

First Impressions May Not Be All That Lasting:
The Importance of Multiple Introductions in Small Classes

By
Major Michael Bonura
Department of History

INTRODUCTION

Due to the small classroom sizes (12-19) and the profession that my students will enter upon graduation (officers in the United States Army), class participation plays an extremely important role in the history classroom at the United States Military Academy (USMA). In my first semester teaching a military history survey course at USMA, I made a deliberate effort to increase the classroom participation of my students. It seemed as though the class took almost 25% of the course before they warmed up to me as an instructor, each other as fellow students, and the material itself, so that by the end of the course the class was energetic and enjoyable for the majority. However, when taking attendance on the penultimate lesson of the course, I made a surprising discovery. When asked who was absent, the cadet sitting next to the empty chair replied, “the guy who sits next to me with the funny hair.” I realized that after almost forty lessons of instruction, my students did not know their classmates’ names, much less anything about each other. I then decided to conduct a classroom experiment to determine if numerous introductions would not only increase their knowledge of each other, but also bond the class together more rapidly and improve classroom participation from the start.

This experiment in introductions as a way to motivate classroom participation and discussion is really an effort to improve teacher-student relations. As such, there is a large body of research that makes a direct linkage between an effective teacher-student relationship and improvements in student performance. At their very basic level, teacher-student relations are a strong motivator and indicator of learning. Taking this assertion as a starting point, there are a number of specific attributes of this relationship that impacts learning in the classroom. Some believe that “a notion of trust between the teacher and student ... is a fundamental and necessary condition for the realization of a particular pedagogy of higher learning.” (Curzon-Hobson, 2002) While other researchers discovered that the important benefit of the relationship is the construction of a safe and nurturing environment that facilitates the students’ ability to create and trust their knowledge (Raider-Roth, 2005). Still another links this relationship directly with student participation and discussion stating that, “student’s enthusiasm, involvement, and willingness to participate affect the quality of class discussion as an opportunity for learning.” (Davis, 1993) This author also includes classroom introductions as a method to inspire and develop student enthusiasm. This experiment in introductions seeks to determine the most effective use of introductions over an extended period in order to improve teacher-student relations.

METHODOLOGY

In order to accomplish the dual goals of getting cadets to know each other and feel more comfortable participating in class, every class that began with an introduction included both their first and last names and the answer to a question I posed to the class. For example, I would ask them to state their name and their favorite color. I would start at the same end of the room and have the cadets go around providing the information until all cadets had answered. I wanted to conduct the experiment across a number of semesters increasing the number of introductions each semester and tracking the results. I ran this experiment for three academic semesters from the spring of 2007 through the spring of 2008.

The First Iteration For the spring semester 2007, I increased the number of introductions to the first four lessons. By lesson, here were the questions that I posed to the class:

- 1) First and Last Name
- 2) Name and Cadet Company (dormitory and student organization)
- 3) Name and future branch (army specialty)
- 4) Name and Cadet Job (position held in the student organization)

The Second Iteration For the fall semester 2007, I increased the number of introductions from four lessons to eight lessons. I began with the same four questions from the first iteration and added the following:

- 5) Name and the sport they play
- 6) Name and favorite war movie
- 7) Name and favorite historical figure
- 8) Name and hometown and state

The Third Iteration For the Spring of 2008, I increased the number of introductions from eight lessons to eleven lessons. I began with the same eight questions from the First and Second Iteration, and then added the following:

- 9) Name and Favorite historical period
- 10) Name and the reason they came to the Military Academy
- 11) Name and the reason they stayed at the Military Academy

ASSESSMENT

To assess the benefits of introductions over a longer period of time, I used five different measures; three that were quantitative and two that were qualitative. The quantitative measures used were classroom participation grades given throughout the semester after every sub-course or block of instruction, a quiz testing their ability to name each of the other members in their class, and a survey asking the students to rate the impact of introductions on their learning and classroom environment. The qualitative measures included student evaluations periodically throughout the semester, and instructor impressions for each of the semesters.

Classroom Participation Grades This data set comprises the single largest measure throughout all three semesters. Every cadet received a grade based on a daily assessment of their participation, and these daily scores were rolled up into sub-course classroom participation grades.

