

PROGRAMMING STUDENT BEHAVIOR: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Dr. Devi Akella,

Associate Professor,
College of Business
Albany State University, Albany, USA.

ABSTRACT

This autoethnography shares my classroom experience in trying to overcome tardiness amongst my students over a period of few semesters. It has been developed using my observations, experiences and problems when teaching human resources management at a college. This paper draws upon behavior modification theories and its elements of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and positive and external reinforcers to shape students' behavior and minimize deviant behaviors which could disrupt classroom decorum. The paper provides instructors with strategies and techniques to reduce tardiness in their classrooms.

Keywords: behavior modification, student behavior, tardiness, autoethnography.

INTRODUCTION:

In the field of education, the issue of maintaining and imposing discipline both within and outside the classroom has always remained forefront. Schools and colleges constantly have had problems with tardiness, truancy, profanity, violence and other factors (Gage and Berliner, 1984). Discipline continues to be identified as an important concern facing schools and colleges. While tardiness remains an unresolved problem inspite of numerous strategies and techniques being offered over the years to confront it within the classroom. Because the habits acquired in school and college are usually carried over to their professional lives by students. Punctuality could end up becoming a serious concern for an employer in the future. There, thus arises a need for a successful intervention technique to overcome this trend of coming late to class by students.

This paper examines tardiness prevalent amongst college students within the theoretical framework of behavioral modification. All theoretical assertions are compared with empirical evidence gathered from an auto ethnographical case study. My experiences, techniques and efforts in combating this vice of tardiness when teaching a course are reviewed and analyzed to suggest effective behavioral interventions. The paper has been divided into four sections. Section one discusses various concepts and elements of behavior modification theories in detail pinpointing areas needing further investigation. While next section extrapolates the methodological concerns and decisions citing reasons for the choice of an auto ethnographical case study. Section 3 and 4 subsequently deal with empirical analysis and concluding thoughts of the author.

BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION THEORIES:

The process of shaping/modifying or molding an individual's behavior is technically called behavioral modification. This concept of manipulating and shaping the behavior of individuals to create "clones" who possess appropriate code of behavior has received considerable attention in the last few decades in the area of organizational behavior. "Behavior modification is rooted on the idea that behavior depends on its consequences" (Bharjoo, 2008: 51). Individuals' actions and reactions are manipulated and coordinated using external reinforcements. This gradually results in individuals' inculcating accepted code of conduct and emulating desired reactions and behaviors (Bharjoo, 2008; Schneier, 1974).

The concept of Behavior Modification evolved from the work of B. F. Skinner. According to Skinner and his followers, an individual tends to repeat behavior if it is followed by favorable consequences and tends not to repeat behavior if it leads to unfavorable consequences. Reinforcement here means anything which the individual finds. Reinforcers are external environmental events which produce desired reaction from the individual. Reinforcers are "external environmental events that follow a response" (Bharjoo, 2008: 51). Reinforcement leads to repetitions of desired behavior from the individual. Something reinforcing would strengthen the response preceeding it and induce repetition of the response. Reinforcement may be positive and negative. Both reinforcements consolidate the behavioral responses and increase the probability of its repetition. There are four ways in which these two types of reinforcement can be used to shape an individual's behavior (see Figure 1):

Positive Reinforcement: when a response is followed by something pleasant it is called positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement produces a favorable consequence and encourages repetition of a behavior. For instance if a student is on time to class s/he gets a reward which is pleasant resulting in repetition of that behavior. Reinforcement should always be contingent on employee correct behavior. Positive reinforcement strengthens and increases the chances of that behavior repeating again in the future. Behavior modification can be "considered to be systematic and progressive application of positive reinforcement" (Bharjoo: 2008: 52). Frequent and powerful positive reinforcement eventually encourage adoption of correct behavior in the future. Behavior is thus, shaped and guided by pleasant outcome reinforcers to push an individual's behavior in the desired direction (Bharjoo, 2008).

Negative Reinforcement: when a response is followed by removal of something unpleasant it is called negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement leads to removal of something which is of unfavorable consequence. This strengthens the response of individual and increases repetition of the same behavior because the external environment has become more comfortable (Bharjoo, 2008). For instance, if a

student comes on time his/her grade remain unaffected. S/he is not allocated any grade deduction penalties.

