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Using Micro-Writing Assignments for Qualitative Assessment in Media Lecture Classes

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Abstract

This case study examines a constructivist approach to teaching a media lecture class (N=199) using conceptual readings and micro-writing assignments collected and evaluated through Google Forms. The approach sought to bring a critical and qualitative sensibility to a course typically run through a traditional textbook and quantitative exams. Feedback suggests students appreciated the structure, course materials, and writing opportunities and preferred the qualitative online assessment forms to more commonly used quantitative "clicker" technology. Challenges included some students "gaming" the system through remote participation, labor-intensive evaluation processes, and occasional technical hang-ups. Suggestions for improvement and development are discussed, with pedagogical insights applicable to both large university courses and smaller journalism and media programs.

A longstanding challenge in university teaching is figuring out how to meaningfully engage students in large lecture classes (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Trees & Jackson, 2007), where the instructor is unlikely to know every student, students might be intimidated about speaking in a crowd, and sheer numbers make substantial writing assignments impractical to grade. In recent years, many lecturers have turned to student response systems, such as electronic remote "clickers" that record students' attendance and enable real-time feedback and crowdsourcing through predominantly multiple-choice response options (Katz *et al.,* 2017; Koenig, 2020; Trees & Jackson, 2007). However, the feedback afforded by these devices has been primarily quantitative and limited by preset responses determined by the instructor. While such feedback can facilitate critical discussion (Bruff, n.d.), it might not be ideal for original thinking, individual critique, or self-expression.

This paper is a case study examining an alternative approach used to teach an introductory lecture course on media in a recent semester. Conscious of engagement challenges and committed to providing a critical pedagogical experience (e.g. Wittebols, 2020) for roughly 200 students, I developed a class based primarily on reading, writing, and qualitative class participation. Because it's impractical to deeply assess and provide individual feedback on written work for such a large number, both reading and participation activities were structured as a series of low-stakes mi-

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cro-writing assignments, collected through interactive online survey forms whose responses aggregated onto a spreadsheet for at-a-glance summative assessments and responsive lecture planning tailored to students' interests and needs. These activities follow from a constructivist theory of education, which suggests that "knowledge is constructed, not received" (Bain, 2004, p. 26); that experiential practice is valued (e.g. Parks, 2015); and that "people cannot fully learn or understand unless they have been active participants in building concepts and knowledge for themselves" (Eyler, 2018, p. 51). To pursue this structure meant rejecting both predominantly quantitative "clicker" engagement systems and high-stakes multiple-choice exams.

The course was designed to equip students to navigate a fluid media environment that does not sit still (Beckett & Deuze, 2016) and a field whose pedagogical texts are outdated before they are published. Specifically, students need to learn not just *what* contemporary media consist of – which many students intuitively understand better than their instructors – but also *how* to critically navigate the media environment in which they are already immersed – assessing what they see, hear, and read and evaluating the meaning and function(s) of media content through frameworks that facilitate agential response (Wittebols, 2020). As Tischauser and Benn (2019) write,

> Our role as journalism educators … is not so much to teach aspiring journalists how to identify truth, as … to build the reflexive capacity they need to grasp the relationship between power, institutions, and knowledge (p. 131).

With this in mind, an assessment system that merely asks students to reproduce names, dates, and simple concepts on short-answer or multiple-choice exams is not sufficient for proficiency. As Eyler (2018) writes,

> [T]here are serious issues with the methodology of trying to cram as much content as possible into the semester. Instead of going that route, let's think about choosing content carefully as a way to help our students develop a framework for thinking about the discipline (p. 106-107)

because "students may learn all the content we teach them and still not know how to utilize this information outside the walls of our classrooms" (p. 155).

