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# SHOULD SYLLABI COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS REGARDING APPROPRIATE CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS?

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On the third day of class, Professor Know-it-all is in the middle of a very important lecture (of course all lectures are important but this one is going to "be on the exam") when a pop song resonates from a ringing cell phone in the middle of the lecture hall, the student stands up cell phone in hand and walks out of the room, only to return a few minutes later. Should the professor take offense to such an act? Or maybe the intrusion was innocuous and the professor should ignore the interruption and continue with the lecture.

The chances are that if you have taught any course in the last decade, you have been irritated by a student in class who used a phone, ate lunch, showed up late, read a book for another class, or interrupted you. You may have found the behavior irritating but did you communicate your personal expectations regarding these and related classroom behaviors to students taking your course? How should students determine whether a behavior is considered offensive or innocuous in the classroom environment? We intend in this paper to consider how expectations about these behaviors tend to be communicated in syllabi and assess whether there is a need for such communication.

Academic performance is directly associated with the degree to which students meet an instructor's general classroom expectations (Parr & Valerius, 1999) and how aware students are of those expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Not meeting academic expectations such as handing papers in on time can have a direct effect on grades; instructors often provide explicit penalties (e.g., point deductions). Not meeting instructor expectations related to classroom civility (e.g., speaking on a phone or carrying on a private conversation during a lecture) may have indirect but equally serious consequences when instructors assess subjectively graded assignments. Beliefs about an individual can influence performance assessment of lecturers (Goldman, Cowles, & Florez, 1983) and student assignments that are subjectively graded (Gibb, 1983). Unfortunately individuals are unaware of the effects of these halo effects on the accuracy of their subjective assessments of others (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). The halo effect literature would suggest that individuals who irritate their instructor may earn lower grades. While instructor expectations often will be communicated implicitly, reliance on implicit communication can lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings (Eraut, 2000, Appleby, 2004). Thus, effective educational practices put the onus of clearly communicating educational expectations directly on instructors.

Course syllabi are intended to clearly and accurately communicate the instructor's expectations regarding a course (Becker & Calhoun, 1999). Most agree that a syllabus should include information about course requirements, goals, deadlines, and learning resources as well as methods to communicate with the instructor (Fink, 2012). However, articles that describe what should be included in a syllabus tend to provide mixed recommendations concerning how instructors should communicate expectations about appropriate classroom behaviors. For example, Altman and Cashin (1992) referred to attendance and lateness, and class participation requirements, Becker and Calhoun (1999) only referred to class preparation requirements, and Appleby (1994) only provided suggestions related to meeting class deadlines. Slattery and Carlson (2005) provided a stronger generic suggestion that syllabi should specify rules regarding distracting behaviors.

We recently examined syllabi available in The Society for the Teaching of Psychology's (STP) Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP) repository of peer-reviewed syllabi for Introductory Psychology courses (STP, 2010), and syllabi for several courses outside of the Psychology discipline that were available in our university tutoring center. We identified 16 potentially irritating classroom behaviors (Table 1 lists those behaviors). In this pilot study, we used a liberal interpretation of whether instructor expectations were included, and found that the syllabi evaluated only comprised an average of 2 to 3 (15%) of these 16 classroom behaviors per syllabus for each of the two samples. A quick scan of syllabi published in the first issue of this journal included similarly few references to instructor expectations. These findings provided evidence of a paucity of instructor references to their expectations about appropriate classroom behaviors, even in those syllabi that STP considered to be model syllabi, thus providing at least some empirical evidence that instructor expectations are infrequently referred to in syllabi.

Why are so few details about expectations regarding classroom behaviors included in syllabi or in recommendations for syllabus content? Informally, several instructors we have spoken with said that they speak about some expectations in class but most appeared to discount the importance of communicating details. Some, like Tom (1998), have speculated that instructors assume that rules are universal and widely recognized, making the instructor's explicit communication about classroom expectations unnecessary. Bjorklund and Rehling (2010) challenged the assumption of universal rules. They suggested that instructor rules vary by individual noting that some instructors are highly critical of certain classroom behaviors that others find inoffensive. Evidence related to the false consensus effect (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) shows that individuals often assume that others share their beliefs and values. The false consensus effect may lead some instructors to not communicate their classroom expectations because they make an erroneous assumption that the rules are universal.

