

## **Dealing with discipline problems in Japanese university classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

University instructors in Japan are at times confronted with disruptive student conduct. What is an effective way to address counterproductive behavior such as using cell phones, forgetting textbooks, and sleeping in class? The author discusses an approach that entails providing students a list of rules in Japanese and English; overtly tracking violations of these rules; and then applying a penalty to the student's participation grade. The article includes a copy of these rules and a sample record sheet.

日本の大学教授は授業中時々学生の悪い行動に悩まされる。携帯を使ったり居眠りしたり教科書を忘れてたりしてしまう学生は面倒を起こす。これらの学生への効果的な対処方法何であろうか。本稿で筆者は一つの方法を提案する。英語と日本語で書かれたルールを学生に配布し、教師はルールの違反を記録して、違反に応じて学生の参加点数を減らす。本稿にはそれらルールのコピーと記録用紙の例が含まれる。

*Keywords:* Japan, university, discipline

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The system in this paper is the result of dealing regularly with problem behavior in university classrooms. Such behavior is a barrier to learning for not only the perpetrators but also those around them. In the author's experience, rules alone are ineffective in modifying student conduct. Likewise, berating students gets short-term compliance at best, as do appeals to reason and maturity because distractive habits, such as playing with cell phones, are too deeply ingrained for many students. Classroom circumstances sometimes call for a deterrent beyond rules, moral suasion and invective.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### 1.1 From where do these problems arise?

We live in an age of rapidly changing classroom demographic in Japan. In the last two decades, the country's university-age population has steadily shrunk. In 1998, one newspaper prognosticated that "as the birth rate drops, all students who wish to enter university will be accepted in the year 2009" (McVeigh, 2002, p. 246). In response, tertiary-level institutions will have to modify admission policies and standards to garner a portion of this shrinking pool of students in order to secure adequate revenue. Students that in the past may not have gained admission to university because of lack of preparation or ability will now attend. This new breed of university student brings to the classroom an attitude to which university instructors may not have had much exposure.

### 1.2 How have others dealt with them?

There are precedents in Japan of successfully addressing behavior problems through discipline. Thomas Rohlen (1983) describes one such case, Yama Commercial High School in Kobe:

[T]he faculty guidance section had decided that students exhibiting bad behavior and those not performing up to the standards for their grade level would be held back for a year. To prove their resolve, as many as 10 percent of some homeroom students were told they could not advance to the next grade. ... In subsequent years, thanks to the sobering effects of this approach, few students were forced to repeat a grade. ... Following this initial and spectacular tightening up, the guidance section established methods of closer supervision aimed at curtailing unacceptable student conduct. ... Teachers began to check systematically which students were taking their books home, and those who brought comics and bad literature to school were taken aside and warned. (pp. 203-204)

Why was this system created and tolerated? Rohlen received this explanation:

One of the two heads of the guidance section provided clues to the reasoning behind the rather Draconian methods. Students of vocational schools, he explained, come from disadvantaged backgrounds and face lives as second-class citizens. This is a situation beyond the students' or the faculty's power to change. It must be accepted as a fact of life. What can be influenced is the training given vocational students to help them cope. Changing the curriculum or improving class size would not help prepare them emotionally for the hard road ahead. But the severity and discipline thus instituted would help students learn to be strict with themselves and better able to endure and succeed in adverse circumstances. (pp.205-6)

By putting discipline first, the school served the students' fundamental needs more than it ever had with books or tests. Equally important, this approach to discipline took place in a Japanese educational setting; that is, it was culturally appropriate. Though the anecdote describes a vocational school, with demographic change comes a greater likelihood that Japanese university instructors will encounter students with the same need for self-discipline.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **2.1 Rules with teeth**

One relationship is well-understood by teachers: Assessment elicits attention. When a grade is at stake, students take notice. Consider the refrain of students everywhere: "Is this going to be on the test?" To tap into this propensity, I decided to make participation, one

component of the overall grade, depend on factors such as attendance, arriving on time, bringing textbooks, staying awake in class, and refraining from cell phone usage. I created a set of rules and attached a penalty to each, based on a percentage of the student's participation grade.

Two documents are used in class: the Rules and the Daily Record Sheet (Appendix 2). The former is distributed to the students, while the latter is used by the instructor to record when students break the rules.

## 2.2 The Rules

On the first day of class, the students receive the Rules, a double-sided sheet explaining the course rules in simple English on one side with a Japanese translation on the other.

Appendix 1 contains a copy of the Rules in both languages.

Students must bring their textbook to every class except the first, when they are just being apprised of the rules. Each failure to bring the textbook results in a 2% reduction of the student's participation grade.

