

Summary report of results obtained from “Online student experience feedback form” in humanities of the May/June 2020 academic session

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The survey was designed to help gauge students’ feedback on online courses in humanities and social science taught during Summer 2020 (first semester only). The goal of the survey is to evaluate the methods (rather than instructors), and to help colleagues design their online and dual delivery courses for the Fall 2020. 120 students took the survey between July 5 and July 17, 2020. The survey is fully anonymous. If students mentioned specific courses or instructors, we removed this information from the summary. The full distribution of departments and programs that students named is in the appendix 1. Kiera Farrell-Beaulieu also wrote her own take on online courses (not part of the survey). It is in Appendix 2.

Distribution methods

The questionnaire distributed to students via three methods: directly via instructors of summer sessions (after grades had been distributed), through student-run informal group chats on Facebook, including DTS200 and on student-run **Innis college’s** page. Farrell-Beaulieu introduced herself and posted a link. She did the same for two additional Facebook groups of UofT: ‘University of Toronto St. George Class of 2022 & 2023’.

University College, Department of Religion, History Department, Department of Philosophy, Center for Diaspora and Transnational Studies and Center for Jewish Studies sent the link, via their instructors, to students enrolled in summer courses. Farrell-Beaulieu also posted on her personal Instagram account encouraging fellow UofT students who took summer courses to do the survey.

The survey consisted of the “numeric part”, where students named and ranked methods of education and the “narrative part”, where they had a chance to elaborate on specifics. Below is the summary of their comments. We asked students to indicate which in-class activities helped them learn best by marking the most appropriate answer on a numerical scale of 1 to 5 that we provided. 5=excellent; 1=did not work for me at all. There was also an option of “0=not familiar with the activity”, if the activity was not offered in a course. Not all students experienced all activities, so we adjust the findings to reflect on that.

Scope

70 percent of students indicated that they took courses in humanities, 41 percent that they took courses in social science, 16 percent were enrolled on life science. All of them reported attending synchronous lectures (98.3%), many commented on tutorials (70%), some on labs (5%) and seminars (7.5%)

Synchronous Activities

All students reported that they attended synchronous or asynchronous lectures, and experienced chat and voice discussions. **80%** found **lectures** to be beneficial to their learning experience, whereas **8.3%** of students did not like them. The most popular activities seem to be **close readings of a text, discussion of a video/audio image, and polls**. Almost all surveyed indicated that they liked **close reading of a text** during lecture time with **56%** rating the activity as excellent. Of 96 students, who experienced the discussion of **a video or visual image**, **45%** found it beneficial. **47.5%** of students indicated that **polls** were a very enjoyable activity in their course,

Students were more divided when it came to evaluating chat and voice discussions. **39.2%** indicated that **chats discussions** were a positive experience, **32.5%** suggested chats were a poor experience; while **21%** of respondents found it to be a neutral experience, marking a '3' on the provided scale. Similarly, **38.4%** of students indicated this **voice discussions during class** were beneficial to their course experience, while **30%** said the opposite. Of 84 students who were familiar with **breakout room** activities, **30 (36 %)** loved it, **37 (44%)** did not like it at all, and another **16 (19 %)** remained neutral.

Finally, **53.4%** of all students reported **office hours** with the professor and/or TA to be valuable to their course experience

Asynchronous Activities

The survey did not provide definitive answers on effectiveness of these activities. Students seem to be divided on everything that we asked. For example, **36.7%** of students liked **discussion boards**, whereas **29.1%** did not, of half the respondents who participated in **Facebook groups**, **13.4%** found these groups to be helpful, while **19.2%** did not. Similarly, half of students reported participation in informal study groups, and of them **20%** found it beneficial, and another **20%** not useful.

Summary of open-answer questions

In the circumstances of the Covid-19 restrictions on everyday life, people commented on the need to have both structure and flexibility when it came to their success in taking online courses. Some students are in different time zones, others have to work during the day, yet others are primary caregivers to their small children, siblings, or aging parents. Many simply cannot get work done during the busy hours at home. Two

suggestions/appreciations when it happened were prominent: **24 hour window for taking an exam** and **recording synchronous** lectures.

Students divided on whether they like synchronous versus asynchronous lectures, but it seems that they still **prefer attending live lectures** and having the ability to watch recordings later. Many students remarked how easy it was for them to fall behind without a structured time when they “need” to be in class, but also said that it would improve their learning experience to have recorded lectures at their disposal for the duration of the course. Some commented on appreciating the ability to revisit material immediately after the lecture to slowly digest more complicated sections. Others liked watching recorded lectures when they were preparing for exams. Additionally, students reported better enjoyment of a live lecture that they knew would be later recorded as they were able to engage in present discussions and more actively listen to the course instructor, as opposed to scrambling to take good notes.

When asked about the most rewarding part of their online course, students praised **open-book tests**. The general consensus was that open-book tests meant that without the pressure to memorize gobs of information, students spent their time understanding course concepts to a greater depth. A more complex and profound understanding of course material is required to apply this knowledge to more challenging open-book test questions.

