

Am i my brother's keeper? buddy approach in improving students' attendance

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative-phenomenological research was to determine the influence of 'buddy approach' in improving the classroom attendance of the students. It also wanted to identify the benefits and inconveniences brought by the approach. Suggestions of the students were also sought. Focus Group Discussion was used to obtain pertinent information from the participants. Also considered were the attendance records of other lecturers. It was conducted among 22 paired participants in General Foundation Program. Results revealed the 'buddy approach' generally improved students' attendance; however, accommodation's distance, waking up late, school bus service, traffic, and lack of motivation were indicators of absences in class. Interestingly, the 'buddy system' promoted cooperation, sharing, bonding and friendship beyond classroom setting but typically it created hassle for the few participants. Implementation of the approach to the entire college and addition of members were recommended.

Keywords: brother's keeper, buddy approach, attendance

1. Introduction

In the present day pedagogy, attendance of students in the classroom is no longer given importance. For students, attending class regularly is less significant for learning would be obtained through independent learning which the trend in the 21st education is. Worst, attendance is not included in the computation of class performance.

Students argued that since they pay for their tuitions, they should be given the decision whether to attend classes or not (Maizel, 2006) [22]. They argued that they can more learning even without attending the class in school (Schoenbrum 2007) [32]. They believe that they can better learn the schools' materials outside of the classroom (DeWitt and Storksdieck, 2008) [9].

Romer (1993) [30] Durden and Ellis (1998) [11] argued that absenteeism among students one of the many challenges faced by modern education particularly in higher education and Devadoos and Foltz (1996) [8] pointed out that absenteeism becomes a major problem for institutions. While Brocato (1989) [3] found that absenteeism directly affects the over-all class performance of students; and Credé, Roch, and Kieszczyńska (2010) [7] stated that class attendance is a predictor of grades.

In Gulf College, students' attendance is one of the recent problems. Full-time and working students alike take their absences whenever they wish despite the college's policy and teachers' constant reminders. Hence, this qualitative study was formulated to determine the whether the 'body-body approach' would improve the classroom attendance and performance of the students. Moreover, this study inquired from the participants possible suggestions to improve the approach.

1.1 Research Questions

This study aimed to determine the impact of 'buddy approach' in improving the classroom attendance of the students. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1) What are the advantages of "buddy system approach"?

- 2) What are the disadvantages of "buddy system approach"?
- 3) What suggestions the student-participants can offer to improve the "buddy system approach" in improving their attendance and class performance?

1.3 Theoretical Lens

This study was anchored on two different theories. The first was the *Interpersonal Theory* developed by the American psychologist, Stack Sullivan. This theory contended that individuals formed their personality within a social context. The author believed that without other people humans would have no personality. He said, "a personality can never be isolated from the complex of interpersonal relations in which the person lives and has his being" (Ford and Urban, 1963) [13]. In this study, it was presumed that paired-participants need to interact with each other whether inside or outside the classroom. This interaction allowed them to define themselves.

The second theory was the 'buddy system'. In this system, two individuals, the "buddies", operate as one unit to monitor, interact and help each other in attaining a certain task (What is buddy system, 2011) [39]. Historically, buddy system was first used in 1942. Paired-individuals have mutual arrangement to work together in finishing a job safely or knowledge is transferred effectively from one to the other (Merriam-Webster, 2017) [25]. The buddy system ignites friendship, belongingness, support and develops behavioral and social needs and self-confidence (Hughes and Carter, 2008) [19]; promotes sharing and collaboration (Anderson, Tenenbaum, Ramadorai, and Yourick, 2015) [1]; develops maturity (Fo and O'Donnell, 1974) [12]. In this study, it was presumed that paired-participants had mutual interaction between themselves through dialogue. It was also believed that participants collaborate and support each one and becoming committed for the welfare of the other.

2. Method

This section presents in detail the research design, instruments used in the study, how the study was conducted, who were the

participants, how the verisimilitudes were observed and the limitations of the study.

2.1 Research Design

This study used the qualitative-phenomenological method. Qualitative method was appropriate to this research because it obtained the personal and significant experiences of the participants with the 'buddy approach.' And the main sources of information were series of interviews (San Jose and Mortos, 2017) ^[31]. Moreover, qualitative approach was suitable because this study was not the end in itself. Another study may be conducted to determine the viability of the 'buddy approach' based on the suggestions of the study-participants. It was clear to me that the aim of this study was based not on statistical requirement because it focused on the processes (Mays and Pope, 1995) ^[23]. on how the 'buddy approach' enhanced students' attendance in class and performance. Moreover, this study described personal confessions, experiences, opinions, narratives and insights (Brinkman, 2014) ^[2] of the participants on the 'buddy system' used in class.

