and I learn a lot by listening in class” (p. 636). They also provided other reasons such as going to class was a good place to see friends, and they had spent a great deal of money on the course and wanted to get their money’s worth. Some students felt guilty for missing class, and some students said that they would miss the quizzes, often unannounced, if they did not attend class. These reasons are similar to the reasons provided by my students.

Higher Grades from Attending Class

When asked if they thought attending class helped them attain higher grades in their courses 31 of the 33 students said that, yes, attending class definitely helped them get higher grades. The following comments are indicative of the ones that students gave for attending class because it helped them get higher grades. One student said,

“Attending class certainly helped me get higher grades since I noticed with a course that I had missed some classes due to the fact that there were the recordings but [I] never took the time to finish the recordings and got a grade that I did not desire”.

Another student said,

“I attend class regularly because I find that I can learn better if I attend live classes rather than watching class recordings as it is harder for me to sit and concentrate on watching class recordings for hours”.

As one student put it, “attending class regularly helps me get higher grades because I can connect with my professors and my classmates as we can share our experiences”.

Others replied that,

“Attending class helps one get and maintain high grades. This is the case for several reasons such as attending class prevents procrastination as you would be able to get answers to all questions and clear doubts instantly which makes starting an assignment or studying less unbearable as it is easier to perform a task when you know what to expect”.

“I absolutely think that attending classes does have an influence on getting a higher grade if the individual decides to actively learn. If the person just sits and listens without taking the information in efficiently they might as well have ditched the class, but because they want to keep their attendance up, then they attend just for that [but not for learning].”

Two students did not see a connection between attending class and getting higher grades. As one student said, “attending live lectures does not necessarily result in higher grades because you can watch the lectures later on, but it won’t be as engaging”.

Another student who does not attend regularly said:

“I don’t really believe attending class helps me score higher as if I wasn’t attending class, I would study the same and get the answers to my questions in some other way or by re-reading the class material”.

It should be noted that this last student earned a D in the course (50-59%) and that the first student who did not think it was necessary to attend live lectures did attend regularly despite her comments. Lukkarinen, Koivukangas, and Seppala (2016) indicated that class attendance is an important factor in determining academic outcomes and that students who attend their classes earn higher grades. This was supported in the data from Bati, Mandiracioglu, Orgun, and Govsa

(2013) who were interested in finding out why students do not attend class. Their results indicated that students attend class when they are interested in the course or if they believe that their grades will improve as a result of class attendance. Further, if the students thought that attendance would not affect their grades, then they could justify not attending class. Sloan et al. (2020) reported that “only 3% of students [in their study] thought that their level of attendance had no effect on grade; 16% felt that the effect was slight; 49% felt that level of attendance had a moderate effect on [their] grades, and 31% felt that it had an extreme effect on grades (p. 14). When looking at the students in my study, I found that 93% of the respondents thought that attending class did affect their grades positively. This is in keeping with the numbers reported by Sloan et al. (2020) who reported that 80% of their students found that attending class had a moderate to extreme effect on their grades.

Benefits of Attending Class

I also asked the students what they saw as the benefits of attending class. The answers varied, as was expected. The main reason that students gave for attending class was that they got to meet other people, participated in discussions, and interacted with their professors and other students (11 students). For example,

“I attend class because I enjoy hearing professionals and people more educated than me talk about their field of expertise and teaching me something about it as well”.

“If we just read the book on our own and learn something we don’t understand, this is the time we need the professor to help us with our questions”.

The next most common response was similar to the first question, which asked why they attended class. Ten of the students said that the main benefit of attending class was that they could ask questions when they did not understand something that was being taught. In addition,

seven of the students said that one of the benefits of attending class was that it allowed them to stay on schedule, which again was similar to why they attended class:

“I don’t like to miss class because if I do, I will have missed whatever is being explained and it throws me off balance and makes it hard for me to follow other classes or read my notes”.

Six said that the lectures gave them the opportunity to learn something new, which gave them more confidence and improved their understanding of the material.

What are some factors that cause students to miss class?

Students had many reasons for not attending all of their classes. Since the course that I surveyed was an online course, it was not surprising that twelve students said that the main reason they did not attend live lectures was the time difference, as many students were studying from their home countries. If the class time was either late at night, the middle of the night, or early in the morning, they reported that they were often too tired to attend class. In the same category, three students reported that they had difficulties logging on some days due to the instability of their internet service. Similarly, three students said they did not see a need to attend class since they could always watch the pre-recorded lectures at a time that was convenient for them.

