A Correlation Between Attendance and Grades in a First-Year Psychology Class

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Abstract
A correlational analysis of attendance records and grades in a first-year psychology class was performed. Subjects were informed that the attendance records would not affect their grades in the course. A correlation between attendance and final grades in the course yielded $r = .66, p < .01$.

Most psychology professors will teach a first-year psychology course at some point in their careers. Most, if not all, will find that attendance is a more serious problem in this course than in any other they ever teach. There are many potential factors producing this result, some of which cannot be overcome. For example, assume that students put greater effort into courses in the realm of their intended major. First-year psychology, or any first-year course, has a greater proportion of students for which the material is outside their intended major as compared to upper-year courses. This problem is inherent in the structure of university programmes. Someone who intends to major in economics can probably only take one introductory economics course in first year. Indeed, most fields of study are structured this way with the intention that students receive a broad education, as well as a general overview of their intended area of study. This is clearly a worthwhile approach; however, it also means first-year courses have many students whose interests lie elsewhere.

Research has revealed significant relationships between attendance and grades (Gussett, 1976; Jones, 1984; Street, 1975; Vidler, 1980). Buckalew, Daly and Coffield (1986) correlated initial class attendance of undergraduates to final grades and found a significant correlation of $r = .31$. They concluded that initial attendance is a fair predictor of future academic performance.

The present paper offers a correlational analysis of the relationship between attendance during the second semester of a two-semester first-year psychology course and final grades in the course.

The implications of this study were obvious: A non-significant relationship would suggest that restructuring of the course was necessary because the course itself was not offering the students any knowledge that a thorough reading of the textbook could not impart; a positive relationship would provide information to students as to the relevance of attendance, which may be important to them when making their own scheduling decisions.

Method
SUBJECTS
Students from one of 8 classes of first-year psychology offered at Laurentian University at the Sudbury, Ontario, Canada campus during the 1989-1990 academic year were examined. The 103 students who completed the course requirements were included in the analysis.

MATERIALS
Lists of the names of students were used. The lists included space beside each name for the student's signature.

PROCEDURE
The students being studied were enrolled in a first-year psychology course running from September 1989 to April 1990. The course comprised lectures, demonstrations, and
laboratories. Santrock's (1988) textbook was used and the accompanying study guide (Walraven & Schneider, 1988) was recommended but not required. Laboratory sessions were based on Whissell's (1989) laboratory manual.

Grading in the course was based on three term tests on lecture and textbook material worth 15% each; two tests on material covered in demonstrations and laboratories worth 10% each; laboratory reports worth a total of 10%; a final exam based on lecture and textbook material worth 25%; and a maximum 2% bonus for participation in an experiment.

At the beginning of the January to April term of 1990 the subjects were informed that attendance would be taken during some classes, but that these records would not be a factor in their grades. Students were told that the information was to be used in an analysis of the relationship between attendance and grades.

During the term of analysis, class lists were passed around 16 of the 24 meetings conducted. Students were told to place their signatures beside their names. The 8 meetings during which attendance was not taken involved either tests or demonstrations.

Results and Discussion
A positive relationship between attendance and grades was revealed. As the number of days students were present in class increased, their grades also increased. Statistically, this relationship produced a correlation of \( r = .66 \). This correlation was significant with \( t (101) = 7.58, p < .01 \).

Forty-three percent of the variance in final grades was accounted for by the attendance factor. However, given the nature of correlational analyses, it remained unclear to what degree attendance played a causal role in final grades. For example, more dedicated students may have studied more rigorously and attended more consistently, so it was difficult to determine whether the studying or the attendance was the key factor in obtaining higher grades. At the very least, the notion that attendance was important in the grade obtained in the course may be said to have been supported.

This should not be taken as a suggestion that professors begin taking attendance and slapping their students on the hand for missing classes. Indeed, Hyde and Flournoy (1986) discovered that mandatory attendance adversely affected the performance of some second-year medical students who had previously not attended classes. Students should be offered clear evidence of the importance of attendance and be allowed to make their own decisions as to whether or not they attend.

References
Buckalew, I.W., Daly, J.D., & Coffield, K.E. (1986). Relationship of initial class attendance and seating location to academic performance in psychology classes. Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society, 24, 63-64.


Whissell, C.M. (1989). Psychology Laboratory Book. (Available from Department of Psychology, Laurentian University, Sudbury, ON, Canada, P3E 2C6).