The Introduction Survey This survey was administered to only the fall semester 2007 and the spring semester 2008 and contained both qualitative and quantitative questions. There were 6 quantitative questions which asked the cadets to gauge the effectiveness of the introductions in helping them to participate more, getting to know their classmates, and if it increased their impression of instructor concern. Then the survey provided an opportunity for the students to comment on the effect of the introductions on their perception of the class and their enjoyment of the class.

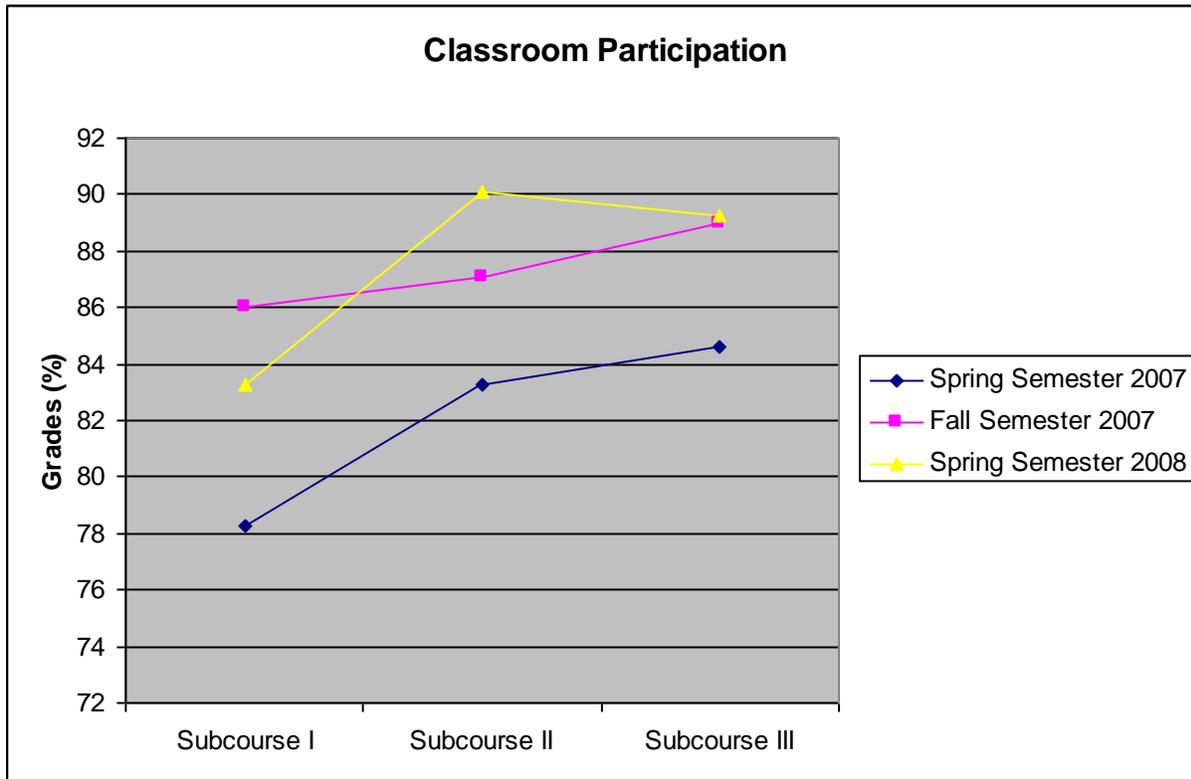
Sub-course Student Evaluations Following most of the sub-courses, the students were afforded the opportunity to provide feedback on the course. They were required to provide at least two things they liked about the course and wanted to sustain, and two things they wanted to improve for the fall 2007 and the spring 2008 semesters. In the instructions, the cadets were provided a list of things to comment on in case they did not have strong feelings in any direction. The introductions were at the top of a list of topics that also included Blackboard readings, class activities, and study and reading guidance provided for every lesson. These evaluations provided useful feedback on the introductions.

Instructor Impressions Following every semester, I assessed the impact of the introductions on the classroom environment as it impacted teaching, student response, and participation both on its own and in comparison to the previous semesters.

RESULTS

Classroom Participation Grades The graph below plots grades from the first three Subcourses in comparison to each other.