The majority of students who contributed to the narrative part of the survey were **fond of discussion boards**. It gave them additional opportunity to expand on course material and relate it to one’s personal life and gave more equal opportunity for participation marks to involve students who may not wanted to speak in lecture. Many also noted that discussion boards gave them time to conceive more insightful responses as opposed to not quite being able to fully articulate a thought when put on the spot during live discussions. One must note that students who left these comments enjoyed discussion boards because they thrive in expressing their thoughts in such a format, as the narration part of the survey is similar to the discussion board. It is important to note that only 36% of surveyed students actually reported liking these elements of the class.

Some respondents commented extensively on the **chat feature** on BB Collaborate, which they liked. They felt that they were able to participate more frequently as it was less intimidating than raising a hand in a large lecture, which subsequently contributed to their understanding of material. Students said that they experienced a confidence boost among their classmates due to the lack of participation anxiety, they became more focused on the quality of their comments rather than their delivery to the class.

A number of students weren’t overly fond of **breakout rooms**, noting that they felt awkward and forced with unnatural discussions that were often left incomplete due to time limitations. One student noted that breakout rooms felt like an overcompensation for sudden transition to online. This student suggested that “less is more” with respect to how we should be planning courses, especially when they’re being delivered in an unfamiliar matter.

Finally, there was an overwhelmingly positive response from students who spoke about the privilege to continue learning despite the pandemic. Student testimonies reflect that the attitude put forth by their professor - both about the class and the conditions of the global situation - had a significant impact on the students' enjoyment of the course. The acknowledgement of the common struggle but still **maintaining enthusiasm and passion** for their discipline created a sense of common experience for students, putting them at greater ease with this new learning style.

A considerable number of students addressed the **mental and social adaptation** required for online learning. Taking courses online doesn't allow students to get to know their classmates and also prevents casual discussion of course material amongst peers. Students reported feelings of **loneliness and social isolation**, regarding a lack of meaningful connection with peers and professors alike. I believe that the transparency of professors about the uncertainty of these times creates a sense of support and unity for students. Despite that everyone is feeling anxious and in despair at times, students showed great appreciation for professors' honesty and felt unified with their peers through accepting that they're all 'alone together'.

Other notable results from the survey:

- Students liked the ability to **receive immediate feedback** from online features like polls, quizzes, and discussion of media prompts. These methods can be applied across many disciplines - whether it be responding to a poll after solving a math problem on paper or reviewing information from the previous lecture - and really helps students gauge their current standing in the course.
- Students can often **derail the course discussion in the chat, which distracts the professor**. Other students found that these discussions, sometimes unprofessional in nature, took away from the delivery of course material as the lecturer ran out of time.
- Due to the fact that everything is now online - handouts, reading materials, additional resources - some students **asked for better organization of course websites**. Students said that websites seemed disorganized as if all material was "dumped" on a single webpage, and suggested better organization of files for easier navigation.
- Mandatory tutorials could be added to purely lecture-based courses to provide additional **structure** and opportunity for peer interaction. This is especially true for asynchronous courses.
- Syllabus descriptions for participation marks are too ambiguous.
- Felt disorganized and last minute.

Appendix 1: Departments and Programs Listed by Students

Note that this was not a mandatory parameter of the survey, it was included by choice by some students, as shown below. Most students did not specify their specific program of study.

- Classics,
- Cognitive Science,
- Computer Sciences,
- Criminology,
- Ecology & Evolutionary Biology,
- Ethics, Society & Law,
- Health Studies,
- History,
- Human Biology,
- Mathematics,
- Philosophy,
- Political Science, and
- Psychology

Appendix 2

Kiera Farrell-Beaulieu statement section

“If there could be some way of making a discord/chat room/discussion page for the entire class I think it would be really beneficial to the student experience. We made a Facebook group chat for our class and it was fantastic. We were able to develop a better relationship as classmates, and a lot of us actually became friends. Most importantly, we were able to discuss class material and help other students with questions/clarifications that they might have missed while in lecture. (Also a great way of sharing notes and providing the opportunity to peer review!)

Further, I think it’s important to give students this platform especially one that isn’t directly supervised by the university. The chat room available during lectures is great, however, it’s recorded and also seen by the professor and TA. Not to imply that there’s anything ~scandalous~ being discussed in any of these chats ; however, I firmly believe that it is crucial to maintain some sense of social normalcy likened to traditional course deliveries. These chatrooms are the way of placing students in a virtual lecture hall and make friends. In lecture, you might lean over to your neighbor if they too are confused, or just to exchange contact info in case you miss a lecture! This discord would provide a very similar purpose, as classmates and I often exchanged private messages after commenting on what another had said in class and unquestionably benefitted in multiple ways by having an alternative platform for interaction.

There are logistical issues with using things like Facebook chats. The first one being that not everyone has Facebook. It may also not be everyone’s preference to make a Facebook account or have their Facebook linked to ~200 other students in a lecture. Additionally, it would be more of a hassle to make Facebook groups, especially if it would have to be done manually, which I think it would be. My recommendation would be to provide automatic enrolment in a discord as part of a class. This would make the process logistically easier, maintain personal privacy, and prevent students from being excluded from chats.”