

The Surveillance of Learning: a critical analysis of university student attendance policies

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Summary of paper

Absenteeism from classes has long been a common phenomenon in universities in Australia, the UK and North America (Romer, 1993; Rogers, 2001; Gump, 2005). The problem was described as 'rampant' in a study of economics students at three elite US universities in the early 1990s (Romer, 1993). In recent years, however, the issue of student class attendance at university has attracted increasing attention. Universities have identified (poor) attendance as a problem, established working groups to look into the issue and developed or re-designed more robust attendance policies as a result.

Such policies normally state that attendance is compulsory detailing any exceptional circumstances that justify absence. These exceptional circumstances coalesce around certified illness, the death or funeral ceremony of a close relative, the performance of public duties (eg jury or military service) and certain religious festivals specific to ethnic minority groups that are not covered by public holidays. Institutions further detail how a student may apply for permission to be absent and a range of penalties for unauthorized absence. This can include stating that a student can be presumed as withdrawn from studies if they miss a certain percentage of classes. Regulations sometimes also require that professors or instructors should keep a record of

attendance. Some university departments have introduced their own compulsory or ‘mandatory’ attendance policies (Leufer & Cleary-Holdforth, 2010). Even more draconian control and punishment measures, such as excluding students who are not punctual for class or even locking classrooms shortly after the start of classes, may also occasionally be found.

Attendance monitoring is part of a broader, and growing surveillance of student learning in modern higher education. The surveillance of learning may be defined as a series of administrative and pedagogic strategies and initiatives designed to monitor the extent and authenticity of student engagement in the learning process (see figure 1). Aside from attendance monitoring, there are a number of other elements that characterize the trend. This includes so-called ‘class contribution grades’ often contributing around 10% or more to a student’s final course assessment. The capacity of online learning platforms to track the number of student ‘postings’ in discussion forums adds a further layer of (e-) surveillance and provides a simple (and perhaps simplistic) means to quantify student contributions.

Figure 1: The surveillance of learning

Form	Description
Attendance monitoring	students complete attendance registers or ‘swipe in’ to class using an electronic recording system.
Participation grades	students receive a class contribution grade for demonstrating their ‘engagement’ as learners in class and/or in online discussion and group activities
e-surveillance	Student contributions to online discussion forums are tracked, recorded and (possibly) graded Routine use of anti-plagiarism software to check on originality of student work

Distrust of students is an integral part of the surveillance of learning given the emphasis on generating an evidence base to demonstrate authentic engagement. For example, students are increasingly required to certify that their assignments and dissertations are free from plagiarism through signing statements to this effect when submitting academic work. Some departmental practices include the routine use of anti-plagiarism software to check the authenticity of all (or a sample of) assignments and dissertations submitted by students. University and departmental policies concerning student attendance is, hence, just a part of the surveillance of learning.

Much of the existing literature concerning attendance has concentrated on the possible correlation between attendance and achievement, the argument of this paper is that attendance requirements are incongruous given the voluntary nature of higher education, the role of modern students as mature, fee-paying customers and the principle of student academic freedom. The first part of the paper will draw on university attendance policies to analyze the reasons underpinning their development and justification. These are essentially divided into three categories related to 'accountability', 'welfare' and 'workplace preparation' arguments (see figure 2).

In the second part of the paper, it will be argued that attendance and engagement policies are part of the increasing surveillance of learning within higher education. This phenomenon is also connected with 'infantilisation' (Furedi, 2003), treating university students as children rather than adults, removing choice and judgement about the value of personal time and how this is best spent. This curiously contradicts the oft-espoused commitment of universities that students should become independent

learners. The analysis will be linked to the concept of student academic freedom from a positive rights or ‘capability’ perspective.

Figure 2: Justifications for Attendance Registers

Category	Argument	Explanation
Accountability	<i>Stakeholder argument</i>	Absence is a waste of public (and private) investment in higher education by the state, employers, parents and wider society and shows a lack of ‘respect’.
	<i>Compliance argument</i>	Attendance monitoring is a legal requirement for some categories of international students in compliance with visa regulations (eg in UK)
	<i>Learning community argument</i>	Attendance is important as a member of a learning community to demonstrate respect for peers and teachers.
Welfare	<i>Academic performance argument</i>	Attendance is positively related to academic achievement.
	<i>Student care argument</i>	Absence might indicate that students have personal and/or social problems that they need help in addressing.
Work preparation	<i>‘Real world’ argument</i>	Attendance and punctuality are workplace ‘skills’ or ‘competences’ that students need to learn.
	<i>Professional practice argument</i>	Attendance seen as essential to comply with professional training requirements for competent or safe practice (eg nursing)

References

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