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Against “Flexibility”: Tightening the Cage of Academic Rigor with Instructors’ Responsibility and Rationality

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Abstract

The end of the COVID-19 pandemic is in sight, but it brought tremendous challenges and opportunities to academia. This paper analyzes the equilibrium between teaching laxity and strictness and corresponding outcomes through the lens of the approach-avoidance framework. On one side, instructors are likely to allow flexibility in course policies and procedures, given the learners’ difficulties amid the pandemic. On the other hand, however, this intention could lead to a lack of control in class and eventually jeopardize academic integrity and rigor. Therefore, we explicate the motivation mechanism and the adverse effects of teaching laxity. Furthermore, a portfolio of teaching methods and mapping based on psychological distance and behavioral control theories is presented. This research contributes to a further understanding of pedagogical innovations in the Information Systems (IS) domain in the unprecedented crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, IS Education, Laxity and Strictness, Academic Integrity and Rigor, Approach-Avoidance

1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the COVID-19 pandemic is near, but it has profoundly changed academia. Colleges and their stakeholders learned and grew from the challenges and difficulties caused by the global pandemic while gradually adopting the “new normal”(Barnes, 2020; Carroll & Conboy, 2020; Nah & Siau, 2020). Many universities have

followed states on lifting mask mandates, while some others will remain in place as a pandemic precaution (Moody, 2022). Meanwhile, the school administration offers instructors more autonomy and flexibility than before in adjusting instructional activities and learning assessments. For example, many school administrators recommended choosing asynchronous lectures and system-embedded proctoring plugins rather

than synchronous lectures and commercial proctoring services.

This type of flexibility is in recognition that students may be ill, providing care for family members who are ill, or they may not have exclusive access to a computer and Internet service at the scheduled time. Besides, many students lost their part-time work on campus and in restaurants and struggled with personal financial difficulties (Brewster, 2020). Due to the infection dynamics and public policy uncertainties, school policies and procedures adapting to the epidemic are possibly inconsistent and delayed, leading to instructors' fears, confusion, and frustrations amid teaching from home. The instructor laxity could arise as instructors are disoriented or cannot expeditiously adjust themselves to the new teaching situation. In this sense, instructors may loosen the assessment rules while providing convenience for both sides. While we acknowledge the importance of flexibility (c.f. Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA in higher education) for accommodating students with disabilities, we argue that this *born-in-the-pandemic flexibility* may implicitly "support and satisfy" students who attempt to avoid heavy lectures and workload. A critical problem suffices – academic integrity and rigor can be impaired while the school's academic reputation can be challenged if the laxity in teaching and learning spreads and the pandemic.

In the following section, our discussion will revolve around a possible explanation of instructor laxity in teaching from home, drawing on the theoretical framework of approach-avoidance dynamics. More importantly, a portfolio of methods based on psychological distance and behavioral control theories will be introduced to mitigate the adverse effects of instructor and student laxity. Relevant teaching experience and examples will be illustrated, as well.

2. APPROACH-AVOIDANCE DYNAMICS IN TEACHING FROM HOME

The approach-avoidance dynamics have been recognized as a fundamental framework in motivation and decision theories (Carver & White, 1994; Elliot, 2006; Liang & Xue, 2009; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992). The term "approach" refers to moving near towards something, whereas "avoid" means keeping away from something. As shown in Figure 1, this research adopts the approach-avoidance dynamics in the context of teaching from home.

	Instructor Laxity	Instructor Strictness
Student Strictness	Arbitrary Laxity	Complete Rigor
Student Laxity	Collusive Laxity	Discontinued Rigor

Table 1: The Matrix of Instructor-Student Rigor and Laxity

There are two competing forces of positive and negative valence that act on an instructor simultaneously. On one side, instructors have to accomplish additional work, as most face-to-face courses have been interrupted and changed into an online model. For example, instructors have to reorganize learning resources, record videos, deliver virtual lectures, and set up virtual office hours. On the other side, instructors need to help address students' personal issues (e.g., illness, technical issues, or other pandemic-relevant instances), possible infection issues for themselves, and domestic distractions and interruptions (Myers et al. 2020). As such, some instructors may tend to choose a temporary, easy teaching model, such as reducing student workloads and offering grade leniency. Saliently, instructor-student interactions have been reduced because of reduced mandatory tasks (e.g., face-to-face office hours and class activities) and increased leeway for virtual activities (e.g., virtual office hours and class activities). From this, instructor laxity can undermine teaching quality while hindering students' motivation in pursuing academic rigor with enthusiasm amid the pandemic.

