Lecture absenteeism among students in higher education: a valuable route to understanding student motivation

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The reasons associated with lecture absenteeism among student groups could shed significant light on student motivation levels and orientations in university settings. Paying attention to the rationales for lecture absence provided by students themselves could also help institutions to diagnose levels of student engagement and respond in appropriate ways. This study demonstrates these assertions by engaging in a critical analysis of the evidence linking lecture attendance and academic performance, using a qualitative analysis of student accounts of their absenteeism. It argues that innovative approaches to higher education would benefit from the extension and development of this kind of inquiry.

Keywords: learner motivation; lecturer absenteeism; student engagement

Introduction

This paper reviews the literature on the benefits of lecture attendance in university settings, and carries out a qualitative examination of the phenomenon of lecture absenteeism in a higher educational context. It analyses the reasons for lecture absenteeism that were provided by absentee themselves, treating such explanations as key indicators of student motivation, values, orientations and perspectives on their learning experiences. By exploring student attitudes towards their own lecture absenteeism, the paper highlights some of the possible differences that may exist between teachers’ assumptions and students’ responses to current higher educational contexts.

The qualitative analysis of lecture absenteeism that is presented here could provide an important route to the diagnosis of student values and perspectives in relation to their own education, particularly with respect to their motivation while enrolled on a programme of study. It is also proposed that this is useful information that could help to build a more comprehensive picture about students’ identities, commitments and approaches in the context of their engagement with higher educational learning environments.

Background

For some time it has been argued that there is an ‘ideological struggle’ underway in higher education institutions (e.g. Lomas, 1997; Scoffield, 1999). This struggle is reflected in what many commentators see as a move away from a collegiate, broadly-based higher education to an increasingly pragmatic approach to the development of skills and competencies that respond more directly to the needs of industry, in...
general, and of employers, in particular (Bakewell & Gibson-Sweet, 1998). As part of this observed shift, an exploration of the values and orientations that students bring to university settings is also required.

If we are to understand more fully the nature of the changes that are occurring in higher education, then the perspectives, habits and orientations of students operating within it should continue to be subjected to more examination. It has been proposed (e.g. Perry, 1988) that there are ‘different worlds’ within higher educational classrooms, and that students experience these settings in ways that are influenced by different values, assumptions, priorities and motivations than those of their teachers. These differences may be more important to understand now than ever before. If universities are changing in terms of their legislative frameworks, processes, outputs and values, in what way do student motivations, values and expectations interact with this new emerging educational landscape? In this paper, we argue that the examination of student behaviours—specifically those associated with lecture absenteeism—in current educational settings can contribute to addressing this important question.

Evidence of the link between lecture attendance and academic performance

Many commentators in higher education assume implicitly that there is a link between student attendance at lectures and their subsequent performance in exams or other forms of assessment of their academic competence. Indeed, several empirical studies from a range of different higher education disciplines have borne out this assumption (see, for example, Schmidt, 1983; Romer, 1993; Riggs & Blanco, 1994; Durden & Ellis, 1995; Lamdin, 1996), suggesting that lecture attendance is an important facilitator of academic success.

However, some studies that have explored the relationship between lecture attendance and subsequent academic performance have been less certain about the link between attendance and performance, showing that this relationship is neither linear nor automatic. Although Baldwin (1980) and Gatherer and Manning (1998) found local evidence that lecture attendance has a statistically significant relationship with subsequent academic performance, they also highlighted that the statistical significance was not particularly strong. More recently, Van Walbeek (2004) has suggested that the link may be weaker than previously assumed or confirmed. Marburger (2001) has been critical of some approaches to exploring links between lecture attendance and academic performance. He argues that methodologies typically used to explore the link generally just regress some broad measure of academic achievement against some, often, blunt measure of attendance. The result of these rather imprecise methodologies is that any cause–effect relationship between lecture attendance and subsequent academic performance cannot be robustly established even though Marburger’s own more microanalytical approach does appear to pinpoint this cause–effect relationship more firmly.

