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Teaching “Like a Girl”: Student Reflection of the Benefits and Challenges of Feminist Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT: Current unemployment rates, job market competition, and the thirst for the college experience has more millennials attending college than any other previous generation, but with the increase in university tuition and courses that feature both online and face-to-face segments for over-sized classrooms, approaches to teaching that keep students engaged can be challenging. Using my own personal reflection, anonymous midterm survey results, and Student Perception of Instruction survey results, the author analyzes the challenges and benefits of feminist pedagogy—a student-centered teaching method that focuses on student responsibility for learning, a decentralized classroom hierarchy, and strategies that promote self-reflection and participation—utilized in a course titled *Women in Literature* at the University of Central Florida. The author finds that the elements of feminist pedagogy used in the course were effective in motivating students to learn more about themselves and each other in a community that is becoming more ethnically and socially diverse. Though there exist many challenges to the ways feminist pedagogy can be implemented in a large, technologically-centered class, this research paper explains that even non-ambitious implementations can be beneficial to students, teachers, and the university as a whole.

KEYWORDS: pedagogy, feminism

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INTRODUCTION

This essay will present my personal observations and reflections on a course I took in the fall of 2013 titled *Women in Literature*. In my observations, I will highlight the benefits of feminist pedagogy, the method of my mentor and professor Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés. While discussing the means by which this pedagogy was used, I will analyze which strategies worked well for students and which did not. In the contemporary college classroom, which may include up to 100 students, online and face-to-face instruction is sometimes combined in a hybrid manner. I will offer a constructive critique of the increasingly common hybrid method of instruction by analyzing feedback via an anonymous student midterm survey, student responses to a Student Perception of Instruction survey at the end of the semester, and my own personal experience as a student. I will use feminist inquiry to discuss the level of success of the course as perceived by those it was meant to teach. Finally, I will compare and contrast the challenges students and teachers face in this environment as well as the place and role feminist pedagogy has in the contemporary college classroom.

WOMEN IN LITERATURE

This section will analyze the course *Women in Literature*. I will first review the syllabus and expectations held by the professor and will then analyze the challenges met and faced with her method of teaching, feminist pedagogy. Finally, with the anonymous midterm survey and Student Perception of Instruction Survey, I will discuss the level of success met by this course by the standards of both students and feminist pedagogy, a method of teaching meant to be beneficial and fulfilling for both students and teachers alike.

Women in Literature was a large class with an enrollment cap of 100 students that met twice a week for fifty minutes and had an online component to supplement weekly discussions. Each student individually read required texts as well as texts chosen by the class via polling, which will be discussed later in the essay. The core texts were all books by women of different ethnicities and the content spanned several genres. These books were *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid, *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* by Lisa See, and *How We Became Human* by Joy Harjo. Other texts were readily available as PDFs or links via the online component of the course. This ease of

access was particularly beneficial as it allowed students of every major to feel comfortable finding the assigned readings.

According to the syllabus, the main objectives of the class were to (1) be able to read and understand common themes, symbols, and ideas expressed by women writers, (2) understand how the political, social, and culture contributions of women in society have influenced the style and content of their literature, (3) engage in creative and analytical writing related to the content, readings and discussions, (4) learn about the various literary backgrounds informing the work of some major women writers of the twentieth century, and (5) explore aesthetic, historical, sociopolitical, and cultural issues related to *Women in Literature* (Rodríguez Milanés).

Due to the large size of this class (in terms of the number of students and the physical space of a large lecture hall), the first challenge both the professor and students had to face was trying to find a way in which discussions could be held in such a manner that every person felt that she or he would be heard. Some students chose to sit in the back of the auditorium, which created an additional challenge to ensure even minimal engagement. An important aspect of feminist pedagogy is engagement because it assures that there is a general understanding of shared knowledge, thus allowing classroom discussions to go further and deeper. Our large classroom thus faced the challenge of creating an engaging and post-positivist environment. According to Chick and Hassel's essay "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Virtual: Feminist Pedagogy in the Online Classroom," post-positivist knowledge is knowledge that "is growing, forming, evolving" (203). This means that the voices of student and teacher are equal and that a conversation between the two can exist in tandem in order for educational and personal growth to occur. The online portion of this class thus allowed for students who engaged less in the classroom to participate more freely without the worry of being called on in a class of over 50 students or conversely not being called upon to speak.