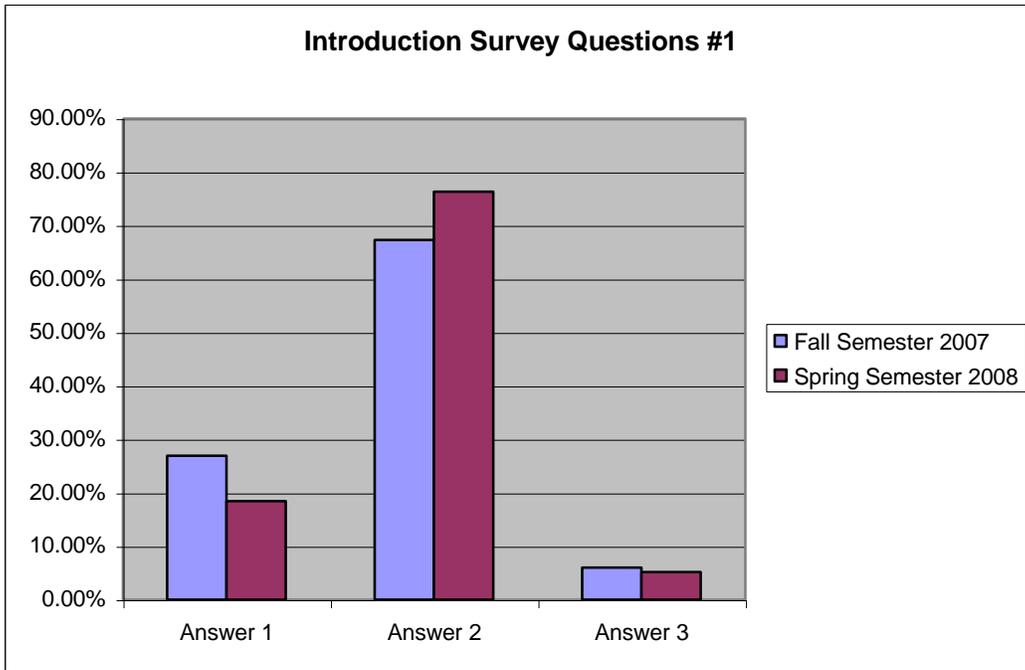
	Subcourse I Grades	Subcourse II Grades	Subcourse III Grades
Spring Semester 2007	78.3%	83.3%	84.6%
Fall Semester 2007	86%	87.1%	89%
Spring Semester 2008	83.3%	90.12%	89.2%



Introduction Survey The survey contains six quantitative questions. Questions were scored on a scale of 1- very much, 2- somewhat, 3- no effect, 4- negative effect. Negative effect (answer 4) was not reported by any students, so is not included in the presented results. Each one of the questions is represented in the bar charts below showing, by percentage, how the classes answered the questions.

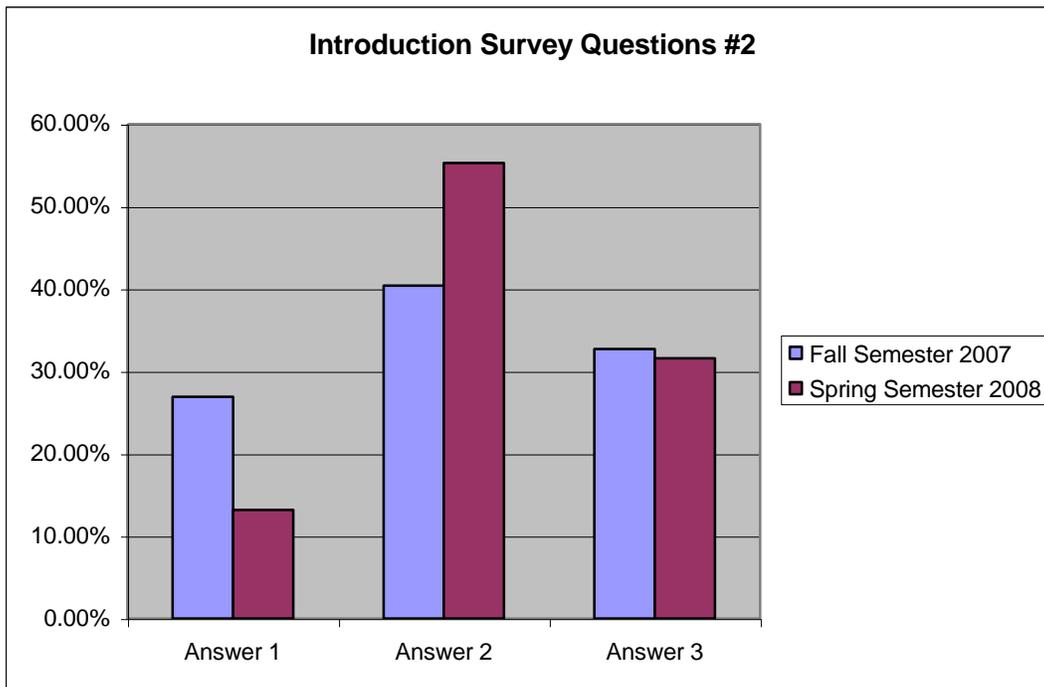
Question #1: Did the in-class introductions help you get to know your classmates?

