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Teaching Tricks and Tips: Random Acts of Attendance

By Paul Sides

The conversion came just before a lecture toward the end of a fall semester when hollowness, alienation, and futility were precipitating out of a required course in which one metric of education, showing up, had hit new lows. No one was being served; all were going through the motions. Hoping that the problem was a maligning zeitgeist, I asked a colleague lecturing in the prior period if he was experiencing a noticeable drop in attendance that semester. He replied that attendance in his class was perfect; he knew it was perfect because at the beginning of every lecture, he required the students to respond on paper to a question about material covered in the previous lecture. A correct answer won two points, an incorrect response was good for one point. Absence of both body and mind earned a gimme bagel. When I inquired about the effect of said policy on his FCEs, he replied with a sunny “Who cares? Every time I ask myself whether the person paying for their education would want them to attend class, I invariably answer ‘yes.’” This was the conversion moment; attendance would henceforth be a factor in my large undergraduate courses.

How to implement the policy? The system should be clear and fair, and not take too much time. If it promotes the learning of names, that would be a value. The system should encourage all to attend, penalize none who perform well whether they attend or not, but apply sanctions to students who were both cutting class and performing poorly. The solution was random attendance checks with direct grade implications. A few minutes before each lecture, I roll two dice onto the document camera stage. The result is immediately apparent to all; if the sum is evenly divisible by 3, attendance is taken by roll call until I know everyone’s name, and thereafter by signatures on an attendance sheet. The probability works out to taking attendance once per week, on average. At the end of the semester, a function is applied to the student’s total. If attendance is perfect, the student receives a 5% boost. If the student’s performance on assignments and exams is excellent, the function is neutral whatever the attendance score. Any student who compounds absence with poor performance takes a hit. This was the theory. Now for the experiment…

In practice, this mechanism succeeded beyond fantasy. The anticipation and focus in the hall as the dice tumbled onto the big screen are as positive as palatable. Imagine that you are a student who has hauled his/her sleep-deprived body out of bed in February in order to attend a lecture on heat transfer, keeping in mind the long-term goal of winning the 5% boost, and you get the idea. Three, six, nine, or twelve elicit cheers and high-fives. Groans greet the rest. Calls for re-roll ring out. Attendance went from 60% to 95% in the first semester of implementation and the effect has remained consistent over three semesters in two different required undergraduate classes. An interesting side effect is that the attendance mechanism is a semester-long experiment in probability. One essence of randomness is repetition; during some weeks attendance is not taken while in other weeks attendance is taken every day.

Downside? None. Of course, the transition to an attendance sheet away from roll-call admits fraud. While going over one attendance sheet, I noticed that one student’s usual flowing signature had been replaced by clumsy initials rendered in lime green ink that had lost nothing of its luminosity upon drying. Scanning the rest of the document revealed, with what rapidity the reader can surmise, a signature in remarkably similar lime green ink. The owner of the clumsy initials received a generous zero for that day and that should have been the end of it, but the following colloquy ensued. (In the following the grammar is corrected to protect the innocent.)

Incoming: Dear Professor Sides, I received a zero on February 17 even though I attended that day. Response: It was not your signature. Grade for 17FEB = 0. Incoming: I was too tired, I had my friend sign for me. Response: The rule is clear. Grade (still) = 0. Incoming: But I know I was there. In fact, if I am ever not there and you roll a good number, my friend messages me so I get up and come to class. Response: That is unethical. Grade (emphatically) = 0. Incoming: I am an ethical person. You don’t seem to understand. Let me explain clearly. If I am sleeping and wake up after class has begun, I call my friend to ask if attendance has been taken; if so, then I attend. You see, it is not my friend who initially calls me when I am sleeping. That would be unethical. Response: Grade (aargh!) = 0.

Probably, there are better ways to encourage students to substitute determined presence for random acts of attendance, such as giving compelling lectures with a cliffhanger twist at the end of each one, but that wasn’t working for me. I admire the directness of giving a micro-quiz on the previous lecture’s topic, but I had fun with the dice. If, contrary to Einstein, Nature rolls ‘em, why shouldn’t we?

The Eberly Center Sees the Value in Coke, or Coffee

By Susan Ambrose, Marsha Lovett and the rest of the Eberly staff

FOCUS received the following response to the item on “Teaching Tricks and Tips” in our last issue, offering to help us understand why and how some tricks work. Here’s what they had to say:

We at the Eberly Center read Alan Kennedy’s feature in FOCUS with enthusiasm, and we applaud the plan to foster a dialogue in the Carnegie Mellon community around teaching and learning issues. Obviously we share your concern that faculty styles and goals but are reasons that some strategies and are reasons that some strategies and techniques will work in some domains with certain faculty styles and goals but do not work in other situations. We hope that providing some of the reasons why will help faculty who read about their colleagues’ teaching tips to implement a variation in their own teaching.

