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Empowering Students: Class-Generated Course Rules

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After we gave 2 classes of introductory psychology students the syllabus, the first class (the experimental group) generated rules for classroom behavior. The instructor presented the second class (the comparison group) with the list of rules and said they were instructor generated. Students rated the rules, several aspects of the course, and the instructor. The comparison group (n = 88) reported higher frequencies of negative behavior by class members. Students in the experimental class (n = 62) rated the instructor more positively. The groups did not differ in grades, perceived fairness, or perceived importance of the rules.

Instructors often complain when students appear not to be engaged or have negative attitudes toward their courses (Sacks, 1996). We believe the syllabus can be helpful in attenuating students' attitudes. Many have written about what

information to put into a syllabus (e.g., Appleby, 1999; Davis, 1993), but less about how instructors can use the processes surrounding the syllabus, especially during the first class meeting (Perlman & McCann, 1999), to create an optimal learning environment.

In addition to obtaining important course information, students will “read between the lines” of the syllabus to glean other critical information about such instructor characteristics as interpersonal style, attention to details, availability, and approachability. Students' perceptions of the course and of the instructor may be influenced by this implicit information, and their perceptions could determine their level of engagement in the course. For example, if the syllabus is extremely formal, organized, and structured, students may perceive inflexibility and rigidity and be less inclined to go to

the instructor for help. A laissez-faire approach may give students the message that the course material or associated requirements are not important. Consequently, students may spend less time studying or may put less effort into required projects.

Unfortunately, students may get a wrong or incomplete impression about a course for at least two reasons. First, students may not be good at attending to the messages sent, either explicitly (Becker & Calhoun, 1999) or implicitly, by the syllabus. Second, instructors may not be aware that the messages their syllabi send create impressions that are inconsistent with their teaching philosophies or styles.

Although rules for student behavior are important, neither students nor faculty may attend to them sufficiently. In addition to policies on cheating and plagiarism, such rules include expectations for cell phones and pagers, eating in class, addressing the instructor, and leaving early. Many instructors have found it easier to list the rules on the syllabus or in an attachment than to correct student behavior in the middle of a lecture.

A side effect of having lists of rules may be that they implicitly communicate an adversarial relationship between instructors and students. When students discover that instructors expect them to behave irresponsibly, their reactions might be negative. Such a syllabus may create a self-fulfilling prophecy: Students may test the limits, and instructors may feel justified as well as encouraged to make even more rules. The result can be a disaster for both the faculty member and the students.

Given that some form of guidelines or rules for the class is necessary to socialize students into the course and that communicating the rules can have serious implications for engagement, how can instructors create expectations for appropriate behavior and still maintain an atmosphere of respect and cooperation? Clinicians talk about empowering clients to make their own decisions and to take responsibility for their actions. Instructors can adapt this approach in the classroom to empower students to become responsible classroom citizens. In this article we (a) present a method for empowering students and (b) assess whether empowering students to be responsible for their classroom behavior had any effect on such behavior, on their perceptions of the course and of the instructor, and on their grades.

The first author implemented a strategy intended to empower her students in an introductory psychology course. Students in one class (the experimental group) generated rules for classroom behavior. The second class (the comparison group), received the rules generated by the first class, but believed the rules to be instructor generated. We predicted that the students choosing their rules would assess the course experience more favorably in terms of not only the rules, but also the class in general and the instructor.

Method

We conducted this study on the regional campus of a large midwestern university. This is a commuter campus enrolling approximately 12,000 students, of which about 54% are full-time. The average age of students on this campus is 26 years.

Participants in the study were students enrolled in two introductory psychology classes taught by the first author. These classes met at 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. on a 3-day-a-week schedule. On the first day of class, prior to receiving the syllabus, students in each class completed a brief questionnaire that asked sociodemographic information and questions related to taking the class: "What grade do you expect to get in this course?"; "How would you rate your knowledge of psychology right now?" (1 [*not at all*], 4 [*about average*], 7 [*very knowledgeable*]); and "How would you rate your interest in the field of psychology?" (1 [*very low*], 4 [*about average*], 7 [*very high*]). Finally, they rated the importance of 21 items normally found on a typical course syllabus, each on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*very important*).