Below, I review the literature on challenges of, and tools for, engaging students in lecture classrooms and on "writing across the curriculum" pedagogy that supports the micro-writing strategies employed for this study. I then describe the pedagogical and instructional basis for the course, lay out data-gathering methods for assessing the course's strengths and weaknesses, provide an informal thematic analysis of the course's key pedagogical instruments, and share student feedback and instructor observations regarding successes and areas for improvement. The cultural approach to course design and micro-writing themes discussed in this paper can be of value to instructors in programs and classes of any size that focus on media literacy and reflection.

Literature Review

Lecture classes are regular features of most universities (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006), especially introductory courses designed to acclimate students to a subject before they move on to more specialized and/or practice-based courses. In addition to large media programs, smaller units might field such courses to build media literacy among majors across their college or university.

However, many pedagogues are not fans of the lecture format. "Large enrollment courses in higher education are the bane of active learning pedagogy," write Trees and Jackson (2007, p. 21), noting the physical distance between instructors and students, the impersonal nature, and intimidating social conditions that discourage participation. Such classes inhibit students' opportunity "to engage in application, analysis, synthesis, or problem-solving" (Trees & Jackson, 2007, p. 22) and often structure grading around a couple of high-stakes exams – a midterm and final. Such structures can stifle student curiosity and intellectual risk-taking, and thus diminish engagement with course themes and concepts. Engagement is partly a measure of students' attention, and an aim of pedagogy is to "hold the attention of students for the sake of changing the things they are likely to pay attention to most of the time. We want to grasp students and direct their attention some place else" (Harvard political theorist Michael Sandel, quoted in Bain, 2004, p. 109).

As scholars have also argued, the quality of students' attention, and their affective response to course content, matters as well (Kahu, 2013). Hence, presenting a higher number of lower stakes assignments – and thus "creating an atmosphere that is friendly to curiosity" (Eyler, 2018, p. 41) – might be desirable. Such an approach offers "challenge and permission for

students to tackle authentic and intriguing questions and tasks, to make decisions, to defend their choices, to come up short, to receive feedback on their efforts, and to try again" (Bain, 2004, p. 100).

Student Response Systems

One tool instructors have used to foster participation in lecture courses is student or classroom response systems, commonly known as "clickers" (Katz *et al.,* 2017; Kim & Park, 2012; Poniatowski, 2019; Trees & Jackson, 2007). Bruff (n.d.) describes the clicker process as working roughly like this: An instructor asks students a multiple-choice question; students respond through the clicker's hardware/software configuration; answers are transmitted to the instructor's computer and assembled into a graphic display, such as a bar chart aggregating anonymous responses; and the instructor uses the results to make real-time pedagogical choices. Varying clicker technology allows a range of flexibility in student responses, such as digits from zero to 10, limited alphabetic entries, and indicators of students' confidence level in their answers (Trees & Jackson, 2007, p. 24).

Creative instructors can use clickers to a variety of pedagogical ends, from taking attendance to monitoring how well students understand a concept, warming students up for discussion, empowering students to steer classroom content, and administering quantitative quizzes and tests (Bruff, n.d.; Katz *et al.,* 2017; Trees & Jackson, 2007). Clickers have been shown to increase overall engagement, which can lead to better attendance and performance (Katz *et al.,* 2017). However, as with most educational tools, clickers work better for some students than others (Kim & Park, 2012). A recent study of one response system found that while students reported a higher sense of belongingness and self-confidence over the semester, there was a slight drop on a scale of engagement measures focused on intrinsic academic motivations. Focus groups found students appreciated the convenience and context provided by the platform but felt disconnected from their classmates and instructors (Spencer *et al.,* 2020).

As an instructor redeveloping a media lecture course to focus on meaningful engagement, critical thinking, and qualitative assessment, I was not interested in recreating students' experience of education as a series of multiple-choice questions with one right (or best) answer. The goal was to steep students in processes of disciplinary problem-solving (Bain, 2004) – encouraging them to develop and defend arguments, find and display evidence, and interact with course material on a deeper and more reflective level. This required a course methodology that was both operationally qualitative and logistically manageable, with efficient tools for collecting and evaluating thoughtful work.

