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Gbolahan Gbadamosi*

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*Email: ggbadamosi@bournemouth.ac.uk

Should we bother improving students' attendance at seminars?

Gbolahan Gbadamosi*

The Business School, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth

Postal address:

Bournemouth University

The Business School,

89 Holdenhurst Road, Bournemouth. BH8 8EB

Tel: +44(0)1202 968748

Email: ggbadamosi@bournemouth.ac.uk

This study uses action research intervention to improve students' attendance at seminars. Specifically, the study asks the question: will students' attendance improve if they drive their own learning by running their own seminars? Records of lecture and seminar attendance at a module and comparative ones were used. Focus group interviews provided additional feedback, with students in support of student-led seminars. Students identified running their own seminars as beneficial, but suggested some modifications. Findings also revealed that, relative to comparable modules, seminar attendance on this module was improved. Moreover, attendance at seminars, but not at lectures, was significantly correlated with and a significant predictor of academic performance. The article highlights ideas for future research.

Keywords: lecture attendance, seminar attendance, action research, reflection

*Email: ggbadamosi@bournemouth.ac.uk

Introduction

There has been a growing general concern about the low levels of students' attendance, both at lectures and seminars in Higher Education (HE) (Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Rodgers, 2001). It is particularly worrisome that the already low attendance at lectures drops even further at the seminars following lectures, especially if these seminar sessions are not mandatory. Many UK universities use a combination of large-group lecture sessions with small group discussion sessions, called seminars or tutorials, as a key method for undergraduate learning and teaching. Absenteeism and low levels of attendance are widespread, and even the best of universities are not immune, and the negative consequences on students' performance, peer interaction, meaningful learning, among others, have received research attention (cf. Chen & Lin, 2008; Lin & Chen, 2006; Marburger, 2006; Romer, 1993). In-class discussions are the fundamental elements in learning in HE (Lin & Chen, 2006) and many of these discussions take place during the seminar sessions. Despite its importance, irregular attendance by undergraduate students in tutorial/seminar sessions is a common problem that recurs every academic year in most universities (Baderin, 2005), and a dearth of research exists on methods to increase students' attendance (Wilder, Flood & Stromsnes, 2001).

The question of whether class attendance affects course grades has been asked for decades and the generally accepted view is that attendance is good and beneficial to students and this has been almost unequivocal (Baderin, 2005; Chen & Lin, 2008; Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd & Thomas, 2008; Paisey & Paisey 2004; Romer, 1993). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate an action research intervention that encourages students' attendance in a manner that is free of direct or indirect coercion of attendance as a

requirement for successful completion of a module. Clair (1999) argued against compulsory attendance policies, demonstrating from a wide range of sources that this may be counterproductive, noting that neither attendance rates nor a compulsory attendance policy may be related to academic achievement. Marburger (2006) partly confirm this reporting that, while an attendance policy has a strong impact on reducing absenteeism, the link between absenteeism and exam performance is weak. Specifically, this study asks these questions: first, will students' attendance improve if they drive their own learning by running their own seminars – with tutor support – and can the attendance predict their performance (grades)?

Allsopp (2002) reported that those who did not attend seminars tended to fail the module – 19 out of 30 students. However, apart from anecdotal evidence, little empirical effort has been specifically directed at answering the question of why seminar attendance had been low. Absenteeism is rampant in even the best of universities and the numbers appear lower than the typical 60-90% attendance rates reported in the literature (Lin & Chen, 2006; Marburger, 2006; Romer, 1993). Consequently, the second interrelated question this study seeks to answer is: how do students' evaluate student-led seminars, what reasons do they adduce for absence, and what suggestions do they proffer for improvements?

This study adopts an action research interventionist approach that might bring about a positive change in students' attitude towards seminars (Norton, 2009). The students conduct their own seminars encouraging (nay ensuring) attendance, and also drive their own learning process. This process could have several immediate and obvious benefits as students will: attend the session; drive their own learning, making it probably more enduring; benefit from working in small groups; develop a better understanding of the seminar process and activities; and assess each other's performance.

Action research, a widely acceptable community of practice for learning by doing, is research conducted by teachers, often concurrent with their teaching. The rationale for using

action research is both to engage in reflective practice, a pedagogical issue and to methodically develop a series of steps to deal with issues in order to change one's practice, which in this case is improving students' attendance at seminars (Norton, 2009). The module under consideration has been run for a few years with unimpressive attendance levels. The overriding interest that underpins this paper is to investigate: (a) whether student attendance at lectures and, particularly seminars, will improve when student-led and if this attendance correlates with and can predict performance (b) what students think is responsible for the low attendance and how they think attendance can be improved and (c) if it should be actively encouraged by tutors and if so, how?

