

“No Comment!”

Surveying student attitudes and opinion concerning in-class writing assignments

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ABSTRACT

In order to address the problem of inconsistent completion of in-class writing exercises students were surveyed to investigate possible root causes of the problem. The 52 students surveyed were in two sections of 9th grade honors English. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to determine the student's overall opinion of the writing assignments, their helpfulness in terms of understanding the readings better, and their preferences for types of questions. The results showed a split in the class preference for creative and specific questions, as well as reporting lack of understanding of the question and not enough time as prevalent reasons for difficulty. Based on the results recommendations for improvement include: student choice in response questions, allowing students to create their own questions, more peer and group dialogue/sharing, ensure clarity of questions and gauge student understanding, and to allow adequate time for full response.

AREA OF FOCUS STATEMENT

The focal problem of this study is an observed submission inconsistency of mostly weekly journal assignments, and varying student responses to the assignments. These concerns present an opportunity to gather information on student's attitudes towards the assignments and try to find patterns and correlations with student perception and success. The focal group of this research are 9th grade students in 2 sections of Quest level English classes at Central High School in St Paul. These 2 classes combined is approximately 60 students, 52 students completed the survey.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Primary: Why do some students struggle to turn in journal assignments consistently?
 - Is there a correlation between positive/negative attitude towards the assignments and submission consistency?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature and studies related to the topic of homework completion tend to stress strategies for greater student motivation and accountability. Some strategies suggested include: increased student self-monitoring, tracking assignment completion with graphs and other visual representations, direct instruction of study skills, and parental involvement. An interesting line of inquiry that helped to inspire this study was the question of student perception of homework, its value and relevance, and the reasoning behind not turning in assignments. Pat Hinchey argues that teachers must stop dismissing students' criticisms of homework, and instead ask themselves if the criticism is deserved. The next step is to start thinking critically about exactly what they assign, under what conditions, and why. These questions helped formed the research questions for this study.

DATA COLLECTION

A student survey on attitudes toward the journaling assignments, completion, and excuses/reasoning for missing assignments is the primary data collection method (see Appendix A). Self-reporting of missing assignments will be checked across the grade book for accuracy and connections.

DATA CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations were discussed concerning surveying the class, and it was deemed unnecessary to gain parental permission for this type of survey. While the survey was not anonymous, assurances were made to the students that it was strictly for the purposes of this research and would no way affect their grade or standing. A statement regarding the project is present at the beginning of the survey, followed by a place for the students to sign to show they had willingly chosen to complete the evaluation.

The greatest effort was taken to make the intent of the question clear, but it became clear in the analysis that question #4 (regarding what they student thought could be done to improve the writing assignments) was often misunderstood as what the student themselves could do to improve their *own* writing. While this takes away from the original intent of the question, it nevertheless provided some unexpected insight into that area of the student's thinking. The answers that reflected this misunderstanding were easy to spot, and considerations were taken during data analysis to consider those answers in a separate pool. There were also issues with question #3, which asked for the student favorite and least favorite type of questions. There were a few students who wrote responses without making a clear distinction on whether they were positive or negative. This was also taken into consideration during data analysis.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The survey's first two questions are quantitative, and the last four qualitative, therefore the first steps of data analysis followed two different tracks.

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data gathered about the students' overall opinion of the assignments (question #1), and how helpful they thought the assignments were to their understanding of the

readings (question #2) was measured on a scale from 1 to 10. The results from both classes on these questions were gathered in a table, which also included the self-reported number of missing assignments (see Appendix B). The overall averages for the first two questions show a favorable overall opinion of 6.77 out of 10, and a positive view of their helpfulness of 7.28 out of 10. The breakdown in the averages of the responses also show a slight difference between the two classes, with 3rd hour answering .25 and .32 points higher on average for both questions respectively. This suggests the journal assignments are viewed slightly more favorably by 3rd hour.

Hr 2 Q1	Hr 2 Q2		Hr 3 Q3	Hr 3 Q3
AVG: 6.64	AVG: 7.12		AVG: 6.89	AVG: 7.44

What the averages don't show of course is the greater difference between the classes, and the range of the distribution of the answers. To analyze the data for these types of variations, two graphs show the frequency of numbers along the scale circled by both classes for both question 1 and 2 (see Appendix C). These graphs also serve to point out some of the outliers, especially the few responses in the lower range of the scale.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data was analyzed in order to find emerging trends and patterns in the free responses. The answers for question 3 (What types of writing questions do you like the best? The least? Why?) tended to fall in the following categories:

Question 3 Key:

S: likes specific questions

C: likes creative questions

Pers: likes personal questions

Anti Pers: dislikes personal questions

Anti Spec: dislikes specific questions

U: unclear (whether answer provided indicates something positive or negative)