Micro-Writing and Micro-Themes

A key element in a course focused on critical thinking and independent reflection must be writing, as "many activities involved in the writing process are similar to the activities that … reinforce learning" (Panici & McKee, 1995, p. 56). Recognizing the significance of student writing, many higher education institutions in the 1990s pursued a pedagogical movement known as "writing across the curriculum," in which classes offered by a variety of disciplines included writing activities to help students process course content. A key feature of writing across the curriculum is "the concept of 'writing to learn,' as opposed to 'writing to inform.' In other words, finished-product writing takes a back seat … to the use of writing assignments that are intended to help students think" (Riley, 1996, p. 78).

There is a natural affinity between writing across the curriculum programs and journalism and mass communication curricula (Panici & McKee, 1995), which of course emphasize a specific set of professional writing skills. Panici and McKee (1997) found in a survey of journalism and mass communication programs that writing across the curriculum activities "encourage students to think critically, are valuable for students, promote and reinforce learning, encourage students to be more precise in their written work, and help students to analyze and synthesize new information" (p. 50). The authors also note that such courses are "challenging to teach" (1997, p. 50) and require "a major investment of time from the professor" (1995, p. 60). This is where one component of writing across the curriculum pedagogy becomes salient: The micro-theme, an essay of up to a couple of hundred words that challenges students to process, synthesize, argue, and support their position with keen efficiency (Kneeshaw, 1992).

Kneeshaw argues micro-themes "can work at any level and in any discipline" (p. 177). Within communication fields,

> The micro-theme assignment may be used in the communication theory, audience analysis,

> and news writing courses. … The micro-theme may focus on a specific question such as: Is all communication intentional? Or it may focus on an application statement (Panici & McKee, 1995, p. 59).

Garner (1994) notes that such activities inspire qualitative judgment, where "passive memorization comes to a screeching halt, and active, critical thinking comes to the fore" (Garner, 1994, p. 3).

Micro-writing assignments are a way to build bridges among lectures, class activities, and readings (Kneeshaw, 1992). They can be pre-planned or assigned on the spot to address issues that arise in class. Responses to the themes can then seed future activities and discussions (Kneeshaw, 1992; Panici & McKee, 1995; Riley, 1996). A class constructed around many micro-writing assignments, as opposed to a couple of high-stakes essays or exams, supports pedagogies that seek to de-emphasize grades and ease student anxieties that can hinder meaningful learning (Eyler, 2018). Such assignments can also be "reasonably easy to evaluate, even for instructors with large classes" (Kneeshaw, 1992, p. 177).

Google Forms

For a lecture-style class, successful evaluation requires an accessible tool that can both efficiently collect students' writing and display it for assessment. The tool of choice for the present study was Google Forms, a flexible, adaptable, and generally free (Murphy, 2018) tool for soliciting feedback at scale across a variety of formats: multiple-choice, check boxes, short answers, paragraphs, URLs, etc. (Kim & Park, 2012; Murphy, 2018). The forms are accessible via online links and can be completed on a computer or smartphone. Student emails can be required with form submissions, which allows them to receive confirmation and a copy of their responses (Rodriguez, 2018). Answers aggregate onto a display page and can be migrated to a spreadsheet, where all responses can be viewed by scrolling through a single document and expanded or condensed for varying assessment purposes.

There is limited rigorous research on use of Google Forms for college pedagogy, and even less on their use in lecture classrooms for media courses. Studies on Google tools generally, including Google Apps for Education (GAFE), have found positive reception among instructors and students (Sabarinath & Quek, 2020). Teacher-scholars have found Google Forms easy to produce and deploy (Iqbal *et al.,* 2018). A study using Google Forms for library instruction found the tool "can assist in creating an active learning environment" (Rodriguez, 2018, p. 71). For the students, "Having the opportunity to justify why the source they selected was significant to their arguments allowed them to draw conclusions and think critically about their research process" (Rodriguez, 2018, p. 77). The study also noted as drawbacks the time investment needed to meaningfully engage with students' answers:

> [U]tilizing paragraph-style questions on the Google Forms also requires more time to simply read through a substantial amount of submissions. … [N]eglecting to reflect on the amount of personal time involved in the process would be careless (Rodriguez, 2018, p. 79).