Results	Answer 1	Answer 2	Answer 3
Fall Semester 2007	26.9%	67.3%	6%
Spring Semester 2008	18.4%	76.3%	5.2%



Question #2: Did the in-class introductions help you to participate more frequently in class?

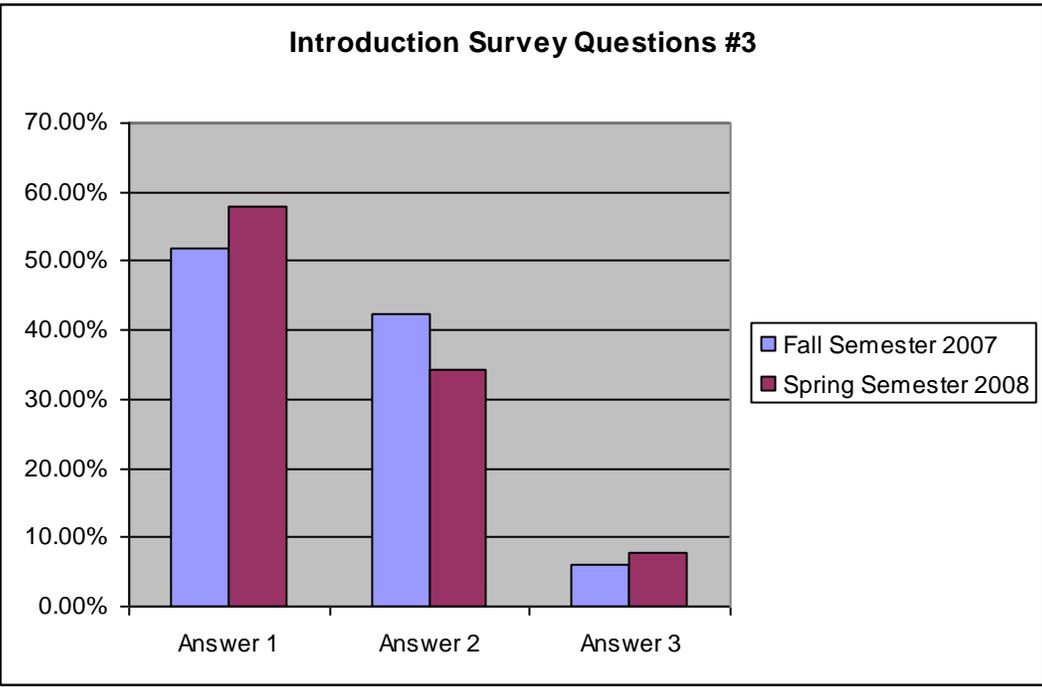
Results	Answer 1	Answer 2	Answer 3
Fall Semester 2007	26.9%	40.4%	32.7%
Spring Semester 2008	13.2%	55.3%	31.6%



Question #3: Did the in-class introductions make you feel that your instructor cared about you as an individual?