As illustrated in Table 1, we propose a classification of laxity and rigor based on the interactions between instructors and students. *Arbitrary laxity* is formulated as the instructor would pursue ease and convenience in teaching from home, despite that some students would like to keep strict class requirements and assessments. In contrast, instructor laxity can often lead to *collusive laxity* - when laxity exists in both teaching and learning. Students can do less or avoid work with minor or minimal punishment (e.g., lower course grades and course failures) because of loosened course policies implemented by instructors. Indeed, *complete rigor* cannot be achieved without either instructor consent and student support – if instructors adhere to strict and rigorous learning requirements and assessments, students may avoid them by using the pandemic as an excuse, then ensuring the academic rigor is likely to be discontinued (*discontinued rigor*).

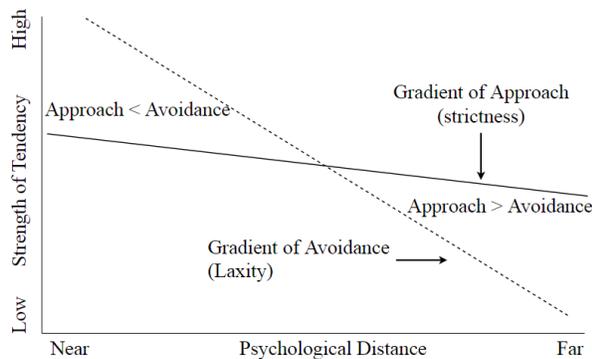


Figure 1: The Approach-Avoidance Dynamics in Teaching from Home (Adapted from Miller, 1944)

Whereas instructors may give academic laxity and excessive “flexibility,” most instructors, or instructors most of the time, we believe, are dedicated to their career since teaching is not only a knowledge-intensive, sophisticated job but a prestigious profession that aims at instructing, inspiring, and illuminating students, even in difficult times like the present. While it is not mandatory, many instructors assume more roles and shoulder more responsibilities in supporting students to face challenges while maintaining the rigor of the learning community. Instructors have a solid intention to approach challenging but meaningful work while being distracted by “flexible” teaching at the cost of academic rigor. Indeed, instructors are experiencing a conflict between approaching academic rigor (i.e., avoiding laxity) and avoiding arduous work (i.e., approaching laxity).

In this approach-avoidance conflict, one needs to recognize that as the psychological distance extends (i.e., the degree to which people feel removed from a phenomenon or an object, see Figure 1), the slope of avoidance becomes steep, indicating the tendency to be lax is diminished. In contrast, the slope of avoidance will move slowly, as the tendency to be strict with academic requirements is strengthened or strictness becomes easier to achieve. Further, in this case, we would see when approach (strictness and rigor) is more robust than avoidance, eventually.

To that end, two approaches can be used to promote the advancement of rigor rather than laxity. The first method is to devalue the valence of laxity. For instructors, it can be intervened by a series of self-consciousness and self-suggestion when instructors are conscious of their environment (e.g., how the pandemic influences the learning context and learners) and of themselves (e.g., how should we adapt to this

situation). For example, talking to yourself – “Cyberloafing to me is relatively meaningless as a responsible professor who loves his or her career and students,” “I’m an educator who adheres to his or her teaching philosophy and principles.”

Another method – extending the psychological distance, includes more practical strategies and tactics. For instance, Rebecca Hamilton (2015) illustrated three aspects that people can adjust the distance in the workplace. Likewise, in work/teaching from home, we can apply these good practices. First, instructors can manage the hypothetical distance, imagining that an event is likely or unlikely. For instance, if one wanted to become a responsible and respected professor among students – high teaching evaluations, good word-of-mouth, and self-value actualization, then he or she would avoid laxity while moving toward strictness with extra efforts. The unlikely circumstances, such as failure to gain tenure or cutoff, will drive an instructor to pursue a high quality of instruction.

