

Popular press think-pieces: beyond the summary

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Abstract

A wide variety of biology-focused news articles and popular books bring alive the relevance of challenging biology concepts. The writing style of these articles makes students much more interested and willing to read them than a textbook. Reading assignments that include a great deal of student choice can foster learning from a diverse student body. The accompanying think-piece writing assignments require that students demonstrate some form of critical thinking, rather than simply summarizing articles. My survey assessing disposition (n = 42 students) suggests that the assignment sparked many students' interest to learn more about biology topics and helped some students feel more engaged with the class content. A list of ideas for popular press readings in Introductory Biology and Conservation Biology is available below the poster.

Approach

- Students wrote reflections on 8 relevant popular press readings throughout the semester.
- Students could choose from a list of suggested readings or find their own using supplied guidelines.
- For each paper, students chose 1 or more of these forms of critical thinking:

- Synthesis of concepts across multiple readings and/or courses
- Application of the topic to *your* life
- Comparison of a change in understanding before and after the reading
- Application of the topic to completely different real-world situations
- Critical assessment of the quality of the evidence or effectiveness of the writing

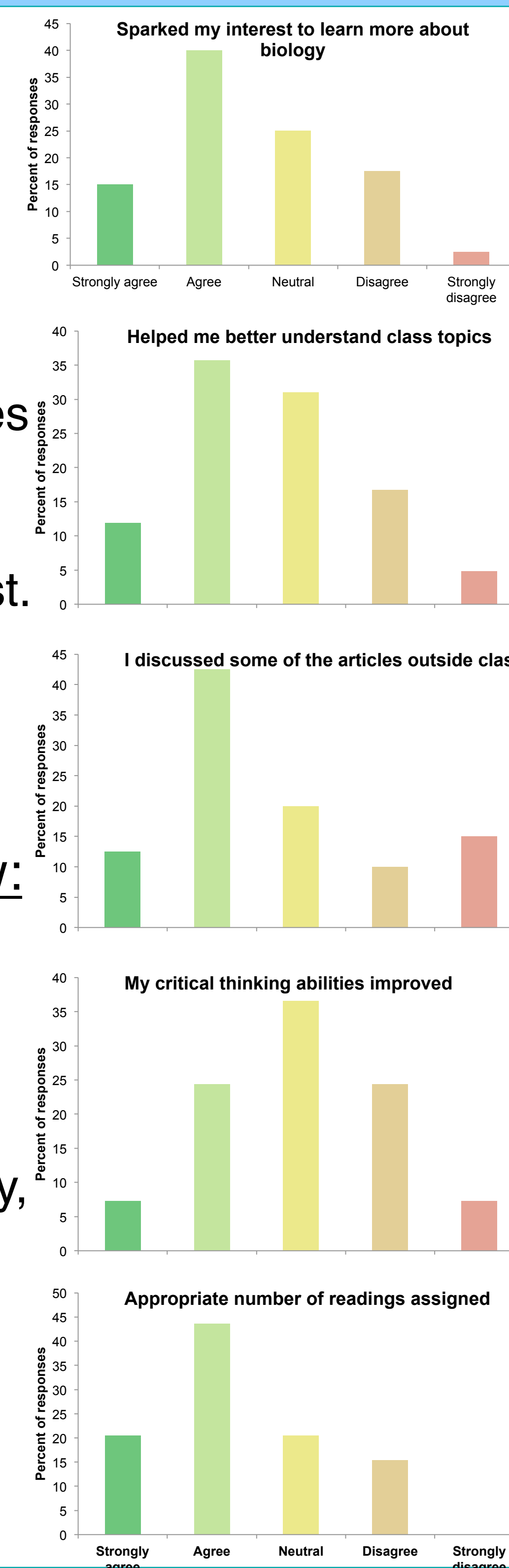
Assessment

• Student surveys:

55% of students discussed the articles outside of class and said the readings sparked their interest.

• Professor's view:

These assignments were fun to read! Students improved abilities to move beyond the summary, sharing original thoughts about applications of the reading topics.



Assignment Excerpts

Comments about the relevance of the topic to my life:

This article was all about the different pieces there are to the simple act of drinking coffee in the morning. My family drinks a lot of coffee but my grandma is by far the most addicted. According to this article for her yearly supply of coffee there would be 60 coffee trees that were used only by her! This article really made me think a lot about how much goes into the little liberties that we Americans take for granted every day. This made me feel like everything that I have or eat or drink most likely contributes to the pollution problem somewhere around the world. At the very least every product I own polluted the environment in the process of transportation, whether it was from China, Thailand, or Detroit.

Synthesis of concepts across multiple readings :

A few days ago I read an article about scientists rallying to try and bring small packs of wolves into certain parks to control the deer and elk population, this is exactly what Leopold was talking about. By taking away the wolves these parks were left out of balance. Unfortunately hunters and ranchers are still on the idea the no wolves is better. They are afraid the introduced wolves will spread out of the parks boundaries (which they are likely to do). Though they should not fear this, it would make for a healthier ecosystem throughout the regions as opposed to just the parks. They wolves will probably follow their prey. Having read both of these articles I am disappointed that even though the effects of having no wolves was pointed out long ago, we still today are 'coming up' with these conclusions and still having so much trouble with the situation.

Student comments

- "It connected the class content to the real world, I liked reading the words of current professionals rather than a textbook."
- "I even shared the reading assignments with my friends and family outside of class."
- "I think the reading reflections should have been more incorporated into the class."