Punishment: is the administration of an unfavorable event which discourages that behavior from occurring again. Punishment is an unpleasant condition. An individual's natural desire to avoid its occurrence eliminates undesirable behavior from repeating. Even though punishment is very effective in short term periods it should be used carefully because ultimately it creates an environment of hatred and unhappiness. Punishment discourages undesirable behavior but it does not encourage desirable behavior either. Further, the individual who is punished hates the punisher for creating an atmosphere of ill will (Bharihoo, 2008). Constant use of negative effects especially over long or sustained periods of time could lead to undesirable emotional reactions. Punishment produces apathetic individuals, lowers self-confidence and self-esteem. It produces a conditioned fear amongst the individuals. It suppresses initiative, flexibility and creativity within individuals. In the long run, individuals might try to escape or avoid that environment or situation (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2011).

For instance if someone comes late to class, s/he is marked absent and given a grade reduction penalty. This might result in the student coming on time in the future. But the student will eventually dislike the instructor and the subject. The student may lose interest in the course thereby negatively impacting his/her grade.

Extinction: is the withdrawal of a desirable/pleasant consequence that is contingent upon the individual's behavior. Positive and pleasant outcomes are withheld which discourages repetition of behavior in the future. If an individual is not given continuous positive reinforcers it ultimately leads to elimination of desirable and productive behavior by the individual. For instance a student keeps coming to class on time but his/her punctuality is completely ignored by the instruction. This stops positive behavior from being emitted in the future.

Figure 1

Punishment	Positive Reinforcement
Negative Reinforcement	Extinction

Source: Bharihoo, S. (2008). "Behavior modification: An efficacious tool of shaping individual behavior productive and supportive to organizational goal attainment", The Journal of Nepalese Business Studies, 5 (1), 50-61.

Behavior Modification theory has been successfully adapted to modulate the behaviors of individuals in various settings. It has been used to regulate the behavior of employees, students and children to regulate and correct deviant behavioral tendencies. However this theory suffers from certain limitations. This theory has been criticized on several grounds, its philosophy, methods and practicality. The theory is guided by the belief that human beings are like rats in a laboratory and their behavior can be predicted and controlled. But in fact human beings are intelligent, thinking, self-directed and self-controlled individuals who are capable of making their own judgments and choices and motivating themselves. Somehow the emphasis has been concentrated on extrinsic motivation and external reinforcers. The role and influence of intrinsic motivation has been ignored. Behavioral modification has overlooked individual's cognitive skills as active participants in the performance process (Bharihoo, 2008; Schneier, 1974). This paper will make a contribution towards this theoretical area by providing more insights about the influence of an individual's internal perceptions and judgments and how it can counter attack all forms of reinforcers to modulate behavior.

The next section will discuss my methodological choices and decisions.

METHODOLOGY:

Ethnography is a "written description that focuses on selected aspects of how people lead their routine (or remarkable) lives in their environment and the beliefs and customs that comprise their common sense about that world" (Muecke, 1994: 189). While auto ethnography deals with the study of personal and biographical documents which provide information about the structure, culture dynamics and

function of the “consciousness of the author” (Vickers, 2007: 224). Methods of auto ethnography include diaries, memoirs, journal entries, autobiographies, letters, witness statements, and similar sources of a personal nature (Saramtakos, 1993). Researchers’ diaries and field notes have also been effective in presenting a perception of the author and his/her social world. Auto ethnography is a combination of autobiography and ethnography. There has been a lot of writing which is critical, confessional in nature—“self-ethnographic”. This is known as confessional ethnography. The second is dramatic ethnography where a dramatic narrative is involved, and the last is auto ethnography where the researcher contextualizes the life histories or autobiographies of the subjects (Madison, 2012). Autobiographical narratives act as clues to the experiences undergone by the self, process or state of the teller. The narratives penned have the capability of depicting the person’s entire social experiences, their interactions with others and the organization. Narratives can also utilize a historical perspective to examine the experiences and outcomes recorded by the teller. Here, a research narrative would be consciously constructed from a social and historical interpretation. All events would comment on existing conditions and reactions with reference to past and their influence on present (Vickers, 2007). Feelings like anger, rage, humiliation, disgust and fear can only be re-lived by the narrator himself/herself and only they can effectively portray them (Vickers, 2007). Therefore the auto ethnography method allows the narrator to recapitulate these feelings in a story form. It enables them to decide what to exclude or include, and which incident was of more relevance from a pain and hurt view point.

