

Contexts for Essay Writing in a Logic Class

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80-211: Logic and Mathematical Inquiry

- Teaches skills
 - Basic logic
 - Validity of inference
 - ...
- Assessed using *exercises*
- Teaches knowledge
 - History of logic
 - 19th and 20th century developments
 - ...
- Assessed using *essays*

10 homeworks, 2 exams: similar essays in both

Let's do an activity ... with YOU!

1. Read the 2 essays being distributed
2. Assess their quality in groups of 3-5
3. Report your findings

The Actual Story



Big surprise

Typeset essay
Homework assignment

- 4-5 days to write essay
- Access to
 - ARC, library, peers
 - spell-checker, web,
 - ...

Could make corrections

Hand-written essay
Midterm

- Strict time constraints
- No help, no technology

Yet

- Well-organized
- Few errors
- Few corrections

Our initial impression

The midterm essays were of *higher quality*

How was this possible?

Conjectures

Our conjectures:

- Technology in the way of flow of ideas
- The web makes one less confident in one's understanding

Our colleagues' conjectures:

- Absence of distractions (people, Facebook, games, ...)
- No multitasking
- Perceived importance of task
- Immediacy of pen and paper

Test them!

Action Plan

- Alternate typeset & handwritten essays in assignments
 - To tease out the role of the exam context
- Handwritten essay in final
- Learn the students' point of view
 - through interviews
 - using a survey
- Develop strategies to help students be more effective with essays

Follow-up Essays

3 typeset, 2 handwritten (including exam)

Outcomes

- No striking differences in quality
- Decline in essay quality in 2nd half of semester
- Decline in class attendance
 - Students clearly under stress
- Students had the option of dropping 2 homeworks

This attempt was inconclusive

Survey Questions

- Homework essays
 1. How much time did you spend on average?
 2. Did you typically make a draft?
 3. Did you do other things at the same time?
 4. Did you complete it in a single sessions?
 5. Did you use tools? Which?
 6. How important were they in your view?
- Midterm essay
 1. How much time?
 2. Did you write an outline?
 3. How important was it in your view?

Survey Outcomes

Only 6 responses

- Time
 - Significantly more on homework (30-45 min vs. 10-15 min)
- Importance
 - Average in both cases, more spread-out for midterm
- Draft/outline
 - Rare in midterm, frequent in homework
- Multitasking in homework
 - Pervasive (music, Facebook, friends, web)
 - No other homeworks at the same time
- Tools in homework
 - Spellchecker, Google, Wikipedia, grammar-checker, other

Survey Analysis

Not enough responses for conclusive results

- Seem to assign same importance to homework and midterm essays
- Significantly more time for homework essays
- Significant use of tools for homework essays
- Lots of distractions during homeworks

Conclusions

No conclusive evidence of benefits of handwritten essays

But, not a handicap either:

- Quality at least equivalent to typeset essays
- A lot less time spent on essays

Give handwriting a chance

- your students' essays
- your own