In general, large lecture sections pose challenges to active participation – whether it's due to seating arrangements or time limits that don't accommodate large classroom size. Some students opt out of face-to-face interaction altogether and prefer online discussions. In this class, the use of a classroom response system (CRS) using i>clickers helped to solve this engagement challenge and achieve some of the primary goals of feminist pedagogy

by providing the opportunity for all students to anonymously “voice” their views when polled. Classroom discussion is paramount for a classroom nurturing feminist pedagogical ideologies because one of the main tenets of feminist theory holds that knowledge should be participatory and egalitarian.

THE I>CLICKER

The i>clicker is a wireless/remote device referred to as a classroom response system (CRS), and large lecture classes often require each student to own or rent an i>clicker device in order to participate in polling sessions or quizzes during every class. Besides being used as a method to award attendance and participation points, the CRS supplemented the slideshow presentations that Dr. Rodríguez Milanés used to provide visuals for students of all learning styles (such as pictures of the author and information about them and their work). By posting previously written questions on the slideshows, students could anonymously answer questions ranging from the content in the literary works we had been assigned to the identities of famous women who have won Nobel Prizes (see Figure 1). The polling session was usually held at the beginning of class after a brief introduction of the lesson by the professor. After the polling time was up, the anonymously charted answers were displayed on the projected screen for the class to analyze together.

Based on my experience as a student, I felt that i>clickers were beneficial to me and to the class in many ways, despite the technological complications that sometimes occurred during the sessions. The CRS allowed for all students to readily participate in the discussion and the answers often prompted even more discussion. We learned how our answers compared to those of our classmates, whether our understanding of the work was the same as others, or a fact about women and literature. At the same time, while i>clickers definitely invited a progressive and egalitarian mentality to class, this technology also had its drawbacks. Sometimes, the questions were posed in such a way that required a yes/no answer or a very specific interpretation of a work; such a rigid answer structure is at times extremely detrimental to the flow of discussion because it does not necessarily allow for all students to explain their way of thinking. Another consequence of i>clicker utilization was that the system could malfunction or be difficult to use and this took away time from the already short fifty minute period we had for actual discussion.

Some students who voiced their opinions on i>clickers expressed concerns on the anonymous online midterm survey such as “perhaps more open-ended questions to stimulate discussion rather than passing through a series of objective facts about the readings” and “it seems like an effective technology, but not quite feasible for a class of our size.”

The size of the class allowed for some students to share answers with their peers before submitting their answers via the i>clicker. This mechanism, however, takes away from a very important tenet of feminist pedagogy, which is personal responsibility for learning. Some students felt that proper knowledge on how to use i>clicker could have enhanced the experience while some preferred for it not to exist at all. Other students seemed uninterested in using technology during the face-to-face portion of the course because it did not help them learn, a sentiment recorded in the anonymous midterm survey responses (see Figure 2). The charts in Figure 2 also demonstrate student preference towards PowerPoint-driven discussions rather than i>clicker sessions.

Verbal discussions unhindered by polling provide for more human interaction that is necessary for the discussion of literature, but despite these drawbacks and considering the size of the classroom, the use of i>clickers is overall beneficial in engaging all the “voices” in the class. The anonymity of the method allows students to feel more comfortable answering difficult and delicate questions that deal with issues such as sexual abuse or racism.

ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Alternatively, there was another method of class polling online that featured one of the best opportunities for student participation. Online, students were separated into numbered groups. In these small groups, discussions were assigned weekly. The discussion topics were based on the readings of the week and allowed for free-flowing conversations. At the very beginning of the course, Dr. Rodríguez Milanés explained that there were specific slots open on the course schedule that class members would fill with the authors *we* desired to be included in the class lessons. In these online groups, we composed a Top Ten list of favorite authors. Dr. Rodríguez Milanés compiled all the top favorite female authors and an open in-class discussion was held (so that students could express *why* they chose certain authors) before a final voting session via i>clicker displayed the classroom’s decisions. This activity involved i>clicker, face-to-face

discussion, and online discussion, and it was highly effective in managing to get the most out of student participation. Re-iterating the main purposes of feminist pedagogy, “participatory learning, social construction of knowledge, and the legitimation of personal experience” (Markowitz 42), all three of these goals are met in this method.

As per online discussion requirements, in a week’s time we had to discuss and reply to fellow group members about the week’s current readings. Having the convenience of replying via Webcourses@UCF, the university’s Learning Management System’s (LMS) messaging tool, there was more time to gather my thoughts on how I wanted to express myself. I felt that, within that time, I was usually able to post my individual reply to the topic. The discussions sometimes asked us to choose a favorite poem by an author and deconstruct it and then respond to a classmate’s post. The replies to other students’ postings required us to add to their thoughts and expand on a dialogue in which ideas were exchanged. If the group members were engaged in the discussions, they usually went very well and I finished the assignment learning even more outside of the classroom.

There were many times, though, that students did not post until the very last minute before the discussion was due and the dialogue fell flat. I feel that this happened more often than not. Personal responsibility is important – students seemed unmotivated to constantly check back on Webcourses@UCF for replies. This method usually required that students check back quite frequently, and if we were all posting at different times, it became difficult to have an ongoing, engaging conversation, especially in the small discussion groups.

We also had a Teaching Assistant (TA) who was extremely helpful in reaching all the students – whether that was about help on a future essay or grading discussions on Webcourses@UCF. The TA was the person who sent out brief responses to our weekly discussion postings. Even though these discussions were meant to provide students with a place to discuss freely, they were still graded for content and the TA’s responses to them were not meant to include her thoughts in the discussions themselves. The online discussion postings were thus designed to increase student responsibility and decentralize the class hierarchy, following feminist pedagogy.

Student feedback on online discussion postings varied from the positive – “the discussion postings are a great

way to keep the students active in the class and it’s always nice to receive a response from either my peers or the TA. All the responses I’ve gotten have been insightful and have been able to give me a new perspective on a text that I might not have noticed prior” – to the negative: “the discussion postings are kind of hard because not everyone in the group participates so it’s hard to get a collective response to the topic. I think it would be easier if we didn’t have groups and just discussed the topic with the whole class.” For my part, although students seem to prefer face-to-face or online discussions, they were more likely to bring an i>clicker to class than to have read the material necessary for discussion (see Figure 3).

Most students felt that the discussions helped them rather than hurt them. Still, several students preferred feedback from the professor. In relation to this issue, Dr. Rodríguez Milanés says in her forthcoming essay “Ms/ Use of Technology”:

Students resist destabilizing classroom hierarchies because they don’t understand that a course that values their perspective is more about the development of personal interpretations and encouragement to further explore than it is about reiterating an instructor’s views. (deNoyelles, Rodríguez Milanés, and Dunlap 24)

Radical pedagogies such as feminist pedagogy are revolutionary in that they attempt to explore and cross boundaries in our daily lives. In *Teaching to Transgress*, for example, bell hooks states that “personal testimony, personal experience, is such a fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory because it usually forms the base of our theory making” (70). It may seem unorthodox to students to have their voices and personal responsibilities held in equal value to their instructor’s. Yet hearing students’ perceptions are not only beneficial to the class/learning environment; students’ voices are especially important for the professor to hear and value how her class understands and feels about certain topics. Our voices help shape the way the class is conducted to promote personal responsibility for our learning. Although this method requires a lot of student engagement, online discussions are effective in having students exchange views and experiences that help shape the way they view each other. It also helps guide the way discussion is held in class. The literature classroom (face-to-face or online) is one of the best places to have students learn about each other in a way

that is not completely dependent on the instructor's interpretation of the material. It also shows a certain level of understanding and skill once a student is able to analyze, relate, and empathize with others because of the content they learned through reading. In short, it is imperative that students take personal responsibility to engage with each other in all components of the class in order to maintain a participatory and egalitarian environment.