In each class, after completing the questionnaire, students then received the course syllabus and spent the next several minutes discussing the information detailed in the syllabus. The 8:00 class then divided into small groups of 5 students each. Each group received a rule category listed on the last page of the syllabus and developed a rule for that category. Categories included eating in class, sleeping in class, coming in late, and use of phones and pagers. The entire class voted on each of the suggested rules and agreed on strategies for self-management of rule violations. Each student wrote the rules in the allotted spaces on the syllabus.

Surprisingly, some of the rules were stricter than those the instructor might have chosen. The class was able to compromise with relative ease, however. The only concrete suggestions they requested were the options for addressing the instructor. The instructor listed these as title ("Dr.") and last name, first name, or "Professor" and last name. Creatively, the students chose "Dr. D," which had not been one of the options.

When the 9:00 class (comparison group) reached the last page of the syllabus, the instructor explained to the students that to facilitate recall of the rules, she was going to present the rules orally while the students wrote them in their syllabus. The instructor then read the list of rules generated by the earlier class. That way, both classes had the same set of rules and an identical syllabus. The difference was that the instructor told the 9:00 students that these were her rules.

At the midpoint and again at the end of the semester, students completed several dependent measures (all on 7-point Likert scales). They rated the importance of the rules, the rules as a learning experience, and the fairness of the rules. They also estimated the frequency of nine classroom behaviors (e.g., "Classroom noise level too high," "Students being rude to other students") on a scale ranging from 1 (*none at all*), 4 (*average amount*), to 7 (*an extreme amount*). Finally, they rated their perceptions of the instructor.

Results

Demographics

A total of 150 students, 62 (out of 67 initially enrolled) in the 8:00 class and 88 (out of 95 possible) in the 9:00 class, completed questionnaires at the beginning of the semester,

and we collected data at Week 8 ($n_s = 44$ and 60) and at Week 15 ($n_s = 35$ and 49). Fifty-six percent of each group completed the questionnaires at Week 15, so we did not have differential drop or attendance rates.

The average age of the students was 20.72. Women constituted 59.3% of the group ($n = 89$); men, 40.7% ($n = 61$). One hundred twenty-five (83.3%) of the respondents listed themselves as White, 16 (10.7%) as African American, and fewer than 5 each as Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Most of the respondents were first-year students ($n = 126$; 84.0%), 17 (11.3%) were sophomores, 4 (2.7%) were juniors, and only 1 student (0.7%) was a senior. Two participants did not list their class. The participants in the two groups did not differ in terms of age, grade-point average, expected grade, reported knowledge of psychology, or reported interest in psychology.

Importance of Behavioral Rules

Participants at Week 1 rated the importance of items on the syllabus. One of these items was "Rules for behavior in the classroom." An ANOVA on this item with the between-subject factors of group and sex yielded a main effect for sex, $F(1, 146) = 5.26, p = .023$, such that women saw the rules as more important ($M = 5.17$) than did men ($M = 4.64$). There were no effects for group and no significant Group \times Sex interaction.

Fairness of Rules

At Weeks 8 and 15, students rated the fairness of the classroom behavior rules. A MANOVA yielded no significant effects.

Learning Experiences

Participants rated several aspects of the course (e.g., videos, lecture, research participation) for the value as learning experiences. Three of these items were relevant to this study: rules for classroom behavior, syllabus, and class discussion. A MANOVA with these three dependent variables yielded a significant Group \times Sex interaction, $F(6, 69) = 3.00, p = .012$. The only univariate ANOVA that was significant was for rules for classroom behavior at Week 15, $F(1, 74) = 7.81, p = .007$. Subsequent tests revealed that women in the experimental group rated these rules as less important ($M = 3.42$) than did women in the comparison group ($M = 4.58$), $F(1, 50) = 6.06, p = .017$. Men did not differ in their ratings.

