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Office Hours as Teachable Moments: Structuring Student-Instructor Interactions Outside the Classroom

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Summary

Students and instructors often approach office hours with an equal lack of enthusiasm. For students, office hours can be inaccessible due to scheduling conflicts or feelings of intimidation when approaching their instructor. For instructors, many report that students do not show up and when they do the visits are brief and linked to assessments. Despite this ambivalence, this workshop argues that office hours are an untapped and significant pedagogical tool to support student-faculty interactions and improve student outcomes.

Substantial research highlights the benefits of student-faculty interaction outside the classroom. In the literature, office hours are the predominant form of communication and informal faculty-student interactions have been shown to support students' academic performance and personal growth. Researchers have found that the frequency of informal interactions that focused on academic topics had a significant positive influence on students. Studies also note that structured interactions have a greater impact than those that were more casual in nature. Additional research has highlighted that it is not necessarily the frequency but the quality of the interactions that supports positive student outcomes.

The purpose of this workshop is to provide participants with strategies to increase opportunities for teaching outside the classroom, and specifically during office hours.

Keywords

office hours, student-instructor interactions, student engagement

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SUMMARY

Students and instructors often approach office hours with an equal lack of enthusiasm. For students, office hours can be inaccessible due to scheduling conflicts or feelings of intimidation when approaching their instructor. For instructors, many report that students do not show up and when they do the visits are brief and linked to assessments. Despite this ambivalence, this workshop argues that office hours are an untapped and significant pedagogical tool to support student-faculty interactions and improve student outcomes.

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KEY WORDS: office hours, student-instructor interactions, student engagement

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the workshops participants will be able to:

- use office hours to effectively support in-class learning;
- address student concerns regarding course content and assessment;
- support students' learning through reading questions and structured office hour discussions;
- use innovative approaches to engage students outside of the classroom.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Chung, C., & Hsu, L. (2006). Encouraging students to seek help: Supplementing office hours with a course center. *College Teaching Journal*, 54(3), 253-257.

In this study, the authors supplemented regular weekly office hours with a course center in introductory physics and symbolic logic courses at a large research university. The course center was a one or two-hour block of time where the instructor and/or teaching assistants (TAs) for the courses would be available to students in an open classroom. The students attending the course center did not have to interact with the course instructor or the TAs and could work independently or in groups if they wished. Based on surveys completed by 109 students (72% of those enrolled in the courses) the researchers found that 67% of students

noted that they preferred the course center over office hours and 83% reported that just having the course center as an option made them more likely to seek help in terms of the course.

This study illustrates that office hour visits are only one way instructors and TAs can interact with students outside the classroom in relation to a course. Course centers will be one of the strategies outlined in the “Outside the Classroom” segment of the workshop and the research highlighted in this paper will support other creative suggestions presented.

Guerrero, M., & Rod, A.B. (2013). Engaging in office hours: A study of student-faculty interaction and academic performance. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 9(4), 403-416.

This study explored the relationship between office hour visits and academic performance in eight political science courses over a four-year period. Of the 406 students participants, the majority (53.7%) never went to office hours, 29% went one or twice, and 14% went three to five times during the term. The study found that the office hour visits showed a significant positive relationship with academic outcomes. Using regression analysis and only accounting for office hour visits, the authors found that with each office visit the student’s final grade in the course increased by 1.273%. A survey conducted with study participants found four strategies that could increase student use of office hours: scheduling office hours at different times on different days to ensure students do not have consistent scheduling conflicts, give reminders to students throughout the course about the time and location of office hours, instructors should discuss the benefits of attending office hours and personally invite students who are struggling to visit them. This study noted that office hour visits were not the only predictor of improved academic performance; higher GPAs and income were also significantly associated with improved performance. However, the authors argued that office hours had a significant role to play in improved student outcomes.

This study highlights the positive affect office hour visits can have on student outcomes and, therefore, supports the workshop’s pedagogical rationale. The strategies outlined in the paper will be presented and discussed with workshop participants.

McGrath, A. (2014). Just checking in: The effect of an office hour meeting and learning reflection in an introductory statistics course. *Teaching of Psychology*, 41(1), 83-87.