Cell phone usage incurs a 1% reduction of the participation grade. *Usage* includes looking at the phone, leaving the phone in sight (e.g., on a desk), or letting it ring. I tell students to turn off their phone and put it away in a bag or pocket.

Sleeping in class reduces the participation grade by 3%. It is not uncommon for students to doze off: human science has discovered no soporific more potent than the university lecture. Accordingly, I allow, even encourage students to come to class with a beverage that will help fight off drowsiness. When I catch a student sleeping, I wake them up and tell them that they need to stay awake and should bring something to drink next time.

Note the sample calculation at the bottom of the Rules. Each rule violation reduces the student's participation grade, which is initially 100%. In the example, the student forgets the textbook twice ( $-2\% \times 2$ ), sleeps in class once ( $-3\% \times 1$ ), and uses a cell phone twice ( $-1\% \times 2$ ),

leaving an adjusted participation grade of 91%. The result is multiplied by the percentage of classes that the student attended (80%), producing a final participation grade of 72.8%.

### 2.3 The Daily Record Sheet

Appendix 2 includes an example of the Daily Record Sheet used to keep a written record of student behavior. I print a dated copy for every class session. After each class, I enter the data in Excel and tuck the sheet away in a file cabinet.

I use this page for multiple purposes, such as calling the roll, writing the time that late students arrive, and noting whether students have submitted homework. If a student forgets the textbook, I put “x” next to their name under the BOOK column. Each time they use a cell phone or sleep in class, I put “x” in the PHONE and SLEEPING columns, respectively. For these last two, I may have to record more than one instance during one class session. The records are not kept surreptitiously: I make a point of informing students at the time that they are being penalized.

For each course, I have an Excel file that contains two sheets: the Daily Record Sheet and Records. The latter looks like a roll book with entries for each student on each date. There are additional areas for tracking failure to bring textbook, cell phone usage and sleeping in class. Because the cells in the two sheets are linked, the values in the Daily Record Sheet automatically update when data is entered in Records. I use the Excel commands *sum* and *countif* to keep running totals for each student.

### 2.4 Seating

Every class I assign the students to different partners and put them in different seats around the room. Ideally, students will work with a new partner every class. The seating pattern resembles a horseshoe, with most of the seats in the middle left empty (Appendix 3). This arrangement makes it easy for the instructor to walk around the class to observe and listen to

students as they engage in pairwork and groupwork.

Rearranging people prevents obstreperous political blocs from forming. Some students enjoy sitting in the back and talking with their friends. Separating these students and assigning them to partners outside of their social clique improves the productivity of the class.

I insist that students learn their partner's name and perhaps other personal information, such as their hometown. Students usually want me to remember their names, but that is a difficult task with so many new faces every semester. Because students find that sometimes they have trouble remembering even one name, they are more understanding when I forget theirs.

One social benefit of assigning students to new partners is that they gain familiarity with other names and faces. We usually feel more comfortable in an environment where we know people. I have found it feasible to have strict rules yet maintain a causal, friendly atmosphere.

## 2.5 Procedure

On the first day of class, I hand out the Rules and explain them with examples. On the second and third classes, I briefly review the rules, since usually some students are attending class for the first time. The procedure for a typical day is as follows:

- At the beginning of the class, I call out each student's name. The students respond with "yes" or "here." When there is no response, the student is marked *absent*. If it turns out that the student was present but did not answer, the student is marked *late*. I do not want to repeatedly call out student names; once should be enough. Students quickly learn to pay attention at the beginning of class for their name.
- I assign students to pairs of seats along the front and sides of the class (Appendix 3).
- As students work on exercises from the textbook, I walk around and observe. If a student has forgotten their textbook, I ask them where it is. Usually students explain

that they forgot it. I remind them of the rules concerning textbooks and then make a note on the record sheet.

- If I see a cell phone on a desk as I walk around, I ask the student to put it away, either in a pocket or a bag. At the beginning of class (within the first five minutes), I often don't apply a penalty since students sometimes forget to put away their phone.
- I ask students to submit homework. I look through the papers one by one and put a check next to the name of each student that has turned in homework. I ask students without a check next to their name whether they have the homework. Often they have not done it, but sometimes they have simply forgotten to hand it in.
- At the end of class, before dismissing students, I remind those that forgot their textbook to bring it next time. I advise students that fell asleep to bring coffee or tea if they have trouble staying awake. I ask students that used their cell phone to refrain from doing so next time.
- After each class, I enter the data in the spreadsheet.

At the end of the semester, I use the data in Excel to calculate final grades. Penalties apply only to the student's classroom participation grade, and do not affect test and homework scores.