I decided to use an auto ethnographical to share my classroom experiences to illuminate my trials and tribulations when trying to overcome tardiness within the classroom. This would enable me to paint a picture of what took place in the classroom, the methods used to overcome students’ tardiness and lack of punctuality. The story form would take the reader directly into the classroom and let him/her assess the effectiveness of different forms of reinforcers which I used. It would allow the reader himself/herself get an overall “feel” of the classroom, the environment, students’ behavior and external reinforcement strategies. The reader is now able to gauge whether it is possible to regulate the behavior of students and modify it to suit the needs of classroom decorum and instructor.

The next section traces my classroom experiences over a few semesters at a college where I taught management courses. I reflected on the sequence of events which took place in the context of my effort to overcome tardiness in my classrooms. To narrow down and increase clarity I decided to focus on one of my classes which happened to be human resources management. In the last few semesters I have been assigned to design and teach courses online at my college. Human resources management happens to be a course at the undergraduate level which I always teach face to face every semester. I initiated a self-reflective process, recollecting my memory, recapturing the major events which took place, jotting them down on paper and then contemplated which experiences to include, exclude or explore and emphasize. It was a messy process but it allowed me to portray a classroom issue in a simple form for the reader. It allowed me to tell a story which readers could enter and feel part of. A narrative which would evoke feelings, thoughts, perceptions, enabling one to relate to my experience (Vickers, 2007), make sense of the everyday working live of an instructor and relate it to the theoretical framework of behavioral modification.

The next section is my story, a story about trying to teach students about punctuality in a mild fashion without being outwardly harsh.

EMPIRICAL DATA & ANALYSIS:

I commence the story with a brief introduction about myself to allow the reader to know what sort of person the instructor was. I am a tenured, Associate Professor of management in College of Business at MU (a pseudonym). I teach subjects like human resources management and organizational behavior at both undergraduate and graduate levels at MU. Last year I got my promotion and tenure. I have been working at MU for over eight years.

MU is a historical black university in the USA and is situated in a rural town with a racial make-up of 79 percent Blacks, 19 percent Whites and 2 percent Hispanics and Asians. MU itself is a predominantly Black institution with 90 percent of the students and staff being of African American origin. Founded

primarily with the objective to educate African American youth, the university commits itself to the concept of “students first” as its core institutional value. MU offers bachelors, masters, and educational specialist degrees along with a variety of non-degree educational programs. The college of business at MU, offers bachelors in management, marketing, accounting, healthcare, information technology and supply chain management and logistics.

I have always taught human resources management at 8:25 am every semester for the last two years. Making to class on time had always been uphill task. I find myself rushing to class, arriving a few minutes early, collecting my attendance sheet, dumping my laptop computer in my office and then running to classroom. But this semester the schedule was a pleasant surprise. My class was now scheduled on Mondays and Wednesdays from 9:50 am till 11:05 am.

I really hoped this new timing would resolve the student tardiness and attendance problem which I had been facing every semester. The class at 8:25 am had always started with half the class on correct time, with another half coming running in 5-10 minutes late. And the rest approximately 15 minutes late. I usually had my entire class by 8:40 am. I had tried to find the reasons for this tardiness and the students always blamed the class timings. I had argued that if you have a problem coming so early don't take this early class, take another in the afternoon or evening or online. But somehow my arguments always failed to get right reaction from the students. The excuses were always same—*“your watch is too fast”*, *“my alarm clock did not work properly”*, *“had to drop my child at day care which opens at 8 am”* and *“got stuck in the traffic jam on the road”*.