We considered in this paper how well students understand instructor expectations regarding appropriate classroom behaviors such as cell phone use, eating in class, and class preparation (other examples are presented in Table 1), and what instructors may deem appropriate or inappropriate classroom behaviors. Studies have examined student and instructor perceptions about inappropriate college classroom behaviors, and negative effects of these distractions on education (e.g., Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010; Morrissette 2001; Boice, 1996; Appleby, 1990). However, we are unaware of any systematic assessment of how well students actually understand an instructor's expectations regarding behavior in classrooms. If students are unaware of instructor expectations, and instructors are irritated by unruly behavior, instructors should consider explicitly communicating their expectations on their syllabi. Our intent in this study was to discern whether or not rules vary across instructors, and whether or not students are aware of their instructor's personal standards of classroom behavior. In this study

we evaluated how well students estimated how irritated their instructor would be about different classroom behaviors on a class-by-class basis.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS AND CLASSES

Two hundred twenty college students enrolled in four upper- and four lower-level undergraduate psychology classes and the eight psychology professors of those classes participated. All were affiliated with a small public university. Three Full and one Associate Professor taught the upper-level classes, and two Associate and two Assistant Professors taught the lower-level classes. Student participants included 120 females, 91 males and nine who did not specify their gender. Professors included three females and five males. The lower-level classes were general education courses that included students from many different majors, and the upper-level courses were predominantly enrolled by psychology majors. Syllabi for these 8 classes were similar to the sample of syllabi from STP and from our tutoring center in that they included an average of 14.9% (between 2 and 3; SD = 10.4) of the 16 items listed on Table 1.

### PROCEDURE

A researcher entered each class and gave both the instructor and students a survey that listed the 16 classroom behaviors included in Table I (each behavior on the survey began with "When a student"). Using Appleby's (1990) descriptor ("irritating"), the student survey asked students to rate each behavior in terms of how irritating each behavior would be to "the professor of this class" on a scale of 1 (very irritated) to 7 (not at all irritated). The instructor surveys were identical to the student surveys but asked instructors to use the same scale to rate how irritating the behaviors were to them.

**Table 1: Descriptions of 16 classroom behaviors included in survey.**

<b>When a student:</b>
1. walks into class late.
2. packs up their belongings before class is over.
3. leaves class early and does not return.
4. uses a cell phone in class, either to send text messages or to talk.
5. falls asleep during class lecture.
6. talks over the professor e.g. blurts out comments during lecture.
7. talks to another student during lecture e.g. private conversation.
8. uses class time to prepare for another class, (e.g.: math homework in biology class).
9. has not prepared for today's class lecture.
10. eats in class.
11. does not participate in class.
12. does not take notes.
13. hands in work late.
14. leaves class and returns, (bathroom, drink, phone call).
15. consistently monopolizes class time and steers lecture off course.
16. asks a question about something the professor has just described.

## RESULTS

### DIFFERENCES IN INSTRUCTOR EXPECTATIONS

To assess the universality of classroom rules we calculated an Intraclass Correlation (ICC) to compare the 8 instructor's ratings for the 16 behaviors to assess the similarity of their expectations. The analysis showed that the instructor ratings were significantly different,  $F(7, 105) = 2.52$ ,  $p = .05$ , and the concordance was relatively low, ICC Coefficient = .45. We calculated the range of instructor ratings for each behavior and found a relative large amount of variability; the average range for the 16 behaviors was 3.56 rating points.

Average ratings across the 8 instructors showed cell phone use ( $M = 1.75$ ), completing work for other classes ( $M = 2.3$ ), talking with others ( $M = 2.5$ ), sleeping ( $M = 2.6$ ), and packing up early ( $M = 2.9$ ) were seen as most irritating. Eating ( $M = 6.6$ ), leaving and returning to class ( $M = 5.0$ ), non-participation ( $M = 5.1$ ), not taking notes ( $M = 5.0$ ), and not prepared ( $M = 4.0$ ) were rated least irritating.

