

Developing Course Policies that Motivate and Support Student Learning

New instructors often wonder how they can create the best learning conditions in their classes. Course policies are one part of creating these conditions. Take a minute to read the case below and consider how this instructor is thinking about developing an attendance policy for his course.

Javier is preparing to teach his first course, Introduction to Human Ecology, in the coming semester. He knows from talking to other instructors in his department that low attendance is a problem in introductory courses. He firmly believes that students can't learn if they aren't in class, so he wants to develop a strong policy to encourage attendance. He looks at some syllabi from instructors in his department and has come across a policy that he is considering for his course.

Attendance policy: I will take attendance at each class meeting. You may miss 2 classes without penalty. At the end of the semester I will determine the percentage of classes you attended and you will receive that percentage of attendance points. In other words, if you attended 80% of class meetings you will receive 80% of the 30 points possible for attendance – which would be 24 points. Being late to class twice counts as 1 absence.

Do you think Javier should adopt this policy for his course? Is this policy likely to lead to high levels of student attendance and support student learning?

The policy that Javier is considering, which uses grades to reward or punish specific student behaviors, is a fairly typical one. Many instructors believe that grades are the most effective tool for motivating students to engage in the learning behaviors they would like to see in their classes, but the research about motivation suggests that is not the case.

What does the research say about motivation?

Grades are not the best motivator.

Decades of research on motivation for learning suggest that extrinsic reward and punishment systems (systems *teachers* put in place to control *students*) **do not change behaviors in the long run**. When we use grades to try and motivate students, we may see temporary changes in their behavior, but those changes won't last. A focus on reward and punishment will also lead many students to focus on the immediate reward or punishment, simply going through the motions and performing for us—but they won't put real intellectual effort into these performances. This means that they lose valuable opportunities to learn and reflect on the outcomes of their behavior. Most importantly, when we resort to assigning grades for behaviors like attendance or participation, we send a clear message to students: my class and my discipline are so boring or painful that I will need to bribe and punish you into doing the work. This actually reduces students' intrinsic motivation to engage in the behaviors that are most important for their learning.

Assigning grades for behavior does not help students take control of their learning.

When teachers rely on extrinsic motivators like grades to control or manage student behavior, we put ourselves in control. This leads students to believe that their role in the course is simply to do as they are told and to accept the rewards or punishments we offer them. This belief has very real

consequences not only for students' behavior, but also for their learning. Many students in courses with policies of this type will not realize that their abilities can develop with practice and feedback, and they will put in only the effort required to avoid punishment or receive the rewards we offer. Not only do these policies disempower students, they show students that the teacher cares more about managing their behavior than about supporting their learning. This makes it unlikely that students will seek help or support when they struggle with the course, further reinforcing their belief that they should simply focus their energy and attention on conforming to behavioral expectations.

Students need to know why we have structured our classes in particular ways.

When teachers demonstrate that the behaviors we are encouraging benefit students' learning, we give them an authentic reason to change in more permanent and meaningful ways. This means shifting our focus from policing student behavior to communicating the path to success in our courses. Policies should focus not on punishments and rewards but should instead help students see the natural consequences, both positive and negative, of their learning behaviors. We should also make sure that students are made aware of the resources that can help them when they are struggling to make sense of or adhere to our policies. Shifting the focus of policies in this way is not only beneficial for students but for teachers as well because it frees us from engaging in fruitless administrative tasks like counting absences, watching the clock to catch latecomers, and keeping a list of who participates in class. Instead, we can spend our time guiding students' learning.

How can we design course policies that better align with the research on motivation?

Knowing what motivates students is an important first step to designing policies that support learning. Now let's look at three principles that can guide policy design, along with some examples of effective policies.

Principle #1: Assign grades for evidence of learning, not behavior.

We have established that a focus on extrinsic motivators is not likely to be effective in supporting student learning, but we also know that certain behaviors will help students be more successful. How can we encourage those behaviors without resorting to grading as a reward or punishment? Below is an example of an attendance policy that explains to students how being in class will help them be successful and that also establishes a clear focus on grading the work students do, not the act of attending class.

