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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Crafting Fair Attendance Policies: Part Two

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In my first blog on this topic I tackled the question of how to create attendance policies that are suitable for the class content and context. But all this focus on the students neglects one more important factor - what about an attendance policy for the instructor?

This was not a major concern of mine when I began teaching, but in the years since, I have had children and communicable illnesses have become a substantially more regular part of my life. I also began my current role in Fall of 2019, just before the pandemic began, which changed much of our larger discourse about “pushing through” illnesses and being present no matter what. But the same issues arise for any instructor who discovers they have to cancel a class unexpectedly - anyone who needs to do more complicated travel to get to a conference than expected, who is invited for a guest lecture with limited lead time, who is on the job market and might get a coveted on-campus interview. How do we cancel classes well?

Now that I have a preschooler and a kindergartener, I cannot get through a semester without a cancellation due to their illnesses (which invariably become my illnesses). This term, I finally wrote an attendance policy for myself that I included in my syllabi. Here are a few things I considered while creating my expectations:

- As with any job, advance notice is best. I have promised my students that I will let them know class is cancelled as soon as I possibly can - which sometimes means I need to

make a decision the night before rather than the morning of. When in doubt, I err on the side of cancelling if I'm sick - nobody needs my lecture enough that it's worth them getting ill.

- I will not require my students to do any "makeup" work that takes more time than a normal class would have; whenever possible, I will keep makeup assignments significantly shorter than class time. Piling on unexpected work just feels unfair to me, but this standard is also key since I may not have an alternative assignment available by their usual class time. I need to respect that the hours students carve out for my course might be all the time they have, and additional work may cost them time they have to allocate elsewhere. I can show respect for my students' complex lives by keeping things concise.
- When alternate assignments are needed, I use methods that students are already familiar with so that they are not wasting time trying to explore a new technology when I want them to be focused on course content. If I don't use discussion boards in a class, I don't ask students to use a discussion board for a cancelled day. Typically, I record my classes and rely on the video to create a shortened lecture.
- Sometimes, just skipping the day is fine. This won't be possible for all sorts of courses - when classes are composed so that prior concepts need to be fully understood before moving on, skipping may never be an option - but my own course design is more iterative and removing any one day isn't going to collapse the structure. I always mourn when I have to pull out a day of content that I love, but sometimes it's better for my students and myself to move on without stressing about covering every single idea and story that I hoped for.

We don't plan our syllabi with last-minute changes in mind, but having a few priorities when imagining cancellations - and taking a moment to craft your own instructor attendance policy - can save you time and headaches when things don't go as planned.

<https://wabash.center/2025/08/crafting-fair-attendance-policies-part-two/>