Rodriguez also notes the potential for technical failure: "[T]he threat of a weak internet connection is always possible" (p. 80).

With these pedagogical goals, choices, and tools in mind, the central questions driving this study were:

> **RQ1:** What might a media lecture course designed around micro-writing assignments and qualitative assessment look like?
>
> **RQ2:** What do students and the instructor see as benefits and pitfalls of such a course?

Methods

Course Design: The class is titled *World of Media*, the introductory journalism lecture course, which is also open to other media majors (communication, advertising, public relations, etc.) as well as students across the university. The course gives journalism majors an overview of the field while providing a broad introduction to news and media industries for other students. The class (N=199 at the end of the semester) consisted of 66.8% freshmen, 20.6% sophomores, 7.5% juniors, 7.5% seniors, and .5% in other categories. The dominant major was journalism (46.2%), followed by business preference (12.1%) and media and information (6.5%). Small numbers of students also represented majors such as education, communication, advertising, kinesiology, social work, psychology, English, and various other arts, science, and engineering fields.

In recent years, the course had been taught from and structured by an omnibus textbook that, like many of its genre, breaks media into its 20th-century component industries, examining each in a distinct chap-

ter: books, newspapers, magazines, music, radio, film and video, television, the internet, and "third screens" such as smartphones and tablets. Concepts such as ethics, and professions such as public relations and advertising, are also presented in discrete, siloed chapters. However, in the 21st century, divisions among these media, concepts, and professions have dissolved in powerful ways, and "third screens" have become "first screens" for most of the media consumed by undergraduate students (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

I undertook to approach these media and concepts more holistically and culturally, which meant reconceiving course content, structure, and activities. Four conceptual books were selected for their thematic, historic, and holistic approaches to media development and use: *Just the Facts*, David Mindich's (1998) exploration and problematization of the development of the journalistic conceit of "objectivity" in the 19th century; *The Image*, Daniel Boorstin's (1992 [1961]) analysis of the mass-media-inspired "pseudo-events" of the 20th century; *Unbelievable,* NBC reporter Katy Tur's (2017) memoir of covering Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, which illustrates the collision of 19th century news values with 20th century pseudo-events in a 21st century media environment; and *LikeWar,* P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking's sweeping account of how social media has been "weaponized" by politicians, entertainers, corporations, and terrorists across the globe to harness viral messaging toward physical-world goals. Together, these books build an argument for how journalistic and other media norms developed, became naturalized, and have been co-opted in the present media environment through changing historical, cultural, economic, and technological forces. The last two weeks of the course were devoted to the theme of "using media for good," which focused on socially conscious poetry and culminated with a class viewing of *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, the biographical documentary of PBS children's show legend Fred Rogers.

Rather than testing students quantitatively on traditional midterm and final exams focused on memorizing key names, dates, and concept lists, assessments were designed around *engagement* – measures focused predominantly on the extent to which students were (1) reading and processing the books and (2) attending and participating in class sessions. Hence the major grading activities were related to participation and reading.

Data Gathering

The data for this case study were collected almost entirely from the pedagogical materials deployed during the semester. Class materials, lecture notes, and contents of the online forms were preserved for analysis. After the semester ended, grades had been finalized, and Institutional Review Board exempt status was approved, a bulk email was sent to almost every student who had completed the class (students with failing grades and a couple of exceptional cases were excluded) requesting their informed consent to draw from their qualitative responses to inform this study. Students were offered a $5 Amazon gift card for participating. Of the 199 students enrolled at the end of the semester, 109 agreed to participate. Quotations in the results section were selected from among the consenting students.

