Handling Office Hours

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After attending this session, you should be able to:

1. Explain the purpose of office hours to someone who is not familiar.
2. Integrate three strategies into office hours for more effective teaching.
3. Develop an approach for handling sticky situations.

During this session, think about approaches to office hours that are:

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Write down at least 3 strategies for office hours to make them more effective:

1. 
2. 
3. 

Action items:

☐ Read your syllabus to identify course policies about which your students may ask.
☐ Develop a 30-sec introduction that describes the value of attending office hours.
☐ Contact an Engineering Teaching Consultant (ETC) to discuss your office hours.

Plenary Resources: tiny.cc/plenary
Concurrent Resources: tiny.cc/concurrent
Workshops/Seminars: tiny.cc/seminars

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Role play instructions (for Student A/B Only)

The goal of this role-play is to experience what office hours may be like, either as a student with questions or as a GSI/IA trying to answer those questions. There are four roles in this role-play:

- One GSI/IA, whose job it is to lead the students to the answer (but not give it to them!)
- Two students: one who wants a good understanding of the problem (content question) and one who has a question about course logistics such as make up exams, deadline extension, etc. (non-content question).
- One observer, who will take notes and report to the class during the debrief.

You will have 6 minutes to complete the role-play. After the role-play, we will have a large group discussion about effective strategies the ‘GSI’ or ‘IA’ used during the role-play, and what he/she might have done differently.

If you are role-playing the GSI/IA, remember that you have a strict time limit to help your students. That doesn’t mean they should know the answer at the end, but that they have an approach to finding the solution. Students may also ask you other made up questions about the (non-existent) course; feel free to make up a (reasonable) answer, while keeping in mind the time constraint.

If you are role-playing a student, feel free to ask the GSI/IA about something not related to the problem (e.g. about exams, something else from lecture, etc.). The point is to simulate the demands and time constraints an actual office hours would have. You can make your question as complicated as you want, but remember that you still want the solution to the problem below.

Problem:

You have 12 marbles. They are all identical except one, which is either heavier or lighter than the others. On a balance scale, you have weighed 4 marbles against 4 other marbles, and found their weights to be equal. With just two more weighings, how can you determine which remaining marble is the odd-one-out and whether it is heavier or lighter than the others?

(Student A STOP READING HERE)

(Student B Continue to Page 3)
Role-play solution  
(for GSI Only)

Problem:

You have 12 marbles. They are all identical except one, which is either heavier or lighter than the others. On a balance scale, you have weighed 4 marbles against 4 other marbles, and found their weights to be equal. With just two more weighings, how can you determine which remaining marble is the odd-one-out and whether it is heavier or lighter than the others?

Solution:

Note that the “obvious” solution of weighing only the 4 odd marbles does not work, as you cannot tell whether the marble is heavier or lighter than the rest.

The key to this question is to notice that not only do you know that the odd-one-out is one of the four remaining marbles (the odd marbles), you also know that the eight weighed marbles are all normal (the normal marbles). You can therefore use them as the standard to figure out whether the odd-marble-out is heavier or lighter:

1. Weigh 3 normal marbles against 3 odd marbles.
   1. If the two sides balance out, the remaining unweighed marble is the odd-one-out. Weigh it against a normal marble to figure out if it is heavier or lighter.
   2. If the scale tips, you now know whether the odd-marble-out is heavier or lighter (since the 3 marbles on the other side are normal), but not which of the 3 marbles is the odd-one-out. Weigh two of them against each other.
      a. If the two sides balance out, then the remaining marble is the odd-one-out, and it is heavier (or lighter, depending on step 1.2) than the others.
      b. If the scale tips, the heavier (or lighter, depending on step 1.2) marble is the odd one out.
Role play instructions:  
Office hours scenarios  
(For Student B) 

The following scenarios illustrate situations that a student might ask you during your office hours. Think about how you might respond to some of the questions. What kind of approach would you take? Might you need to consult with the professor of the course? Is this something you can handle on your own? Are you aware of the school-wide or departmental policies that might relate to this matter?

1. This is week 6 in the semester. The midterm is tomorrow. A seemingly nervous student comes to office hours for the first time. This student is embarrassed to tell you, the GSI, that he hasn’t started studying yet because of his busy schedule. Your student wants to get some study tips for the midterm.

2. Your student received a bad grade on the midterm and visits you in office hours to find out what she can do to improve his grade. Student would also like you to review the material with them.

3. Your student wants to talk with you about some problems she is experiencing in the assigned group (one member is not contributing; one member seems to have a writing problem; the timing of the meetings are not meshing with the student’s schedule, etc.).

4. Your student comes to office hours to reschedule an exam because he is going to be out of town on a class field trip the day of the next exam.

5. Your student is interested in finding a mentor. Your student goes to office hours to see if you might be open to mentoring her. She has been impressed with your previous experiences, teaching, and overall demeanor.

6. Your student is appalled by the grade he received on a paper that he worked very hard on. He wants a re-grade.

7. Your student is questioning whether to stay in this major and goes to you, the GSI, for advice.

8. Your student has found remarks made in class (by the faculty member or by another student which the faculty member ignored) offensive. He visits you for advice on how to handle this.

9. Your student is questioning whether to drop the course after a bad midterm grade. This student wonders about the implications for financial aid and how a “W” is viewed when applying to grad school.

10. Your student has asked you for assistance because of a learning disability. This will require classroom or test accommodations.
Sticky situations for student instructors

1. A student comes to every one of your office hours for help on the homework. This student usually has several questions for each homework problem. These questions range from trivial to complex. The student lets you know that he/she wants an A in the class and wants to complete every homework 100% correctly. In addition to attending your office hours, the student has now taken to emailing you several times a day asking questions about the material and homework. How will you set limits on your time for your students? How will you let your students know that they are responsible for the answers they provide on their homework? How do you respond to “is my answer correct?” or “is my answer okay to receive credit?” How do you talk to this student without being condescending? What resources should you let the student know about?