2.2 Instruments

In this qualitative research, I used interview particularly Focus Group Discussion among the students. A validated research guide questionnaire was made in obtaining the answers to the sub-problems presented in the research questions. The research guide questions were subjected to validation to make sure that research-participants could answer them with ease. According to King (1994) ^[20] interview guides may require participants to at least think of their answers. On the other hand, DiCicco and Crabtree (2006) ^[10] mentioned that interviewing as a method in qualitative method may be done in diverse perspective which may result to a wide ranging interviewing approach. Before the conduct of the Focus Group Discussion, students were asked to write essays about the 'buddy system'. The essay aimed to initially know the insights of the students. Thus, during the conduct of the FGD, study-participants had already knowledge about the questions. In addition to the interview-guide questionnaire, attendance sheets from other teachers who taught in the same batch students were obtained. Further, short random interviews were conducted among those teachers. These first-hand information were used to triangulate with the results of the FGD. Although I understand that most triangulation were conducted between mixed method, that is quantitative and qualitative methods, this cross-comparison of results from two different sources was also considered triangulation. This was so because my purpose of comparison was to cross-check whether the information I obtained had consistency or disparity.

2.3 Procedures in the Conduct of the Study

In qualitative method, strict procedures were necessary to obtain credible and valid findings. Thus, the following steps were observed in the conduct of this study.

- 1) During the few days of class, students were asked to introduce themselves using an activity template as guide. This was conducted to acquaint the students with each other. It was observed that at first students were hesitant and shy. Culturally, girls usually do introduce only with other girls but this time, they need to introduce themselves in the presence of the boys. A list of paired was made.

- 2) Students were oriented on the college's policy on students' strict attendance in class. Also, they were introduced to the learning outcomes.
- 3) The "buddy system" was given. The buddy system is an idea where two people need to be together during the class - sit beside each other, answer pair work together, discuss together, and share materials with each other. Moreover, a buddy needs to inform his partner whenever he/she will be late or absent in class, needs to inform his partner what was the lesson during his/her absence, and needs to inform what was the assignment given. Thus, with the buddy system, each one needs to have each other's contact number.
- 4) For ten weeks, students need to adopt the buddy system. It was observed that students' everyday attendance was 85-90%. And whenever someone was absent or late, a buddy would inform the teacher.
- 5) The researcher also obtained attendance sheets of other teachers who handled the class. This was done to triangulate the attendance of the students with other classes.
- 6) To strengthen further the outcome of the study, I conducted base-line questions regarding the 'buddy system' before the conduct of the Focus Group Discussion. This was conducted to determine the students' reactions on the system and what the students could say about their partner.

2.4 Participants of the Study

This study was conducted among the twenty-two (22), eleven-paired General Foundation Program students taking General English Language. These students were chosen because they were in their adjustment period and they were considered at 'high risk' students. McInnis (2001) ^[24] mentioned that students during this period commonly gain importance about their undergraduate schooling in their first year of study. Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) ^[29] said students' initial experiences in their studies influence their perseverance to continue their college education. Tinto (2000) ^[36] and Williams (1982) ^[30] said freshmen students likely to withdraw or fail from their studies if they (Peat, Dalziel and Grant, 2001) ^[28] negative experiences. Thus, it was wise to have the buddy system which gave these freshmen students' opportunity to know each other the soonest. These student-participants were handled by me for ten (10) weeks.

2.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

In handling the verisimilitude of a qualitative method, Guba and Lincoln (1988) ^[14] identified four standards: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. On the other hand, Van Manen (1997) ^[37] enlisted four criteria for qualitative method: orientation, strength, richness and depth. Orientation refers to the involvement of the researcher in the world of the research participants and their responses. Strength refers to the convincing capacity of the text to represent the core intention of the understanding of the inherent meanings as expressed by the research participants through their responses. Richness serves the aesthetic quality of the text that narrates the meanings as perceived by the participants. Depth is the ability of the research text to penetrate down and express the best of the intentions of the participants.

In observing orientation, I made myself involved in the learning of my students. I was their writing and speaking tutor for 10

weeks. My students and I met in the classroom from Sunday to Wednesday. To make them at ease with me, I memorized their first names, made friends with them, and reminded them whenever they were absent or there are some important announcements.

To make the information convincing, I gathered base-line information from the participants. The purpose was understand better the responses and later to triangulate with the interview. It was found later in the analysis that the information provided by the participants corroborated with the Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

In addressing the richness of the information, I transcribed, interpreted, analyzed, and presented the verbatim information accurately. Moreover, interview with other teachers who handled the same class was done. This was done to enrich the information obtained from the FGD. All these information were subjected to coding and memoing and presented in themes and core ideas.