Also, we can “manually” gear the temporal and spatial distances toward strictness rather than laxity. For example, using self-imposed deadlines and schedules, i.e., in the weekly announcement, informing students that you will post a video about the special topic about forecast methods and COVID-19 infection cases, or there is a virtual Q&A session you will be there, at least. From this, instructors can visualize future events and detailed procedures to accomplish the goal. As for spatial distance, an excellent way to manipulate it is to choose a suitable place to focus on the teaching – e.g., your study room in the early morning or evening, when and where you can avoid domestic influence and interruptions. Social distance (not to be confused with public health social distance for reducing virus spread) can be utilized to increase virtual communications and interactions with your students, colleagues, and other stakeholders in the learning community. Sharing is a good thing; information, knowledge, feelings, ideas, thoughts, and, more importantly, support are all encouraged. The potential benefits of social distance are experience and skills to promote teaching from home and psychological well-being.

3. THREE METHODS TO MITIGATE THE LAXITY IN TEACHING

This distance manipulation can be replaced with each other or applied in a portfolio. Hence, we synopsise and suggest three practical methods (3S methods) to mitigate laxity while improving

academic strictness and rigor – *the self method, the solid method, and the systematic method* (Table 2). One stream of literature is the behavioral control theory extensively applied in Information Systems studies (e.g., Jaworski, 1988; Kirsch, 1997; Choudhury & Sabherwal, 2003; Soh et al., 2011). Briefly stated, the self method is based on an instructor’s responsibility and self-control. Besides estimating the likelihood of an event occurring (e.g., furloughs, layoff, tenure, promotion), one’s rumination and reflection on their career pursuit largely determine their approach-avoidance intention. For that, a self method can be a good starting point for instructors to change the prior equilibrium of acceptance and avoidance.

Instead, the solid method relies on fixed and established rules and procedures in the teaching at home. It can be directed by the school administrator or self-imposed. It is fixed schedules, timelines, and “places” to meet, rather than a flexible manner that an instructor can arbitrarily modify or cancel. Hence, managing temporal and special distances is essential in this method.

Lastly, the systematic method is a social solution to engage with significant stakeholders in the learning system. With that, each member can be mutually supported and monitored. Also, this method embodies the spirit of learner-based instruction, as shown in many pedagogy studies (e.g., Barr & Tagg, 1995; Landry et al., 2008; Saulnier et al., 2008; Weimer, 2002). In this method, instructors need to leverage social distance management.

4. CASE ANALYSIS AND COURSE MAPPING

This section provides a course mapping for the Information Systems discipline to discuss the challenges, teaching practices, and methods applied.

Principles of IS/IT Management Course Description

This course mainly provides a solid foundation and overview of information systems in business and emphasizes how competitive strategies for companies are formulated and implemented using a combination of information technologies.

Challenge

As an entry-level IS course, one of the biggest challenges is the large number of topics and concepts related to information systems, IT strategies, and emerging technologies to be taught.

The Self Method (Responsibility-based)	
<i>Actors</i>	Instructors – the re-designers of course policies and procedures
<i>Activities</i>	Instructors perform their roles and responsibilities in adapting to teaching from home through practicing self-suggestion and self-control. The goal of the activities here is to address the instructor’s laxity. “Self-Control”
<i>Psy. Distance Adjust.</i>	Hypothetical distances, e.g., “I will make a good teacher.”
The Solid Method (Rule-based)	
<i>Actors</i>	Instructors and students – the strict implementers of the updated course policies and procedures
<i>Activities</i>	Instructors self-impose fixed schedules and deadlines to promote the accomplishment of teaching and learning tasks “Structural and Process Control”
<i>Psy. Distance Adjust.</i>	Temporal distances and spatial distances, e.g., “I have virtual office hours from 2 PM to 4 PM to meet with my students.”
The Systematic Method (Relationship-based)	
<i>Actors</i>	Instructors and students (i.e., co-learners) – the re-developer of course policies and procedures
<i>Activities</i>	Instructors work with students, as well as other stakeholders in the learning community to share knowledge, feelings, thoughts while mitigating the laxity and inefficient learning “Social Control”
<i>Psy. Distance Adjust.</i>	Social distances, e.g., “I learned a lot about online teaching from my colleagues from virtual seminars, workshops, meetings, and interactions with my students in discussion forums.”