Evaluative evidence from the class was selected by reviewing reading response and participation prompts to build a rough taxonomy of types of activities and questions presented to students, representative examples of which are shown below. On the final regular day of class, students completed a longer participation form asking about their experience with the class structure, readings, and Google Forms. About three-fourths of the class, 148 students, completed this final form, whose results are aggregated in the findings below.

Results and Discussion

Google Forms and Micro-Themes: The primary goal of the micro-writing assignments collected via Google Forms was to encourage and assess student engagement with the course content. Reading response questions sought evidence of (1) breadth of reading; (2) comprehension of key concepts; and (3) critical evaluation of the author's argument. In-class participation questions varied depending on course content and activities, time allotted for the participation response, and strategies for ensuring that only students in the room could satisfactorily complete the form. Kneeshaw (1992) proposes a rough taxonomy of questions and prompts that can be used for micro-themes: "a straightforward topic with some room for interpretation; an assignment to compare, contrast, and analyze; student analysis of a topic from a pre-selected list; or a thought-provoking comment to be followed by a student's point of view" (p. 177). Below are summarized the types of micro-writing prompts involved in the two main activities of the introduction

TABLE 1: Categories of Participation Prompts

Question type	Description	Example(s)
Summative/ Evaluative	Students were asked to reflect on one or more key concepts of the day – and often relate those concepts to previous readings or class discussions.	The class listened to a podcast on how media norms had been used to manipulate public opinion on climate change and discussed the podcast in the context of truthtelling and "objectivity." The participation form asked for students' "main takeaway" from the podcast, allowing them to express views without prompting from the instructor. Students' widely varying comments included, "The media and journalism can have the tendency to make scientific issues political"; "With topics that are controversial, it is hard to remain unbiased and share both sides fairly, but if you want to aim for objectivity you have to try"; and "[T]o be objective we don't have to list both sides of the story if one side is obviously wrong."
Contributory	Students were asked to provide new information by sharing personal stories or conducting research and inputting their results.	The first chapter of *LikeWar* is dense with anecdotes and data from politics, entertainment, culture, and crime from around the globe. One class period, I gave students a few minutes to research one proper noun, place, event, or detail from the chapter that interested them and write a short paragraph. Then students had time to share what they had found with one another. On another day, after reading about Charles Lindbergh in *The Image* and discussing media-produced celebrities, I gave students a link to a historical newspapers database and had them find an old Lindbergh news story, enter the lead or caption, and describe the story in relation to the concept of pseudo-events.
Questions	Students were asked to identify areas of confusion or curiosity to help guide follow-up sessions.	In the same participation form where students shared their research from the *LikeWar* chapter above, I invited them to pose questions they still had about concepts from the chapter. Responses included, "How far are people in the government allowed to go on social media and what can they say or not say?"; "I'm curious about how difficult it is for journalists to find out this information, given the inherent danger of being in the middle of gang wars like these"; "The book talked about a lot of different events from around the world. I am just wondering how the authors will connect all the events"; and "[W]hat are some ways social media could be weaponized in the future? and how would we defend against that?" Such questions led to a wide-ranging discussion in the following class where we talked about Internet regulation, the First Amendment, the purpose and tone of the book, its relationship to our prior readings, globalization of media, and cultivation theory relating to crime coverage.
Feedback	Students were asked to share their opinions on a given activity or assignment to help the instructor evaluate its effectiveness.	An early assignment had students spend five days tracking their media use in a worksheet and then enter their totals into a Google Form so we could aggregate and analyze the data. After students completed the assignment, a participation form asked students to "State one thing you would change about the media diary assignment (structure, content, timing, etc.) if you were to going to assign it next semester, and why."

to media class: participation and reading responses.