N: neutral, either approval of all or none of the question types

There were also responses that fit into multiple categories, most notably those who liked both creative and personal questions. The largest category was creative, which 16 students cited as their favorite type of question. Second largest was specific, with 12 students, and personal with 8 students. The fact that these two large categories formed was probably influenced by the wording of the prompt including creative and specific as the two examples for types of questions. The most intriguing categories were those that enjoyed personal questions and those that did not, since they tended to have the most explanation of why they felt that way. The direct conflict in the like and dislikes between these groups show the range of interest in the class, but also present a potential problem in trying to please the whole group. A typical answer for those in the “Pers” category: “I love answering personal and deep questions because I have a lot of things to write about when it comes to these.” Or: “The questions about our family really affected me and made me realize the importance.” In the opposing group one person even cited finding some questions “too personal” made her “have trouble opening up”, and listed that as one reason she hadn’t completed some.

Connections

There was no apparent correlation between the types of questions that the students favored and the amount of assignments they missed or did poorly on. Students who struggled favored both specific and creative questions. Surprisingly their opinion of the assignments and their helpfulness followed the overall positive average of the class. This is an encouraging outcome of the survey, that the students do view the in-class writing as helpful to their understanding of the readings. The students also had consistent trouble self-reporting the number of assignments they missed, and this lack of awareness could be one of the reasons for the inconsistency of assignment completion. Their reasons were often a lack of time or forgetfulness,

but also cited a lack of understanding on some of the questions. Students who hadn't missed assignments and generally did on them well reported this also; a connection that suggests this lack of understanding was across the board and not simply due to a lack of attention.

ACTION PLAN

Based both on suggestions given by the students and my own conclusions drawn from their responses I suggest the following action plan to improve submission consistency. Given the split in the class preferences that emerged from the question on favorite questions type, some variety in the questions is key to engage both groups. It is also paramount to make sure that all students understand the question and are given adequate time. Building the habit of carefully reading the question could be beneficial not only for the in-class writing, but quizzes and other forms of assessment. Also some direct instruction in way to approach questions that are outside student's comfort zone, or are difficult could give students techniques of how to tackle challenging questions. One student expressed a need for more in-class time, since he has difficulty focusing at home. While it may be challenging to devote more class time, being aware of using time effectively, and remind students to at least make notes to themselves about their thoughts could help them complete the assignments by the time they are due. Based on the literature, some strategies to promote self-regulation could also be helpful in terms of raising students awareness of their completion rate and increase motivation. The following is a summary of recommendations to enact in the classroom:

Recommendations

- Student choice in response questions
- Allow students to create their own questions
- More peer and group dialogue/sharing
- Ensure clarity of questions and gauge student understanding
- Allow adequate time for full response

FINAL THOUGHTS AND REFLECTION

This action research project yielded much understanding of the students attitudes towards in-class writing, and provided good data to base recommendations on. It was also a good exercise in surveying. In the future I hope to apply this experience to improve question formulation to better the clarity und decrease misunderstandings. I would suggest the following improvements to questions 3 and 4:

3) What types of in-class writing questions do you like the best?

(For example: creative questions, specific questions, etc. Give examples if you can .)

The least?

Why?

4) What would you suggest to make in-class writing assignments better?

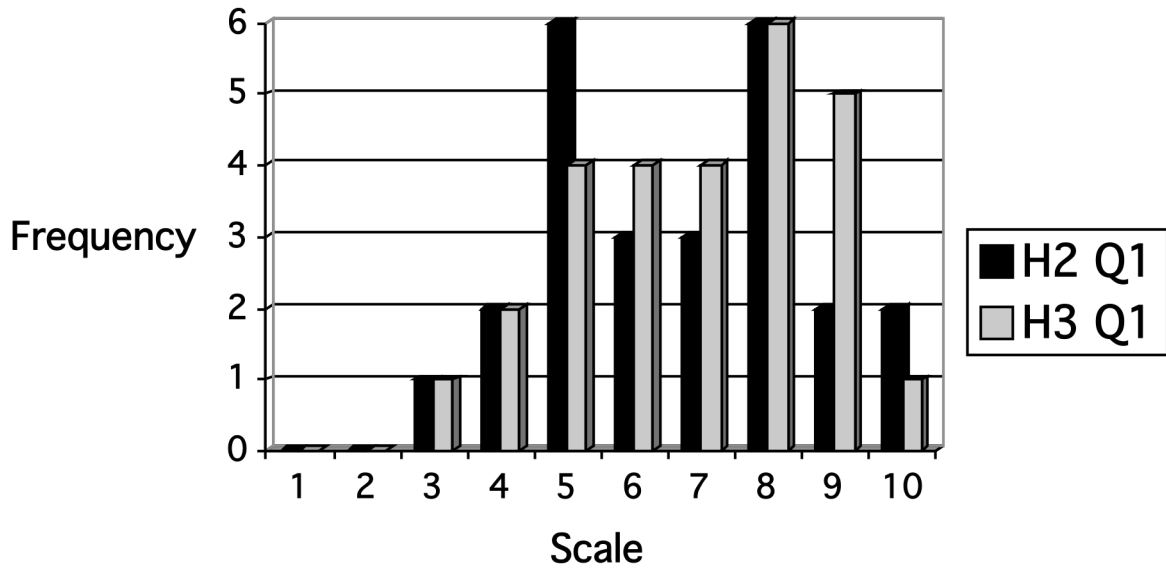
By providing space for “best” and “least,” it clarifies the answers provided, and encourages students to provide both answers. The changed wording in the fourth question will hopefully clear up the misunderstanding of students saying what *they* could do better. Although answers provided clearly under that assumption resulted in some interesting unexpected knowledge, so it could be a useful addition to the questions. Overall there was surprising and unexpected knowledge gained about student opinion, that didn’t necessarily fit with the original research questions, but were useful and interesting.