One student said this about what made him attend class or made him skip class:

“I would consider whether the course is live or recorded. If it is live and not recorded I will attend class on time. If it is live with a video recording I will attend class when there are no special circumstances [that keep me from class]. If it is a recorded class, I will start watching it as soon as the professor emails me the recorded video.”

Another common reason for missing classes was illness (7 students). Students also reported that they often did not attend classes if the topic was not interesting (6 students), if the class was not in their major (3 students), if they had other assignments due (4 students) and they would look at the topic for the day, and if it was difficult they would attend but if not, they wouldn't (2 students). They were more likely to attend class if their instructors were interesting to listen to and if they had developed a rapport with the instructor and their peers (4 students), but they would not attend if the instructor just read from PowerPoint slides as they could just review the slides later (4 students). They also said that they would attend class if attendance was part of their grade (4 students), as they wanted to get the highest grade possible.

O'Sullivan et al. (2015) said that the students who did not attend regularly thought that they could get away with non-attendance, especially when attendance was not tracked. The other contributing factor for attendance was related to their peers. If the majority of students in a class spoke disparagingly of a course and the instructor, then attendance tended to be poor as students justified non-attendance by saying that the course was not useful, or the pedagogical approach was not to their liking. The authors stressed how important the influence of peers was on attendance. If a negative undercurrent regarding the lecturer or the course existed, then attendance was affected, which meant that in some courses the attendance was not based solely on individual behaviour. Similarly, Sloan et al. (2020) found that students had many excuses for non-attendance including pressure to complete assignments so that they worked on their assignment rather than attend class, the poor lecturing of the instructor, the time the lectures were held—if they were too early or too late in the day they did not attend, and the content of the course; all contributed to students missing class. They further reported that illness was one of the major reasons that students used for non-attendance, followed by exhaustion and

employment conflicts. The authors speculated that listing illness as a reason for non-attendance was seen as the most acceptable reason for missing class.

Many of these same reasons for non-attendance were highlighted by Bati et al. (2013) in their study, which also stressed that illness was the most common reason provided by students for missing classes. The students also cited workload for non-attendance: the students said that they had to finish assignments for other classes and, therefore, had to make a choice between going to class or finishing an assignment. The authors saw this as an issue with time management on the part of the students. The students further stated that if they were not interested in the subject or if the lecturer was considered boring, then they did not feel bad about missing class. The students also commented on class size and said that larger classes made attendance participation impossible and affected their ability to grasp concepts, thus justifying their non-attendance.

In the age of online learning, a study by Sloan et al. (2020) found that 68% of students in an Australian university said they did not attend lectures because they could listen to the recorded lectures on their own and learn just as much as attending the class in real time. However, Nyamapfene's (2010) study showed that class attendance still remains one of the most important determinants of how students do in the course, regardless of how much access they have to online materials. The author determined that just having access to online lecture material did not in itself help with academic performance. Vandehey, Marsh and Diekhoff (2005) found that no significant difference in academic performance between students who were given complete notes, students who received outline notes, and students who did not get any notes was found. As a matter of fact, Vandehey et al. pointed out in their study that 30% of the students did not make use of online materials even if they were available. It was found that the students

who used online materials were students who did not attend class, and they only used them when an examination was being given. When students learn online or use only online notes, they miss the interaction between lecturers and peers that is so important for learning and understanding. The notes can provide the information, but it is the discussion that helps students form a shared-learning community where everyone benefits from the supportive social environment.

Conclusion

It is challenging not to take it personally when students do not attend class. As an instructor, I often wondered if they didn't like me or my method of delivery. While that does account for some of the reasons for absenteeism, those are not the main reasons that students do not attend class. It was affirming for me, being an instructor, to find out that the main reasons that my students do not attend class are beyond my control, and include reasons such as illness, work conflicts, internet difficulties, and time conflicts. However, when planning my courses, I will pay more attention to the discussions that I hold with my students so that they will have a voice in their learning. I now know that students attend classes that they deem useful and where they actually learn things that will benefit them not only in their overall grades, but in their ability to think about a topic from various points of view, which they can only get if they are participating in a social environment. Vygotsky (1980) had the right idea when he said that learning cannot take place in a vacuum but needs to be nourished in an environment that requires students to understand the material and not just learn the material. Instructors have to restructure their classes if they find that the rate of absenteeism is high, and not just accept it as part of the social fabric of higher education.

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