Results	Answer 1	Answer 2	Answer 3
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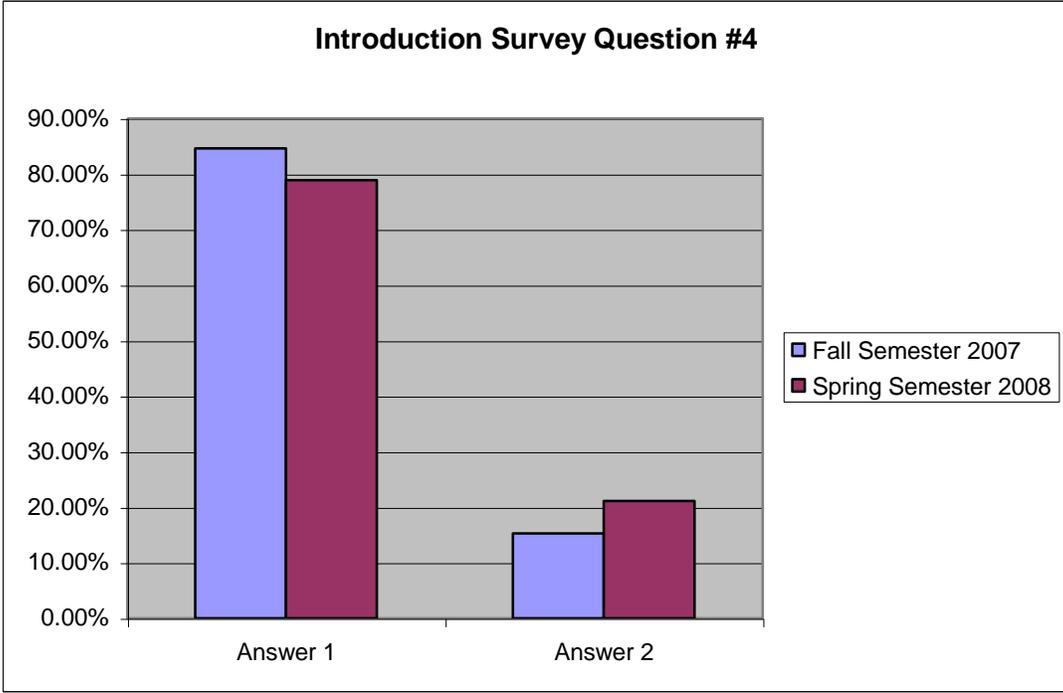
Fall Semester 2007	51.9%	42.3%	6%
Spring Semester 2008	57.9%	34.2%	7.8%



Question #4: Would you like other instructors to include frequent in-class introductions in their classes?

