Creating Classroom Integrity by Eliminating Punitive Course Policies

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Introduction & Rationale

During the height of Covid, university faculty across the country loosened their attendance and late work policies to honor student need. Because of these inclusive policies, an increasing awareness about the ableist nature of strict attendance and late work policies grew (Bungle, 2021; Parsloe & Smith, 2022). In the fall of 2021, after returning to campus following a year online, students were burnt out, disconnected, and regularly absent. I quickly became aware that some of my teaching practices were not only no longer effective, but also exclusionary. Because it is integral for scholars to interrogate their participation standards that "may be rooted in oppressive practices of cultural imperialism" (Walton et al., 2019, p. 29), I recognized it was time to change my course policy practices. Ahmed (2017) claims feminism is how we generate knowledge and "feminist theory is world making" (p. 14). As a feminist non-ableist communication scholar and professor, developing an inclusive classroom community became paramount to my pedagogical practices.

Because education is a practice of freedom rather than domination (Freire, 1968), and we should teach to the highest common denominator (Dolan, 2001), in the Spring of 2022, I consulted my former university's Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE) to redevelop my late work and attendance policies. Punitive attendance and late work policies are exclusionary, demoralizing, and arguably ineffective; the premise of penalizing students for late work and missed class privileges the hypothetical "perfect" body and reiterates ableist notions of success (Nicolas, 2017).

In my experience, grade penalties accrued due to submitting late work cause students to submit sub-par work or create unnecessary stress during already stressful times. Forcing students to attend class and/or penalizing work for being late without documentation requires students to spend time obtaining said documentation. The time spent getting documentation is often better spent resting or studying and forces students to prioritize class policy over their physical, emotional, educational, or mental needs. When students are penalized for missing class, they often come to class sick. Students with disabilities or pre-existing conditions suffer when ill students come to class, and all students suffer when forced to attend class while feeling poorly. Students with mental health issues often have no recourse for an excused absence and thus no "excuse" for missing class. Students with disabilities may not be able to arrive to class on time due to the distance between classrooms, overcrowded elevators, packed hallways, and the like. The plethora of causes for, and issues produced by, punitive policies are endless.

Punitive class policies, specifically ones related to attendance and the submission of work, are a form of normalizing policy that controls classroom practices. In turn, these practices mark bodies as, and divide students into categories of, normal and abnormal (Palmeri, 2006). A rhetoric of success, founded on inherently ableist and discriminatory practices, is "insidious;" it becomes reified and so widely accepted as common sense that it denies its own rhetoricity—it '*goes without saying*'" (Cherney, 2011, emphasis in original). The need to intervene in ableist policies and provide alternatives to current "regime(s) of normalization" (Palmeri, 2006, p. 49) is integral to the work of scholars.

Rather than have disciplinary policies based on negative practices, I want to encourage best practices by creating proactive policies based on student self-awareness and respect for the classroom culture. I want to use technology to become more democratizing (Ai, 2016; Bailey,

2017). I want to build spaces that enable student success by recognizing different needs, and I want to be more inclusive of people's physical and mental health, while also adhering to mandatory learning outcomes and maintaining a high level of rigor.

The term initially used to describe my new policy was "professionalism." I implemented the practice into a Speech course at a STEM university among students focused on success in the workplace. Moving forward, I'm inclined towards Classroom Integrity (CI). What I am talking about is a grading component that compels students' proactivity and adheres to mandatory learning outcomes while simultaneously honoring the need for missed/late class(es) and/or missed/late work. The goal of CI is not to have students produce better work, but to provide a space that is more inclusive of student need. According to Brenneise (2020), in her work on students with autism spectrum diagnosis, "communication experts need to be ready to adapt" by becoming "equipped to interact with" students of different needs (p. 318). Proactive communication from students equips faculty with some of the means to adapt, and a CI policy invites that sort of communication. CI is an approach to pedagogy that asks teacher and student to honor one another, for students to see each other as whole people, and for both teacher and student to respect the learning process in class and at home. CI is about creating a cohesive learning environment by seeing each person as complete human beings.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to
1. Develop self-awareness of physical, emotional, and mental capabilities and needs.
2. Understand and value rest as integral to success.
3. Gain a sense of accountability towards oneself, one's peers, and the professor.
4. Practice honesty and straightforwardness.
5. Communicate needs and wants in a timely and precise manner.