Participation Forms: Participation-based Google Forms sought responses during class time to assess engagement, track attendance, and determine areas for follow-up. The time during the 50-minute class in which students were asked to submit the forms varied based on the lesson plan, the participation activity, and tactical assessments of how best to determine students were validly present and participating. Most of the time, this took place in the final minutes of class. This allowed students to reflect on the day's content and helped ensure their engagement wouldn't flag after having completed the form if time remained during the class.

On some occasions, however, the participation question helped set off discussion and was presented earlier in the class period. For instance, the first class began not with a review of the syllabus but with students invited to write down a definition of media, discuss it with a neighbor, then input their definition into a Google Form. We then reviewed some of their definitions and compared them with existing definitions from a range of sources. The goals of this exercise were to (1) set the tone for the class, in which students were positioned as active learners whose own media knowledge and backgrounds were relevant; (2) help relax students and get them talking with one another early; and (3) introduce them to the main system of class communication, activity, and feedback for the course. Generally, participation questions broke down into four rough categories, detailed in Table 1.

Reading Responses: Reading responses pushed students to contemplate authors' concepts and their implications. These micro-writing assignments allowed the instructor to: (1) assess engagement by noting whether a student synthesized ideas and examples from across the reading or simply plucked a detail from the first paragraph; (2) assess comprehension by comparing the student's answer against the main themes of the reading and other course material; (3) detect students sharing answers or plagiarizing from the reading by noting echoes across answers or with language in the text. Early incidents of (likely ignorant) plagiarism provided teachable moments to help students understand subtleties of quotation and attribution. General categories of reading response prompts are detailed in Table 2.

Student Feedback: On the final regular day of class, a summative participation form sought students' opinions about the semester, including a quantitative rating of how they felt the Google Forms worked on a scale of 1 (hated them) to 5 (loved them). One hundred forty-eight students, about three-fourths of the total class, attended and/or and responded to the form. The mean rating for the Google Forms' effectiveness was 4.56. Students were also asked to compare their experience of using Google Forms against clickers, if they had used those devices in the past. Eighty-six students (58%) reported having used clickers before; of that group, 12 (14%) said they preferred clickers, and 74 (86%) said they preferred Google Forms.

Students were asked to explain their responses. Common positive comments were that the forms were easy to use, flexible both in terms of conceptual range and device usability, inexpensive (free) as opposed to clicker systems, and allowed for meaningful engagement. One student wrote,

> I didn't have to pay and it was a super convenient way to share my opinion and have my attendance accounted for.

Regarding flexibility and ease of use, student comments included:

> I can access these Google Forms from any device so if my laptop wasn't around, I could still fill out the responses on my phone. Also, they're simple and understandable.

> It made everything super easy and quick to do. Click the link and submit, simple! Also, having them linked on the course page rather than making us go into d2l or classroom or anything, was convenient. Everything was in one place.

In terms of meaningful engagement, comments included:

> I thought it was a good way to take attendance and also let people share their opinions without having to talk in class if they didn't want to.

> I found it really amazing how we were able to interact or add questions as the lecture went on. It made me feel more involved in such a large class.

> It made it easy for us to give you our thoughts about what was going on in the class and it was fun to fill out.

Evidence of intellectual engagement came in comments such as:

> I liked how the questions are not straight forward so it challenges you to analyze the questions.

