

What's a Prof to Do?

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, MAY 7 2013

CEFAM is a business school that encourages attendance in classes. No, strike that. It is a business school that *demand*s attendance in classes. Indeed, unlike other higher education environments where I have studied and taught, CEFAM is typically French in that attendance is taken in every single class, reported to the administration instantly and electronically, and parents are informed if their children are absent for any significant time.

In this environment, a strict attendance policy in the POL 210 class is appropriate. For the current Summer semester, any student who is absent for 3 of the 20 class sessions will lose at least 6 points off their final grade, while one who is absent for 5 of the 20 sessions (25% of the course) will lose at least 20 points off their final grade. In either case and owing to the need to earn a minimum grade of 72 for the course to pass, students who are absent more than once or twice generally do poorly.

You would imagine that both the administration and faculty hard lines on attendance would encourage students to attend all classes and, in truth, it usually does. However, there is a force that is stronger than most anything CEFAM can proffer under normal circumstances that encourages absences during the summer semester: being French.

France in May seems, at least to this expat Australian, to be overrun with public holidays. After a four day week last week thanks to the May Day holiday (May 1st) there is a double whammy this week with the anniversary of VE Day (May 8th) and Ascension Day (May 9th) falling on Wednesday and Thursday. This leaves a class on Friday as the only thing standing between a French student and a five day weekend – and for an otherwise committed student, this would probably be the only absence of their semester.

So what is a professor to do?

The class is going to run and I am going to have to be there. I could reschedule the class but the only alternatives are Saturday's which suits students even less and me not at all as I count down to a second summer teaching in China.. Knowing that I would likely be teaching to half my students or even less, I decided to offer an incentive to encourage students to attend instead of heading for the sun and sand of the south of France.

This Friday I have scheduled a geography test. It is not difficult, though it is extensive in scope, and can easily be finished in the time allowed. Indeed, the fastest of the students should complete the test with almost everything correct within an hour of the two I have allotted for the test. The test is worth 10% of the final grade which, while not enormous, is enough to encourage all but those students most confident in their ability to 'ace' everything else that they should be there.

Anyone not in class for the test will earn themselves a 0 for the test, effectively removing any chance of them earning an A or A- for the course and probably – for an average student – meaning that they'll finish with nothing more than a B- overall, and probably more likely a C+.

Is it ideal? Of course not. I would prefer that students want to be in class, make efforts to be there every day, and prefer international politics over a day of doing not much on a beach on the Côte d'Azur. But I am also a realist and know – France being France – the notion of a five day weekend at the cost of only a single absence is too easy a

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decision to make in favor of the beach. Perhaps I am moving from 'encouraging attendance' to 'incentivizing attendance' (or even 'punishing absence') but I want my students in the room learning this summer and there's precious else I can think of to ensure they'll be there this Friday.

(Note: Of the nine sections in the CEFAM summer program, only two were re-scheduled for Saturdays and at least five will include tests for credit this Friday.)

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