Appendix B: Survey Results, Hours 2 and 3, Questions 1, 2, 5

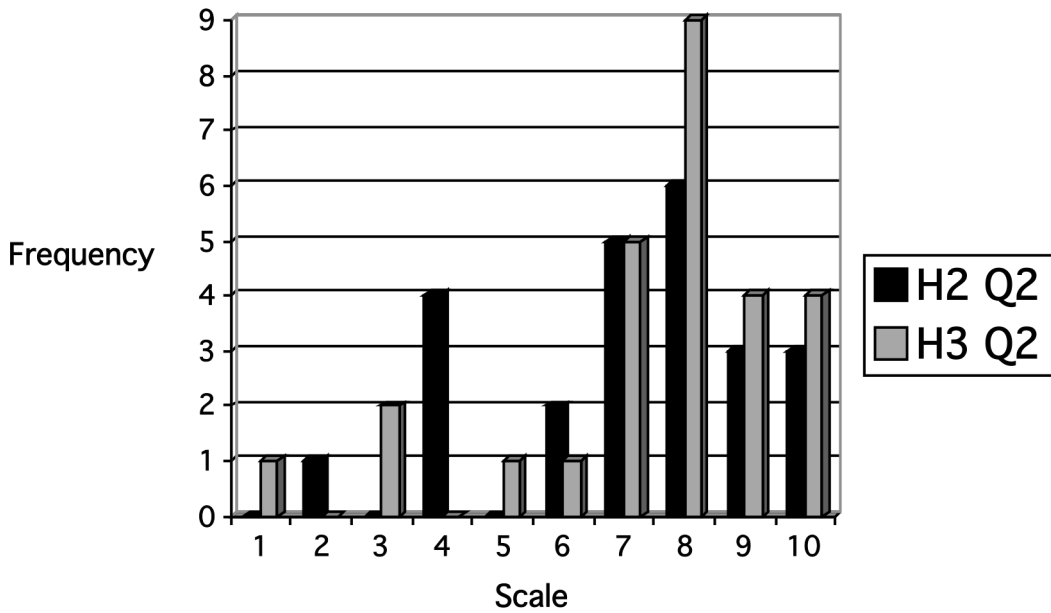
H2 Q #1	H2 Q #2	H2 Q #5	H3 Q #1	H3 Q #2	H3 Q #5
8	8	2 *transfer	3	1	4
7	9	3	8	10	2
5	4	0	8	7	3
8	7	3	5	8	0
5	6	10	4	7	?
5	8	2	5	7	3
8	7	2	8	8	2
5	4	? *transfer	9	9	0
5	4	2or3	6	8	1or2
7	8	2or3	6	8	0
6	7	0	5	3	3
4	2	2	4	3	1or2
8	8	0	9	6	1
10	10	too many	7	8	1
7	7	0	8	10	0
6	6	0	7	9	0?
8	9	0	8	8	0
3	4	3	7	5	0
9	7	0or1	10	9	0
4	8	0	6	8	0or1
9	10	0	9	10	2
6	10	0	8	9	0
10	9	0	5	8	1
8	8	0	9	10	?
5	8	0	9	7	?
			6	7	0
			7	8	0
AVG: 6.64	AVG: 7.12		AVG: 6.89	AVG: 7.44	
MED: 7	MED: 8		MED: 7	MED: 8	
MODE: 8	MODE: 8		MODE: 8	MODE: 8	
MIN:3	MIN:2		MIN: 3	MIN: 1	

Appendix C: Graphs 1 and 2

Graph 1: Frequency of Survey Answers



Graph 2: Frequency of Survey Answers



References

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