> i have used clickers in other classes but I like

TABLE 2: Categories of Reading Response Prompts

Question type	Description	Example(s)
Open-ended	These questions gave students freedom to describe their takeaways from the reading. Such prompts can personalize the learning process (Walkington & Bernacki, 2014): Instead of expecting all students to start and end with the same knowledge, the prompt encourages students to take the lessons that are most meaningful to them.	One prompt asked, "What did you learn about Internet and social media history from this chapter that you didn't know before?" At the end of *Unbelievable,* students were asked to "Name a key thing you have learned about broadcast reporting and/or political journalism from Katy Tur's book." A question on a reading about critical thinking skills asked, "How can you apply this advice to your own media production and consumption?"
Conceptual	Prompts asked students to summarize and define people, events, and ideas from the books in their own words – both to point students toward the most important aspects of the reading and to assess how well they grasped the key concepts.	Questions included, "Who was Ida B. Wells, and why is she important in this chapter?"; "Explain the limitations of 'balance' as a journalistic value, as argued by Mindich"; and "Explain in your own words what Boorstin means by a 'pseudo-event.'"
Comparative	Students were asked to compare ideas from the current reading to previous ones, to build understanding of the relationship among authors and arguments.	One prompt called for students to "Compare *LikeWar's* history of media and technology with the histories in *Just the Facts* and *The Image*. What do these authors highlight that the others didn't, or vice versa?" When the class moved from *Just the Facts* to *The Image,* a response question was, "Boorstin doesn't talk explicitly about 'objectivity' in the beginning of *The Image*, but he gives a sense of how he might think about it. How would you compare Boorstin's implicit view of objectivity with Mindich's in *Just the Facts*?"
Critical Thinking	Students were asked to critically evaluate the ideas and arguments presented by authors. Answers shed light on their preconceived notions about journalistic roles and clued me in on strengths and weaknesses of my own argument in lectures.	Students were asked to judge correspondent Katy Tur and her colleagues' news decisions in the 2016 presidential campaign, some of which involved cases where Tur had withheld information from her news reports (but included in her book) that might have embarrassed herself, Donald Trump, or his staff. One response prompt asked, "Give an example of one of these decisions. What do you think about her choice?" Many students were more concerned with Tur maintaining her access and good relations with Trump than with her telling true stories to citizen-voters. This orientation informed my subsequent approach to teaching key journalistic principles.

> the Google Forms better because you get to hear my thoughts and opinions about what we are learning about that day.
>
> Clickers make me feel like I'm always being quizzed on my abilities and it puts me on edge. I'm a journalism major, I like to write, not taking multiple choice quizzes every class.

Students who offered negative comments on the Google Forms focused mostly on logistical problems that had occurred intermittently through the semester, specifically spotty Wifi service in the lecture hall that resulted in occasional delayed access to the forms. One student who rated the Forms a 4 wrote:

> I think it went really well when it worked. I would give it a 5 if it wasn't for the internet being so bad sometimes.

Another issue some students raised, which was noticed instructionally throughout the semester, was the potential for students to "game" the system, or to monitor the interactive course document remotely and fill out the participation form when it appeared on the document even though they had not attended or participated in the class session. As one student wrote,

> I personally liked it [the Google Forms], but I know a lot of people who just used it to their advantage and never came to class because they did their attendance at home.

For many students, however, the forms were an adequate gatekeeper of attendance, as evidenced by one comment regarding the emphasis on attendance and participation in the final grade:

> I liked how causal[casual] they were but I didn't love how they favored so heavily into your grade.

Among students who preferred clickers, representative comments included:

> clickers are less effort
>
> Clickers are faster than Google Forms and the class can see the results easier.
>
> Clickers are fun to use. I like when I have to do clicker questions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The most useful aspect of structuring the introductory media course through micro-writing assignments on Google Forms was the affordance for at-a-glance qualitative assessment of student engagement. Although each form yielded thousands of words, the instructor could quickly scroll through the spreadsheet to establish which students had contributed and which had not. More effort, however, was required to assess whether students had contributed *meaningfully*.

The Google Forms also facilitated timely and responsive class planning. In addition to documenting individual student engagement, the answer spreadsheets allowed for quick assessment of what the class as a whole was focusing on, what they didn't understand, and what they were most interested in. This enabled the incorporation of students' responses, interests, and questions into subsequent lectures, turning course planning into an ongoing conversation rather than a regimented information delivery system.

