

Five Minute Essay As a Writing and Reflection Exercise

The chemical engineering students at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, are seldom given an opportunity to write and the lack of writing is often reflected in the reports that they produce in later years. To improve their writing proficiency and confidence, the students in a second-year process engineering class were provided with four written exercises. We report on this activity, which required students to write and reflect on a weekly basis.

METHOD

Once a week, towards the end of the three-hour tutorial session (equivalent to recitations in United States), students were asked to write for 5 min on the topic of “What I learned in class yesterday.” They had to put in words, without mathematical equations or pictures, what they took away from the lecture. They then had to swap their work with a neighbor who would mark with tick (agree), cross (disagree), and question mark (unclear). As feedback, the author would have to verbally elaborate on the items with a question mark, while the marker would have to explain why (and revise) items they had marked with a cross. Students were later asked to reflect on how useful they found the exercise using a Likert scale response.

RESULTS

While it may not be clear how useful the free writing was as preparation for report writing, the student responses were very positive. Less than 10% of the respondents gave a negative response (disagree and strongly disagree) and more than 75% responded positively (strongly agree and agree) for all weeks (Figure 1). There was a slight decrease in positive responses over the weeks, with students possibly tiring of the writing, but there was also a decline in the number of Likert responses. Ultimately, the exercise did not contribute to the final mark on the course, but given that students were not made aware of this, there was a secondary advantage of higher attendance.

CONCLUSIONS

While the writing portion was taken seriously and yielded positive responses, the peer feedback portion of the task was not taken as seriously. Even with sufficient time given for reflection in the exercise and no further courses to attend for the day, most students left quickly after the writing. However, the exercise is something that would be considered again to encourage both writing and reflection. □

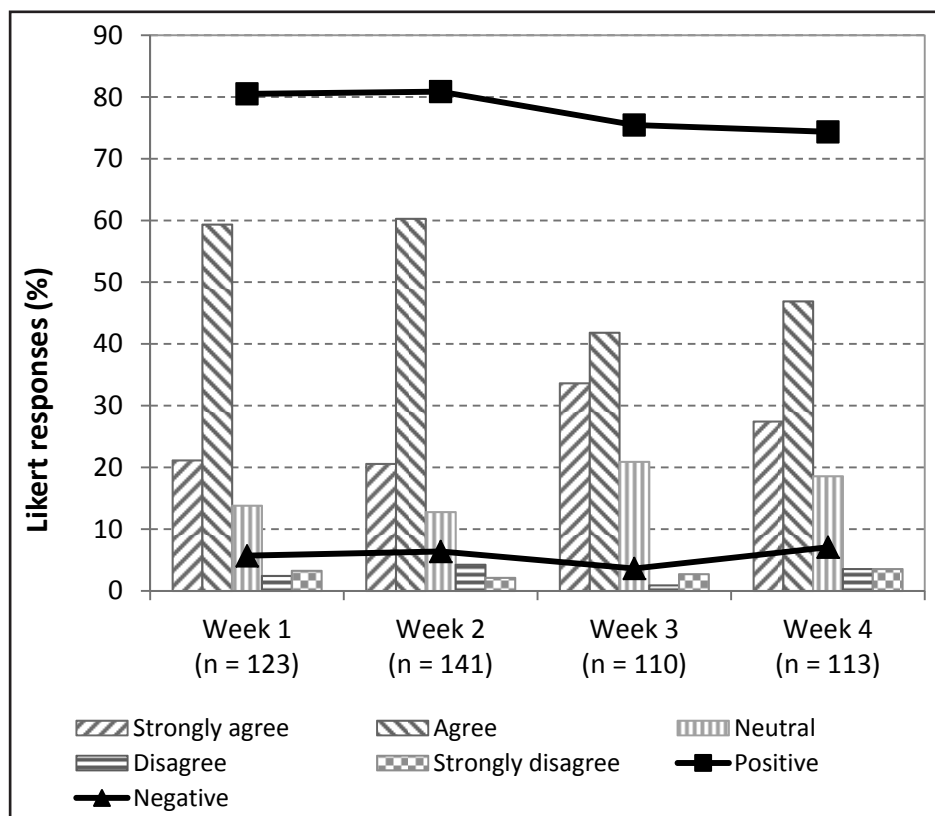


Figure 1. Student responses to the free writing exercises: “Writing a 5 min essay on what I learned in the last lesson was useful.”

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This one-page column presents practical teaching, advising, and diversity tips in sufficient detail that others can adopt the tip. Focus on the teaching method, not content. The column should be maximum 550 words, but subtract 50 words for each figure or table. Submit as a Word file to Phil Wankat <wankat@ecn.purdue.edu>.