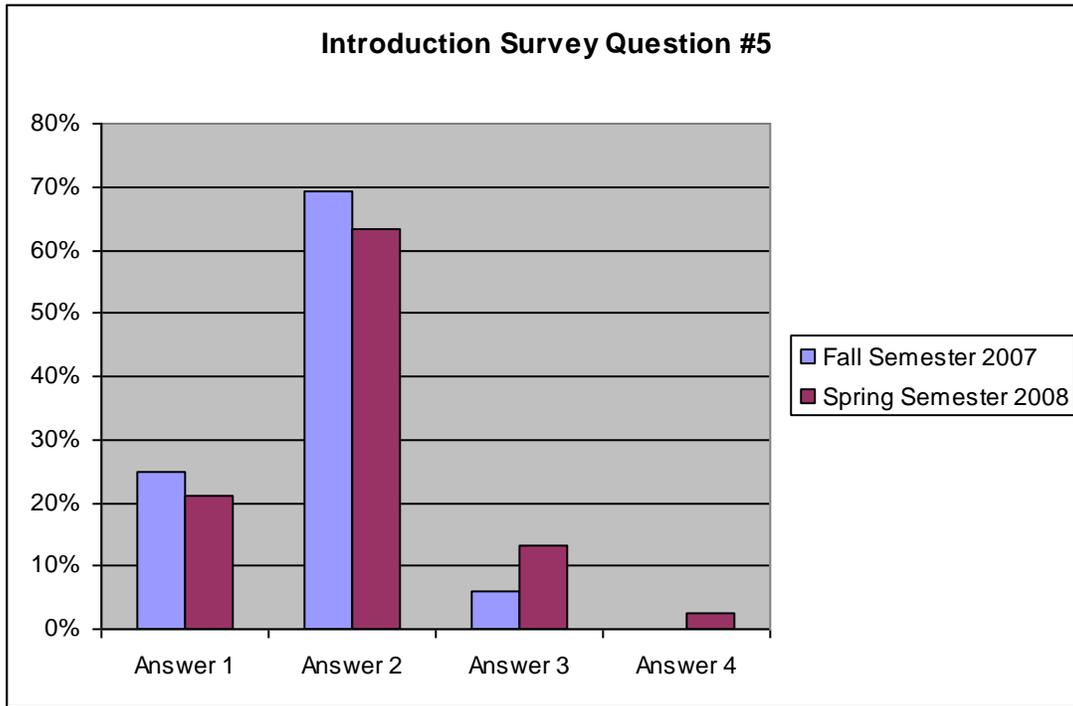
Answers: 1- Yes 2- No

Results	Answer 1	Answer 2
Fall Semester 2007	84.6%	15.3%
Spring Semester 2008	78.9%	21.1%



Question #5: Compared to the frequency of introductions in this class, would you like in-class introductions to be:

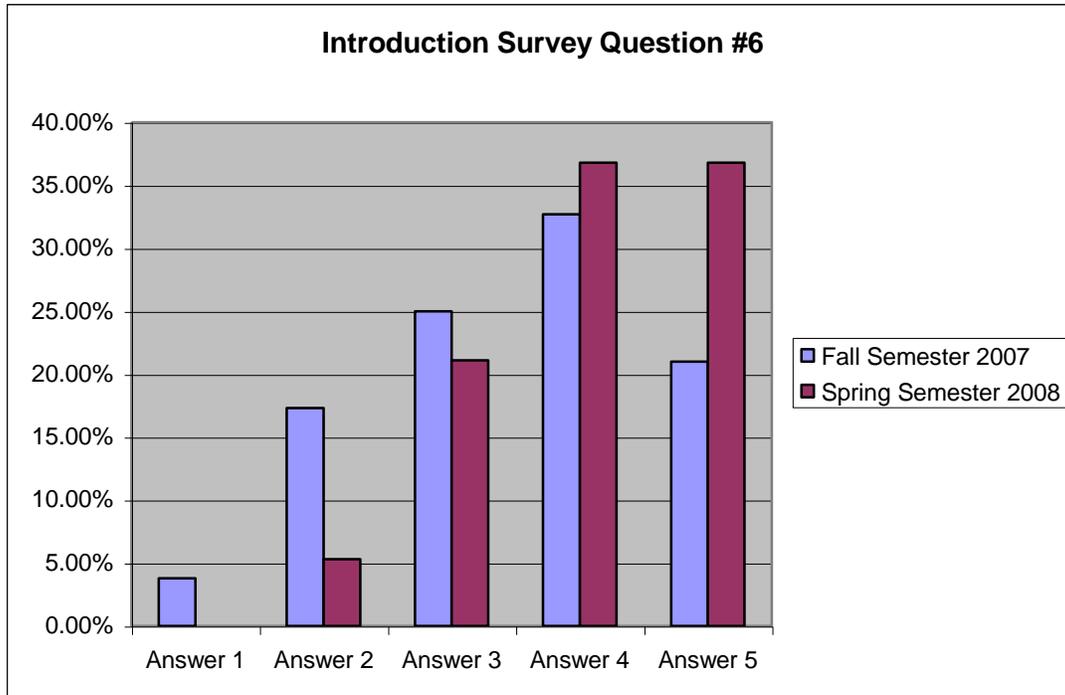
Results	Answer 1	Answer 2	Answer 3	Answer 4
Fall Semester 2007	25%	69.2%	6%	0%
Spring Semester 2008	21.1%	63.2%	13.2%	2.6%



Question #6: Approximately, how many of your classmates did you know prior to this class?

Answers: 1- 80% 2-60% 3- 40% 4- 20% 5- 10% or less

Results	Answer 1	Answer 2	Answer 3	Answer 4	Answer 5
Fall Semester 2007	3.8%	17.3%	25%	32.7%	21%
Spring Semester 2008	0%	5.3%	21.1%	36.8%	36.8%



Question #7: How did the in-class introductions impact YOUR perception of the class? Explain.

Representative Answers from Fall Semester 2007:

Made it feel as though instructor actually cared about cadets in class. Sometimes it seems like instructors just go through the motions and this was a nice change.

Made us talk more from the get-go

It let us know that this class was more about discussion and learning rather than random hazing.