Finally, the regular flow of qualitative responses, and the flexibility to ask a variety of questions, helped to invest students emotionally in the course and its content. Early in the semester, students were asked what kinds of music should be played before class started. I remember the little thrill that crossed one student's face when she recognized the artist I was playing as the one she had requested on a Google Form in the prior class. This emotional connection is not simply a matter of students and instructors sharing a good vibe; thinking and feeling have been found to be mutually dependent, and emotional engagement is important for learning (Eyler, 2018; Kahu, 2013). Eyler recommends that instructors ask themselves, "Where is the emotional angle in the material? How might it connect to students' lives and their emotional responses to the world?" (p. 127).

The two major cons to running the class as structured were (1) dealing with students who tried to game the system and (2) the amount of intellectual energy and recordkeeping required to keep up with the qualitative responses.

Assessing and arguing with students who sought to take advantage of the online forms was the most exhausting and disheartening aspect of the class. It became clear that more students were filling out the class participation form each day than appearing in the room. Some students would simply wait for the link to appear on the online course document and complete it from wherever they were. (This is an issue that might not arise with more geographically attuned clicker technology.) The result was a cat-and-mouse game in which I not only evaluated responses based on their content relevance, but also began popping the Google link on and off the document during class, giving students *verbal* questions to answer on the generic feedback form, and otherwise seeking to

outsmart the students who were outsmarting me. This occasioned a few disputes with students who insisted they had been in class even though they did not fill out the form or filled it out with something irrelevant. Further, it made me feel cynical and disillusioned.

The second semester I taught the class, I stopped recording attendance altogether and increased available participation points to 40 percent of the grade. Then, rather than arguing with students as to whether they had been in class, I could simply judge whether their answer demonstrated sufficient engagement – shifting emphasis from physical presence to intellectual relevance. A subsequent adjustment has involved assessing both reading and participation responses on a 3-point scale rather than recording simple binary credit/no credit. This helps to further differentiate between students who are just phoning it in and students who are clearly engaging with the material. Any disputes over whether a student received sufficient points for a given answer can be resolved simply by inviting the student to write a stronger response – which keeps the intellectual obligation with the student and reinforces the pedagogical aims of the class.

The second major drawback of the micro-writing assignment system was labor. As Panici and McKee (1995) argue, classes that focus on writing, particularly those with high student counts, "require a major investment of time from the professor" (p. 60). Unlike with most classes under the writing across the curriculum umbrella, feedback was not provided on individual students' writing. Instead, the class received general feedback in subsequent lectures developed from trends, patterns, and common (mis)understandings expressed in their responses. This process, of course, means that students had to independently apply the general commentary to their own writing and argument, which is not ideal – but it is better than not having the opportunity to write critically in a lecture course at all. From the instructor's end, I read most words of most responses – first, to ensure that only students who had engaged in good faith with the material were rewarded; second, to develop and refine subsequent lecture activities; and third, because I was really curious. Depending on the prompt and plans for the next class, this assessment could take from 30 to 60 minutes per Google Form, or about three to five hours per week on top of other prep work. For some instructors, this might well be worth the time. For others, it might not be – or, depending on other demands, it might simply not be possible.

One final con was the challenge of unreliable internet service in the particular classroom that was the setting for this study. It mostly worked, but when you're counting on Wifi with five minutes left and students can't access your participation form, things can get hairy.

In sum, the semester proved satisfying in terms of meeting the pedagogical aims of running a critically oriented lecture class that built on constructivist educational theory and intellectual process rather than rote memorization and quantitative outcomes. The semester also proved intellectually and emotionally exhausing. The pedagogical lessons on micro-writing and conceptual design from this case study can apply to smaller courses in small programs as well as to large university courses. For instance, I have found Google Forms useful for collecting feedback and crowdsourcing questions and examples in journalism skills courses. And quick writing assessments, such as "one-minute papers" (Anderson & Burns, 2013) that ask students to reflect on what they've just heard could be fruitful in media history and ethics courses, as well as other offerings in the mass communication curriculum. Future research can continue exploring the balance between meaningful engagement and efficient assessment in media classes.

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