Explanation

CI includes a statement about my commitment to inclusivity. My statement reads:

> I am committed to transparency in my teaching practices, giving you agency in your education, and allowing you to make the best decisions for yourselves. I will always explain my rationale for course policies, assignments, and grades. I expect you to be honest, approach class in an engaging manner, and respect my time as I respect yours. I encourage you to make the choices that are best for your education and for yourself.
>
> Attendance is expected but not required. Arriving to class on time is expected, but lateness is understood. Work is to be submitted on time; late work is accepted. Preceding a missed class, tardiness, and/or submission of late work, students must communicate with me via email.

CI accounts for approximately 10 percent of a student's final grade. The rubric for CI is:

Criteria	Ratings					
Attending Class	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Unacceptable	
Arriving to class on time	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Unacceptable	
Treating me and your classmates respectfully in class	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Unacceptable	
Actively participating in class discussions and activities. No unnecessary use of phones, tablets, or laptops in class.	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Unacceptable	
Following assignment guidelines and submitting work on time	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Unacceptable	
Notifying me in advance about late work.	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Not Applicable	Unacceptable
Notifying me in advance about missed class/coming to class late.	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Not Applicable	Unacceptable
Using respectful and appropriate language in class and in all written communication.	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Not Applicable	Unacceptable
Replying to emails within 48 hours	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Not Applicable	Unacceptable

The rubric is purposefully malleable so that it allows for the nuances of student behavior. For example, if a student misses two classes and emails me in advance about both, they would receive a Good for attendance and an Excellent for "notifying me in advance about late work;" said student could still receive an A for CI. If a student never submits late work nor misses class, then they receive a Not Applicable for "notifying me." If a student consistently submits late work without notification, but comes to class and participates actively, they could earn a B for CI. If a student regularly misses class yet emails each time, they will again receive an Excellent for "notifying me in advance about late missed class" but their attendance grade would be poor or Unacceptable. Further, their grades for "Actively participating in class discussions and activities," "Actively contributing to group work in class," and "Coming to class prepared having read course material" would be marked as Fair or Poor since there weren't in class to do those things and would likely earn a C for CI.

I insist all communication about attendance and work is done via email so there is a record, and I can align the email to the late work or missed class notice in Canvas. Verbal notification does not count, and I remind students of that repeatedly. Sometimes a student would apologize in

person after missing class, and I then remind them an email is needed to avoid grade penalty; I understand mistakes happen, and I also insist on accountability.

Participation and respect come in many forms. Participation is not just talking, it's acting as timer during speeches, taking notes during group work, posting comments on a class video or in the discussion board, sending an email to me, or visiting my office. Respect is listening and paying attention; it's demonstrated through verbal and non-verbal communication; it's performing active listening during a speech and applauding after. Regular use of technological devices is dependent on student need and communication of those needs with me. No one is penalized for checking their phone occasionally.

I explain the nuances of this grading technique multiple times throughout the semester. During the first week of the semester, I introduce the concept, discuss my commitment to inclusion and my reasons for being inclusive, and I show students the grading rubric. I offer time for reflection and questions, and I inform students that once we are settled into the semester, we will revisit the policy. During the third week of the semester, I re-explain the policy by re-visiting my statement about inclusivity and the rubric; I explain why integrity matters, and I offer examples of students who have demonstrated integrity during previous class sessions or via emails and/or posts in Canvas. We talk about "real life," about careers, family, friends and all the ways proactive communication is important. Just like they would text a friend if they were running late to the movies, they should email me and let me know their work will be late. I remind them the policy is meant to help not hurt; my goal is to support them, not penalize them. This often leads to a discussion about power dynamics (why emailing me may feel daunting), different means and forms of communication (text vs. email and language choices), and context (social v. professional). Our discussion about the policy encompasses many of the topics covered in class – written v. oral communication, relational dialectics, temporality, the communication model, and encoding and decoding. I again allow time for reflection and question.