Some researchers suggest that the relationship between lecture attendance and academic performance is stronger for minority groups (see, for example, Gatherer & Manning, 1998). They argue that interventions to ensure attendance at lectures might facilitate greater levels of internal equality in higher educational environments. Based on their own findings, Gatherer and Manning (1998, p. 123), have argued that ‘to abolish the lecture completely may present a threat to equal [educational]
opportunities’. The rationale for this assertion is based mainly on the observation that non-traditional students may acquire experiences and knowledge at lectures that they are less likely to be able to access elsewhere. It is argued that more privileged, ‘traditional’ student groups can find ways of replacing or overriding the benefits of lectures through greater levels of access to other resources, such as information technology, time, assistance from experienced mentors and general ‘cultural capital’, all of which support their academic performance.

This brief review of the available literature suggests then that statistically significant and positive relationships can be observed between lecture attendance and subsequent academic performance. But none of the findings suggest that lecture attendance is either necessary or sufficient in support of academic performance. And, of course, in other ways, the findings common to these studies may not hold true everywhere for all students. Factors such as individual student strategies, competencies, personality and lecture quality (perceived and/or actual) also clearly have a role to play.

Notwithstanding these considerations, there seems to be enough evidence across disciplines to conclude that in order to optimise academic achievement, attending lectures is still important for students. It can be argued, even in our changing educational world, that lectures play an integral part of the academic experience for students and that attending them gives rise, at the very least in some contributory way, to academic development and the facilitation of academic attainment. As previous literature has suggested, this may be particularly true for students from non-traditional backgrounds or for those who may struggle with the challenges of more self-directed, independent learning in a university environment.

Explaining the link between attendance and performance in university

Given what has been outlined above, the link between academic performance and lecture attendance may seem somewhat self-explanatory. However, as outlined above briefly, other principles, features and dynamics of higher education, such as independent study, self-directed learning, enhanced information access and information technology, are making it more necessary to explain why lecture attendance still plays a part in the enhancement of academic performance. Gatherer and Manning (1998, p. 123) suggest that:

the lecture provides a means of directing learning...[and]...the lecturer may serve to highlight the core of the syllabus in a way in which reading lists and tables of expected learning outcomes cannot, as well as providing an accessible source of verbal assistance for students.

The demonstrated links between lecture attendance and academic performance may be an indicator that lectures provide students with information and orientations that they are less likely or less able to access outside these scheduled teaching times even in emerging educational environments. Lectures may still be the learning episodes that provide important signposts to students, that explain the rules of engagement that many of them find it otherwise difficult to learn, and that help them to understand the areas and tasks that they need to focus on most in order to navigate their learning experiences more successfully. And, in addition, the allocation of a formal time slot to focus on a specific topic within a specific subject
might serve to create ‘traction’ in what might otherwise be a rather unstructured student schedule.

Perhaps, then, educational environments are more traditional and conventional than many of the developing educational alternatives might seem to suggest, and universities are changing more slowly than their educational rhetoric of change and development proposes. In any case, the established routines that treat lectures as the main medium for communication and education are still strong. Lectures as educational episodes are still likely to represent among the most robust methodologies used by institutions to educate their students. In light of this, the links between attendance and performance might be seen as easy to explain.

Alternatively, however, lecture attendance may simply be a proxy for student conscientiousness and diligence, highest among students who subscribe also to active participation, time management and associated most closely with those students who are likely to conform to the institution’s expectations of them in a range of other ways. Students who routinely attend the lectures associated with their programmes of study are perhaps those students who are also routinely likely to work harder, to engage more actively with their topics and to rise to a range of challenges, of which lecture attendance and engagement is only one.

In light of the aforementioned discussion, it seems clear that one of the implicit dimensions of student attendance that we believe deserves more attention is that of student motivation to attend. Motivation theory generally addresses the questions: what initiates behaviour, what maintains behaviour and what causes behaviour to stop (e.g. Morley et al., 2004). Although an in-depth analysis of motivation theory is far beyond the scope of the present paper, we argue that motivation to attend can be understood more clearly by examining the reasons for non-attendance.

