

Empty Office Hours: A Teacher's Reflections on an Unexpected Phenomenon

By Olivia Conner

Throughout my years at university I would attend multiple office hours per session, making sure that my teachers knew my name and were aware of how hard I was working. I was convinced that this connection would give me a personal edge that would ultimately help me gain a better grade. However, many students do not have the same tendencies, but I have to admit that because of this personal experience I had anticipated that my own students would have an equal enthusiasm for interaction as I did, but I was proven wrong. Hence, I wrote this article to discuss the purpose of office hours, to share the ideas I have had and have learned from others, and to inspire teachers to introduce creativity and flexibility into their office hours with the hope that they will subsequently attract more students.

Firstly, it might help to discuss what the purpose of office hours is and why teachers and students continue this relationship outside of class. Although holding office hours is usually mandatory for all teachers, some may think that this time impinges on the already busy schedule and might therefore reduce their enthusiasm. However, this need not be the case because this time is for teachers to get to know their students better and to assist them with various issues or misunderstandings that arise throughout the class, ones that students may not feel comfortable discussing with everyone else. It is also for one-on-one time that some students might crave, although getting them to take the first step into the office can be difficult.

For example, when I began teaching full time at the university level, I set my office

hours for the same time every week. At first, I sat in the office waiting for students to line up outside my door. When it did not happen I reassured myself that when the time for marking came, they would be rushing to my office, fighting each other off for extra help with editing since this is when I often visited my teacher. I even went as far as creating a sign-up sheet to organize their visits, just in case they overlapped. However, I spent my office hours planning lessons instead and when the time for essay assessment came around I did get a few visits, but they were mostly from my best students who needed help the least.

Subsequently, after a little reflection I decided that it was time to take action, so I made some changes the following semester. Also, I was inspired by a few teachers in my department who had had more experience than me on this, teachers who went as far as developing office hour task sheets for their struggling students who were falling behind the given curriculum. I began to think critically about how to make office hours more accessible and attractive for my students, depending on their goals, lifestyles and personalities.

I realized that many students were unaware of why they should attend office hours. For that purpose, I created a list of reasons why they could benefit from visiting my office and went over this on the first day of class. For example, they could discuss the curriculum, tests, assignments, career choices, and even personal matters that were affecting their performance. I included this last point because I noticed that a couple of students visited my office simply because they wanted advice on an issue they

were concerned with that did not exactly involve me or my class.

For instance, I had a student visit to discuss her future career plans and her personal goals. When she left, I was pleased that she had found someone to talk to, even if I could not solve her problems for her. Nevertheless, if students come for advice on matters that are too personal, or if they seem to be emotionally unstable, teachers should make sure they have the contact information to refer that student to the appropriate support department within the institution. We, as teachers, can give students good advice in some personal circumstances but should not try to be professional counselors if we are not trained to do so. I also noticed that the students who came to visit me were often in the top 5% of the class. One student came for editing help because she did not believe that her peers could offer the kind of editing support she needed. To make the most of this student's talents, I decided to connect her to a peer who was at the same level of ability to restore the confidence that her fellow students could be of help to her, and to renew her enthusiasm for the peer review process. Also, it saved me the time I would have spent correcting her reports in my office.

Another good idea I learned from a colleague is that teachers can have a collection of materials on hand to give to students, such as grammar exercises, writing activities, or a list of useful websites. Teachers can suggest that students complete these activities after the meeting, especially when there is an area where students specifically need improvement. Whether the student is not feeling challenged by the material for the class or is struggling to understand concepts, giving students projects to help their specific needs might make them feel like they are taking a step in the right direction towards greater linguistic competence.

Although successful students are more than welcome to visit during office hours, the real question for teachers is how to attract the stu-

dents who are falling behind in the class and how to make sure that those students' academic needs are being addressed within the short time available. I have observed that one of my colleagues gives her students a diagnostic test at the beginning of the semester and then encourages students of her choosing to visit her office for assistance with their time management and language weaknesses, giving them handouts for curricular support and discussing how to better organize their time by asking them to discuss their study habits with her.

This innovative method inspired me to be more proactive with my students and to email those that I felt were struggling or were missing too many classes. I would ask them to come into my office and discuss their absences, or I would work with them on a specific issue that I felt they were falling behind on. This system allowed me to pay more attention to my students' performance and attendance. Simply having a discussion with the students helped me foster a better relationship with them, thereby promoting more communication and understanding between us.



Where and when teachers hold office hours may also affect student participation. Generally, coffee shops are appropriate areas for meetings with students because they add a casual element to the discussion. If teachers work in a cubicle, or share an office, students may feel uncomfortable. They may be intimidated by the atmosphere of the office and might be more inclined to go somewhere they are accustomed to. Personally I would often

meet students in my office and then walk with them to the coffee shop, chatting on the way to calm their nerves.

Finally, encouraging students to visit in groups can be a way for teachers to make the most of the time they have and to promote more visits. If students are shy or fearful that they will have nothing to discuss with teachers, they may be more likely to come if they know other students will be there to assist them. This works well when students are assigned group projects. Having the whole group come as a unit will assist teachers in observing group dynamics and may help them perform better group assessment.

In the end it is up to you how you structure office hours and here are some helpful ideas: give students a reason to visit, offer them materials to take home, invite them to visit, have them come in groups and change the atmosphere. This will encourage students to come and make the most of the time they spend in the office. Overall, office hours should be a time for connection and discussion, and that is why it is important for both teachers and students to participate.



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