I re-visit and re-explain the policy two more times concurrent with the university's Early-Alert Grades and Mid-term grades when I input and then update the CI grade. With each input of grades, I remind students the grade can change throughout the semester. Also, throughout the semester, as needed, I respond to emails from and send emails to students reminding them of the integrity aspect of the course. At the end of the term, I input their final grades.

To input CI grades, I use the Canvas attendance feature, which shows when students were absent and/or late and the color-coded gradebook feature to note late work. I then search my email by their name to see when or if the student sent an email. I keep the process as simple as possible.

Debrief

Since that first class, I've incorporated CI into all my classes with great success. I've found there to be no significant burden on my daily workload nor changes to grade averages. The three times throughout the semester I input CI grades does take a bit of time, but I believe it to be worth the time, especially in lower-level classes. If implementing this process in an upper-level class, I believe twice per semester – around mid-term and at the end of the term – would be sufficient.

If class sizes are larger, responding to emails and inputting of CI grades may become overly burdensome. My email responses are short, and most email systems offer forms of predictive text that can serve as a basic reply. Inputting midterm CI grades could be made easier by using an Acceptable/Unacceptable grading scale.

With over a fifteen years' experience teaching at the college level, I have found the change in policy does little to impact the students who, for any number of reasons, don't do their work and/or don't come to class, whereas it has made all the difference for attentive and engaged students needing some extra time or flexibility. Each semester, there are one to two students who submit almost all their work during the last week of class, much to my chagrin. Even after multiple emails expressing concern on my part, they insisted all would be well and to my surprise it was. This, of course, is not to say other students won't – but some students always manage to fail a class even when the instructor does everything in their power to prevent it from happening. The idea of CI is in line with Dolan's (year) notion of teaching to the highest level of student and not focusing on the students who may abuse the policy.

Over the course of four semesters, there's been no trend towards grade inflation nor grade depreciation because of the policy. Overall, I have found the practice incredibly productive, easy to manage, and considerably more inclusive.

Assessment

As mentioned, my initial piloting of this assessment practice was aided by former university's CTLE. As such, I compiled data regarding the policy and its impact. Some key numbers include:

Data Collected at the beginning of the semester inclusive of students in three sections:
- 93% Strongly Agree (SA) or Agree (A) "The class policies make sense to me."
- 92% SA or A "The class policies make me feel welcomed and included."
- 92% SA or A "The class policies help me set my own priorities when navigating the demands of the semester."

Data Collected at the end of the semester broken down by three sections:
- (1) - 93% (2) - 100% (3) - 79% SA or A "the class policies helped me set my own priorities when navigating the demands of the semester."
- (1) - 94% (2) - 100% (3) - 93% SA or A "Over the course of the semester, the class policies made me feel welcomed and included."
- (1) - 94% (2) - 100% (3) - 88% SA or A "The policies in this course provided me with increased flexibility in prioritizing the demands of academic life according to my needs."

In answering the question, "In your own words, describe how the class policies and focus on professionalism impacted your experience in the class." Students from three sections stated:
- Honestly I hate COM classes, but I thoroughly enjoy this class as I feel respected here
- The class policies and demands, had held me accountable and made sure I didn't slack off during the semester and kept me on track.
- The policies did a great job at helping me become more of an independent student who had to prioritize decisions that would be in my favor.
- This class help me focus on how to micromanage my time, and use that time in an orderly fashion.
- The professional policy in this class forced me to make more of an effort to show up to classes and participate two things I often struggle with as a student.
- It made me more prepared for the real world and to be more professional

- It made the all around class very welcoming and it helped me manage my time better as a student
- It helped me learn how to communicate with the teacher
- It made me feel like I could behave like an adult with my attendance and class work
- The class policies established a good atmosphere of learning and allowed everyone to work their best.

Student feedback since my initial data collection remains incredibly positive. Eliminating punitive policies for late work and attendance has not only made my class more inclusive but also encouraged personal growth and responsibility.

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