### ACCURACY OF STUDENT PREDICTIONS

For each class, we used a one-sample t-test to compare the instructor's rating for each of the 16 behaviors to student ratings from that instructor's class. We considered each class a separate study, but used a more conservative Bonferroni correction that adjusted for all 128 tests and lowered our alpha level to .0004. The first column in Table 2 lists all 16 items and provides scores and other statistical values for all comparisons in which  $p < .0004$ . Degrees of freedom varied across questions for individual instructors because students occasionally did not complete a rating (classes averaged 97.7% completion of items).

**Table 2: Instructor rating, student rating mean and standard deviations, and t-test comparisons for items for which there were significant differences between instructor ratings and class estimates of how irritating instructors rated 16 classroom behaviors (all  $p$ 's < .0004).**

Student behaviors When a student:	Class #	Instructor Rating	Class Rating <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	t – test <i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> ) =	effect size <i>d</i>
walks into class late	1	2*	4.20(1.57)	$t(34) = 8.30$	1.40
	2	3*	4.75(1.62)	$t(23) = 5.29$	1.08
	4	2*	4.25(1.52)	$t(39) = 9.39$	1.48
	5	2*	3.87(1.41)	$t(14) = 5.14$	1.33
packs belongings early	4	1*	3.80(1.60)	$t(38) = 10.96$	1.75
	7	2*	3.72(1.24)	$t(24) = 6.92$	1.38
leaves does not return	2	2*	4.74(1.21)	$t(22) = 10.82$	2.26
	3	2*	4.40(1.57)	$t(39) = 9.69$	1.53
uses a cell phone in class	1	1*	2.08(1.63)	$t(37) = 4.02$	0.66
	4	1*	3.79(1.66)	$t(38) = 10.53$	1.68
	7	1*	2.58(1.47)	$t(23) = 5.27$	1.07
falls asleep during class	1	1*	2.56(1.30)	$t(35) = 7.20$	1.20
	4	2*	4.18(1.80)	$t(38) = 7.54$	1.21
	5	1*	3.67(1.63)	$t(14) = 6.33$	1.64
interrupts the professor	1	4	3.00(1.19)	$t(34) = 4.98$	0.84
	2	2*	4.25(1.75)	$t(23) = 6.30$	1.29
	3	1*	3.05(1.47)	$t(39) = 8.84$	1.39

Student behaviors When a student:	Class #	Instructor Rating	Class Rating <i>M (SD)</i>	t – test <i>t(df) =</i>	effect size <i>d</i>
	4	2*	3.73(1.60)	t(39) = 6.81	1.08
	5	6	3.13(1.90)	t(14) = 5.89	1.51
talks to another student	1	1*	3.03(1.37)	t(37) = 9.15	1.48
	2	1*	3.75(1.29)	t(23) = 10.41	2.13
	4	2*	3.61(1.48)	t(37) = 6.69	1.09
	5	5	3.13(1.51)	t(14) = 4.80	1.24
prepares for another class	1	1*	3.11(1.41)	t(36) = 9.09	1.50
	2	1*	4.32(1.67)	t(21) = 9.30	1.99
	6	2*	3.50(1.50)	t(19) = 4.46	1.00
	7	1*	3.28(1.21)	t(24) = 9.44	1.88
not prepared for class	2	3*	4.50(1.35)	t(23) = 5.44	1.11
	3	6	4.45(1.30)	t(39) = 7.54	1.19
	5	6	3.60(1.45)	t(14) = 5.43	1.66
eats in class	1	7	4.65(1.73)	t(34) = 8.01	1.36
	3	7	5.53(1.48)	t(39) = 6.28	0.99
	4	7	5.74(1.20)	t(39) = 6.65	1.05
	7	7	5.08(1.66)	t(24) = 5.80	1.16
does not participate in class	1	7	3.95(1.31)	t(36) = 14.17	2.33
does not take notes	1	7	4.43(1.54)	t(36) = 10.16	1.67
	4	4*	5.13(1.57)	t(39) = 4.53	0.72
	5	7	4.93(1.49)	t(14) = 6.97	1.39
	6	3*	6.14(1.15)	t(20) = 12.50	2.73
	7	3*	4.80(1.61)	t(24) = 5.60	1.12
hands in work late	3	3*	3.95(1.36)	t(39) = 4.37	0.70
	6	2*	4.11(1.85)	t(18) = 4.95	1.14
	7	7	3.04(1.65)	t(23) = 11.72	2.40
	8	2*	4.00(1.29)	t(12) = 5.59	1.55
leaves class and returns	1	7	5.00(1.67)	t(35) = 7.17	1.19
	2	3*	6.04(1.19)	t(23) = 12.44	2.55
	3	7	6.05(1.22)	t(39) = 4.93	0.78
	4	7	5.79(1.28)	t(38) = 5.87	0.95
	6	3*	6.33(0.91)	t(20) = 16.73	3.66
	7	4*	5.76(1.33)	t(24) = 6.61	1.32
	8	5*	6.38(0.96)	t(12) = 5.20	1.44
monopolizes class time	1	5	3.68(1.04)	t(33) = 7.45	1.27
	2	3*	4.91(1.24)	t(22) = 7.40	1.54
	3	1*	3.59(1.33)	t(38) = 12.14	1.95
	5	6	3.13(1.73)	t(14) = 6.43	1.66
	7	6	3.58(1.35)	t(23) = 8.78	1.79
asks redundant questions	2	2*	4.29(1.23)	t(22) = 9.11	1.86
	3	1*	3.95(1.49)	t(38) = 12.39	1.98
	6	2*	3.71(1.52)	t(20) = 5.16	1.13
	7	2*	3.52(1.31)	t(24) = 5.02	1.16

