Is it OK to be late?

In the United States, it is important to be on time, or punctual, for an appointment, a class, a meeting, etc. For an American, being on time means arriving at the exact hour of the scheduled meeting. However, this may not be true in all countries. An American professor discovered this difference while teaching a class at a Brazilian university. The two-hour class was scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. and end at 12 p.m. On the first day, the professor arrived at 10:00 a.m., which was on time for him as an American. To his surprise, no one was in the classroom. Many students came after 10 a.m. Several arrived after 10:30 a.m. Two students came after 11 a.m. Although all the students were friendly and greeted the professor as they arrived, few apologized for their lateness. Were these students being rude? Before deciding that they were simply impolite, the professor decided to study the students’ behavior.

The professor talked to American and Brazilian students about lateness in both an informal and a formal situation: lunch with a friend and in a university class, respectively. He gave them an example, asked them how they would react, and recorded their answers. If they had a lunch appointment with a friend, the average American student defined lateness as 19 minutes after the agreed time. On the other hand, the average Brazilian student felt the friend was late after 33 minutes.

In an American university, students are expected to arrive at the appointed hour. In contrast, in Brazil, neither the teacher nor the students always arrive at the appointed hour. Classes not only begin at the scheduled time in the United States, but they also end at the scheduled time. In the Brazilian class, only a few students left the class at noon; many remained past 12:30 p.m. to discuss the class and ask more questions. While arriving late may not be very important in Brazil, neither is staying late.

The explanation for these differences is complicated. People from Brazilian and North American cultures have different feelings about lateness. In Brazil, the students believe that a person who usually arrives late is probably more successful than a person who is always on time. In fact, Brazilians expect a person with status or prestige to arrive late, while in the United States lateness is usually considered to be disrespectful and unacceptable. Consequently, if a Brazilian is late for an appointment with a North American, the American may misinterpret the reason for the lateness and become angry.

As a result of his study, the American professor learned that the Brazilian students were not being disrespectful to him. Instead, they were simply behaving in the appropriate way for a Brazilian student in Brazil. Eventually, the professor was able to adapt his own behavior so that he could feel comfortable in the new culture.