Table 2: Descriptions for Three Teaching Methods from Home

In addition, there are some unique challenges in teaching entry levels courses. For example, a considerable number of business students whose major is not CIS/MIS/IS/IT will also need to take this course. Hence, teaching the course entirely online might not be the best option during the pandemic.

Teaching Practice

It would be helpful to include emerging technologies, especially technologies playing an essential role during the pandemic, such as

machine learning for detection and diagnosis, big data analytics for tracking, supporting infrastructure, and blockchain technologies in business (He et al., 2021). Students will then have a better appreciation of how information systems can support and sharpen the business process. Additionally, faculty can take this opportunity to record a short video for each of the upper IS courses they are teaching.

Method Applied

The Solid Method. As a foundational course, it is appropriate to adopt the self method with fixed schedules and deadlines to promote instructors' teaching and learning tasks.

Business Data Networks & Security

Course Description

This course introduces networks and data communications, including the design, administration, and theory of local and wide area network systems. Students will learn to plan and design computer networks based on their understanding and lab practices using various network software. Topics include data communication technologies, network architectures, internetworking, protocols for data link, network, transport, and application layers, effective network design, planning, implementation, wireless technologies, network management, and security.

Challenge

It is challenging to show network models entirely online. Many of the activities designed for a lab environment will have to be converted online. This challenge dramatically increases the workload of faculty to convert lab-related materials online.

Teaching Practice

It will be helpful to include some hands-on activities online. Faculty may also incorporate small group projects into online activities.

Method Applied

The Self Method. In this course, instructors should perform their roles and responsibilities in adapting to teaching from home through practicing self-suggestion and self-control – that means, they need to do some extra work to set up the “virtual lab” for students, including seeking appropriate virtual software for students and troubleshoot their problems, often.

Database Management

Course Description

This course teaches students how to use data to stay competitive in a changing business environment. Topics include relational database

methodology, modeling, design, database administration, structured query language (SQL), data preparation for analysis, and current innovations and trends in the corporate environment (e.g., NoSQL, distributed data storage, blockchain).

Challenge

It is challenging to show students how to run SQL code without a lab setting.

Teaching Practice

Similar to the network course, it will be helpful to add virtual machines to students so that an online lab can be created. It will be beneficial to students to learn database management in a standard environment.

Method Applied

The Self Method. Again, in this course, instructors should perform their roles and responsibilities in adapting to teaching from home through practicing self-suggestion and self-control while going above and beyond their roles to support students in difficult times.

Systems Analysis & Design

Course Description

This course provides a comprehensive introduction to the strategies and technologies for building information systems in organizations. The course covers a general process for information system development such as analysis, design, development, implementation, and maintenance. Systems analysis and design tools will be used to understand information system issues and design the information systems that address the issues.

Challenge

It is challenging to explain different diagrams online. Also, it may be challenging to explain information systems-related issues online.

Teaching Practice

It will be helpful to pre-record some of the cases and then ask students to work as smaller teams to understand further the crucial steps and roles in the system analysis and design.

Method Applied

The Self Method. Like foundational and concepts-based courses, it will be important for faculty to be strict in implementing the updated course policies and procedures.

Cybersecurity Management

Course Description

This course focuses on the broad areas of descriptive, predictive, and prescriptive analyses to gain insight into an organization's functioning, make predictions, and prescribe courses of action. In addition, students learn to utilize contemporary analytics software and collect data from various sources.

Challenge

Like the network and database course, many activities designed for a lab environment will have to be converted online. This situation dramatically increases the workload on faculty to develop a virtual lab while moving learning resources and materials online.