Review of related literature

The literature on attendance at lectures among university students is limited, with considerable work done in the USA (Clair, 1999; Launius, 1997; Romer, 1993; Snell & Mekies, 1995); in Australia (Massingham & Herrington, 2006) and elsewhere, for example, Taiwan (Chen & Lin, 2008). Much less has been done in the UK (Baderin, 2005; Paisey & Paisey, 2004; Newman-Ford et al 2008) and very little attention has been devoted specifically to seminars attendance (Baderin, 2005).

While researchers have focused on the link between attendance and academic performance (e.g. Baderin, 2005; Chen & Lin, 2008; Launius, 1997; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Paisey & Paisey, 2004; Snell & Mekies, 1995); methods of improving attendance at lectures (Baderin, 2005; Wilder, Flood & Stromsnes, 2001); and at methods of improving seminar attendance (Baderin, 2005); this author did not find any direct action research based intervention of how attendance at either lectures or seminars can be improved. This research is therefore a contribution in this direction. How we can improve attendance at

seminars since both anecdotal evidence and research suggest attendance is indeed better at lectures than it is at seminars (Baderin, 2005, Paisey & Paisey 2004).

Lecture attendance and academic performance

Attendance generally tends to operate in a self-perpetuating manner and can affect the learning environment of the module. For instance, if at the beginning of a semester a module starts with few students attending lectures and/or seminars, this may lead to further low attendance in subsequent sessions as other students may become demotivated and, seeing that absentee students get away with non-attendance, may decide to reconsider their own attendance in the future.

Chen and Lin (2008) found that lecture attendance has a positive and significant impact on college students' examination performance corresponding to a 9.4% - 18% improvement in examination performance for those who choose to attend classes. Romer (1993) concluded that attendance and academic performance are strongly related and, therefore, students who often attend classes also get better grades, but he did not take attendance at every lecture in his investigation which is limiting. Taking the work of Romer (1993) further, in a module where attendance constituted 25% of the assessment, Snell and Mekies (1995) took attendance at every class and students also wrote lecture summaries which were corrected, stamped, signed and returned in following class. They found a relationship between attendance and earning a grade A or B. Launius (1997) found attendance was significantly positively correlated with performance. She found that 70% thought instructors should give credit for class attendance, and 84% said that earning attendance points increased the likelihood of their attending a class. She, therefore, concluded that these results suggest that instructors interested in student attendance would do well to

reward such behaviour. All these studies used paper-based systems to monitor attendance, a process which can be fraught with data inaccuracies and therefore lead to questionable research findings (Newman-Ford et al., 2008). Using an electronic attendance monitoring system, which reduces the limitations associated with paper-based system, Newman-Ford et al. (2008) found a strong, statistically significant correlation between learning event attendance and academic attainment confirming extant studies.

If attendance is as beneficial as empirical evidence tend to suggest, why then do students absent themselves from lectures and seminars? Massingham and Herrington (2006) summarised a collation of reasons why students *will attend* classes and they all relate to a perceived '*value*' in the lecture. They concluded that today's students have benefited from learning in a constructivist manner and are simply bored by the instructivist approach they face in many university lectures. Students will therefore be encouraged to attend classes when: the quality of instruction is higher with lectures being more interesting, varied and challenging (Romer, 1993; Baderin, 2005); they receive information helpful for assessment tasks or exam questions (Massingham & Herrington, 2006).

Moreover, the increasing use of modern technology means the state of delivery of teaching and learning are changing rapidly. These include: access to *Blackboard* which reduces the need to take notes in class since detailed PowerPoint slides are made available; audio and video recording of lectures; online databases and e-reading materials. Interestingly, Copley (2007) found that majority of students surveyed on the use of audio and video podcasts of lectures stated that having access to podcasts of lectures would not increase their likelihood of missing lectures, which is a common concern of academics considering whether to provide podcast records of lectures (Blaisdell, 2006; Massingham & Herrington, 2006); because lectures still allow opportunities for interaction and a structured learning environment.

Part-time work has been also cited as a major reason why students miss classes (Cooper, Taylor, Smith & Catchpole, 2002; Paisey & Paisey, 2004); although curiously Morgan (2001) found that work commitments appeared to have little effect on attendance. Cooper et al. (2002) also demonstrated a link between socio-economic status and students' attendance. Studies have established that many students work because of financial necessity (Cooper et al., 2002; Richardson, Evans & Gbadamosi, 2009) with a smaller number seeking to gain experience to support their studies (Richardson et al., 2009).

