AN EXCHANGE CONCERNING STUDENT ATTENDANCE AND PEDAGOGY
April 27th – 29th, 2011

Professor D:

Dear colleagues involved in environmental studies, concerns, courses --

Please forgive me once again for sharing GEOL xxx stuff with you (or with some of you), but I think some of the results of today's end-of-semester polling of my students on environmental issues will be of interest - and possible surprise to you - as they were to me. The poll results on environmental and national environmental issues contrast markedly with general US public attitudes (i.e. malaise) on environmental issues - no great surprise here - but the lopsidedness of the poll on some critical environmental issues now on the national stage has surprised me. Perhaps the "lopsidedness" of responses to some of the questions I posed could be attributed by skeptics to "brainwashing" my students, but I would prefer to interpret it as the consequence of a GE course that objectively discusses critical environmental issues in a classroom setting.

My only regret is the malaise of the 50% of my students who found something else to do at 9 AM on the next-to-last class day of the course. Such absenteeism is a great disappointment to me. It can be attributable in part to my pdf-posting of all my lectures on Blackboard, but also stems (I think) to the large percentage of our undergrad students who find more important things to do than to attend class. If so, this is a generic problem that USC needs to address beyond departmental levels.

I'd welcome your feedback on the poll or what else is written here. Abashedly, I must admit that this is the first time I have ever conducted an end-of-the-course poll in GEOL xxx, but it won't be the last.

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Professor A:

This is so interesting, [Professor D]! We should all do this! It's a great exit survey on what they learned as important to societal and environmental issues. I will use the same in my future 100-level classes. So cool! Thanks!

As for the attendance issue, such is a "national epidemic", as I will call it at Tuesday's USC conference "Teaching with Technology". I have been given just six minutes, but will be focusing on this issue. While most of the conference is about technology in the classroom, I will speak on what is missing, our students. You have it right, it's origin comes with the student expectation that all that is needed is on line. The situation has become so profound, that many students expect that they will not need to attend class. The smart ones figure out which classes that they need to attend and they will be there. Those less fortunate often end up into trouble.

We all deal with this. Me too! And again, it is a national issue. My main message to the conference, will be that if one is using Powerpoint or other such means of digital delivery, it
needs to be just an outline, rich in visuals. Otherwise, most of lecture needs to come from us prompting the students to take notes, which we all know as a time-honored form to maintain engagement. Of course, active-learning practices really help, such as demonstrations, experiments, and interactive discussions.

But such also slow the progress, meaning less content, but the counter argument is more learning.

I continue to re-think how I teach. In the past, I know my basis has been too content driven. From [Professor D] and all on this distribution, I would love to hear your thoughts. Also, let me know if I can refer to your good thoughts! I am still working on my six minutes. The bottom line, is that we need our students to wish to attend our classes and learn not just the material but also our passion for the topic.

Thanks, [Professor D], for the sharing! We all need to do this and more often!

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Professor L:

I think [Professor A] once again is spot on. I would just add that I think some cultures in the university are anti-intellectual and more job focused. In my large class of 220, 60% of the business students said they never go to class if they can avoid it. We do need to work on "active learning" but even then they do not show up. I teach five case studies and I use the Kennedy School rules-you may not submit a case essay unless you participate in the discussion. In other words, come to class. After each case, I get e-mails from no shows asking for the essay. Most are IR Global Business and when I say no they tell me that in Marshall we can get the assignments why not in your class? We are not on the same page.

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Professor J:

Hi all, to quickly add an observation as someone new to this, at the end of my first semester teaching a GE class here at USC: in my class I have usually had about 66% attendance in lectures (~80 of 120 students), but participation in my labs and on my fieldtrip was well over 90%. There is credit directly associated with every lab, and with the fieldtrip, but I also did some pop quizzes in lectures so there is some credit there too. Maybe this suggests that a combination of active learning together with being assessed for credit most encourages higher attendance, and more engagement with the material? This is perhaps obvious, but sometimes it might be easy to forget how many students do actually come to the labs....

On another but related note, I have been struck my how many students in my lectures are spending their time doing things other than taking notes (Gmail chat, Facebook, and online sports events, and occasionally sleeping, rank high among competitors...). This is obviously not
universally true, but my basic point is that it is not clear to me that attendance alone is a real indication of attentiveness or engagement...

And [Professor D], let me also add my thanks for sharing the poll with us, and initiating this discussion, which is informative for someone new!

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Professor H:

One thing I have tried (with marginal success) is to tell students about half way through the semester, that I will put a one point exam question and its answer on the board during the first 5 minutes of the class. Then I erase it. This does encourage them to show up on time, but I can't say it has greatly increased attendance.

I do tell them they will be hurting themselves if they share it with other students, but I am not sure how exclusively this assists those who come to class.

I note with interest the rather small fraction of the class enrollments that actually submit course evals (often on last day). It is generally <50%, and often lower in my classes.

I agree that smaller class sizes favor better attendance. I do think this is a serious problem with the GE courses. I found myself much less engaged with the class as a whole with 170 last fall, rather than the traditional 120 that I have usually taught. It seemed to show in class ratings, which were significantly lower than in the past.

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Professor L:

Hey, we better stop talking about students and teaching. Someone might think we care about our students!

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Professor A:

Wow! This has been helpful! THANKS {Professor D}! I think we all try to teach in a way that the students wish to attend. And, I am always thinking of new ways to invoke active learning. I also strive to learn all of their names but such is a semester long exercise, and I don't recommend such for new faculty. My Geol xxx class has 245 students. Of course, there are some that still often miss class.

I actually don't know the attendance for Geol classes but my students think I do. I use clickers and at the beginning of each class I offer several "real exam questions" on the past lecture. This is part of my learning-centered experiment and it works well. After each question, I show the
range of student answers and the correct one. The students can see how well they did compared to their peers and I can see how the class performed on a topic I just taught. I am often humbled at how poorly they did on a topic I thought I did really well. Such usually occurs on Tuesdays on questions from the past Thursday's class.

In the past, some students resented having to buy a clicker ($32 at the bookstore) and others never did buy one. This year I made it part of the grade, 3% for participation. As a result, all had one and the evals were all positive about the use of clickers. Hence, if the work is part of their grade, the students are on board. Okay, I get it!

Another learning-centered experiment was the posting of test banks, without answers. I first did this four years ago and it worked well for the first two years. Students teaching students! Ahh, it was great and very learning centered. The impetus was that I knew that old exams were out there, so the test bank had every question I had ever asked. But I noticed over years 3 and 4, less student interaction. It was not working. What was going on? But a student told me. The website http://www.coursehero.com/ had test banks with answers for courses such as mine for all universities across the nation. The experiment failed and the solution was to abandon this and write new exams. I get it!

Why do I not know attendance since I use "clickers"? If you use a PC, you will, but on a mac, the program Turning Point, has yet to be upgraded for mac's. I have to use the 2004 version and although all students have to register their clickers, I cannot access this information. But, the students don't know but now you do!

Should you get cynical about teaching and students from such experiences, DON'T! They are 18! Or just a bit older! Of course, the priority for some is just about grades. And they may not be concerned about learning. That is our challenge. Hope you agree with me as I now carry this banner to another place.