Representative Answers from Spring Semester 2008

Introductions helped break the ice and allowed me to establish a bond-in-learning with the rest of class.

It gave me the perception that class participation was important.

It made the class seem more formalized because of the official and repetitive nature of the introductions.

Question #8: How did the in class introductions impact YOUR enjoyment of the class? Explain.

Representative Answers from Fall Semester 2007:

The class was a much more comfortable environment. I felt more motivated to participate in discussions.

It made class easier as far as open-discussions go.

Representative Answers from Spring Semester 2008:

They allowed the class to feel more at ease talking about certain subjects which makes the class very enjoyable.

If gave me insight and sparked discussions.

Made me enjoy the class more.

Subcourse Evaluations While the Subcourse Evaluations encouraged cadet feedback on a number of elements of the course, they were specifically asked to comment on the introductions.

Spring 2007:

With just four lessons of introductions, the Subcourse Evaluations received from this semester did not reference them at all and focused on other aspects of the course such as the use of multi-media and reading assignments.

Representative Answers from Fall 2007:

I liked the introductions

The introductions were a good idea.

The introductions were great. This is one of the only classes where I actually know people

The introductions made class more comfortable.

Representative Answers from Spring 2008:

Introductions helped facilitate class discussions and participation

Introductions helped bond the class as a group.

The introductions went on way too long.

The introductions were ineffective the way in which they were conducted.

Instructor Impressions

Spring 2007:

After doing introductions for four lessons as opposed to only the first lesson, there was only a nominal difference in the classroom participation. It still required a long time to warm the class up and get them used to my style of instruction and the required open discussions in class. While the class did become more open, there remained several individuals who simply refused to comment at all and knowingly allowed their grade to suffer.

Fall 2007:

Continuing the introductions for eight full lessons produced a tremendous effect. The class felt more open and comfortable much more rapidly and the impact was not only a greater amount of buy-in from the cadets about the class material, but about my Officer Professional Development and Army stories. The cadets seemed to enjoy the class more than the previous two semesters.

Spring 2008:

The introductions had many of the same positive impacts from last semester. The class quickly understood what I meant by participation and quickly began to enjoy both the course material and my

instruction. Participation was uniformly good across the course. However, towards the end of the introductions there began to be a backlash against having to continue to provide names and pieces of personal information or opinion to the class.

DISCUSSION

When I began the experiment in the Spring of 2007, I had some very straightforward objectives in mind. I implemented an increased number of introductions in my classes to improve the cadets' awareness and knowledge of their classmates with the idea that this in turn would increase classroom participation and would make the class more enjoyable for both the cadets and for the instructor. The increased number of introductions absolutely made a huge positive impact on the cadets in my classes. It encouraged the cadets to participate earlier in the semester increasing their learning and enjoyment in class. Not only did class participation improve, but the quality of work improved as well and my cadets were much more enthusiastic about the material.

While the experiment met my goals, the introductions had an impact on the cadets that was absolutely unexpected. What the introductions seemed to really change was the cadet buy-in in both the instructor and the class. The introductions made the cadets as a group see themselves as a team and the instructor as really a part of that team. They felt that I cared about them as individuals and was personally vested in their performance. This increased the buy-in in the course material and I began to see much better products and at the very least cadets seriously thinking about the questions and problems I posed to them in class. More importantly than that was their increased buy-in in me, the instructor. I felt that in the Fall 2007 and the Spring 2008 that the cadets began really listening to my messages on officership, and their profession, that I was making a difference in changing cadet attitudes concerning the military experience, discipline and standards. The introductions helped to create a much more lasting impact than the way in which I taught in my first two semesters at West Point.

In reviewing all of my collected data, I have decided on the optimum use of the Introduction to increase cadet buy-in and participation. I think the introductions at their most influential and effective was at the eight lesson mark. Fewer than eight lessons made no difference at all while greater than eight lessons made them seem formulaic and repetitive. The cadet responses in the Spring 2008, while still enjoying the introductions, showed a significant increase in negative answers about whether they had an impact and how long they went on. Eight lessons seemed to combine the novelty of the event with a real attempt to get the cadets to learn something about their classmates. The use of introductions over an extended period fundamentally changed both the way I teach, and my effectiveness at reaching cadets in the classroom.

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