This study investigated if office hours utilized in combination with a learning reflection prior to a test would improve student achievement. Forty-one psychology students in an introductory statistics course participated and were randomly assigned to meet with the course instructor prior to a test. Those selected to meet with the instructor were asked to submit two questions twelve hours prior to meeting. The office meeting lasted between twenty to thirty minutes and afterwards students were asked to complete a learning reflection form that required them to assess their learning in the course, identify behaviours that helped and hindered their learning, think about three behaviours they could adopt or change to improve their learning, and also create a study plan for the upcoming test. The study found that those students that completed the meeting and reflection outperformed

other students. While it was unclear if it was the office meeting or the learning reflection that had the greatest impact, the combination suggested that structured office meetings can support learning outcomes.

This paper highlights the benefits of structured office hours and supports the workshop's module on using reading questions to focus office hour visits. By asking participants to complete a survey prior to the workshop the facilitators are modeling the technique used in this article to illustrate how student questions regarding content can guide the discussions in office hours to support improved outcomes.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Duration (min)	Subject	Activity	Purpose
5	Welcome and Introduction; Agenda Overview; Workshop Goals	Questionnaire Review the general findings from the questionnaire completed by participants prior to the session (see Appendix A).	Highlight the key concerns of participants and note what will be covered in the workshop. Focus on specific issues in the workshop as well allows participants to know their concerns will be addressed.
10	What do office hours mean to you? What have been your experiences with office hours?	Group Icebreaker "Where are you on the line" activity? Ask questions about office hours experiences to gauge perceptions and understandings of the use of office hours (see Appendix B for activity instructions and questions).	Create an open and honest environment to discuss the challenges experienced with holding office hours.
10	Overview of the Pedagogical Rationale	Mini-lecturette Review of research on office hours and the relationship between faculty-student interaction and academic outcomes to provide the pedagogical rationale for this workshop and for office hours.	Review current, evidence-based research on which the workshop is founded, and examine the pedagogical importance of office hours.
20	Discussing Assessments- Role-play of office hour interaction and group take-up	Role play With feedback from audience create a list of strategies participants can put in place to support learning in these situations (have a pre-made list of strategies and reveal after the group work to compare)(see Appendix C)	Model how to manage student concerns regarding assessments and create teachable moments.

	Scenario: student seeks answers regarding assessment		
20	Supporting Reading: The Development of Reading Questions	Mini-lecturette Discuss theory related to reading skill development Group work at tables Give the participants a short reading (less than three paragraphs) and ask them to create a set of reading questions as groups (see Appendix D)	Create reading questions or activities that participants could use to structure office hours around supporting student understanding of course material to increase the quality of office interactions
15	Creating Learning Environments Outside the Traditional TA Office Hours	Group discussion With feedback from audience, participants create a list of ways they can create/support learning environments outside the classroom. You can have a list pre-made and reveal after the discussion (see Appendix E).	Explore creative ways to engage with students outside the classroom in order to increase both the frequency and quality of these interactions.
5	Final reflection	Group discussion Revisit parking lot from ice-breaker activity discuss any outstanding questions or concerns	Determine that the majority of participant concerns have been address and give time for participants to reflect on what has been presented.
5	Moving Forward	Ticket out the door Question: One thing you learned and/or one strategy you might use in your course (Appendix F).	To allow participants to consider how they might use aspects of the workshop in their teaching.
Total Time: 90 minutes			

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

This workshop has been designed as a ninety-minute session; however, it can be shortened or lengthened depending on the inclusion of the group activities and the number of participants. In its current format, the workshop requires two facilitators but it can be run by one if the role-playing activity is altered or if a participant, using a script, is asked to assist.

In light of the literature discussed above, this workshop will present strategies that support both the increased frequency of office hour visits and the quality of these interactions. Through a role-play activity, workshop participants will collaborate to develop strategies to

address student concerns about marks and assessments and to create teaching moments from these encounters. The workshop also provides participants with the pedagogical theory and instructions to create reading questions for students that can be used to focus office hour visits. Time is provided during the workshop for participants to practice creating these questions in small groups. Lastly, the workshop presents creative approaches for designing office hours, explores the possibility of holding office hours outside of an office setting and introduces different formats for student-instructor interactions.