Correction
Our article on Health Services in the November Focus contained an incorrect phone number. Please note that to make appointments the number is 412-208-2157.
As a librarian, one of my primary roles is to speak on the importance of verifying sources of information. I remind students that they are often inundated with peer-reviewed articles and that they should properly cite information. My job is to assist our students in finding the primary source of information relevant to any research. If we take the effort to go beyond the textbook, we would be helped by original data sources and by contacting established authorities. Research papers and books can hold more merit if they follow the path of an idea back to its early foundations.

But how can we judge the authority or worthiness of the information if we do not know how to evaluate it? How do we know the information is classified? Do we have to be concerned with how that information was gathered? What are the means in which data is obtained that might consequently be used in our research? Do we need to be concerned about this some more?

Yes, would be the answer if you were in attendance at the Faculty Senate meeting on November 14 where the discussion was in regard to the proposal for a Classified Research and Freedom of Expression. At the October Faculty Senate meeting, Professor Peter Lee, Vice Provost for Research, described the proposed Center that would plan to conduct classified, as well as, unclassified research.

Last summer, the Language Technologies Institute (LTI), part of the School of Computer Science, responded to an application to a Department of Defense—DoD’s call for a Human Language Technology Center of Excellence. At the October Faculty Senate meeting, Professor Peter Lee, Vice Provost for Research, described the proposed Center that would plan to conduct classified, as well as, unclassified research.

Following the recommendation of Faculty Senate, a decision had yet to be made on the proposed Center, saying that “Secret work in general runs counter to the universal communicative freedom of expression.” Asserting that any citizen could be the target of surveillance policies, if there are no checks on how the data is gathered, “...in spirit” to the document but for a change in the language, particularly in order to remain up-to-date as laws change.

SAILS: Measuring Literacy

By Jean Alexander, Head, Hunt Library Reference, University Libraries

How information literate are Carnegie Mellon students? How well can they assess their information needs, search for and evaluate information sources, and use them effectively and ethically? Carnegie Mellon faculty and administrators, and Middle States want to know. We also want to help coping with the massive quantity of information resources available on the Web, in electronic databases, and in print. But in order to help them, we need a rough measure of their current skill levels.

To answer this question, the University Libraries and Office of the Vice Provost for Research decided to conduct a study of information literacy this fall under graduate students. SAILS is a multiple-choice test designed to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses at Carnegie Mellon, as well as some indication of differences between schools and programs, although the sample is small and not large enough for extensive slicing and dicing.

Carnegie Mellon is one of the few institutions to administer SAILS on the Web to all undergraduate students on a volunteer basis. The students who have received this study will receive two e-mail notices encouraging them to take the test online, which takes 25-30 minutes, and then a lot of students have the opportunity to participate without a threat of any consequences. The SAILS demographic breakdown of test-takers on that date was: freshman 35%, sophomores 25%, juniors 20%, seniors 12%, and middle school, 12%, 18% from H&SS, 14% from SCS, and 6% from Tepper.

In September, 2004, a proposal was submitted by the Language Technologies Institute, in response to a solicitation by the U.S. Department of Defense, for the creation of a “Human Language Technology Center of Excellence”. Funding would be at a level of $5,000,000 or more per year, for at least 10 years, with the goal as much as possible to build the basic infrastructure for the Center to conduct both classified and unclassified research (about half and half). Personnel who engage in classified research will require a security clearance.

Professor Peter Lee, Professor and Vice Provost for Research, made a brief presentation at the October meeting of the Faculty Senate, describing the nature of the proposed Center. Professor Richard Stern, who would direct the proposed Center, responded to questions from Senators.

No explanation has been provided to the Senate or to the University community of the need for security classification of the work to be undertaken. Furthermore, it is not clear how an explanation cannot be provided because of the proposed need for secrecy. Secret work in general runs counter to the university commitment to freedom of expression. Particularly within a national political environment that involves secret gathering of information without a court ordered warrant, the fact that CMU is making a request for information with ignorance of what it will be asked to do is cause for alarm.

Neither a large budget nor an opportunity to further enhance the prestige of the Language Technologies Institute justifies work done at CMU, albeit fundamental, that could make use of materials that have been gathered through actions that threaten the individual liberties of United States citizens. The Senate therefore requests the immediate issuance of a public statement by the Language Technologies Institute that assures the university community that it will not make use of materials that have been gathered through the use of surveillance operations that involve United States citizens without a court ordered warrant, that it will take whatever actions are necessary to assure that the materials it uses satisfy this condition.