To warrant in depth in my study, I added probe questions to the research questions. The purpose of the probe question was to gather enough information that would support the main inquiry. In every research questions, I made two or three follow-up questions. However, I made sure that the probe questions were related to the main questions.

2.6 Limitations of the Study

This study only focused on the experiences of freshmen students who were subjected to the 'buddy system'. This study only included one section from the Faculty of Foundation Studies. Moreover, the participants were in the morning session. Thus, the result of this study cannot generalize its results to the entire population of Gulf College. However, the result may be a good basis for consideration. Further, in this study unlike others, did not consider the capability and age range of the paired-participants. It meant that there was no mentor-mentee rather the paired-participants were in equal footing.

3. Results

Presented in this section are the results of the Focus Group Discussion of the 11 paired students. The purpose of the interview was to determine the experiences of the participants in the 'buddy system' and to gather significant understanding they obtained from the experience and suggestions to improve the 'buddy system. Also included in this section are the thematic analysis and core ideas obtained from the FGD.

In classifying the information obtained from the FGD, I patterned the response with the Nvivo. The frequency was considered *General* if the responses had 50% of more recurrence; *Typical* if there was 25-49 percent reactions specified in the interviews; and *Variant* if the reactions' occurrence was 25 percent and below.

Moreover, the results were divided according to theme brought about by the sub-problems presented in the research questions. For better understanding of the results, tables were also included although many researchers have debated on whether tables should be included in a qualitative research. I chose to include tables for better referencing of the findings. Together with the numeral representation of results, descriptions were also provided. The combination of tables and descriptions, I believed enriched the understanding of the results.

Lastly, in coming up with the thematic analysis, coding and analysis of the information were conducted.

3.1 Promotion of Students' Attendance

Class attendance of the participants was obtained from three different lecturers who handled the class. This was done to verify whether participants' class presence were consistent and therefore to find a pattern. Comparatively, the earliest session, 9:00-10:00AM, has the most number of absences incurred. Of the 11 pairs seven incurred less than three absences and four paired committed four or more absences. This indicates that more of the time at least more than half of the students are present every day. On the succeeding classes, paired-students attended their classes regularly except for two paired-students. In an inquiry conducted among these paired-students, distance of the house to the college, waking up late, left by the service bus and traffic on the road were the reasons why they were not able to come to class early. On the other hand, one student who incurred 11 or more absences in all sessions mentioned her lack of interest to the foundation subjects led her to be absent in her classes. It could also be noticed that both she and her partner had been absent from all the subjects. Nonetheless, she failed in all subjects due to excessive absences and none submission of assignments. She was advised to resit all the subjects.

3.2 Benefits of Buddy System

The base-line answers of the participants regarding what they like about the 'buddy system' confirmed the Focus Group Discussion results. The participants liked the 'buddy system' because it promoted cooperation among them. They also found the approach to be helpful in their studies and it created fun and friendship beyond classroom setting.

In the FGD, it revealed that the participants liked the 'buddy system' because it helped them in their studies. It created friendship beyond their English class. In their other classes like IT and Math, they remained partner. In most of their activities, participants were able to cooperate and share with each other. Typically, because of the 'buddy system', a buddy became concerned with his partner. Whenever a buddy was absent from class, his partner would inform the teacher that his buddy was absent. On the other hand, the system encouraged the participant to attend class to see his partner. It implies that the 'buddy system' formed bond between the participants.

In a separate interview among the pairs, they were asked to describe their partners. Typically, they described their partners as "fun, kind, and friendly." It implies that the 'buddy system' was able to make the paired-students to have share moments with each other. Through the approach, the pair became closer personally which resulted to friendship.

3.3 Inconvenience of Buddy System

Despite the positive outcomes of the 'buddy system' few of the students found the 'buddy system' a hassle. For them the regular checking of their presence in class was annoying. During the first period, I usually asked a buddy of his or her partner's whereabouts. This might be the reason for intimidation. Secondly, few students find 'buddy system' not good because their partners relied on them. This disgusted reaction of few pairs was a result when their partners did not cooperate in pair work, instead letting their partners do and finish the task alone. As a result, their friendship was affected.

4. Recommendations for Improvement

Because of the positive results of the 'buddy system' among the participants, some recommended that the approach be implemented in the entire college. They believed that extending this approach, it could somehow help them in their lessons and assignments for it develops friendship, promotes cooperation, creates fun moments, and develops concern. Moreover, few recommended that 'adding one more person' to the paired-students would be better. Thus, a group would consist of three members.

5. Discussion

Presented in this section are the summary of the findings of the study. Moreover, other previous and recent studies are cited for comparison of results. In the same way with the findings, this section is also divided according to the sub-problems.