Prior to the workshop, participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix A) and submit to the facilitators via email or through an online tool. This will allow facilitators to address issues identified by the participants and cater the workshop elements, such as the role-play to the concerns of those attending. The “Where are you on the line” activity (see Appendix B) allows participants to reflect on their prior experiences and opinions on office hours. It also allows for participants to share their experiences, find commonalities and create a community for the remainder of the workshop. The inclusion of the role-play (see Appendix C) provides a concrete example for the participants to consider and an opportunity to think about how to implement strategies discussed in their workshop. The “ticket out the door” at the end of the workshop helps participant to reflect on how they might use some of the strategies introduced in the workshop in their own teaching (see Appendix F).

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A: Pre-workshop Questionnaire

Office Hours Workshop Questionnaire

PURPOSE

We would like to find out about your experiences and concerns with office hour and how your students are using them. Your answers will help us cater the workshop to your needs and we will endeavour to address all of your concerns and questions.

QUESTIONS

1. How often you do hold office hours per course, per term?
2. How often do students visit you in office hours?
3. What is the most common reason(s) student attend your office hours?
4. How do you feel about holding office hours?
5. What is your biggest concern regarding holding office hours?
6. What questions do you have regarding office hours or interacting with student outside the classroom?

APPENDIX B: “Where are you on the line?” Activity

PURPOSE: This activity provides an opportunity to explore the experiences and opinions regarding office hours and provides a space for a honest discussion about the challenges that come from interacting with students outside the classroom. It will also allow participants to think back on their experiences prior to the beginning of the workshop so that they can ground the material that is being introduced.

MATERIALS: masking tape, two signs labeled “Agree” and “Disagree”

PROCEDURE:

1. Before the workshop begins, create a long line on the floor using masking tape and place the signs at the ends. The line needs be long enough so that all participants will have room to stand on the line.
2. Explain the purpose of the activity to the participants, letting them know it will allow the group to explore experiences and perceptions of office hours that will help ground the rest of the workshop. Inform the participants that you will say a statement and that they are to move along the line according to their experience or opinion on the topic. If they strongly agree or disagree they can move to the ends of the line or they can find a space elsewhere on the line that corresponds to their opinion. After each statement allow time for the participants to find their space on the line and then ask a couple of them to comment on why they chose that spot, then move on to the next question.
3. Before beginning the activity first practice how it will run with a mundane statement such as “I love eating brussel sprouts” and have the participants move to the space on the line that corresponds with their opinion.

POSSIBLE STATEMENTS:

1. When I was an undergraduate student I went to my instructor’s/TAs office hours
2. I enjoy holding office hours
3. Student never use my office hours
4. Students only come to office hours to petition for a better mark
5. Office hours are a space for learning

APPENDIX C: Role Play Scenario

PURPOSE: This role play models some of the questions, attitudes and behaviours that might come into play in an office visit with an undergraduate student about a grade he/she received on an assignment. The workshop facilitators will play the roles of instructor and student in this scenario.

SCENARIO:

Student: Hi, I'm here for your office hours. I can meet with you now, right? I want to ask you about my assignment.

Instructor: The assignment that was handed back in class an hour ago? Okay... sure. Come on in. Do you have your assignment with you, and specific questions you would like to ask about it?

Student: I have my assignment, yes... but my only question is, why did I get this bad grade?

Instructor: You know, why don't you sit next to me, so that we can both see your paper properly and we can work together? (Student moves to sit beside the instructor)

Instructor: So, Casey, how is the term going so far?

Student: It's okay, I guess. It's busy. I live off campus, and I work almost full time, so it's hard to come to class all the time.

Instructor: Maybe you can get the notes from a friend in the class. Can I take a minute now to browse your paper again, to refresh my memory?

Student: Sure... (Instructor quickly browses the paper, while Student sits awkwardly)

Instructor: Okay, so there's a lot we can talk about here. But I want you to start the conversation... why did you come to see me?

Student: Well, I'm an A student, and you gave me a B minus on this paper. I've never gotten a B minus before, and I really want to go to law school, so if you don't give me a good mark on this paper, I'm not going to get in. I need an A on this paper.

Instructor: I see. Well, let's start at the beginning then. How can you make this thesis clearer?

Student: Umm... I don't know. I thought it was clear. I did my best.