IN-CLASS DISCUSSIONS

Face-to-face discussions were usually held continuously throughout the entire class. This method was very well liked by students (see Figure 4). The lessons were driven by and presented via slideshows and were projected onto a large smart board. The entire class could see and read the slideshows – they often contained biographical information, pictures, and discussion topics.

Sometimes, we were required to select a favorite quote from the assigned reading so that students could lead the discussions based on what they thought was interesting or confusing. If the class was prepared, the conversations were fuller and more engaged. Many times, students did not read the material before class and Dr. Rodríguez Milanés led the discussion in such a way that still required students to provide feedback. Chick and Hassel state that feminist pedagogy requires class members to be responsible for “habits of mind,” which includes demonstrating initiative over one's education and developing thinking patterns and awareness that go beyond the actual course. If students do not read the material it is impossible to fulfill this goal, but if the classroom is invested in learning, we can learn so much more than just the facts or base content of the books.

ASSIGNMENTS

In my four-year experience as an English Literature major at UCF, literature courses are generally not usually assignment-heavy, but reading the material is a major portion of the work alongside essays, especially in upper-level courses. Discussion postings and essays are the two methods that are the most frequently used to grade student work and participation in hybrid courses. It is assumed that students come to class having read the material, though this is truer for upper-level courses as opposed to 3000-level courses that students of every major are welcome to take. Due to the fact that i-clickers were used in this course, it provided non-literature majors

with enough grades to track their personal progress. Students tend to feel worried when there are not enough graded assignments to balance their overall grade in the course. Specifically, if there are only essay assignments, then students worry that they have to do very well on the essays in order to earn a good grade. For students who are not accustomed to writing literary critical research essays, this can be a daunting task, although students were encouraged to seek feedback from the instructors or the University Writing Center.

I felt that *Women in Literature* had assignments that were effective in both providing students with enough grades and challenging us. Most importantly, these assignments were in line with feminist pedagogy and classroom objectives. Specifically, the three literary critical essays we were required to write gave us a chance to use a reader-response critique of two assigned works at a time. In this essay format, we could compare and contrast novels, essays, poems, etc. while still being able to express how we related to them or how they related to the world. For the third and final literary critical essay, Dr. Rodríguez Milanés offered an alternative assignment titled *Oral History Literacy Assignment* in which students were allowed to interview a woman in their life for an hour and then write an essay detailing the interview and the importance of that woman's life and history with literacy. I particularly enjoyed this assignment even though I opted for another research paper because it allowed students to look outside themselves and more profoundly understand the adversity the average woman must go through. Furthermore, students were invited to share their oral histories in class. In the context of everything that we learned in the course about inequality in gender and race, this practice was an original alternative to essay writing that expanded student empathy and personal involvement.

On the back of every essay we turned in, we answered three memo questions that involved a good amount of self-assessment and critique, an important aspect of feminist pedagogy as well. Here is an example of two memo questions I answered for one of my essays:

1. What was the most interesting thing I learned writing this paper?

The most interesting thing I learned is that Judith Ortiz Cofer still comes face to face with discrimination, especially in the work place. Since I am a Latina, I can relate in many ways so

it's sad to learn that these stereotypes of Latinas being unintelligent and sexually desperate are still really prevalent in this society although many Latinas prove to be otherwise. I like that Cofer's response to that is to continue to be herself and give her audience a more realistic view of the world and of Hispanic women.

2. What does this paper deserve? Grade it and justify the grade.

I think that my paper deserves an A because I did better than last time – this paper analyzes how both Judith Ortiz Cofer and Lucille Clifton use different mediums (a short story and a poem) to reach the same goal. Both hope to eliminate negative stereotypes of women of color by portraying them realistically. I used many in-text citations and tried to make it as cohesive as possible.