**Note.** Students and instructors rated on a scale of 1 (very irritated) to 7 (not at all irritated). Class number 1 – 4 was lower level, and 5 - 6 were upper level undergraduate classes. Asterisks (\*) indicates that the instructor rated behavior as more irritating than students predicted.

We found that in 32.0% of the comparisons students underestimated how irritated the faculty would be, and in 14.8% of the comparisons students overestimated how irritated faculty would be. Classes averaged 7.5 significant discrepancies (SD = 2.83; range from 2 to 11). The effect sizes ranged from  $d = 0.66$  to 2.73, with 4 of the significant discrepancies considered medium effects and 56 strong effects (Cohen, 1992).

For each behavior, we examined whether there was a trend toward student overestimation or underestimation of instructor irritation. Students tended to underestimate how irritating entering class late, leaving, early, packing up early, cell phone use, sleeping, preparing for other classes, talking with others, submitting work late, and asking redundant questions (75% or more of the significant discrepancies for each of these behaviors showed student underestimations). For five behaviors we observed mixed results, with closer to half of the classes overestimating and half underestimating how irritating the instructor would find the behavior. These behaviors included interrupting the professor, not prepared, not taking notes, leaving and returning to class, and monopolizing class time. Students overestimated how irritated instructors would be about non-participation and eating in class in all significant comparisons.

## DISCUSSION

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The ICC showed that expectations differed across instructors, providing evidence that rules are not universal. Also, students often poorly predicted instructor expectations but we saw individual differences in student predictions within each class, with some students accurately predicting instructor expectations. We replicated this general effect in eight classes, and the strong effect sizes, and repeated demonstration of student misperception of their instructor's expectations in all classes suggested generalization across instructors. Clearly, it would be unlikely that student predictions would be perfectly accurate, but inaccuracy alone would simply increase variability and not tend to show significant differences in a specific direction with large effect sizes.

As respective groups, students and instructors tend to give different ratings of the appropriateness of many classroom behaviors (e.g., Appleby, 1990; Tom, 1998, Parr & Valerius, 1999). Our goal was not to replicate studies comparing those groups, but instead to better elucidate how well students know their instructor expectations regarding classroom behavior. About half of the comparisons showed a significant difference between faculty expectations and students' perception of those expectations. Students frequently underestimated how irritating some student behaviors would be to their instructor.

While we did not intend to examine factors that created individual differences in expectations, we saw no strong trends related to level of classes and instructor experience in this small sample. The accuracy of student perceptions about the appropriateness of classroom behaviors was different from instructor to instructor. Even with these moderate sized samples, the significant ICC and wide range of instructor ratings given for each behavior showed that irritation ratings varied considerably across instructors. We saw little evidence that any instructor consistently offered the highest or lowest ratings across behaviors. While prior reports (e.g., Appleby, 1990) showed relatively high variability of instructor ratings, they did not differentiate between variability due to individual instructors consistently offering higher or lower ratings for all behaviors versus instructors showing different acceptance levels for different behaviors. Our data suggests that individual instructor differences frequently explain variability of instructor ratings, providing further evidence that expectations about appropriate classroom behavior do not follow universal patterns.