Example of an attendance policy: Your in-class work is the key to your success in this course. Attendance itself is not graded, but graded in-class activities and assignments are the key to helping you practice and so I can give you the feedback you need to succeed. You can't learn or have a passing average on these activities and assignments if you don't have consistent attendance. Missing class means that you will earn a "0" for the activities or assignments missed. Unfortunately, there can be no make-up opportunities for in-class activities except in documented cases of extreme extenuating circumstances. Naturally, if you miss an assignment or activity that happened at the beginning of class before you arrive or at the end of class if you leave early, that also results in a "0", and there can be no make-up opportunities. Most

importantly, I want you to learn in this class, so missing our class meetings means less time learning for you and fewer opportunities for me to support you with feedback.

Principle #2: Give students tools that put them in control of managing their behavior and their learning.

Students need to believe that they, not the instructor, are ultimately in control of their learning in the course. When our course policies are written as absolute rules or ultimatums (“Do this or else!”), we infantilize students and take away their agency. A better approach is to give students some choices that they can manage without our interference. Not only does this empower students, but it also removes us from the role of arbiter and makes course management easier. Below is an example of a management policy that gives students options and puts them in charge of their own success.

Example of a policy that helps students manage their own learning: As many of the assignments in the course are done in class, it is impossible to schedule make-up opportunities for missed assignments. Because there will be occasions in your life when missing a class meeting or missing a deadline for an assignment is simply unavoidable (illness; personal crisis), this course has a few built-in safety valves. These are your tools to use in managing your success. Be careful not to use your safety valves too early in the semester since you may need your droppable grades to offset an unforeseen low score or difficulty later in the semester.

- *Safety Valve One: You will be able to drop your lowest 1 of the 3 individual essay grades.*
- *Safety Valve Two: The average of the best 90% of your in-class work will count toward your grade.*
- *Safety Valve Three: The lowest check-in quiz grade will be dropped from the calculation of your average.*
- *Safety Valve Four: The average of the best 90% of your online writings will count toward your grade.*
- *Safety Valve Five: If you become seriously ill during the semester, or become derailed by unforeseeable life problems that will prevent you from completing the course successfully, you and the instructor will automatically schedule a special meeting in order to make arrangements for you to withdraw from the course*

Principle #3: Write policies transparently so students can see that those policies are designed to support their learning.

Students need to see that their teacher has designed course policies with their learning in mind and that they will have the support they need to be successful. The nature of the policies is of paramount importance, but the way you describe and frame policies matters as well. Below is an example of an academic integrity policy that explains why academic integrity is important and points students to resources that can help them adhere to the policy.

Example of an academic integrity policy: Academic honesty and integrity at all levels are essential to maintaining an environment of trust in a scholarly community. These values will be of crucial importance to your ethical participation in a workplace environment as well. Students are on their honor to be ethical and honest in carrying out all the assignments and requirements

of this course. Any violations of this code, such as cheating, copying, plagiarism, or misrepresentation or one's own work, will meet with the appropriate penalties and discipline as outlined in the [UAlbany Standards of Academic Integrity](#). All the work you do in this class must be your own, and it must be work originally done for this class. Turning in your own work from other classes, current or past, is unacceptable. Saving all your drafts and notes as evidence of your writing process is not only good scholarly practice but can also help you to show the development of your ideas if your work is called into question.

Sometimes students are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism; there are resources available to help you. If you have basic questions about plagiarism, you might want to consult the UAlbany Libraries' [resources about information literacy](#), including a [tutorial specifically focused on academic integrity](#). In addition, we will spend time in class reviewing appropriate documentation for the essays you write, which is an important component of academically and professionally ethical behavior. Finally, if you have specific questions about whether an approach you are considering might be considered plagiarism, please feel free to ask me for help.

Resources about motivation and course policies

Ambrose, S. A., Lovett, M., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., & Norman, M. K. (2010). What factors motivate students to learn? In *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching* (pp. 66-90). Jossey-Bass.

Harrington, C., & Thomas, M. (2018). *Designing a motivating syllabus*. Stylus Publishing.

Palmer, M.S., Wheeler, L.B., & Aneece, I. (2016). Does the document matter? The evolving role of syllabi in higher education. *Change*, 48(4), 36-46.

If you would like to learn more about developing course policies that support student learning, we invite you to [request a consultation](#) with ITLAL.