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**Late Again?**

**A faculty member wondered why her students were always late. So she asked them.**



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By Stephanie Reese Masson

It’s 9:30 a.m., and the upper-level course I teach on mass communication is about to begin. Ten of my 27 students are missing. Twenty minutes later, that number dwindles to just two, as eight students arrive, one by one, during my lecture. Frustration kicks in as I try not to let the latecomers derail my train of thought.

Does any of that sound familiar?

Tardiness had been a common pattern for my mass-communication course. I had tried talking with students directly — in groups and one-on-one — about responsibility, professionalism, and respect. Even giving quizzes at the start of class did not help reduce the stream of late arrivals. That day last fall in class as I watched all of those students stroll in late, I knew something had to change. So instead of seeking more advice from an instructor’s point of view, I decided to go to the students for answers.

At the next class meeting, after waiting for the usual tardy suspects to arrive, I introduced a topic change. Urging everyone to respond truthfully and without fear of consequences, I asked students: "How many of you are bothered when one or more classmates arrive less than 10 minutes late?"

I was shocked when only two students raised their hands. Students indicated that as long as their classmate entered quietly, they did not care if he or she arrived within 10 minutes of the start of class. I was soon heartened to learn, however, that how late someone arrives did make a difference.

"How many of you are bothered when one or more classmates arrive more than 10 minutes late," I asked?

This time the majority of the class had a hand in the air, even those who often arrived tardy. Closer questioning revealed students were more involved in the class after the 10-minute mark, meaning that any late arrivals were more distracting. There was also an underlying feeling that students who repeatedly arrived extremely late didn’t place the same value on the course as those who ran only a few minutes late.

Over all, students were much more understanding about tardy arrivals than I, and that got me thinking: Was I worrying too much about something that most students find irrelevant? I set out once more to find a solution to the tardiness, but this time, one from their point of view. I turned to my students and asked: "What can instructors do to motivate you to come to class on time?"

Their first answer took me by surprise and was the clear winner in all of their suggestions: shaming.

"Dr. ‘Smith’ stops class if we’re late," a female student said. "Then he says something like, ‘Jane, how nice that you decided to join us today.’"

"That really works?" I asked.

"Yeah, I don’t like when the professor talks to me in front of everyone," she replied. Several other students nodded in agreement.

Next on their list was extra credit given within a brief window at the beginning of the course for doing something simple — like writing their names on a sheet of paper, or answering a simple question from a previous class.

"So what do you think about quizzes at the start of class?" I asked, expecting that that, too, would get students in their seats on time, though it hadn’t worked for this class.

Loud, negative remarks flew around the room. I heard comments about harassment, teacher bullying, and blackmail. In short, they resent the quizzes — a lot. And they didn’t just dislike the quizzes, they resented instructors who gave them. Most important, they said they did not come to class on time to take them.

It also seems that a student’s year in college makes a difference. "The freshmen are scared to miss class," one upperclassman said. "They think it’s still high school and you’ll get in trouble. We’ve learned it’s not that bad to be late. Nothing’s really going to happen to you."

Apparently losing quiz points or missing part of a lecture didn’t qualify in my students’ minds as "bad things."

Their final suggestion to instructors to get students in their seats on time: Be entertaining. If you are deemed boring as an instructor, it is much more acceptable to miss your class — however important or relevant the material. The students’ definition of "entertaining," was hard to pin down. PowerPoint lectures — and, in fact, most lectures of any kind — clearly fell in the "boring" range.

Pondering their responses was a little overwhelming. Should I morph into a shaming, extra-point-giving, sideshow act?

After considering my various options, I tried two tactics in a course I taught this past spring that included some of the same students. First, I took a suggestion offered in a workshop at my university: I didn’t record any tardies on my attendance roster. If students were late, they were marked absent, and four or more absences resulted in a deduction from their final grade.

That strategy worked well. Several students who were habitually tardy in the fall-semester course attended more regularly in the spring. Students seemed to respond more to the idea of being marked absent than to the prospect of losing a few points as a penalty.

I also surprised students twice during the semester with simple extra-credit assignments to begin the course. I followed up at the end of the session by announcing the activity to those who had arrived late and missed the opportunity.

While both ideas worked to a degree, neither one totally eliminated tardy arrivals. As much as I dislike it, I may try a mild form of shaming with the most blatant offenders this fall after a private consultation about their behavior. While that seems harsh, I am influenced by [Bonnie Snyder’s assertions](http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/students-who-are-chronically-late-to-class/) that chronically late students "display a passive-aggressive personality style" that plays out in disruptive ways throughout the semester.

I also like the idea of starting class with a five-minute "freewrite" as explained by Michelle LaFrance in a [July 2014 article](http://chronicle.com/article/A-21st-Century-Attendance/147693) in *The Chronicle.* The exercise counts for a small number of points toward the final grade.

Finally, Steven J. Corbett, in the same *Chronicle* [article,](http://chronicle.com/article/A-21st-Century-Attendance/147693/) offers advice on making a class, if not entertaining, at least more low-key and enjoyable. I am inspired to incorporate some of his ideas into my own teaching style on days when the lesson plan is less scripted.

Now is my chance to ask faculty members for their advice: Have you been successful in curtailing tardy arrivals? How? And for those of you who have not, what do you plan to do differently this fall? Share your ideas in the comments below.

*Stephanie Reese Masson is an instructor of language, English, and communication at Northwestern State University in Louisiana.*

http://chronicle.com/article/Late-Again-/232115?cid=megamenu