Seminars / Tutorial attendance

Several studies have highlighted the positive value of seminars/tutorials in teaching and learning in HE (Sharma, Millar & Seth, 1999; Tansley & Bryson, 2000). Baderin (2005), in a survey using both lecturers and students as respondents, found that 50% of the lecturers estimate tutorials as the most important learning method compared to only 15% of the students who feel so. This gap in the level of importance attached to tutorials between lecturers and students perhaps explains why many lecturers feel students are not well engaged with seminars/tutorials, although 66.67% of the students concede that tutorials are as important as lectures. The value and obvious benefits of seminars includes, among others, opportunities for: in-depth discussions in small groups, discussing unclear areas of the lectures in detail, a more 'informal' discussion that ensures every participant is contributing, and giving particularly shy students the opportunity to contribute and make friends. Anderson (1997), citing several sources, discusses further benefits of tutorials to include: providing an arena where 'active' learning can take place and where critical thinking and the development of communication skills can be encouraged; encouraging students to think more independently and gain confidence in their own abilities. These foregoing arguments perhaps

further justify why improving students' attitudes to seminar attendance might be worth promoting.

Nevertheless, it seems that students will want more objective and concrete individual benefits than speculative assurances about seminar attendance. For example, Baderin (2005) found that 77% of students indicated that their attitude towards tutorial attendance would change (for the better) if attendance counted towards assessment marks. Hinnnet and Bone (2002, p. 54) noted that '*In students' eyes, anything that is assessed is important*' and that '*in increasingly competitive market-led times students can be forgiven for attributing less status to those activities that are not formally assessed*'. Although, Paisey and Paisey (2004) found that lecture attendance seems to be a better indicator of performance than seminar attendance. It is, therefore, reasonable to argue that increased student attendance at seminars or lectures may be considered unimportant unless it translates to increased learning as measured by improved module performance and attainment.

Research methodology

Location, setting and sampling: this study is action research based learning intervention using a mixed method approach. The research location was the Business School of a post-92 English university and the sampling unit were students enrolled on a mandatory level 5 module. Class size was 32 students.

The module was taught over a standard 15 week semester with 12 teaching weeks. Formal classes comprised of a mix of lectures and seminars. The findings reported in this paper relate to attendance at 11 X 1 hour lecture and 8 X 2 hour seminar sessions. The final module assessment requires students to undertake two pieces of course work and no final

written examination. Attendance was taken throughout the module and the author was the only tutor on the module.

The entire population of students enrolled on the module were involved and the purpose was clearly articulated on the first day of class. Complete anonymity was assured and since no individual identifications were required it was easy to obtain the support and cooperation of the students.

The seminar intervention procedure: the action research is intended to enhance students' attendance at seminars through the intervention. The previous seminar model for this module included a variety of students activities; academic journal readings, case studies, experiential exercises, role-play, games among others, but mainly tutor-led. The actual intervention involved grouping students to lead the seminars and followed these procedures:

- At the beginning of semester, students were put in 6 small groups of between 6-8 members using the class list. The timing and topics for each group were drawn randomly on the first day of class to ensure fairness in terms of order of group presentation.
- Students were fully guided on the requirements of the process and likely benefits of the intervention which includes better attendance, flexible and more creative seminar activities, closer group interaction, taking better control of their own learning and a more positive overall experience. Detailed instructions and a class email list to ease contact among group members were made available on Blackboard. Moreover, the tutor ran the first two seminars to allow time for students to work in their groups and prepare their own seminars.
- Each student-led seminar was assessed both by the tutor and entire class using a questionnaire provided by the tutor, but results of each group were not disclosed until after every group had presented. This was to prevent a group being unduly advantaged

over others as a result of the feedback. Only non-members of the presenting group participated in evaluation. The peer assessment in part is to democratise the assessment and allow the input of all participants, while the tutor assessment moderated from a professional standpoint. The average of the two marks constitutes the allocated mark to each group. Student-led seminar activity did not constitute part of module overall module marks due to restrictions imposed by the validated module specification.

- An attendance register of two comparable cohorts (a previous cohort of same module and a comparable module) was used for comparative purposes and to examine differences in attendance with the main group.
- To encourage participation and a competitive spirit, a reward to be shared by the group was promised to the winning group and runner up. Two boxes of chocolate with a total value of £12.00 (£7.00 for the winning group & £5.00 for the runners up) were given out during the final class session.

