

## Voices of students in “transformed” courses: From CWSEI End-of-year event, April 2012, student perspectives forum.



A panel of five undergraduate science students who have taken transformed courses was convened to discuss, in front of an audience of over 50, the impact on them of recently introduced teaching strategies. Each student responded to four specific questions provided prior to the event, and then an open discussion was run with questions and comments from the audience. (See <http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/EOYevent.html> for event details.)

Strong students were recruited primarily because quick thinking, clear articulation and confidence are important for a successful panel. Do their comments reflect all students? Probably not, however hearing from thoughtful, imaginative and conscientious students is certainly more useful than not hearing from students at all.

No analysis or synthesis has been done, however three possible themes include: (i) students find their time in transformed classes changes the way they use their time outside of class; (ii) students feel more confident about what they know and what they don't know; (iii) communication with experts (instructors) is better in transformed classes. Do you see other themes?

**Question 1a:** *What are the differences you see between this course and more traditionally taught courses? In your opinion, which part(s) of this course contributed most to your learning? (Consider all aspects of the course).*

- 1) More self-paced.
- 2) less lecture; less being talked to.
- 3) pre-readings.
- 4) emphasis on understanding, not “right/wrong”.
- 5) some grading based on pre-readings.
- 6) student involvement.
- 7) We found we were learning from each other.
- 8) We get to know and talk to the professor better. It's more likely I'll talk to the professor later.
- 9) Transformed courses can be not so good when activity questions are not well thought out.

**Question 2:** *Are there differences in how you interact with this instructor compared to other courses?*

- 1) No interaction with instructor in other courses.
- 2) Instructors often don't really seem to care. They lecture at you.
- 3) In traditional lectures, questions are often asked too quickly or in ways that do not draw you in.
- 4) In transformed classes, there is more time and inclination to ask questions; i.e. a much higher comfort level.
- 5) See also Qn 1a, (8) above.
- 6) The “telling mode” DISCOURAGES question asking.
- 7) Professors are seen more as an authority figure.
- 8) Transformed classes are a more personable environment.

**Question 1b:** *Is there any part of the transformed course that you would change?*

- 1) We were never graded on activities.
- 2) More quizzes or marking of in-class activities work.
- 3) Problems occur when groups reach the “we get it” point.
  - Include a variety of levels of completion; offer something for students ahead of the curve. Maybe as bonus material. Doing that would need incentives.
  - Some activities end up taking away from getting on with more. Maybe add challenge problems, readings, etc.
- 4) In statistics, activities seemed to be more beneficial to weaker or average students.
- 5) BUT explaining to others can fill up some of that “problem” but may also be another disincentive.

**Question 3:** *Has the way you think about how you learn changed since being a student in a transformed course?*

- 1) Transformed classes are more like a tutoring session. Using groups to learn was not a shock because it was done in 1<sup>st</sup> year.
- 2) Everyone knows group work is better – except some professors.
- 3) Concepts of spacing were mentioned and explained by our professor.
- 4) I do less procrastinating.
- 5) Homework is “easier” because we leave class more aware of what we know and how to use it.

### **Open discussion:**

- 1) Question asked: Does group work help ESL friends?
  - a) Student answers: Not clear. Don't know. But it could suppress difficulties we have with ESL instructors !

- 2) Could you expand on “wanting more” in activities {mentioned above.}?
  - a) In traditional courses, we often can’t tell if we want new stuff because we don’t know if we know it. That’s why we can say we want more from transformed courses. Better understanding leads to better awareness of questions, and hence to recognition that we could do more.
  - b) One student said the issue is definitely more relevant in senior courses.
  - c) However, another student said it is more relevant in first/second course.
  - d) Students acknowledged that the issue is difficult in classes with students that have widely variable backgrounds.
- 3) Do weaker students benefit better?
  - a) Students weren’t sure. Audience suggested it depends on how group activities are run. It could go either way.
- 4) Did you make new friends more easily in these courses? Yes.
- 5) Are random groups OK?
  - a) Yes, in the beginning, but later I prefer working with folks I work well with. Example from one course that uses fixed groups of 6 (assigned randomly but permanent for the course): “I still talk to those folks as friends!”
  - b) Quality of friendships when groups are fixed for the whole term is much better.
- 6) Which type of class is more draining?
  - a) Traditional owing to the “cramming” scenario.
  - b) Understanding as we go along is MUCH better at end of year. No panic at end of year.
  - c) In traditional courses, at the end of semester feel I have to learn it all.
  - d) In traditional courses there is the same (stressful) feeling of “not sure I got it”. This happens when running between classes, too. And it gets worse and worse as you struggle through several of these.
- 7) Initial reaction? And when did you realize transformed courses are “better”?
  - a) Excited at square one because I know traditional approach doesn’t work.
  - b) I was opposite to that, but it took only first week or so.
  - c) I thought it would be great from square one. “Wow we’re actually learning stuff”.
  - d) Why don’t we have every course like this?
  - e) This is the best course and we should learn in every course this way.
- 8) Why can’t you study in groups after a straight lecture? Would you be better able to learn in traditional course having experience in transformed course?
  - a) We don’t have time in our program to do the group work thing at home.
  - b) From audience: I would add that it’s also about experts steering the learning using feedback that is visible during class. Both the activities and the feedback involve expertise which isn’t available when doing homework.
  - c) “Some lecture classes I can’t learn anything anyway”.
- 9) Could you handle it if all courses were transformed?
  - a) Pre-readings could cause workload to increase a bit, but in the end, the total effort would be pretty similar; it’s a matter of when the work is needed.
  - b) No cramming effort means working early, which is better.
  - c) Time overall is saved because homework was ‘easier’. We didn’t have to learn it (figure it out) before getting going. There is a “properly” to doing pre-readings etc. The key is how it’s implemented. Work needs to be carefully targeted; for example, well crafted learning goals are important.
- 10) From audience: instructor seeing what’s going on – yields better tests, better assignments, etc. He now feels his final exams are harder.

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