Frequencies of Observed Behaviors

At Weeks 8 and 15, participants estimated the frequency with which nine behaviors occurred in class. Six of these behaviors were negative; three were positive. We performed a MANOVA on the six negative behaviors, both at Weeks 8 and 15. We did not use time as an independent factor because we were not interested in changes over time, only in seeing if there were effects at any time during the semester.

The MANOVA yielded a main effect for group, $F(12, 62) = 3.71, p < .001$. Subsequent univariate ANOVAs revealed that participants in the comparison group reported higher frequencies of negative behaviors than those in the experimental group at both times, with the exception of students leaving early, which reached significance only at Week 15. The other behaviors that reached significance at both times were classroom noise level too high, students coming in late, students being rude to other students, students being rude to instructor, and students talking to each other during class. A MANOVA performed on the three positive behaviors (good student participation in class discussions, good cooperation among the students, and students enforcing the rules with each other) yielded no significant differences.

Instructor Ratings

Participants answered nine questions, at Weeks 8 and 15, regarding qualities of the instructor. A MANOVA on these ratings yielded a main effect for group, $F(18, 57) = 2.07, p = .019$. Univariate tests showed that students in the experimental group rated the instructor as more courteous toward students at both Weeks 8 and 15 than did students in the comparison group. At Week 15, ratings were also higher in the experimental group on the following items: willingness to answer questions in class, willingness to hear different points of view, encouragement of classroom discussion, and genuinely interested in students. In summary, ratings of the instructor were higher when discussion about the rules occurred. The comparison group did not rate the instructor higher on any items.

Course Grades

There was no significant difference in course grades between the groups.

Discussion

These results provide some support for the effectiveness of our procedure. According to the perceptions of students, fewer violations of the rules occurred when students had the opportunity to develop their rules. Whether these behaviors were actually occurring less frequently, student perception of the classroom environment may have an important impact on the students' classroom experiences. Feeling comfortable in an environment and having a sense of control over their experiences may enhance students' investment in the class.

An unexpected observation came from the instructor's department chair during the semester. As part of the department evaluation process, the chair observes the instructor's classes once during each semester. The chair commented later that the second class was noisier with more students talking among themselves during the lecture.

Students in the empowered class also had more favorable attitudes toward the instructor. They rated the instructor as more courteous, more willing to answer questions and to hear different points of view, and more encouraging of classroom

discussion. These perceptions may have stemmed at least partially from the first day of class when the instructor asked the class to generate its set of rules. The instructor's announcement may have signaled to students that they were going to have a different experience, and students may have altered their perceptions of the instructor throughout the semester. Time spent on the rules was different for each class, and this difference may have confounded the results. Limitations of these data include the difference in class sizes and times of day the classes met. A further limitation of these data is that the instructor was not blind to the experimental condition, which could have affected her behavior in both classes. However, an unexpected benefit of empowering the students could be a corresponding change in the instructor's behavior that then results in a more positive classroom experience.

The positive impact of this procedure was limited in this study: The procedure did not influence students' grades, their perceptions of the fairness of the rules, or their rating of the importance of the rules. Indeed, among women, those in the experimental class rated the classroom rules as less important than did those in the comparison class. They may have been responding to the length of time spent discussing the rules and may have perceived that the rules did not warrant extra discussion.

Instructors could adapt this procedure to meet the needs of a wide variety of classroom situations. Classes could discuss fewer categories of rules, giving them the chance to discuss them at greater length, particularly those that have been most problematic for instructors. Instructors may wish to present students with finite lists of options for rules to avoid students developing rules that the instructor cannot live with. Soliciting feedback from students about the procedure

and the rules could not only add to the students' sense of empowerment, but could help the instructor to fine-tune the process in future classes.

This one study is not a definitive test, but it appears that the procedure at least does no harm and may be useful. At the very least, discussion of classroom rules may serve to open communication between instructor and students. Students may feel more comfortable approaching the instructor with questions or concerns, which would be an additional benefit.

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Note

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