

Learning and Teaching During Office Hours

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Office hours can be an extremely valuable part of your teaching experience and their impact should not be underestimated. Technically, office hours are those times of the week you are expected to be in your office and available to confer with your students.

Office hours are crucial to creating good relations between you and your students.

Talking with each student on a one-to-one basis can give you insights into the class that might never be gained by addressing them in a large group. You will know more about the students as individuals and have a better understanding of their performance in class and on assignments. You can get to know the quiet students who are reluctant to speak up in class. Furthermore, this can be a time when students can get to know you as an individual, too.

Office hours provide a valuable opportunity for individualized teaching and learning

Listening to and asking questions of your students during office hours helps you learn more about an individual student's study habits and skills, motivation to do the work, and understanding of the course material. Such insights can help you pinpoint where there may be problems and can help direct you to solutions. For example, if you see that a student really wants to master the course material (motivation is high), but that he or she needs to work on study skills, your advice to this student would be geared toward changing study habits. On the other hand, if you see that a student knows how to study but lacks motivation, you might want to help the student see how the course material can be relevant to his or her interests or goals.

Encouraging Attendance at Office Hours

Where to Hold Them

As part of your GSI appointment, you are usually expected to keep a certain number of office hours per week. Your department should provide office space for this purpose. If you have not been informed where your office will be, contact the person in charge of office assignments in your department. You might begin by asking the departmental secretary.

In addition to meeting with students in your office, you have the option of meeting them in a more informal setting like the Union or a local coffee shop. Perhaps there is a place you like to go for coffee everyday. You may want to tell your students that they can meet you there. If you meet with students at a time when restaurants are not usually busy, the management is less likely to object. You might want to check with them, however.

When to Schedule Them

Often GSIs share an office with other GSIs. Once you find out where your office will be and who will be sharing your office space, try to coordinate your schedules so that each of you has office hours at different times. This way you will not be disturbing one another, and you and your students will have more privacy.

Other considerations are the schedules of both you and your students. Although it will be impossible to make your hours compatible with every student, it would be helpful to try to accommodate to the typical schedule. For instance, 8:00 to 10:00 on Sunday morning is not likely to have them standing in line outside your door! Furthermore, you might want to wait a week or so before you announce your hours to give yourself a chance to settle in to your own schedule. This will allow you to choose a time that will be best for you. When you write your hours on the board or on a handout, be sure to add the words "and by appointment" so that those students who cannot meet during those times will know that they can arrange another meeting time if they wish.

How to Encourage your Students to Visit

If you just post the hours and take a "wait and see" attitude, you may give the impression that you do not care whether they come to see you. This kind of approach will likely bring only the most assertive or problematic students. Some GSIs require every student to visit during office hours at least once. If this is too time consuming or impractical, you may want to encourage your students in other ways. When you post office hours, you might tell your class that you really want them to meet with you and why it is important. Or if they have papers to write, encourage them to share their first drafts and discuss them with you during office hours.

What to Expect

Learn to expect the unexpected. Students may want to meet with you for a variety of reasons ranging from the need to clarify something you said in class to serious personal problems best handled by a counselor or mental health professional. In either case, you need not worry if you do not have all the answers. You are not expected to have all the answers. Instead of worrying about giving your students answers to everything they ask, focus your energy on helping *them* find answers to their questions.

If the problem is personal in nature, you will have to determine whether the student is asking for more than you are expected or are able to provide. Sometimes support and encouragement may be all that the student needs, and much

of the stress caused by personal problems can be alleviated simply by being a good listener. But if the problem seems to persist regardless of your attempts to provide assistance, or if it is so severe that you are concerned about the student's safety or well being you should refer the student to one of the counseling services on campus. (See "Questions Frequently Asked by U-M GSIs," p. 7) Remember that you are not the student's personal counselor.

Also, do not be surprised if students visit you irregularly during the semester. Students are more likely to drop in before and after an examination, before an assignment is due, and the week prior to final exams. You may need to schedule extra appointments to accommodate to these peak periods.