I also had made some compromises, 5 minutes late was not considered tardy anymore. I started spending the first 5 minutes getting the powerpoint slides ready, talking to class about the topics for that day. And then took attendance roll, again repeating the names which were left blank a second time. But I refused to consider those who were 15 minutes late and marked them absent. The students protested that in other classes, they were marked as tardy and three tardies was counted as one absence by other professors. And they wanted the same policy in this class as well. Some even threatened to complain to the chair of business administration department about my attendance policy. I repeatedly explained the attendance policy which stated that more than three absences without any valid absence excuse letter resulted in grade reduction as penalty. After three absences, all other three would lead to deduction of one mark from the overall grades received by the student. I told all students that I had all student attendances recorded on a excel file and was aware of who was absent.

One semester in desperation I tried a different tactic. At 8:30 am, I had the door closed to avoid latecomers from strolling into the classroom. But this had produced a violent reaction from the students. They actually complained to the chair and the dean about me. I was advised to keep the door open and allow all students in no matter what time it was and mark them as tardy.

“Try giving them random quizzes which add up towards the overall course grade during the first ten minutes of the class. There will be no more latecomers”, suggested the Business Administration Chair. I earnestly followed this suggestion next semester. I allocated 20 percent towards overall course grade and had a quiz on randomized basis throughout the semester. Students who walked in late missed the quiz and their overall grade suffered. But this was too good to be true in reality. Students who were tardy and missed quizzes, would meet a few days later with excuse letters. Letters which gave very valid sound excuses for walking 10-15 minutes late. Work responsibilities (usually night duties), small children (day care excuses), pooled car rides and sick letters. I now had to develop make up quizzes which sort of added to my work overload. Corrections and test preparations seemed to be endless that semester. I therefore decided to do away with the quizzes after using it for two semesters. I felt the system of using roll call at the beginning of the semester was much better. It allowed me to handle my teaching, advisement, service and research load better.

I wished this semester with the new class timings I would not face this problem again. I entered the class and nervously scanned the room. The number of students in the classroom seemed to be less. I inquired if any student events were taking place that day. I received a negative response. Things had come back to usual scenario. Students walked in during my lecture late and tardy unapologetically. At the end of the class, I found myself explaining the college's attendance policy, penalty for absences and tardiness and the importance of punctuality.

Over the next few days I made a conscious effort to find out what my colleagues were facing in their classrooms. I am not an overtly social person, who participated in office gossips and maintained professional working relationships with all my colleagues. I was always outside the office network and the last to know the latest news circulating within the business school. My investigations revealed something similar happening in all classrooms except for a few who happened to be administrators as well as professors. In the next faculty meeting I learned from two of her female colleagues who always happened to receive very good teaching ratings that their students were always on time for their classes. In fact, they finished roll call on correct class time. They were always 5 minutes early, finished attendance right on time with a full classroom and no one walked in late. *“It is all about class management. You have to be firm and tough with them. You just need to announce about your policies on the first day and then take no nonsense from them. In fact the other day one student walked late, and she looked at me and said –okay I lost 5 marks. I strictly enforce the penalty policy discouraging anyone who is tardy”*.

The discussion continued. I listened avidly for any insights to deal with this problem in my class. The Dean ordered the attendance policy to be strictly implemented and all latecomers to be penalized. If anyone came late they should be allowed to sit near the door not to disturb the class and not be given attendance credit for that day. He talked about the importance of punctuality amongst business professionals and its relevance in corporate environments. He requested faculty to keep this in mind and implement the attendance policy vigorously in classrooms. I nodded. I really wanted to eradicate this tardiness in my classrooms and amongst all my students.

In the next class, I reminded the students about the rules and regulations of business school. The policies mentioned in the syllabus and how they had signed an acknowledgement sheet on the first day of class. I read aloud the attendance policy:

“Class attendance at MU is compulsory. Students’ grades are based on daily class participation and performance. Teachers will not administer examinations and quizzes to students who have been absent for reasons other than official business of the University, sickness, or emergencies such as death in immediate family, jury duty, court summons, etc. When students are absent for emergency reasons, the number of absences permitted should not exceed the number of credit hours awarded for those except for the most extreme emergencies (e.g., death of family members, jury duty, etc.). The instructor will officially certify all excused absences.”