5.1 Promotion of Students' Attendance

Although 'buddy system' did not prevent absences of participants, it somehow prevented more students not to attend classes. It was observed in Table 1 that absences occurred mostly during the first period but improved in the later period. It comes to show that there other reasons why students take their absent in the earlier class. Moreover, the 'buddy system' somehow takes it role when a concern partner reminds his buddy about his absence in class. The 'buddy approach' develops a value of commitment for both students. Kossinets and Watts (2006) ^[21] mentioned that stronger connection between two persons creates deep concern with each other; so that when a partner is absent, one is oblige to remind the other because he believes not attending a class is counter-productive. In my observation this sort of concern between partners brought by the 'buddy system' creates enhance quality and quantity of learning. Although to some extent it also has negative aspect. Few participants rely on their partners. For Ning (2010) ^[27] if 'buddy system' is prolonged, it would result to mutual understanding, friendship and positive attitudes; (Bush, 2003) ^[4] collaboration to dive in and Cartwright (2005) ^[5] attachment. On the other hand, Inuzuka, Kondo, and Yamamoto (2009) ^[16] believe that friendship and attendance are asymmetrically related. These observations are strongly manifested among the four-paired students who incurred four or more absences and the eight-paired participants who have three or less absences. These participants develop friendships and if one is present most likely the other one would also be absent or the other way around. Paired participants adopt association with his/her partner.

5.2 Benefits of Buddy System

The result of this study reveals that the 'buddy system' promotes cooperation and friendship among the participants. This finding answers the previous query of Storch (2001) ^[33] whether 'group or pair interactions are collaborative or not.' Generally, in this study paired-participants revealed that the nature of their task outputs were products of collaboration between them. Moreover, they reiterated that their collaboration resulted into a deeper friendship and understanding. Sydow and Sandel (1998) ^[34] who found that 'buddy system' encouraged 'frequent interaction' among students, while Chogahara, Cousins and Wankel (1998) ^[6] pointed out that 'buddy system' developed positive atmosphere; on the other hand, Kossinets

and Watts (2006) ^[21] mentioned that it promotes stronger relationship and more spikes between the partners.

5.3 Inconvenience of Buddy System

Two noted disadvantages of 'buddy system' are aired by the participants. One is the repeated checking of attendance and second is the dependence of the partner. This inconvenience of the 'buddy system' may be raised by few paired-participants whose partner is not participative or responsible. According to Harris (2014) ^[15] 'buddy system' gives less sense of responsibility to students. He further stated that for some students, they don't take it seriously. On the other hand, Joseph (2017) ^[18] stated that possible reason of unsatisfaction in a 'buddy system' is the pair-mismatched and frustration due to non-cooperation of the partner in a task while Thalluri, O'Flaherty, and Shepherd (2014) ^[35] mentioned that it is more likely on diversity of student's personalities. In this study, the decision of pairing the participants is based on the sitting arrangement of the students. During the first day of class, I let the students introduced themselves in front of the class. An introduction questionnaire is provided as guide. After all the students finished the introduction, I presented the 'buddy system', then, the pairing of participants is done based on the sitting arrangement. This procedure may lead to these disadvantages by the few paired-participants.

6. Recommendations for Improvement

Despite the few noted setbacks, the 'buddy system's' benefits are lauded by many paired-participants. Generally, the participants recommended that a college wide 'buddy system' may be created and an additional buddy may be added; making a group of three. These recommendations are not impossible. In New Jersey College for Girls (2015) ^[26]. College wide 'buddy system' is part of their core values under "belong". The college believes that through the 'buddy system', new students can settle in and adjust quickly. On the other hand, Johnston (2015) ^[17] who adopted 'team buddies' in her classroom found her students to be tremendously friendly, confident with high peer acceptance, and protector of each other.

7. Conclusion

Is class attendance should be a requirement in passing a course in college? This million dollar question has bothered many teachers and school administrators; however, there are several answers to this query. Gestalt psychology would tell us that someone's perspective depends on his position. Several studies which deal with the relationship between class attendance and students' academic achievement reveal that class attendance directly and indirectly affects academic performance.

In this study, it is shown that although absences in class are inevitable for whatever reason, inter-relationship between students encourage them to be present or otherwise in the class. Thus, in a classroom, students' meaningful interaction between and among themselves must be reinforced so that students will be encouraged to attend classes. Bonding among students provides opportunity for peer-tutoring and positive caring and behavior. Thus, whenever someone is not present, someone would be willing to share the lessons because he or she feels the commitment. Also, the 'buddy system' as an approach, although it only typically reinforces attendance, it generally promotes friendship, connection and collaboration among the

students. I believe if this approach will be continued for a longer period and implemented in all courses, then, it could be a good approach for attendance.

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