In general, office hours can provide the opportunity for lots of learning and teaching. GSIs and students can learn about each other. GSIs can learn more about how their teaching is coming across to the students, and they can tailor the teaching that goes on in office hours to each student's individual needs. A GSI and student can work together to solve difficulties that the student may be having with the course. Thus, office hours can be a positive experience for both GSIs and students.

Teaching Students to Solve Problems

When a student comes to you during office hours and says, "I don't get it," what do you do? The most natural response might be to try to find out more specifically what the student doesn't understand and explain or demonstrate it to the student. Although the student may also expect this, it may not always be the most effective way to help. The student may listen to the explanation or watch as you work the problem and may go away thinking the problem is understood. And, in fact, that particular problem may be understood, but when asked to do a similar problem on a test, the student has difficulty. There are a variety of reasons a student might be having difficulties in solving problems. The sources and types of errors a student may have are listed below.

Sources and Types of Errors in Problem Solving²

Inaccuracy in reading

- reading the material without concentrating strongly on its meaning
- skipping one or two unfamiliar words
- losing one or more facts or ideas
- failing to reread a difficult section
- starting to work the problem before reading all of the material

Inaccuracy in thinking

- starting to work the problem before reading all of the material
- not placing a high premium on accuracy (above speed or ease)
- not taking enough care in performing some operation
- interpreting words or performing operations inconsistently
- not checking a formula or procedure when feeling some uncertainty
- working too rapidly
- drawing conclusions in the middle without sufficient thought
- analyzing problems inactively
- failing to break a complex problem into parts; not using the parts that are understood to figure out more difficult parts
- not drawing upon prior knowledge and experience in trying to make sense of ideas that are unclear
- failing to use the dictionary when necessary to understand the problem
- not actively constructing a representation of ideas on paper (when a representation would have helped in understanding the material)
- lacking perseverance
- lacking confidence and giving up easily
- choosing an answer based on a superficial consideration of the problem (having a feeling of what might be correct--guessing)
- solving the problem in a mechanical manner without much thought
- reasoning the problem part way through, giving up, and jumping to a conclusion
- using the "one shot" approach in solving the problem and when that doesn't work giving up

How You Can Help

Students need training and practice in problem solving. To make teaching during office hours more effective you must make it student oriented instead of teacher oriented. Your goal is not to show them how to do problem number two, but to teach them how to go about solving problems and how to think while solving problems. In other words, you must get students to do the thinking and help them modify their thinking by having them slow down and use good problem solving techniques. Some ways to get students to slow down and reflect on their thinking processes when solving a problem follow:

- Have students read the problem aloud and tell you what is needed to solve it before they start to work on the problem.
- Get students to work problems while "thinking out loud." Encourage students to constantly talk about what they are doing and why. This will slow down the thinking process and make it more explicit and more

²Adapted from Whimbey & Lochhead, (1980).

accurate. You can often help students check their own reasoning and find their own mistakes by having them express exactly what they know about a problem.

Comments or questions that can help students clarify their thinking might include some of the following:

- › What are some possible ways you might go about solving this problem?
- › Tell me what you know about the problem.
- › How might you break the problem into small steps?
- › Please tell me how you got from step one to step two?
- › What are you thinking right now?
- › I don't understand your reasoning behind that step. Will you please explain?

Sometimes you will find it necessary to model good problem solving techniques. You may have to demonstrate how you would go about reading and understanding a question

before starting to work the problem. You may show how you would solve the problem, making the process clear to the student (e.g., working step-by-step, backing up if necessary when things don't work out, breaking a complex problem into parts and using the parts you understand to figure out the more difficult parts, actively constructing a representation of ideas on paper, etc.). After modeling the process, require students to work through a similar problem to make sure they understand the process.

Working with individual students is an extremely effective way of teaching and is likely to be an important part of your responsibilities. One of the most beneficial aspects of office hours is the opportunity to hear individual students practice talking (or thinking aloud) about the material. This will give you a chance to know how students think, what they understand, and to know their strengths and weaknesses in working with the material of the course.

References

Whimbey, A., and Lochhead, J. (1980). *Problem solving and comprehension*. Philadelphia: The Franklin Institute Press.

Adapted from:

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