More specifically, then, the following study asks: what reasons do students tend to give for not attending lectures? It is subsequently proposed that it is possible to analyse these reasons in structured, meaningful and informative ways. Examining varying levels of motivation to attend may help us to identify different ‘absentee types’ that could, in turn, create a diagnostic tool for helping to explore individual student strategies and levels of engagement at university.

Methodology
The participant sample for the present study mainly comprised 20–21-year-old undergraduates. All participants were in their third year of a business studies degree programme. A total of 230 students were asked to complete a survey in which they were asked to recall a time in their recent past during which they did not attend a scheduled lecture. They were also asked to describe the circumstances associated with their absence and were provided with a list of prompts that might help them to identify the characteristics of those circumstances. Most importantly, they were asked to supply, in their own words, the reasons for their absence. The survey also asked students to record the approximate percentage of lectures they attended during the academic year.

Once the data from the 230 respondents had been gathered, the qualitative reasons for non-attendance were subjected to analysis and coding, observing the traditional coding strategies outlined by Holsti (1969). Responses were coded into one of three categories: (i) signals of high student motivation (reasons for
non-attendance that were due to genuine inability to attend as a result, for example, of illness or bereavement and ones that could not be attributed to a prevailing lack of motivation to attend); (ii) signals of medium student motivation (reasons for non-attendance that were related to the prioritisation of other pressing programme-related tasks, such as project assignments or essays); and (iii) signals of low student motivation (reasons for non-attendance characterised by trivial, low-quality activities, such as watching television, playing computer games, or by passive behaviour that indicates low levels of willingness to attend lectures).

Results
Almost all respondents were able to identify a recent occasion on which they had been absent from a scheduled lecture.

Non-attendance rationales that signal low student motivation
Of a total of 230 participants who provided reasons for non-attendance, just over 60% were categorised as low motivation responses. Typical statements provided by students that fell into this low motivation category included the following:

Too tired after the weekend. Loads to do in college and easier to stay in bed and forget about it than being in college worrying about it. Weather was terrible.

Went home for lunch with a friend. Started watching TV, got lazy.

I missed the lecture as I was playing [a computer game] the night before. I was also playing a game of cards and this didn't finish until 4.30 in the morning. I also drank a litre of Lucozade Sport and couldn't get to sleep. Anyway, the notes are [online].

My housemate borrowed my alarm clock and I didn’t wake up for my 9 o’clock class.

Don’t like lecturer. Lecture room too small. It is a double lecture. Too long. Too boring. Only lecture that day. Asks questions to the class. Notes are available online. Lecturer only reads slides.

Non-attendance rationales that signal moderate student motivation
According to the coding framework, moderate motivation statements occurred almost 23% of the time in this sample. Typical ‘moderate motivation’ responses included the following statement types:

Missed due to the fact that I had an essay due at 12pm. Had to write my conclusion for the essay. As usual, left work until the last minute.

I didn’t go because I was working on a project. I wanted to go but time was an issue and it was unrealistic to try to make it.

Non-attendance rationales that signal high student motivation
Out of the sample surveyed, just under 17% of responses were deemed to be codable into the high motivation category. Typical statements in this category included the following:

Was having an operation on my knee.

Didn’t go to my lecture...due to a family bereavement.
I had a stomach bug over the weekend and I was still really sick on Monday morning so I stayed in bed.

Relationship between motivation levels and lecture attendance

There is an inverse relationship between the motivation levels associated with non-attendance and the self-reported percentage of lectures attended ($F=2.168$, $p<0.001$). As Table 1 shows, students who reported low motivation reasons for non-attendance, also reported a lower percentage of lectures attended across their course of study.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that students in this sample do not articulate a sense of obligation to attend lectures, despite the messages, assumptions and convictions that faculty members may share about the importance of such attendance. Among this sample of students, at the very least, occasional lecture abstenteeism is the norm and, for many, absenteeism is a relatively regular occurrence.

The present study shows that when recalling incidents of non-attendance, respondents’ internal motivation to attend seems most likely to be low. This could indicate that lectures are not perceived to be useful, that students are either gaining what is provided through lectures by other means or, more problematically, that many of them may be missing out on scheduled interactions that may have an effect on their academic performance.

