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The Question of Presence: Practical and
Philosophical Reflections about Attendance
Policies During and After Covid

What happened

In all three quarters of the 2020-2021 school year, I taught in-person classes: one FSEM in the fall, three sections of WRIT 1122 in the winter, and three sections of WRIT 1133 in the spring. All of these courses were completely in person. In other words, they were not (technically) hybrid courses. The enrollments in these classes ranged from 13 to 17 students, which is typical, but I was assigned to large stadium-seating rooms so that students could spread out. Masks were worn by me and my students during all of our class meetings.

In many ways, this last school year was typical. I met the same course goals, taught many of the same assignments I typically teach, got to know a few students, gave assignments, gave feedback, etc. But in other ways, things were strange. Wearing a mask in front of masked students in a large room changes the energy. I found it more difficult than usual to remember names of half-faced students. In-class discussions, on which I often rely, were more difficult. But these differences were basically minor ones that I knew (and I hope) were temporary.

One of the most difficult changes for me in the 2020-2021 school year was the question of attendance. In the fall of 2020, I (naively, as it turns out), put the same attendance policy on my syllabus that I always have had: "I will allow two absences without penalty, but each absence after that will lower your final grade by 5%." This policy, as I now realize, did not take into account the need for some students to Zoom into class. Because of Covid policies and realities, students were occasionally in quarantine. DU had strict guidelines for testing and for access to

campus buildings. Therefore, if a student tested positive for Covid or lived with/near someone who tested positive, or was potentially exposed to Covid, or just plain didn't feel good, I had to allow them to Zoom into class instead of attending in person. Of course, I was happy (and obliged) to comply with his. In fact, I was grateful that Zoom allowed for students who could not attend in person to still be able to hear and see what was happening with me and the other students in class.

By the winter and spring quarters of 2021, my attendance policy changed in two significant ways: it moved to near the top of my syllabus and it contained provisions for students needing to Zoom:

This is an in-person class. I expect and hope that you will physically be in class each time we meet. The class is designed for you to be there. I understand, though, that there may be a time when you are in quarantine or sick or are unable to attend in person. If that's the case, please email me and explain the situation If you are not in class and not on Zoom, you will be marked absent. If you are not in class and you join Zoom without a reason, you will be marked absent. If you are regularly attending class on Zoom instead of in person, we will have a chat. You are allowed two absences without penalty, but each absence after that will lower your final grade by 10%.

This policy tries to do two things. First, it strongly reminds students that this is an in-person class and not an online or hybrid course. For most of my students this last year, my class was the only one they were taking in person. I even had a few students before the start of each quarter who emailed me to ask if they could be in my course even though they

would not be on campus for the whole quarter. I told them no and then added an additional statement at the very top of my syllabus: “Just a quick reminder that this class is in person. It is NOT an online class. If you're not planning on being on campus this coming quarter, please drop this course and add an online course.” In other words, I wanted to communicate emphatically that attendance was important and preferred (as long as everyone was safe).

The second thing the above attendance policy was trying (and was required) to do was to allow for contingencies. Near the end of the spring quarter (May 2021), it was uncommon for a student to be in quarantine or to be positive for Covid. But in the fall of 2020 and in the first three or four months of 2021, those things were common. Many of my students lived in dorms, and they were often being required to quarantine. I also had a fair number of athletes who were closely monitored and were often having to quarantine. I estimate that in the winter quarter of 2021, I had on average at least three or four students (out of 15) who had to Zoom to each in-person meeting.

The problem

Let me reiterate that I was ok with those policies and realities. We were all stressed and anxious and trying to deal with new realities. I did not mind complying with university guidelines, and I did not mind being flexible with my students. However, I did experience some frustrations with my attendance policy, frustrations that have caused me to think about what attendance means and what kinds of policies I should have in the future.

Specifically, I know that some students took advantage of the option to Zoom into class. I noticed that this happened most often in my 8:00 a.m. courses (which I taught in the winter and spring quarters). I had a few students who physically attended fewer than half of the class meetings. I know that many students who Zoomed into class

had legitimate reasons, and I did not begrudge them that opportunity. But I would often get vague and terse emails mere minutes before the start of class from students saying that they would be attending on Zoom. For example, here's an email I got from a student at 8:04 a.m., four minutes after class had started: “Hi Dr. Stacks, I'll be joining class from zoom today because I feel under the weather.” I have no way of knowing if that student was really sick. I do know that he joined the class on Zoom, never had his camera on, never contributed to class discussion, and never left the Zoom meeting. When class was over, I ended the meeting while he still on it. This happened many times throughout the last academic year.

Some possible solutions

After thinking about this and informally discussing this problem with colleagues, I know that there are a few ways to ameliorate this problem. First of all, I could require that students who Zoom into my class leave their cameras on and that they participate in class discussion at least a couple of times. This is a fine solution, but I have a concern about requiring students to let me see their personal spaces. Let me give you an example to explain why I worry about this. In the spring of 2020, when we were all teaching asynchronously, I remember a specific student who was embarrassed to meet with me for virtual office hours because he did not have his own room. He was living on his aunt's couch. As we talked over Zoom, his young nieces and nephews watched cartoons in the same room. He simply was not able to put himself in a professional setting for our meeting. Is there an ethical concern for requiring students to leave their cameras on? What if they have roommates who would also need to consent to possibly being on camera? Am I overthinking this?