Meyers, Bender, Hill and Thomas (2006) were unable to detect any instructor variables such as age, gender, and race that were any more than weak predictors of classroom misbehavior. Future research may find that these other variables may help predict an instructor's particular classroom expectations. However, student awareness that instructors with certain attributes tend to find certain behaviors inappropriate serves as a poor substitute for an accurate description of the instructor's expectations. The former leaves students playing a guessing game in the classroom while the latter could circumvent any classroom interruptions.

Students in this study often poorly predicted their instructor's expectations, but why is that a problem? As one might expect, students who do not recognize actions as inappropriate are more likely to engage in those behaviors (Nordstrom, Bartels, & Bucy, 2009). Students who are unaware may engage in behaviors that distract the instructor from time spent supporting learning (Feldmann, 2001). Instructors faced with an unruly classroom may view students as adversaries (Boice, 1996), and this negative view of students may tend to reduce instructor immediacy, which can lead to poorer student performance and motivation (Christensen & Menzel, 1998). Students who do not understand implicit rules may get poorer grades or might disturb classes and be assigned lower grades by displeased instructors (Parr & Valerius, 1999; Eraut, 2000). Inappropriate student behavior can decrease instructor morale, and subsequently decrease the quality of the instructor's teaching (Boice, 1996), and decrease instructor engagement with the university (Caza & Cortina, 2007). All of these outcomes may come in part from student misunderstanding of a personal set of standards held by the instructor.

If, as Tom (1998) suggests, some instructors assume classroom rules are universal (i.e., false consensus [Ross et al., 1977]) then they may fail to clarify and communicate their expectations. Lilienfeld, Ammirati, and Landfield (2009) suggested that in order to overcome cognitive biases like the false consensus effect, one must become aware of the bias and recognize that it might have a real-world effect. We hope our observations might help instructors recognize and reflect on the possibility that others may have different perspectives on what constitutes appropriate classroom behavior, and see that their own misperceptions may negatively affect learning in their classes, something that would unintentionally negate the fundamental purpose of higher education.

One limitation of the study is that the course instructors were from a single discipline and that findings might not generalize outside of psychology. While the evidence suggested that these instructors had different expectations, it may be that instructors from other disciplines might differ from psychology instructors in the way they interact with their students. While we are unaware of any theories that would support such predictions, future research might replicate our investigation using classes in other majors.

Including instructor expectations on a syllabus or other supplemental material may not guarantee that the students will attend to that material. Unfortunately, students often do not attend to all material on the syllabus and students do not rate syllabus information about student conduct as very important (Davis & Schrader, 2009). Therefore, instructors should be careful to place important material prominently in the syllabus and remind students of the rules (Becker & Calhoun, 1999), or involve students in other ways to reinforce the importance of the classroom rules (e.g., DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005).

Previous investigations have suggested that good communication of expectations can reduce inappropriate student behavior (e.g., Landrum, 2011) and have shown that students are more likely to follow rules when they are more aware of them (e.g., DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). Detailing

expectations on a syllabus should better inform students and that should increase appropriate classroom behaviors. Since our 16 behaviors were just a sample, instructors should focus on communicating expectations regarding those classroom behaviors that are most important to them. Future research should assess how different means of communicating rules may affect student behavior and whether different types of rules will require different forms of communication.

These findings suggest that students poorly predict instructor expectations. Therefore, instructors must fully assess what standards are important to them, and clearly communicate those standards to students. The syllabus appears to us to be an excellent vehicle for such communication but some instructors may prefer other means of communication such as separate written or electronic documents designed to communicate classroom rules. Those who are irritated by student classroom behaviors, and possibly by student errors associated with scholarly assignments (see, Perera, Lee, Win, Perera, & Wijesuriya, 2008; Landrum, 2011), should consider asking themselves whether they have mistakenly assumed that the students should have understood an unwritten universal rule. If Professor Know-it-all is perturbed by his student's use of a phone, perhaps he should evaluate his syllabus (and we our own for that matter) to determine whether classroom policy about cell phone use was explicitly communicated to his class.

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