The memo questions were honestly seeking students' attitudes on the assignments and encouraged self-reflection. I especially liked the question about what we found most interesting because it made me reflect on what I had learned, rather than just turn in an essay and forget about the topic after it was done.

Just as self-critique is important in feminist pedagogy, peer-critique is also vital so that students can learn how their peers understand their work and work together to promote the understanding of the class as a whole. Another assignment we had in *Women in Literature*, for example, was an online group presentation on any female author the group decided on. My group chose Jane Austen and we communicated via Webcourses@UCF. Online, we chose individual tasks to complete and e-mailed one person the separate parts of the assignment to organize. I put together a single Prezi presentation, a slideshow, and posted it on Webcourses@UCF so all the group members could review it. Once we uploaded our presentation, Dr. Rodríguez Milanés told the class the presentations were ready to be evaluated. Classmates would view each slideshow, then anonymously submit a survey that asked them to evaluate the performance of each separate student in the group and assign a score for the group presentation as a whole. Dr. Rodríguez Milanés then averaged her grade, the TA's grade, and the students' grades to produce the grade we received, which reflected what everyone in the entire classroom felt we deserved. I really liked that I could individually review

the author presentations because it made me feel that my opinion was important for the success and growth of the class – this is a method by which students can feel valued as important members of the learning environment in which they share power with their instructor, proving that their engagement can literally change the flow of the class.

Overall, the assignments in this course were helpful in carrying out feminist pedagogical tenets like legitimizing personal experience, learning about underrepresented groups (women/women of color), and self and peer-review. The assignments also made the teacher and students personally responsible for maintaining a post-positivist environment where education could grow in a liberatory way.

CONCLUSION

Feminist pedagogy performed well in the case of *Women in Literature*. The Student Perception of Instruction Survey showed that over 80% of the students felt respect and concern shown towards them, 70% felt that the environment helped students learn, and 63% felt that the communication of ideas and information was effective. In each of these parameters, the student responses placed this course above the university average. A major part of feminist classrooms is that they are student-centered rather than lecture driven. Certain courses may find this tenet challenging. Math and science classes rely on theories and formulas already created, so lectures can work particularly well here. Although humanities courses can usually utilize more aspects of feminist pedagogy, this does not mean that parts of the practice cannot be used throughout the university. Student voices can be heard in any environment, whether it's through online methods, i>clickers, or face-to-face interactions. Peer review is also feasible, especially if smaller groups are created for larger class sizes. Even if classroom environments are not ideal, feminist pedagogy holds that students and teachers must respect one another and create a way for that environment to serve them both.

In literature courses, the goal is to have students understand – via reading and discussion – connections between characters and how their issues relate to the real world and themselves, and courses such as *Women in Literature* focus specifically on groups like women and people of color that are often neglected in the study of literature and are discriminated against. If students are actively engaged in the lesson, they will learn through

the class material about adversity and the discussions in class will help to solidify their understanding of how this adversity existed and still exists today. Our discussions should not diminish our interpretations of the work, but should expand our interpretations and realize what they imply about ourselves and the world around us. Students should actively feel like we are growing into cultured and educated peers, as this is the goal of the college experience.

Many of the issues that college students face today rely on their lack of personal responsibility, since it is easy to become complacent or lost when there are so many people striving for the same goals and there is seemingly no direction or care being given to their individual voice. It is difficult to combat issues such as increases in tuition or unemployment, but with themes of pedagogical methods that promote student involvement in the way feminist pedagogy does, it is more likely that students will feel that college is an essential growing experience. Teachers who use feminist pedagogy should be encouraging their students to grow into more well-rounded and compassionate individuals, and challenging them to see outside the box and find methods of learning that work for them. Students should be able to do the same for their instructors, demonstrating that there is equality within the learning environment itself and that knowledge is ever-growing and ever-changing.