Another way to help with my problem is to give participation points. Several of my colleagues use this approach, which makes a lot of sense. I have considered a three-point

scale: 3 points if you are present in class and if you participate, 2 points if you are present and don't participate, 1 point if you are on Zoom and participate, and 0 points if you are absent or if you are on Zoom and don't participate. Or something like that. Numerous variations of this approach seem reasonable. I like this idea and may use it (Zoom or no Zoom) in future courses. To be completely frank, my concern, though, is my ability to take a few minutes after each class meeting to write down a number for every student. Let's imagine that class ends at 9:50, and now I have 10 minutes to walk to another building for my next class, and a couple of students are lingering to talk to me, but I still have to write down a participation grade for each student. In other words, I wonder if this is a practical solution.

Finally, one possible way of dealing with this problem is not dealing with it. To quote Nietzsche, "I allow myself to be lied to so that I am not always on the lookout for liars." Of course, I'd love if every student of mine attended each class and participated enthusiastically. But if someone wants to blow off class, send me an email, turn on their Zoom, turn off their camera, and go back to bed, that's really no skin off my nose. Their grade will most likely reflect that decision anyway. I don't want to let students who are struggling slip through the cracks, but I also don't want to be anyone's father, checking on their whereabouts and their level of attention.

Bigger questions

Struggling with the practical issue of a Covid-friendly attendance policy has raised some interesting questions for me. What, for example, does it mean to attend a class? What does it mean to be "present" or "absent" from, say, an online asynchronous course? From a hybrid course? From an in-person course with a Zoom option? In the above paragraphs, I have assumed that full attendance requires that I can see the student (in a seat in front of me or on Zoom with a camera turned on) and that the student says

something (aka, "participates"). Are those the *sine qua non*s of participation and attendance? Perhaps I am privileging a certain kind of participation. Could I allow for other modes of presence? What if a student is on Zoom with no camera and never says anything out loud, but they engage thoughtfully in the peer review we do in class that day? What if they contribute to an ongoing Discussion we have on Canvas? After all, I have learned that some students would rather not speak out loud in class and would rather demonstrate their engagement in other ways.

These questions parallel my thinking and reading about how I use class time. I have been planning on using more of my class time on workshopping, writing, and drafting, instead of on discussion and lecture. If I do that, then what would participation look like? Wouldn't visibility and audibility be less important in those kinds of activities? If I spent 110 minutes in class with students while they worked quietly on drafts of a paper and I answered individual questions, how important is the physical presence of a student since those activities could also be conducted online?

This is all to say that my problems with Covid attendance has productively troubled my stubborn and conservative notions about what I expect of students during the 220 in-person minutes they owe me each week.

My next syllabus

This fall, I will be teaching two in-person courses. That means that at some point in the next two months, I will be writing some new attendance policies. The world will be different in September than it was back in January. DU will have different guidelines. I am under the impression as I write this that I will not be required to offer the Zoom option this fall. One possibility, therefore, is that attendance will revert to being a binary again; you are either present or absent. I'm familiar and comfortable with this system. I know how to monitor and record it. But, as much as

I hated dealing with other possibilities this last year, I wonder if I should eschew any Covid-era options. For example, let's imagine that it's September 2021 and I am happily back to normal with in-person students, taking roll as usual. But I have an athlete in my class who is travelling as part of a sports team. This student is in a hotel in Kansas City during our scheduled class meeting. Traditionally, that student would be absent. But now this student and I are both familiar with and comfortable using Zoom. Perhaps this student could sit in the hotel's lobby and Zoom into my class and not miss out on an important lecture. Or maybe a student gets an old-fashioned cold this October. They shouldn't come to campus and infect us all, but they could sit in their dorm room and listen to me talk about the homework and the upcoming assignment. Or maybe someone visiting a sick grandmother can nonetheless participate in synchronous peer review. Students are now able to stay caught up with class despite their absence from the classroom.

To put it simply, is there a practical way to maintain the benefits of Covid's technology without going returning to the headaches of its attendance policies? I haven't yet decided what next quarter's syllabus will look like. I know that it will not be the same as last quarter. But I don't think I'm going to forbid student the option to Zoom into class. Mostly likely, I will require some kind of proof for the reason of their physical absence. (I'm troubled by the implications of this, however. How, for example, does a student prove that they didn't feel good or that they had a cold?) And/or I will require a student on Zoom to demonstrate concretely some level of participation during class time. Or I might still mark a student absent but allow them to Zoom. I don't know how many students are motivated enough to get dinged for being absent but still want to Zoom in so that they don't fall behind.

I am still looking for that middle ground between "absent" and "present." Or perhaps presence is a sliding scale. Is that

scale called "participation"? Is it something else? What does it mean to be in class in a world after Zoom?