In administering this policy, each College of Business faculty will apply college-wide consequences for students who fail to attend all classes in a timely and regular manner. “Timely” means that the student is sitting in her/his seat at the prescribed hour and minute set forth in the schedule. Class typically begins with the taking of the class roster, which means every faculty will mark students absent if they are not present during the calling of names from the roster. (Alternately, instructors may have a quiz at the official start time of class, and only those in timely attendance for class will be permitted to take the quiz. (Those late or absent receive a grade of zero on the quiz.) Quiz grades given in lieu of calling roll will comprise at least 20 percent of the overall course grade. Faculty choosing to occasionally, or randomly, give quizzes at the start of class will also assign at least a 20-percent weight.

For faculty calling roll each day, a student who misses “roll-call” is considered absent, although he/she may attend class regardless of how late the student might arrive. (Seats close to door may be reserved for “late arrivers.”) Points will be deducted from the midterm exam for absences occurring during the first half of the semester and from the final exam score for absences occurring during the last half of the semester. Points will be deducted in accordance with the following scale, depending on how many days per week the class meets: for classes meeting “two-days-a-week” the instructor will deduct 2.5 points from the midterm exam grade for each unauthorized absence, and between midterm and final exam he/she will deduct 2.5 points from the final exam grade for

each unauthorized absence. Any and all absences from class will result in the above penalties.

Attendance on the first day of class is essential as “attendance verification” is a paramount faculty responsibility and thus the instructor will, via banner web, be notifying the Registrar and Financial Aid about student attendance beginning the first day of class and continuing until at least midterm.

I continued about the importance of punctuality in their lives—professional lives and the good impressions it created. Students all agreed to follow it. But some explained that they had classes in other buildings and the time difference between classes was 5 minutes. This was the reason why they walked in late, it was not on purpose. It was not me, not my class or my subject personally. It just happened to be unavoidable. I reasoned that I would ignore 5 minutes of lateness. But was not willing to compromise beyond 9:55 am. Somehow I felt nothing had been effectively resolved. Even though the number of students coming late to class substantially reduced. The problem by itself continued to persist.

At the end of the semester I distributed open ended questionnaire to all my 35 students to get some feedback on reasons behind their tardiness. The answers were pretty repetitive to all questions. The following are some of the student responses:

REASONS FOR TARDINESS:

“not having a ride to school or walking to school from my apartment...”

“overslept, car wouldn’t start, first class over lapped the second...”

“I commute from another city...”

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENTS STRATEGIES:

“I believe positive incentives will help in reducing tardiness because students will come to class on time if they know they will be helping or boosting their grade...”

“...positive is always better than negative...”

“anything positive is always motivating...”

“...knowing I will lose points on my grade doesn’t motivate me especially if I am tardy, I feel I might as well take my time or not show up at all...”

“...if the professor gave credit to those who attended on time...”

NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT STRATEGIES:

“Take role before class. Lock doors as soon as class starts...”

“deducting points for excessive tardies because students care about their grades mostly...”

“negative because that will teach the student a lesson if they are penalized for tardiness then they will remember that for next time”

“...pop quizzes...”

INTRINSIC VS. EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION:

“an interesting learning environment...”

“I am motivated by the fact that I paid for the class. I want to receive all the information I need to succeed in the class...”

“a creative environment that is relatable to students not just a teacher reading from book...”

“if the class were more exciting like hands on, elaborating, inquisitive, enthusiastic, or just a little bit more interesting in general...”

After reading the above students’ views, I reflected back on my techniques and methods. I had tried to be reasonable by deciding 5 minutes late was not tardy and instead used the first few minutes in getting the lecture ready. I had enforced the university’s attendance policy which stated more than three

absences without a valid absence letter resulted in grade reduction as penalty. After the first three absences, all other three would lead to deduction of one mark from the overall total grades secured by the student.