Focus group: volunteers were requested from the class. Five students (3 females, 2 males) volunteered to participate, two of whom were students who had 100% attendance at both lectures and seminars; two had over 80% attendance and one student had an average attendance of about 50%. The focus group was used to conduct an in-depth discussion with the students, with a view to obtaining information about their impression of the student-led seminars and how to get the best results from it in terms of students' attendance and participation. The focus group was held on the module's final contact day.

Results and discussion of findings

The key interest of this research is to improve the attendance of students specifically at seminars. In table 1, a summary of the students' attendance at both lectures and seminars is presented.

Table 1. Module attendance at a glance (N = 32)

Weeks	Lecture attendance	Seminar attendance
1	31	31
2	30	25
3	19	No seminar – Snow disruptions
4	22	Individual tutorials
5	24	23
6	9	6
7	21	18
8	13	10
9	25	17
10	17	6
11	21	Individual tutorials

The lowest attendance reported at seminars was 6 with the highest being 31 and an average of 17. It is clear from the table that attendance drops, albeit not significantly, from lectures to seminars. Also, attendance dropped at an incremental rate from the first session throughout the semester. Similar results could be reported for the lectures. Table 2 below gives a lucid summary of activities in the student-led seminars.

Table 2. Summary of student-led seminar sessions

Weeks	Remarks on session activity	Evaluation (Average Peer Score & Tutor Score)	Attendance Numbers: Seminar / Lecture / Members Present
8	Quiz: Participation was very active and students seem to enjoy it, based on their feedback and comments in class.	Peer = 52% Tutor = 62%	10 / 13 / 3
9	Journal article reading & Quiz: Group was not well prepared but had some activity. Tutor had to take	Peer = 45%	17 / 25 / 2

	over using back up activity to complete the session.	Tutor = 40%	
7	Journal article reading, Quiz & Video clip: Discussions were interactive and participation was high. Quiz was very popular.	Peer = 70.71% Tutor = 80%	18 / 21 / 3
*3, *5 & *10	Three groups were excluded from analysis for different reasons: (*3) Heavy snow on day. Lecture held but seminar was cancelled (*5) Group had no activity to present/use for seminar because they had not agreed. (*10) All group members did not show up on the day and did not give reasons. <i>Seminars held with back up tutor activity for (*10) and (*5).</i>	*Groups excluded from analysis	(*3) - None / 19 / 1 (*5) - 23 / 24 / 2 (*10) - 6 / 17 / 0

The question we seek to answer is to what extent the intervention has worked to enhance students' attendance? Although table 2 presents a complete report and summary of activity throughout the module, it does not help us to answer this question because it does not present any comparable figures as we are able to see in table 3 (below).

Table 3. Attendance figures with comparative modules

	2009/10 Experimental Cohort (Semester 2) N = 32	Previous Cohort (Semester 2) N = 41	Module - 2009/10 (Semester 1) N = 36
Lecture attendance			
Lowest	9 (28.1%)	10 (24.4%)	12 (33.3%)
Highest	31 (96.9%)	38 (92.7%)	31 (86.1%)
Average	21 (65.6%)	22 (53.6%)	20 (55.5%)
Seminar attendance			
Lowest	6 (18.7%)	6 (14.6%)	6 (16.7%)
Highest	31 (96.9%)	25 (61%)	20 (55.5%)
Average	17 (53.1%)	15 (36.6%)	13 (36.1%)

In table 3 above, relative to the comparable cohorts, the attendance on this module 32 (compared with 41 and 36) is better especially given the lower total number of students. This is especially so at seminar attendance. While the lowest attendance does not appear much

better to the comparable cohorts, the average and particularly highest attendance were demonstrably better indicating that students' attendance improved when they lead their own seminar activities.

Findings from focus group session

The focus group discussion focused on two interrelated tasks. First, an evaluation of the process used to run the student-led seminars and, second, suggestions about what could be done differently to improve attendance. The session generated some interesting discussions, which can be summarised as follows:

- Students generally agreed that the intervention is a good idea that should yield positive results. They felt frustrated that many of their colleagues were not cooperative to make the sessions more successful.
- Three of the five students were, however, of the view that many students miss lectures and seminars for 'legitimate personal reasons'. When prompted for details, they reeled out what they consider very important reasons to include: students are at work; students are completing their assessment for this and other modules; students are involved in some parental responsibility; some students do not find seminars productive; there is no reward for attendance or sanction for non-attendance; some students feel they have learnt everything they need to learn on the topic during the lecture; and students have not had time to prepare for the seminar (e.g. do the required reading) and do not want to be embarrassed in class.