APPENDIX A

Figure 1: Example of slideshow i>clicker question

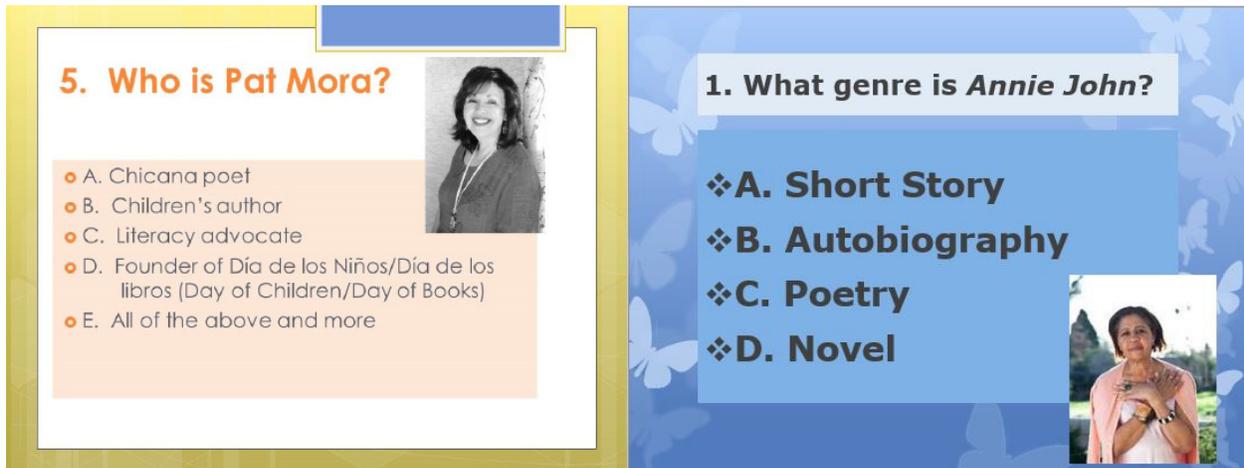


Figure 2: A portion of the anonymous midterm survey results from LIT3833

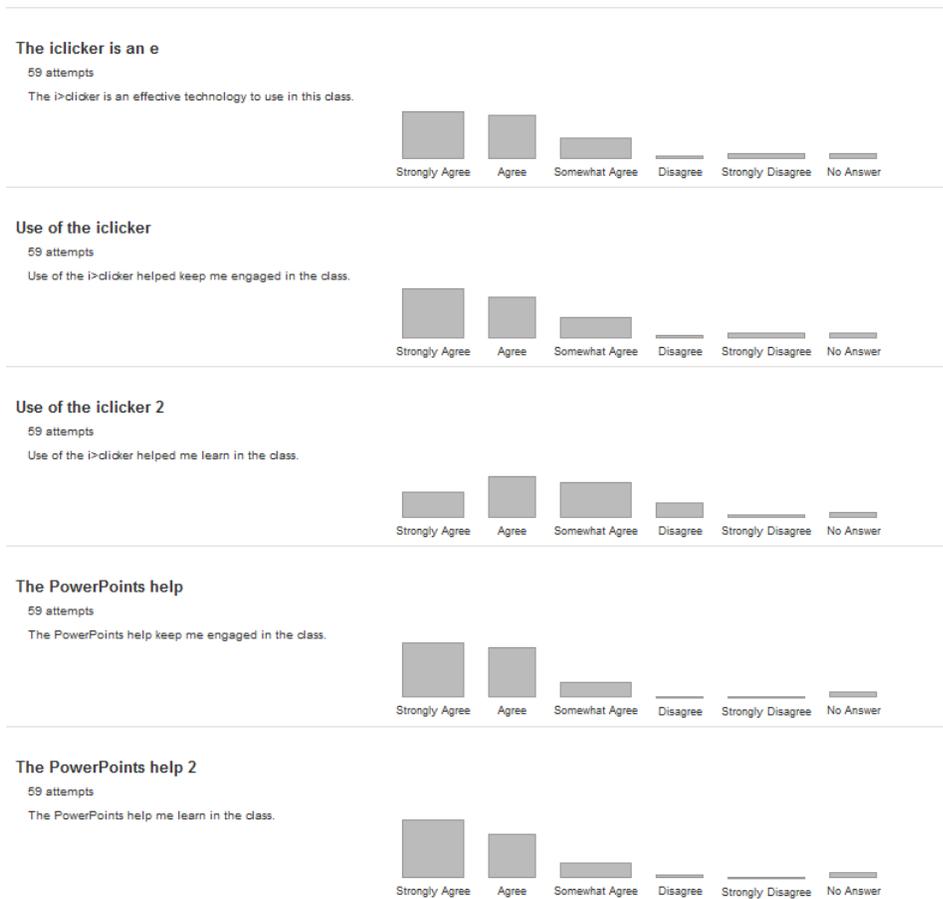