I had tried surprise randomized quizzes one semester. I allocated 20 percent of the course grade towards class quizzes. Quizzes were given to student during the first ten minutes of the class on a randomized basis. Students who were tardy to class missed the class and subsequently their grades suffered. I had the classroom door closed after 5 minutes to avoid latecomers from strolling into the classroom. I had copied and pasted the attendance policy into my syllabus. I had informed students about this policy at the beginning of the semester and continued to emphasize it.

I had been repeatedly using negative reinforcements to reduce or eliminate tardiness amongst the students. I realized I needed to try positive reinforcements for a change. I decided to allocate around 5 percent of the course grade for attendance and punctuality to increase frequency of desired behaviors amongst students. Or alternatively allocate some extra credit to those students who regularly attended classes and were on time. This would increase the frequency of desired behaviors amongst the students. I also accepted the fact, that external reinforcers could modulate behavior to some extent but ultimately it was the individual and his/her internal levels of interest which would guide his/her actions. As the students had all mentioned in their responses “*an interesting learning environment*” and “*more hands off activities...*”. I always had class activities in my courses but now I made an effort to make them more practical and interactive. I decided to redevelop my classes to have an equal mixture of lectures and interactive experiential class activities sessions.

I integrated these intrinsic motivation techniques into my classes in the subsequent semesters with positive outcomes. Tardiness has minimized extensively. It has not disappeared but neither is it a major problem of concern anymore.

The above empirical data supports behavior modification theories assertions. Behavior can be guided by usage of positive and negative reinforcements. But this modulation is limited in scope, because human beings are intelligent beings, who can think and reason on their own. The behavior of students’ can be manipulated up to a certain level. But after that, it is their levels of interest and participation within the course content which would motivate them to come to class on time. Intrinsic motivation is more important than external positive and negative reinforcers in shaping behavior. Classes should be designed to allow more participation and interaction. The grading scheme should provide credit for class participation and activities and also for attendance.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, behavior modification is a useful theoretical framework in trying to understand student behavior and in modulating deviant behaviors. It discusses mechanisms to encourage acceptable behavior and reduce and eliminate negative behaviors. However the theory tends to lay emphasis on external reinforcers and tends to minimize the influence of intrinsic motivation on behavior. This study makes a contribution by focusing attention on the fact that internal motivational factors are more influential than all forms of positive and negative reinforcements.

The study adopts an autoethnographical format to allow the reader into the classroom and gauge the effectiveness of various reinforcements techniques used by the instructor. Empirical data examines the different methods used by the author like pop quizzes, closing classroom door, attendance policy and the students’ reactions towards them. Students’ feedback is reviewed to come forward with suggestions which might be helpful in overcoming this habitual student behavioral problem. Empirical data reveals that positive reinforcements are better in shaping student behavior. All forms of extra credit or grades which acknowledge those students coming on time would further encourage repetition of positive behavior amongst the same and new student population. Also a conscious effort should be made to stimulate the interest of students with experiential exercises, hands off activities to design a creative learning environment. On overall, this paper allows a peek into the world of a college instructor, classroom and students perceptions. It also ends up raising questions pertaining to boundaries of behavior modification theories in controlling human behavior and actions.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Bharijoo, S. B. (2008). Behavior modification: An efficacious tool of shaping individual behavior productive and supportive to organizational goal attainment. *The Journal of Nepalese Business Studies*, 5 (1), 50-61.
- [2] Gage, N. L. & Berliner, D. C. (1984). *Educational psychology*. Massachusetts: Houghton-Mifflin Company.
- [3] Hellriegel, D. & Slocum, J. (2011). *Organizational Behavior*. Ohio: Southwestern Cengage Learning.
- [4] Madison, S. D. (2012). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics and performance*. London: Sage Publications.
- [5] Muecke, M. A. (1994). On the evaluation of ethnographies. In J. M. Morse (ed) *Critical issues in qualitative research methods*, pp. 187-209, Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- [6] Saramtakos, S. (1993). *Social research*. South Melbourne: MacMillan Education Australia Pty Ltd.
- [7] Schneier, C. E. (1974). Behavior modification in management: A review and critique. *Academy of Management*, 17 (3), 528-548.
- [8] Vickers, M. H. (2007). Autoethnography as sensemaking: A story of bullying. *Culture and Organization*, 13 (3), 223-237.