Teaching Practice

It will be helpful to include some of the most recent cases related to cybersecurity so that students can develop a better understanding of the critical role of cybersecurity in the modern business world. Some special topics related to cybersecurity and privacy during the pandemic would be relevant and engaging for students who need to understand real-world examples.

Method Applied

The Self, Solid, Systematic Method. The reason is the hybrid nature of security courses in the IS domain – behavioral, managerial, and technical aspects. On the one hand, instructors need to reorganize and revamp the learning materials for behavioral and managerial security knowledge. On the other hand, instructors need to set up a "virtual lab" to help students achieve these technical learning outcomes. The systematic method is also appropriate for cybersecurity courses. Through this method, the instructors will need to work with students and other stakeholders to redesign the course. It is important as knowledge and trends in cybersecurity are constantly changing. Notably, COVID-19 brings additional challenges to cybersecurity. Thus, it will be helpful to be more flexible in this course.

Business Analytics

Course Description

This course focuses on the broad areas of descriptive, predictive, and prescriptive analyses to gain insight into an organization's functioning, make predictions, and prescribe courses of action. Students learn to utilize contemporary analytics software and collect data from a variety of sources.

Challenge

Students may need additional support in understanding the technical aspect of business analytics. Without face-to-face hands-on experiences, it is hard to learn the technical components online.

Teaching Practice

Instructors should convert some of the materials online and update some case analyses related to COVID, e.g., forecast analyses using confirmed cases data and vacation data from these public health agencies.

Method Applied

The Self Method. As the content is relatively stable during the pandemic. It would be reasonable to let instructors impose fixed schedules and deadlines to promote teaching and learning tasks.

IS/IT Capstone

Course Description

Using a team concept, students will analyze, design, create and implement a working information system for a public or private organization. Emphasis will be placed on IT project management, rapid application development, quality assurance, and implementation of the system.

Challenge

It is hard for students to accomplish projects in a virtual team.

Teaching Practice

Faculty could help students find potential clients/sponsors off-campus. Also, faculty can consider working with other departments on campus and find internal projects that can fulfill the requirements of the project.

Method Applied

The Systematic Method. It is clear that flexibility should be provided in the course activities. Also, instructors should ardently work with students and external clients to identify a project that can serve the purpose of the capstone.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Like many other studies, this study has several limitations that can be used for future research. First, while this study includes both instructors' and students' laxity and strictness in its framework, it can shed light on more details about the interaction between instructors and students while coping with the laxity caused by the pandemic and other contingent factors. In

addition to the three control methods, we proposed for the instructors, they should also be applicable to students. Nevertheless, the effects of the proposed methods on students may be different from that of instructors, particularly the self method and the solid method. Therefore, we would argue the critical role of instructors in promoting control for students, for example, enforcing the specific rules and learning goals for students at early stages while encouraging students to redesign the methods on their own. Taken together, the last method – the systematic method, should be the most efficient way to achieve complete rigor and mitigate collusive laxity since instructors and students can monitor, support, and encourage each other in maintaining the rigor of teaching and learning, toward a collaborative learning community. Second, this study relies heavily on a conceptual framework based on the approach-avoidance model and the teaching experience of several IS faculty contributed to this article. Hence, it is worthwhile to further theorize and examine the dynamics and driving factors of the classified rigor and laxity with empirical evidence. Lastly, while our study is situated in the context of the pandemic, future studies can look into instructors' and students' laxity and rigor during the normal time.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we acknowledge that instructor laxity, in the guise of flexibility, has been a popular excuse for avoiding adequate course preparation and design (possibly including extra and redundant workloads) in adapting to the interruptions due to the COVID-19 epidemic from our teaching experience. Such laxity should be mitigated and reduced in that this could hurt our professional standards and performance, school reputation and enrollments, and, more importantly, our students' motivation to learn at this challenging time. Also, flexibility should be accommodated and given to our colleagues and students with disabilities and real needs. Inspired by the approach-avoidance conflict and behavioral control theories, we propose three methods for bridging the psychological distance in teaching from home and hope these teaching tips will be helpful in our community.

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