A number of specific recommendations were made that they felt could enhance attendance in the future:

- The same room should be used for both the lecture and seminar. A modification to this, which was proposed by one student and accepted by the others, is not to have a clear distinction between lecture and seminar periods. This way the tutor can move between one and the other. When the tutor cautioned that this may not work in very large classes with over 100 students, students suggested that different tutors should be responsible for smaller student numbers to make this practicable.
- There must be a reward for seminar attendance, for example, a percentage of the marks should be given for seminars ranging from 7-15%. When pressed to reach a consensus the group agreed on 10%.
- Tutors should allow students to pick the seminar group they want to belong to as students have worked together before and know each other. Consequently, they will be able to work together or at least there would be 2-3 people who would constitute the nucleus driving others.
- The seminars should be linked to the assessments in a way that would make each student group do something clearly beneficial to enhancing students' grades in the module assessment.

Students' attendance and performance

The relationship between lecture and seminar attendance and students' academic performance in the module was investigated using Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient. There was neither a significant correlation between students' performance and lecture attendance ($r = .10$, $n = 32$, $p > .05$), nor between students' performance and seminar attendance ($r = .24$, $n = 32$, $p > .05$). However, a close examination of the data revealed that the top performing student in the module had the lowest attendance at both lecture and

seminar. When this student was excluded and the data reanalysed, the new result showed a significant correlation between students' performance and seminar attendance ($r = .37$, $n = 31$, $p < .05$), but still no significant correlation between students' performance and lecture attendance ($r = .25$, $n = 31$, $p > .05$).

Regression analysis was used to assess the ability of attendance to predict academic performance. Lecture attendance was not a significant predictor of performance ($\beta = .255$, $p > .166$). However, for seminar attendance, the total variance explained by the model was 13.9%, $F(1, 29) = 4.67$, $p < .039$. Seminar attendance was thus a statistically significant predictor of performance ($\beta = .372$, $p < .039$) accounting for 13.9% of its variance. This is contrary to Paisey and Paisey (2004) who found lecture attendance to be a better indicator of performance than seminar attendance. A limitation of the study is the lack of complete comparative data on academic performance that makes it difficult to compare these findings with the two control groups.

Reflection and engagement with the issues

The success of the present intervention is positive and promising, but limited, and could be considered mainly exploratory. It also has clear value for reflections.

This action research has involved a lot of reflective practices prompting the following tentative conclusions:

- Students may deliberately miss seminars if they feel completely satisfied with the materials covered in the lecture.
- Seminars, as far as most students are concerned, provide an opportunity to clear up difficult points. While this appears a generalised statement, increasingly, students

seem to ask themselves, what benefit do I get from attending the session and how would it enhance my grade? Do tutors appreciate what students look for in seminars?

- Is insisting on lecture and seminar attendance a tutor ego problem? Do tutors feel lonely, with a bruised ego and feeling unimportant, when students don't attend lectures and seminars? Are they indirectly worried about future job loss since lack of attendance, coupled with students continued success, is perhaps an indication of the increasing value of other means of knowledge dissemination and delivery? For example, one tutor wrote *'I tend to take it personally when students do not show up for class!'* (Launius, 1997).
- In a repeat or replication of this intervention some modification could be considered: reward students' attendance, allow tutors more flexibility and control over module assessment, refocus seminar attendance in a way that makes it difficult to successfully complete/pass the module without attendance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main question is whether we should bother improving students' attendance at seminars. The results from this action research suggest a resounding 'yes'. Clearly, the intervention enhanced students' attendance and participation in both seminars and lectures. Moreover, when the top performing student is excluded from data analysis (perhaps an exceptionally gifted student) seminar attendance significantly predicted students' academic performance confirming the positive value that interaction and engagement in small groups seminars tend to generate. These findings have important implications. First, guided student-led activities do have positive impact on both their attendance and performance and tutors may do well to consider a structured shift in balance towards more student-led. Second,

students seem supportive of seminar attendance that is linked to module assessment. More flexible tutor control of such assessment may be beneficial for overall students' experience. For future research, an intervention which allows a student-led seminar to constitute a part of the students' overall marks in a module might produce perhaps even higher performance levels than the modest findings this research suggests.

Notes on contributors

Gbolahan Gbadamosi researches in the areas of: unethical work behaviour, workplace wellness and well-being, and students' adjustment in higher education. His recent publications related to HE have appeared in *Higher Education*, *Journal of Education and Work*, and *South African Journal of Higher Education*.

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