2. The day before the first test in your class, a student personally discloses that they have a learning disability and require extra time on the exam. However, the student does not have the official documentation from the University of Michigan’s Services for Students with Disabilities. How would you handle the immediacy of the situation with the exam being tomorrow? Who would you refer the student to?

3. You are out at a bar on South U with your friends. One of your students approaches you and offers to buy you a drink. Do you accept? As you are chatting the student brings up the test they had recently taken and how they were worried about their performance because their mother has been very ill and they have been unable to focus on studying. When you go home that night, you see that the student has requested that you add them as a friend on Facebook. How will you balance the professional and personal aspects of being a student instructor? What are your rules for online relationships with your students?
Handling Office Hours

What is the value of office hours?

What is the Purpose of Office Hours?
- Follow-up on course materials.
- Answer questions about the homework or other course material.
- Teach the students good study habits.
- Help the students with exam preparation.
- Clarify information from lecture and elaborate on specific points.
- Provide additional mentoring aside from course issues; on life, graduate school, potential jobs, etc.
- For individualized learning.
- To act as a resource for students.

Why Would a Student Attend Office Hours?
- A student needs help completing the homework or answering homework questions.
- The GSI/IA runs effective office hours by providing assistance to everyone who comes.
- The GSI/IA can explain material covered in class better than the professor can.
- The student cannot work with the professor.
- The GSI/IA provides answers to the homework problem.
- Students go to office hours to talk to other students in the class to get their perspective or help; office hours act as a community meeting place.
- The GSI/IA encourages students to go to office hours.
- The one-on-one interaction during office hours may help students clarify their questions and learn better.

Why Would a Student NOT Attend Office Hours?
- The student likes to study independently and do homework on his or her own.
- There is a stigma about asking for help.
- The office hours are often too crowded.
- Students are uncomfortable with the GSI/IA (the GSI/IA can be condescending, intimidating, etc).
- Confusion about the time and place, students do not know where the office is and/or the GSI/IA has not made it explicitly clear what time they hold office hours.
- Inconvenient times for the student (early Monday morning).
- The GSI/IA does not use the time efficiently (e.g. the GSI/IA spends a lot of time on trivial points; the GSI/IA only answers one student’s questions at a time).
Logistics and policies for office hours

_Suggestion: talk to your teaching faculty member._

1. How many office hours per week will you hold? Will you have in-person vs. virtual office hours? Will they all be in one day or spread out across multiple days?

2. When will you hold your office hours? Will they be on the night before the homework is due? Will you hold additional hours before exams?

3. Where will you hold your office hours? Will you find a classroom with blackboard, be in a computer lab, or your personal office? Is there an official GSI office for holding office hours?

4. What is your e-mail policy? Will you provide your phone number to students? Will you accept Facebook friendship requests from your students? _Suggestion: let the students know of these boundaries early._

5. What expectations do you have for students who come to your office hours? What happens if a student just wants you to give out homework answers? Will you ask them to prepare questions ahead of time?

6. How will you fairly and efficiently handle a large group of students during office hours? What happens if at the end of your office hours, there are students who still have not been helped?

7. Will you hold extra office hours at students’ requests?

8. How responsive will you be via email? _Suggestion: establish an email response policy. For example, set email format for students, e.g., include course title in email subject, and have them number their questions. In turn, you will respond within 24 hours._

In addition to your own policies above, familiarize yourself with your instructor’s policies such that yours do not conflict with or compromise his/her policies. Also familiarize yourself with university policies (e.g., email policy, academic integrity, GEO contract, course policy, confidentiality requirements, prerequisite policy, etc.).

_Finally, what would you do if you started to spend more than your appointment fraction per week?_
Things to consider when setting up office hours

- Coordination with other GSI(s)/IA(s) and professor – if possible, stagger office hours so that you don’t have your office hours on the same day or at the same time.

- Holding separate office hours for review or conceptual questions and homework questions—this can help students who are struggling with the material not get drowned out by a myriad of homework questions.

- Check with the primary instructor how much help you are allowed to give students—can you discuss the actual homework problems or just problems similar to the homework problems? Are you allowed to tell them when they’re on the right track or when they’ve made a mistake? If multiple GSIs/IA, discuss how they conduct office hours, how they guide students in problem solving, and how much information and help you provide (in the interest of consistency and fairness).

- If you have a class with projects, consider breaking some of your office hours up into small appointments so that one group cannot dominate or take a majority of your time while others are neglected.
Formats of office hours

One-on-one/small groups

Pros
- Individual attention
- Less intimidating to students who don’t want to ask questions in front of their peers
- Gain insights into the class that might not be gained by addressing them in a large group
- More comfortable for GSIs/IA’s who do not like to formally lecture

Cons
- Less efficient than meeting with large number of students.
- Less consistent information delivery.
- Repetitive when same questions are asked
- Sometimes difficult to resist simply giving answers

Discussion/review session

Pros
- Service many students simultaneously in a time efficient manner
- Students are reassured that they are not the only one that did not understand “that” concept in class
- Stimulate students to learn from each other

Cons
- Students can get answers simply by coming to office hours, without trying the problems themselves
- Must manage excess collaboration depending on course guidelines (e.g. must all work be done independently)

Impromptu face-to-face or email/CTools chat

Pros
- Students appreciate availability
- Email allows for written explanation which can be good if there is a language barrier for either the GSI/IA or student

Cons
- Possibly intrusive
- Can pose a time management issue
- Number of student emails can be overwhelming.
- Difficult to express mathematical terms.