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ENCOURAGING STUDENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CLASSROOM WITH "ABSENCE BUDDIES"

No doubt you've heard this from students: *"I am sorry I wasn't here last class. Did I miss anything?"* I have heard it, too. During my first year or so of teaching I responded the same way I am sure some of you did: *"That's alright. Let me get you the handouts."* It does not take much effort to see what was wrong with that response. Instead of enabling student slacking, instructors should be fostering accountability and self-reliance. Here is what I do now in my introductory-level courses.

There is a long list of reasons why students miss class. Many work full-time while taking courses. They may have families or are single parents with young children. However, many students are not busy at all—no jobs or families—and do not show up because (a) the class is boring/long/meets too early, or (b) I am a lame teacher. (While I am skeptical of the latter, I am sure it has been true at times.)

It is difficult to place absent students into a neat, recognizable categories. They have included the highly motivated (a woman who still wanted to attend despite doctor-ordered bed rest during a rocky pregnancy) to the inconsiderate (a student who continually skipped class and suggested I call her at work during her lunch break to talk through the day's notes). Although almost impossible to explain, this much is certain: students will miss class for various reasons. Some are legitimate reasons, some not.

Instead of investigating the causes of absences, my focus is on encouraging responsibility. To that end, I prefer that students not ask me what they missed. I want them to know without asking me and work it out on their own, saving us both time. This can be achieved by making a point to address this expectation at the beginning of the semester.

During the first week of class, the syllabus is our primary text. I organize mine so that everything students need is there from the start, including all due dates and reading assignments. Within the section describing the attendance policy, I include information about what students should do if they miss a class. Their responsibility is to keep up with any assignments listed in the syllabus and to contact a classmate for notes on the day's lesson.

As simple as that sounds, I add one more step. I found that some students still did not ask classmates for missed material, so I created the "absence buddy." Sometime during the introductory business of the first week, I ask students to write their names and email addresses on scraps of paper. I collect the scraps, and put them in a pile on a table at the front of the room. One by one, each student comes up and takes a scrap. When all the scraps are gone, I explain that the name and email address on the one they chose belongs to their absence buddy. If they miss a class, they now have a contact for catching up on the material. Next, I turn them loose to locate their absence buddy and introduce themselves. This part has the potential to be somewhat chaotic, but it gets students out of their seats and talking to one another.

There are guidelines, of course. Students must not give out their classmate's email address and should use it only if they have missed a session. This way, even if they never become friendly with anyone else in the class, they always have a backup: someone to email for missed notes. There can be kinks in every classroom system. If a situation arises in which a student uses an absence buddy as class notetaker, I deal with it on a case-by-case basis.

I have found that absence buddy abuse is extremely rare, most likely related to the discussion we have as a class immediately following the exercise. I explain that part of me will always find it strange when students apologize for missing class. I do not blame them, and I know it can be a thoughtful gesture. But is it really necessary? After all, it is "their dime, their time." Some students do not realize what an opportunity classroom

time is to learn, interact, and engage. I would be doing them a disservice if I did not remind them of that at the start of each new semester.

Further, education is expensive, and missed classes are wasted money. "Do not feel like you have to apologize to me," I say; "apologize to yourself."

Our discussion usually turns to the simple pleasures knowledge brings. It empowers students to know what to do and where to look for information when they miss class. I have helped them embrace their own capabilities. With this plan in place, the number of times I am asked about missed information has dropped significantly. The result is less stress on me and a new sense of accountability and self-sufficiency in my students—good news for both parties.

Still, perfection is elusive. Despite my efforts, now and then I still encounter students who do not get it. When they ask me whether they missed anything, I say, "*Yes, everything*." They smile and sometimes still apologize. I tell them it was rough, but somehow we managed to pull together and soldier through, despite their absence. Sometimes I wipe my brow for effect. A little good-natured sarcasm goes a long way when used properly. They get the point without feeling attacked, and—bonus—I am somewhat hilarious.

We can always improve our teaching. It is the nature of the beast. This business of ours is a challenging pursuit, requiring the kind of stamina and fortitude matched only by those in, say, competitive eating. There is a lot on our plates. The latest fads in teaching, mixed with time-tested methods, create the tendency to cram it all in and hope for the best. But slowing down and examining one issue at a time works best for me. The absence buddy system gives me more control over one more challenge as I move to tackle others, always remembering to take small bites.

Mike Bove, *Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Southern Maine Community College, 2 Fort Rd., South Portland, ME 04106. Email: mbove@smccme.edu

MOVE IT OFF-COURSE: EDUCATIONAL MEDIA REVIEWS THAT SUPPORT COURSE CONTENT

Time is the only commodity that cannot be saved; it must be spent. Acknowledging that fact, I hate to waste my students' time. Many of my students are non-traditional, working, raising a family, and taking college courses. I enjoy teaching face-to-face, but I often wrestle with using class time to show a documentary. I know documentaries are valuable, but I also know that my students have not paid their money to watch television. Therefore, I have created some off-course projects that recognize the value of class time and the value of media forms that benefit students.

My students are required to write as many as five media reviews and include a reaction to each. Each assignment is valued at one percent of their overall grade. For most students this one percent provides sufficient motivation to complete the projects, but is not enough to harm them if they honestly cannot afford the out-of-class time to complete the project. Students have choices for three of the assignments; I provide the fourth and fifth. They have a list of the media in our library, connected to an intrastate library consortium that expands the selection process.

Students can experience other forms of educational media—websites, professional journal articles, and popular media, including movies and novels with plots tied closely to course content. I permit students to express their creative talents by producing a work of art, writing a fictional short story, or creating a poem—all inspired by course content. I require that the items go on public display, with students getting credit for their work.

I have kept the rigor low on these assignments because the value is in experiencing the content of the media. Students are to limit their reaction/review to one or two pages of typewritten material. Many have thanked me for these assignments. They appreciate the luxury of watching a documentary or reading a novel and receiving credit for it.

Greg Tefft, *Professor, Biological Sciences*

For further information, contact the author at Northwest State Community College, 22-600 St. Rt. 34, Archbold, OH 43502. Email: gtefft@northweststate.edu

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
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