#### **4. FAQ and FHO (frequently heard objections)**

These are some of the questions and comments that have come up when I have presented this material.

Schools let you use this approach?

I have never had any complaints about this system from either students or

administrators. The rules are common sense. It is hard for students to argue that they are paying attention and learning when they are sleeping or playing with their cell phone. Forgetting a textbook impedes participation and is an inconvenience to pair- and group-work partners. By the way, I have never failed a student simply for having slept in class, played with their phone, or forgotten their textbook. This behavior only lowers their participation grade, which comprises about one-third of their overall grade. Students fail because of poor attendance and poor performance.

Students really improve their behavior?

Many do, some don't. No system is 100% effective. Eliminating problematic behavior is an idealistic goal. Reducing its occurrence is a realistic one.

Sometimes students give a reason for using their cell phones. What do you say to them?

If they are using the phone to check the time or look up a word in a dictionary, I tell them that they can ask me the time or find out the meaning of a word from me. (I wouldn't apply a penalty the first time in such cases.) I prefer that they put the phone away, since it can easily become a distraction.

What if students are late because of the bus or subway?

I ask students to produce a slip of paper from the driver or station agent. With the proper documentation, they are not penalized. My intention is to encourage responsible behavior when matters are beyond someone's control.

Some teachers don't excuse lateness regardless of the reason. I prefer to apply to students the same standards that I apply to myself. As a teacher, if you were late to class because of the bus or train, would you deem it a reasonable excuse?



What if students close their eyes for just a couple of seconds, or take a quick peek at their phone?

That's a judgment call. Law enforcement officers do not pull over every driver that marginally exceeds the speed limit. In the same way, I can overlook minor infractions, especially when I have greater matters on my mind (such as teaching). The rules don't exist for their own sake, but for getting students to understand that their behavior has an impact on their learning and thus their grade.

Why not take cell phones away from students?

The cell phone is their property, so it should remain in their possession. If something happened to it while I had it, I would be at fault. I'd rather kick the student out of class if they cannot refrain from using a cell phone.

What do you care if students sleep or quietly use their phone? They aren't interfering with the class.

In a lecture with 100+ students, it wouldn't matter so much, but language classes are different because they are interactive. My class involves mostly pair work and group work, which are not effective if students do not participate.

What about other behavior, such as incessantly chatting with other students while the instructor is talking?

You could penalize students, but I usually ask the students to either be quiet, or to leave the classroom. Some schools do not allow students to be dismissed from the classroom. In that case, I would consider such a rule for the sake of students who are trying to learn.

Before creating more rules, consider the words of Karel von Wolferen in reference to the innumerable rules imposed on grade school students (1989, p.122): "It is clear that many of

these rules were designed on the principle that more rules mean fewer disciplinary problems. This was, at least partly, a miscalculation. The lawyers and Nikkyoso [schoolteacher union] see a direct connection between meaningless rules and pupils who resort to violence against their teachers and each other.”

Just as you don't want student behavior to become unmanageable, you don't want rule-making to get out of hand. New rules do not buttress existing ones, whereas an excess of rules dilutes their potency and breeds recalcitrance. Rules do not create discipline; teachers and students do.

Don't students get tired of moving around to different seats at the beginning of class?

At first they are unsure of its purpose because they do not move around in other classes. However, they do get used to being assigned a seat and to having a different partner every class. Students have reported in class surveys that they enjoyed meeting their classmates.

I don't like rules or enforcing them.

I don't like rules much either, but concluded that I had no choice. Behavioral problems were getting out of hand. I was tired of scolding students for playing with their phone, trying to get students to stay awake, or reminding them to bring their textbooks. If you can address these problems without rules or penalties, please do so. If you can't, then make sure you lay down the rules right at the start.

Alex Kerr (2001, p. 293) holds that “obedience is largely what Japanese education is about.” I do not want my classes to follow suit. I'm not interested in mind control, but behavior restriction during the class. I try to apply rules evenly and fairly to all students, regardless of attitude or scholastic ability. My goal is to prevent disruptions that will ruin the learning opportunities of others.

Have you tried negotiating the rules with the students?

No, I haven't, though I know other instructors that have negotiated rules with success. If you believe that you can arrive at a workable agreement, go ahead and solicit input on rules and penalties. Of course, rules should be kept within parameters set by the university administration.

How do students react to your approach?

Some students show obvious distaste, but most accept the rules as a normal part of school life. Students have appreciated the chance to bring coffee or tea. Once, on the last day of an English course that met at 1 p.m. (i.e., nap time), the students gave me 25 bottles of coffee, one from each student. The whole class had chipped in as a gesture of thanks.