Although there are no guarantees that this sample of students is representative of student populations in general, in a local sense, the frequency of the appearance of low motivation reasons for non-attendance provides at least some cause for concern. First, as Baldwin (1980) suggested, attendance can be correlated negatively with the perceived value of lectures on the part of students. Students may simply weigh up the costs and benefits of lecture attendance and decide that the processes and outcomes they associate with attending do not merit the effort required to attend. It stands to reason that if lectures are not perceived as being worthwhile, relevant or useful experiences, students’ tendency to turn up may be affected adversely.

However, like many researchers in the general area of absenteeism, we caution against the attribution of non-attendance to either single or simple causes. Students in this group seem often to recognise the benefits of attending lectures (saying things like ‘I know I should have gone’ and ‘this was a bad thing to miss’) but, even with this orientation, many of them fail to attend, often for the relatively trivial reasons

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Motivation levels</th>
<th>% Lectures attended</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>79.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>86.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>90.64</td>
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offered in the low motivation category applied to the present study. This seems to indicate that there are many other pulls and pressures in their lives (social, financial, emotional or physical) that need to be taken into account in order to understand, to address and, where necessary, to tackle absenteeism.

Even more significantly, it is important to recognise that so-called low motivation behaviour may in fact be masking some more deeply-seated reasons for not attending lectures. Some of the responses coded into the low motivation category do point to experiences that indicate that students may be under significant kinds of psychological pressure and may be engaging in avoidance behaviours in response to experienced stress, anxiety and even shame. Once a student ‘gets lost’ on a programme of study, their sense of competence, their ability to engage with lecture material and thus their motivation to attend may all suffer. Insomnia, leading to ‘next day fatigue’, replacement behaviours, denial, distraction and avoidance may all be indirectly indicated in the ‘low motivation’ category. This is a series of phenomena that could be subjected to further analysis in order to shed more light on the nature of the student experience and the ‘real’ reasons associated with choosing not to attend lectures.

The data in the present study also suggest that motivation to attend, as deciphered through the critical incident analysis undertaken for the purposes of this study, can help to predict general attendance or non-attendance patterns in broad ways, a technique that might be a useful tool for academic practitioners and teachers, and a way of understanding student cohorts more comprehensively.

Despite the emerging flexible forms of engagement in higher education, and the traditional autonomy that students are afforded in most higher education settings, the evidence still shows that lecture attendance provides a strong platform for helping to ensure and enhance academic performance. Therefore, it is still appropriate to treat lecture non-attendance as something that is at least potentially a problematic routine for students, as well as a possible threat to their success at college. This is not to say that a draconian aproach to lecture attendance is implied by the present study. Lecture non-attendance might simply be part of a short-term coping strategy when students are under particular pressure in other aspects of their programme of study. And absenteeism may afford other benefits in individuals’ attempts to balance the various pulls and tensions in their lives (Hackett & Bycio, 1996).

The priority implied by the present exploratory study is a greater understanding of the reasons and outcomes associated with different kinds of non-attendance. Understanding that students absent themselves for different reasons is an important starting point that can help educators to gain more insights into the nature of teaching environments, the values to which students subscribe, the pressures that learners face and the ways in which they respond to and interact with the challenges and dynamism of learning and performing in higher education.

Certainly, a more dedicated exploration of lecture absenteeism and the reasons offered by the absentees could help to explore student orientations towards their higher education experience in general, the perceived quality and benefits of formally scheduled learning episodes and the overall levels of engagement that students display when interacting with the higher education instutions in which they have registered.
What seems explicitly clear among the population surveyed is that lecture attendance is not necessarily treated as an important part of students’ own engagement in higher education, and that it is not part of the psychological contract often assumed to have been adopted when students enrol on a programme of study. Of course, the extent to which these values are shared by the student population in general cannot be confirmed by the present study, but if such values do prevail, then the implication for educators and their institutions is significant.