Instructor: Well then, why did you choose to structure your paper this way?

Student: I don't know! It just came out that way. I don't know! I just want to get an A. Tell me what I have to do to get an A. I just want you to give me an A!

Instructor: Yes, yes, okay. You know what? Let's start again. I think your main focus for improvement here should be your thesis. Tell me about what you want to say in this paper.

Student: Oh, okay. I can do that. I want to show how by labeling countries as "third world" we are already creating assumptions about their development and that it prevents us thinking about development in different ways.

Instructor: I see! That's a great focus!

Student: Yeah... it sounded different when I said it out loud. I don't think I said it like that in the paper.

Instructor: I don't remember reading your argument that explicitly in the paper. Sometimes it can be helpful to talk things out – this can help make your focus tighter. Let's go through the paper now to see how you develop this idea. Tell me about the structure of the paper. How did you organize your paper?

Student: I don't know... I just started writing stuff down. I think it got better near the end, because I didn't really know what I wanted to say until I got to the end. How should I organize the paper?

Instructor: That's a question you have to answer for yourself! Let's see what you've got here first. Do you have a pen or pencil with you?

Student: No... do I have to take notes?

Instructor: Let's work on this together. Here's a pencil. Go through the paper, and write down the main idea of each of your paragraphs in the margin – just one word or phrase. Then let's see how those ideas connect to each other.

Student: Can't you just tell me what to do?

Instructor: This is your work, not mine. Your thesis is really creative; I haven't thought about the topic in this way before. I would really like to see you develop it further. Let's get started on the structure...

Some dialogue inspired by: Beth Finch Hedengren, *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 70-80.

APPENDIX D: Reading Questions Activity Handout

Reading Questions Development Activity

Reading Goal	Basic	Comprehension	Analytical	Global
Your Goal	Ensure basic literacy skills are in place	Get students engaging with the texts on a preliminary level	Encourage deeper understandings through reading	Support student to make connections beyond the text
When Is This Used				
Applications for Office Hours				
Sample Question				

Adapted from Adler, M.J. & van Doren, C. (1972). *How to read a book*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

APPENDIX E: Outside the Office Strategies

PURPOSE: This is a list of possible ways to create learning environments outside of traditional office hours that can be implemented by instructors.

“Walk & Talk”

Walk and talk, is a storytelling device used in films and tv shows in which multiple characters have conversations while on route. The same technique can be used by instructors with students and can occur on the way to or after a class has taken place. Additionally, instructors can setup times for students to meet them and instead of sitting and discussing issues the instructor and the student can walk to another destination. This technique allows the interaction between instructor and student to be more informal and can help relieve the anxiety that students can sometimes face when sitting across a table from their instructor.

Course Centres

As outlined in Chung and Hsu (2006) a course center is a one or two-hour block of time where the instructor and/or teaching assistants (TAs) for the courses would be available to students in an open classroom. The students attending the course center did not have to interact with the course instructor or the TAs and could work independently or in groups if they wished but it was a dedicated space for course work.

Themed Office Hours

Themed office hours provide further structure to office hours. Office hours can be themed around particular readings or course assignments. This allows for the interactions that take place to be more focused and allows the instructor to prepare for particular questions that may arise. In addition, office hours can be themed around reading questions and working through answers with the students (see Appendix D)

Office Hours in Public Spaces

Holding office hours in public spaces increases the visibility and accessibility of the instructor, allowing students to feel more comfortable. Holding office hours in a centrally located or convenient space reduces the barriers for students. This can include coffee shops, study spaces and student centres. However, it should be noted that not all students will be comfortable discussing issues in public and that allowances should be made so that some office hours continue to be offered in more private spaces.

Video Conferencing/Virtual Office Hours

Technology can also be used to allow for alternative spaces for office hours. Instructors can setup times for students to be able to speak to them using video conferencing tools available through their institutions. Please see Li and Pitts (2009) for further information.

APPENDIX F: Ticket Out The Door Feedback Form

Office Hours as Teachable Moments Workshop

One new thing you learned and/or one strategy you might use in your course?

Office Hours as Teachable Moments Workshop

One new thing you learned and/or one strategy you might use in your course?

Office Hours as Teachable Moments Workshop

One new thing you learned and/or one strategy you might use in your course?