Don't you spend an inordinate amount of time tracking and recording this data?

Setting up the spreadsheets takes time. During the first three or four weeks, as students establish new habits, there are more rule violations to record. However, over the course of the semester, students adjust, and recordkeeping gets speedier: There are fewer violations, so I copy and paste a lot of columns in Excel. Since I use this data to calculate grades, the time is an investment whose benefits I realize at the conclusion of the course. The following semester, I reuse the template and plug in new student names.

You punish students for failure. Wouldn't it be psychologically more effective to reward success?

Probably, but I don't feel obliged to reward students for doing something they should do anyway, i.e., the bare minimum. If you want to give students a carrot, here are a couple of suggestions: a bonus for perfect attendance (never absent or late), and a bonus to students that bring their textbooks every time. The bonus could increase their participation grade, or earn

something concrete, such as a book certificate.

I don't have these problems with my students. Why do you think that is?

Are you teaching at a high-level university, or in a department with a more stringent entrance examination? Students in these classes tend to have gained self-discipline in the course of clearing the hurdle of examination preparation. They have an incentive to follow the rules of the system: Doing so in the past has led them to success. By the time these students enter university, the habits of discipline are well-engrained. That said, the student population is changing, and you may encounter behavior problems in the future.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This article has presented an approach to handling some of the disruptive student behavior that university teachers in Japan may encounter. The atmosphere of the university classroom has changed and will continue to do so. Disruptive behavior is not going to diminish, certainly not on its own. There is no magic bullet for classroom discipline, but rules alone are not universally adequate. In some settings, penalties are necessary for students to take the rules seriously.

It may seem burdensome to enforce rules and apply penalties, but there is a compelling need to maintain an atmosphere conducive to learning. Alex Kerr (2001, p. 299) describes Japanese university as a place where “there is no need to study, because grading is lenient. ... Since a university education matters so little for [the student's] future, the next four years spent on it are sheer play.” Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that many students treat classes and the efforts of professors as frivolous. Going easy on problems at first and getting tough later on can never work in this context. It is better to strictly enforce discipline at the outset and then ease up afterward.

Just as important as student needs are teacher needs. Discipline sustains something invaluable to education: teacher dedication. I find it easier to maintain my dedication in classes that have fewer disciplinary problems. I hope that the ideas in this article help you maintain yours.

### **NOTES**

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### **REFERENCES**

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## APPENDIX 1

# THE RULES

### Textbook

- You must have a textbook. If you do not have a textbook already, you must buy a new one.
- Bring your textbook to every class.
- Each time you do not bring your book, your participation grade will go down by 2%.

### Sleeping in class

- Do not sleep in class.
- Each time you sleep in class, your participation grade will go down by 3%.

### Cellular Phone

- Do not use cellular phones in class.
- Each time you use a cellular phone in class, your participation grade will go down by 1%.

### Attendance, Absence, and Lateness

- Class starts at 10:30 a.m.
- If you do not answer when your name is called during roll call, you will be marked late.
- If you come in after 10:40 a.m., you will be marked absent.
  
- Inform the teacher of planned absences *before* you miss a class.
- Give the teacher the necessary pieces of paper *before* the class you miss.
  
- Being late three times is the same as one absence.
- Absences lower your participation grade.
- If you miss four or more classes, you fail the course automatically.
- It is possible to fail the class with three or fewer absences.

### **Example**

There are 15 class meetings. Let's say you miss three classes, forget your textbook two times (-2% x 2), sleep in class one time (-3%), and use your cell phone two times (-1% x 2).

Participation grade =  $100\% - 4\% - 3\% - 2\% = 91\%$

Three absences:  $(15 - 3)/15 = 80\%$  attendance

Final Participation Grade =  $91\% \times 80\% = 72.8\%$

# 授業の規則

授業の決まりを守ること。

## 教科書

- この授業の教科書を持っていなければ新しいのを買います。
- 授業には必ず教科書を持って来ます。
- 教科書を持って来なければ参加点数が2パーセント下がります。

## 授業中の居眠り

- 授業中には絶対に居眠りはしません。
- 授業中に寝ると参加点数は3パーセント下がります。

## 携帯電話

- 授業中に携帯電話をしません。
- 授業中に携帯電話を使うと参加点数は1パーセント下がります。

## 出席、欠席、遅刻

- このクラスは午前十時三十分に始まります。(10:30 AM)
- 出席を確認している時に返事がなければ、遅刻と見なされます。
- 午前10:40分以降は授業に来ても欠席となります。
  