It could be enormously useful for educators, with every new cohort or generation of students, to use lecture attendance as a possible signal for a range of orientations and motivation levels that students adopt or experience. Educators need to understand the reasons underlying the cases in which attendance costs appear to outweigh attendance benefits in the eyes of students. Such reasons contain important insights, not just about what is going on in students’ heads, but also how universities might respond meaningfully to those states of mind. Lecture attendance might throw light on students’ adopted sense of responsibility for their own learning, might help us to understand more about how they see themselves and how they want to project that identity to others. Ongoing analyses of lecture attendance may, furthermore, help students themselves to reflect on these questions and to explore the phenomenon of ‘different worlds in the classroom’ (Perry, 1988).

Conclusions and directions for future research

The tentative findings and the extant literature that have been explored in the present paper provide a route to recognising the sometimes significant ways in which institutional assumptions may differ from those of their students. Higher education strategy formulation and implementation generally assumes that lectures are necessary and important, that resources are allocated according to the number of ‘contact hours’ associated with each programme of study (even for part-time and distance learners) and they treat lectures as a central and implicit part of the rationale for higher education. Lecture attendance is seen as positively associated with academic performance and lectures are institutionally perceived to be valuable and interesting learning experiences for students.

The present study, and at least some of the literature that precedes it, calls these prevailing assumptions into question. Students may experience lectures as only one part of an array of pressures and pulls that they encounter while at university, and seem to engage in a constant decision process that involves weighing up the benefits and costs of attending. The respondents in the present study clearly tended to see lectures as optional and not always a beneficial or important part of their time at college. Furthermore, the analysis of their responses suggested that non-attendance may simply be a coping mechanism supporting other aspects of the course or that it may provide a signal that students are finding it difficult to cope, either psychologically or pragmatically, with the content, processes or schedules associated with the formal learning curriculum.

It is important to emphasise again that this was a small and exploratory study. A much more intensive investigation of the phenomenon of persistent non-attendance, its antecedents, conditions, contexts and effects would involve focusing on a more structured and complex study, and almost definitely require a more comprehensive comparison between students who display different patterns of attendance. Such an
extended study would, among other factors, also require a close examination of the
differences between disciplines, teaching methodologies and student profiles. Clearly,
the exploratory issues raised in this paper will require confirmation and elucidation
before firmer and more detailed conclusions about the causes and effects of lecture
absenteeism can be reached.

It is also important to emphasise that this exploratory study has focused
specifically on student attendance levels at face-to-face lectures. It is interesting that
despite enormous developments in information and communication technology the
conventional lecture remains a standard tool in a wide range of higher educational
environments. The potential to deliver lectures both electronically and asynchro-
nously remains untapped in many settings. Our students are increasingly part of a
generation of ‘digital natives’, whereas many of their teachers may still be ‘digital
immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001). This generational divide may itself be causing some
fundamental disconnects in the assumptions associated with the relative benefits of
attending face-to-face, ‘real-time’ lectures. On the other hand, engagement with
electronically delivered lectures may indeed be subject to the same or similar
attendance issues associated with their more conventional counterparts, a possibility
that is beyond the scope of this paper, but also worthy of further investigation.

Increasingly though, the perceived value, impact and quality of the lecture
experience, however that lecture is delivered, are likely to be central and important
issues that influence the decision by students to attend and engage.

Thus, if self-reported non-attendance rationales were explored among larger
numbers of students in a more representative range of settings, then the tentative
findings presented here could be expanded. Such an expansion would inform the
higher education sector about patterns of behaviour that may be closely linked, not
just to academic performance and success, but also to retention rates, student
satisfaction and to understanding what factors might serve to enhance learners’
active engagement in higher and further educational contexts.

All of these possibilities carry rich potential for innovative educators to reflect
upon. Exploring and analysing lecture attendance rates and rationales might provide
an important springboard for action in the areas that progressive educational
developers have been considering for some time. Such analyses could shed new and
interesting light on ideas for student support strategies across the sector, could help
to derive a more robust picture of student motivation and engagement in higher
educational settings, could inform strategies designed both to enhance and provide
meaningful alternatives to lecture attendance, and could help to generate new forms
and levels of interaction by students with the institutions that have been established
to serve them.

References
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