

## Testing the effect of a new assignment on student's interest: Reading and presentating an empirical research article

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#### New assignment:

I introduced a new assignment in a Master/PhD class on Labour Economics: Students have to read an empirical research article in groups. When we cover the theory associated with the article in class, the group in charge makes a 5-minutes presentations of the paper, followed by a 5-minutes discussion.

The two objectives are:

- **Cover more empirical research, provide more concrete examples:**  
The class is currently too focused theory
- **Make students participate, and improve their presentation skills:**  
Students do not have many opportunities to participate in this class

#### Pedagogical project:

**Would students get more interested in the class if they have to think about concrete questions related to the theory covered?** The objective of my pedagogical project is to test the effect of the assignment on students' interest in the topics covered in class.

- Students were randomly matched in groups of 5 (or 6) and assigned an article on one of these topics. I selected 11 empirical research articles on 6 major topics covered in class:
  1. Job search of unemployed workers
  2. The determinants of the unemployment rate fluctuations
  3. Minimum wage,
  4. Employment protection policies
  5. Unemployment insurance
  6. Active labor market policies
- I ran 2 short surveys (about 2 minutes) among all students during the first and last lecture.
  - The survey asks how often students read empirical research
  - The survey elicits students' interest in each of the 6 major topics covered in the Labor economics class, in a scale from 1 (Not interested) to 5 (Extremely Interested)
  - In a final open-ended question, students could provide their opinion on the assignment

• I use the survey data to measure the impact on students of the assignment in two ways

- 1. Before/After:** I compare students' answers at the beginning and at the end of the semester to assess the effect overall of the class (or of other classes attended during the semester).
- 2. Differences-in-differences:** Having for each student, 6 interest measures in 2 periods allows me to implement a differences-in-differences. I test if students' interest in the topic randomly assigned increased more than their interest in the other topics covered in class

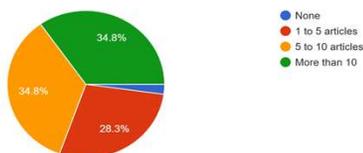
#### Results

- In the first wave, I collected answers from 46 students, in the second wave 26.
- The survey highlights four interesting facts:

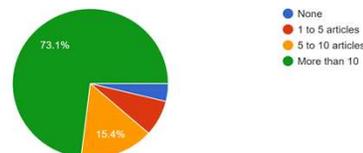
#### **Result 1: Students increased the number of papers read during the semester**

Figure 1: Number of articles read at the start (top) and at the end (bottom) of the semester

How many empirical research articles have you read (i.e. you spent more than 20 minutes on it) since September 1, 2021?  
46 responses



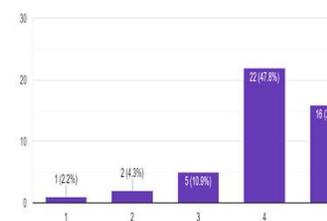
How many empirical research articles have you read (i.e. you spent more than 20 minutes on it) since September 1, 2021?  
26 responses



#### **Result 2: The change in the interest of students varied across topics. The interest of students increased the most in the lecture on active labor market policies (ALMP).**

Figure 2: Interest in ALMP at the start (left) and at the end (right) of the semester

Active labor market policies (i.e. how effective are policy interventions aimed at helping unemployed workers find a job?)  
46 responses



Active labor market policies (i.e. how effective are policy interventions aimed at helping unemployed workers find a job?)  
26 responses

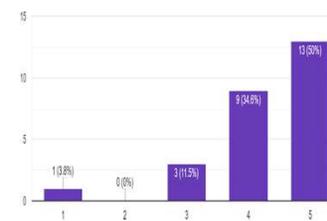


Table: Effect of assignment on student's interest in the topic

	All students		Female students		Male students	
	Interested	Score	Interested	Score	Interested	Score
TopicAssignedXEnd	0.10 (0.10)	0.27 (0.16)	0.09 (0.31)	0.09 (0.31)	0.49* (0.23)	0.49* (0.23)
TopicAssigned	0.10 (0.08)	0.13 (0.11)	0.21 (0.13)	0.21 (0.13)	0.01 (0.23)	0.01 (0.23)
End	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.10)	-0.23 (0.16)	-0.23 (0.16)	0.06 (0.10)	0.06 (0.10)
Nb of observations	432	431	245	245	186	186

Note: Students were asked how interested in the topic they are, from 1 (not interested) to 5 (extremely interested); "Interested" is a dummy variable equal to 1 if the student answered more than 3 and "Score" is the continuous variable.

#### **Result 3: Students increased their interest in the topic of the assignment more than in the other topics covered in class**

#### **Result 4: The assignment increased the interest of male students, more than that of female students**

#### Going further

My overall assessment of the assignment was very positive, and I decided to keep it in the class in future years. However, it is unclear if it would be better to make it mandatory to pass the class in the future.

- The students who presented were very engaged in their presentation and more active in the class afterwards. The presentations were often followed by interesting discussions with the rest of the class. Students also seemed happy of the attention they received from me, and frequently engaged in discussions about ideas for their Master thesis with me afterwards.
- One challenge was that the presentations were not graded, nor mandatory. I was worried that some groups would not prepare any presentation for the lecture assigned to them. It could have decreased the motivation of subsequent groups and compromised the whole exercise. It never happened: there was always at least 1 of the 5 students present during the lecture of their presentation, and who was well prepared.
- However, some students clearly did not contribute to the work in their group and it created some feeling of unfairness, and some frustration. The main feedback of students was to make this assignment mandatory in the future.