- 欠席するクラスの前に欠席すると先生に伝えてください。
- 欠席するクラスの前に先生に適当な用紙を渡してください。
  
- 遅刻三回は欠席一回に相当します。
- 欠席すると、参加点数が下がります。
- 四回以上欠席すると自動的に授業は落第となります。
- 三回以下の欠席の場合も授業を落第する可能性があります。

## 例

この授業は15回会います。あなたは3回に欠席して、2回に教科書を持ってこなくて(−2% x 2)、1回に授業中に寝込んで(−3%)、2回に携帯電話を使いました(−1% x 2)。

$$\text{参加点数} = 100\% - 4\% - 3\% - 2\% = 91\%$$

$$\text{欠席3回} : (15 - 3) / 15 = 80\% \text{出席率}$$

$$\text{総合参加点数} = 91\% \times 80\% = 72.8\%$$

## APPENDIX 2

Note: All names are fictitious.

| <b>Eng III 10:30 a.m. Monday</b> |          |                   | <b>11/22</b> |               |                 |              |             |
|----------------------------------|----------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|
| Semester 2 – 2009                |          |                   | Class #7     |               |                 |              |             |
|                                  |          |                   | <b>Late</b>  | <b>Absent</b> | <b>Sleeping</b> | <b>Phone</b> | <b>Book</b> |
| 1                                | 10908007 | Egawa Kaoru       | 10:35        |               |                 |              | 1           |
| 2                                | 10908008 | Fujimoto Nanako   |              | 1             |                 |              |             |
| 3                                | 10908012 | Hatate Kanae      |              |               |                 |              | ×           |
| 4                                | 10908016 | Hoshino Yuuji     | 3            | 2             |                 |              |             |
| 5                                | 10908019 | Itou Tetsuya      | 3            | 2             |                 |              |             |
| 6                                | 10908020 | Iwasaki Yasuhiro  |              | ×             |                 |              |             |
| 7                                | 10906006 | Iwasaki Yumi      | 1            | 1             |                 | 1            |             |
| 8                                | 10907008 | Kawahara Masanari | 2            | 4             |                 |              |             |
| 9                                | 10905014 | Kimura Naoya      | 2            | 1             |                 |              |             |
| 10                               | 10905020 | Kuniyasu Daiki    | 6            |               |                 |              |             |
| 11                               | 10906020 | Morozumi Kie      | 1            | 1             |                 | ××           |             |
| 12                               | 10905093 | Murata Shiori     | 4            |               |                 |              |             |
| 13                               | 10906034 | Nagata Ai         | 3            | 1             |                 |              |             |
| 14                               | 10905033 | Nakahara Natsumi  |              | 3             |                 |              | 1           |
| 15                               | 10905044 | Satou Kousuke     | 1            | 1             |                 |              |             |
| 16                               | 10907045 | Satou Tsubasa     |              | 4             |                 |              |             |
| 17                               | 10905053 | Sayama Yui        |              | 1             |                 |              |             |
| 18                               | 10905056 | Sugawara Gaku     | 4            |               |                 |              |             |
| 19                               | 10906061 | Suzuki Hiroki     | 10:37        | 3             |                 |              |             |
| 20                               | 10905069 | Tadano Satomi     |              | 1             |                 |              |             |
| 21                               | 10907073 | Tanikawa Ami      |              |               |                 |              |             |
| 22                               | 10906083 | Tomoda Yuuma      |              |               |                 |              |             |
| 23                               | 10908089 | Urano Ayumi       |              |               |                 |              |             |
| 24                               | 10908091 | Watanabe Youko    |              | 2             |                 |              |             |
| 25                               | 10908093 | Yamada Yui        |              | 3             |                 |              |             |
| 26                               | 10908100 | Yoshida Yuuta     | 5            |               |                 | 1            |             |



### APPENDIX 3

#### Chalkboard

| Instructor |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |
|------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|
| 1a         | 1b | 7a | 7b | 8a | 8b | 9a | 9b | 10a | 10b |
| 2a         | 2b |    |    |    |    |    |    | 11a | 11b |
| 3a         | 3b |    |    |    |    |    |    | 12a | 12b |
| 4a         | 4b |    |    |    |    |    |    | 13a | 13b |
| 5a         | 5b |    |    |    |    |    |    | 14a | 14b |
| 6a         | 6b |    |    |    |    |    |    | 15a | 15b |

A seating diagram for a class of 30 students. The students are arranged in twos (1a/1b, 2a/2b), a setup that lends itself readily to pair work activities. Because of the space between desks and the wall, it is much easier to walk around the sides of the classroom to observe students than it is to navigate between desks.