ECF Professor Richard Stern—who would direct the Center if it is funded—Professor Stern agreed that any concerns about information that is obtained illegally, such as through torture or surveillance, are appropriate for discussion but that the LTI created a position statement to assure us that they would not support such means to obtain research datasets. Professor Stern noted that the LTI's stated position would have been made if he had not put forth his proposed resolution.

Other comments brought to the floor:

The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act—FISA was mentioned as having laws on concerning surveillance. Are we ever in a position, though, to know the source of information if it is has been obtained through surveillance? Freedom of expression is the “essence of campus” and for a campus to do classified research is “absurd”—the whole LTI application should be withdrawn.

Suggestions were made to re-word Professor Stern's proposal of concern into a broader document so as not to “point the finger” at the LTI. Other reactions also focused on agreeing “in spirit” to the document but for a change in the language, particularly in order to remain up-to-date as laws change.

One senator commented that the issue is really a “department” and that we need to plan state that we should not be doing research on data illegally gathered. Another senator would like this same statement added to our Policy on Restricted Research.

Professor Hoburg has appealed to the faculty to help him craft a broader proposal. A complete text of the original proposal is printed here and is also available on the Faculty Senate's Web site at the “Minutes, Documents for Review” link. This site also contains details on other Faculty Senate agenda items.

Business from November’s Faculty Senate meeting also included discussion on a related issue—the Policy on Expression. Additionally, a report on the Design Review Committee policy was presented and an update of the progress with the Gates Building was outlined. How can, how can our Science Libraries grab some “collaborative” space inside the Gates Building? In the spirit of the fairness doctrine, FOCUS seeks a variety of opinions.

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Classified Research and Freedom of Expression; a report from Faculty Senate

By Donna Beck, Engineering Librarian and Faculty Senator, University Libraries

SAILS: Measuring Literacy

By Jean Alexander, Head, Hunt Library Reference, University Libraries

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Review of The House of Leave

By Chris Hallstein, Teaching Professor of German, Modern Languages Department

A quick book around the Rash Studio Theater at the Perry Center reveals that most of the audience on hand is composed of students—either actors of stage crew members—although the characters they play are—albeit at least of an obviously older vintage than our current students. For them (and for the actors) this play has become not just a just playwright John Guare set The House of Leave, is not really "history," as it is for the actors on stage and the walkway. But this book care about remedying this. It is a view that are the very heart of a book that is as much about an in-world in which the main protagonists are unable to matter to the stage. And when it comes to "1965," the rest of us had been there and done to "1965," the rest of us had been there and done done that! But after my second row seat and scan the stage. Classic black and white photos of the rich and famous from the 1960s dominate stage right: American celebrity magazine cover of First Family, Dorothy Dandridge, Lassie, Pope Paul VI, Dean Martin, Johnny Carson, Rin Tin Tin. And}
Wishing to eat a turkey every ounce of the Slow Food ideology at their website, you can check out some stories. (If the Indy link goes behind a pay wall, the news outlet that seems to have picked up the article 1876697.ece, the only First World over the last two decades,” says FAO head reflecting on the burning question of the politics of food, the politics of Slow Food Waters (of Chez Panisse fame) dedicated to the politics of food, the politics of Slow Food to be exact. Not everybody knows about the movement which started in Italy some years ago as a counterweight to fast food. Fast food, as everybody knows, is essentially American. So between now and next week we’ll be reflecting on the burning question of the day: is slow food anti-American? Is fast food always a political negative? What if you’re really very hungry, urgently hungry and don’t have time to contemplate anything anymore? We’ll see.

And while the slow food is an important burning issue, perhaps even more important is the story that not only US, but also most Western news outlets have ignored. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has been “celebrating” the 10th anniversary of the World Food Summit by recalling which nation of their pledge “to halve the number of undernourished people by 2015,” and how far off they are. “More than 850 million people still remain hungry and poor [about 18 million more than in 1996].” Action should be supported to improve rural livelihoods by reversing the decline of public investment in agriculture over the last two decades,” says FAO head Jacques Diouf in The Independent of London http://news.independent.co.uk/world/politics/article1876697.ece, effective for Nov 16. So it says.

Among several recommendations, the panel suggested that the USDA scrap the word hunger, which “should refer to a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.”

And so it goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation. “hunger” is not a very scientific term, and for the chairman’s speech-making of the so-called Master of Cuisine. And as we’ll try to show in our.