Figure 3: Results from the anonymous midterm survey on self-evaluation

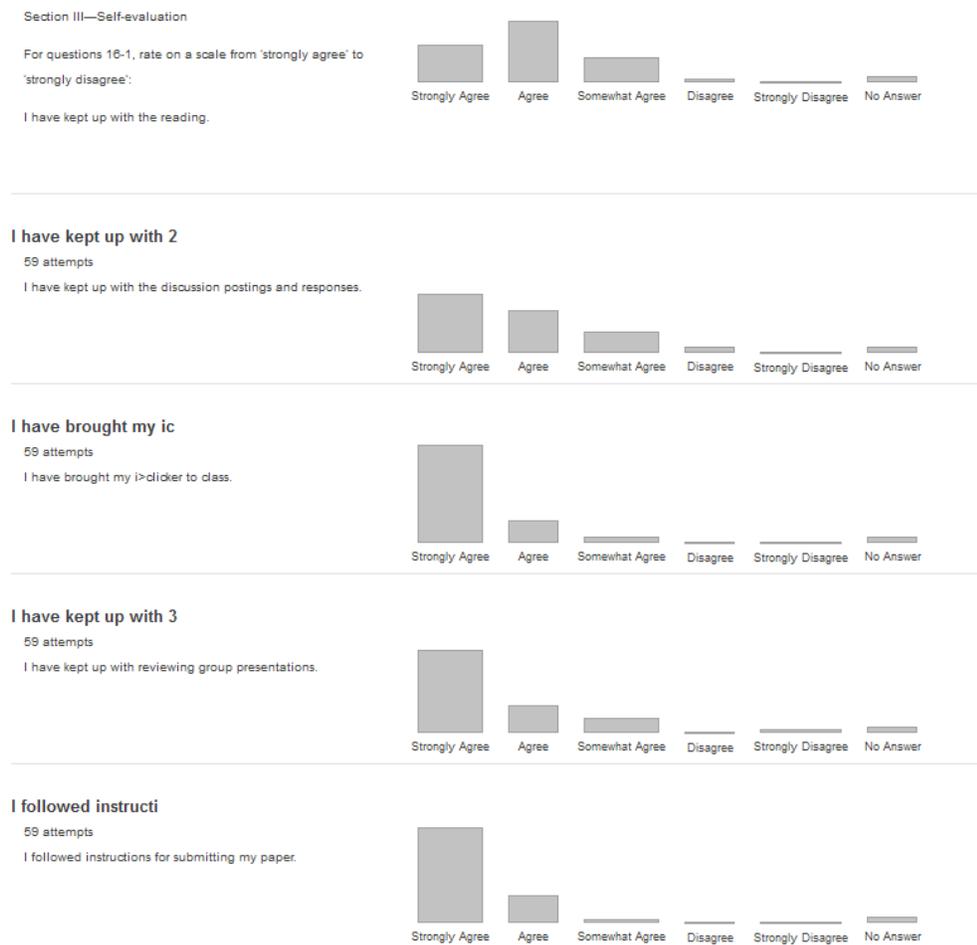


Figure 4: Results from the anonymous midterm survey that shows positivity towards classroom communication during lecture



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