

Investigating Student Perceptions of the Online and Face-To-Face Discussions of Scholarly Articles in General Education Courses

Tyler E. Ostergaard, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Platteville

Intro

This project sought to gauge student perception of the issues that prevent in-depth discussions. The intent is to use these findings to formulate an intervention to improve class discussion in a latter phase of this SoTL Project. Data were collected from students in four general education courses in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, which ran all as fully in-person and on-campus classes at UW-Platteville. Student perception was assessed using quantitative and qualitative tools and collected via an online questionnaire. Student responses to the questionnaire were ambivalent, with little marked difference in preference or perceived learning between online and face-to-face environments. However, close reading of the open response questions suggests anxiety and worries about being wrong motivated student aversion to face-to-face discussion.

Literature Review and Background

In the early 2000s and 2010s scholars began to assess the validity of online discussions. These studies often analyzed the new learning opportunities afforded by online discussions, rather than asking if students benefited from both approaches simultaneously. These studies found a general preference for face-to-face discussion with a substantial appreciation of some of the advantages of online discussions (asynchronous, easier to look back on, potentially more deliberative, etc.). Building on these my current project seeks to interrogate student perception of online and face-to-face learning and if they are working together.

The primary instrument for assessing student learning in this study was a questionnaire distributed to students after completing the online and face-to-face discussions. The questionnaire was built on questionnaires used by Meyer (2008) and McKee (2015). The questionnaire was distributed to students via CANVAS to allow anonymity, easy access for respondents, and fully digitized output. The questionnaire produced Likert scored data (Fig. 1) and open response questions which were coded and analyzed qualitatively (Fig. 2).

Student participants came from three Fall 2021 classes and one Spring 2022 class. All of these courses grant Fine Art General Education Credit, which is required for all degrees at UW-Platteville. As such the classes draw a wide range of students. This meant the participating students were very heterogenous, but it was hoped it would also mean it also the survey population would be broadly representative of the larger student body. Unfortunately, due to low response, this later goal was not realized, and the data set skewed toward majors, upper-level students, and female students.

Fig. 1- Student Questionnaire Responses

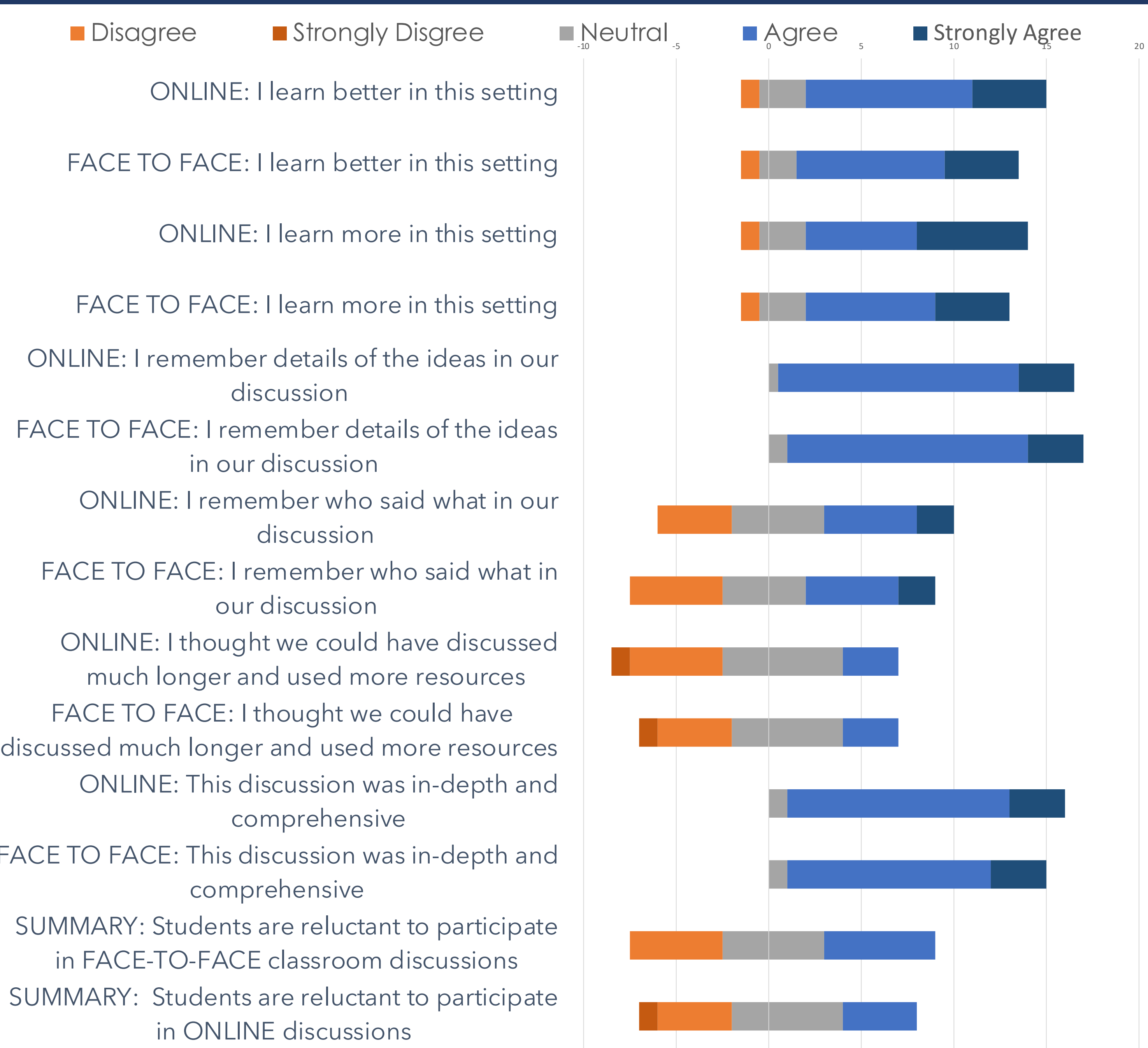
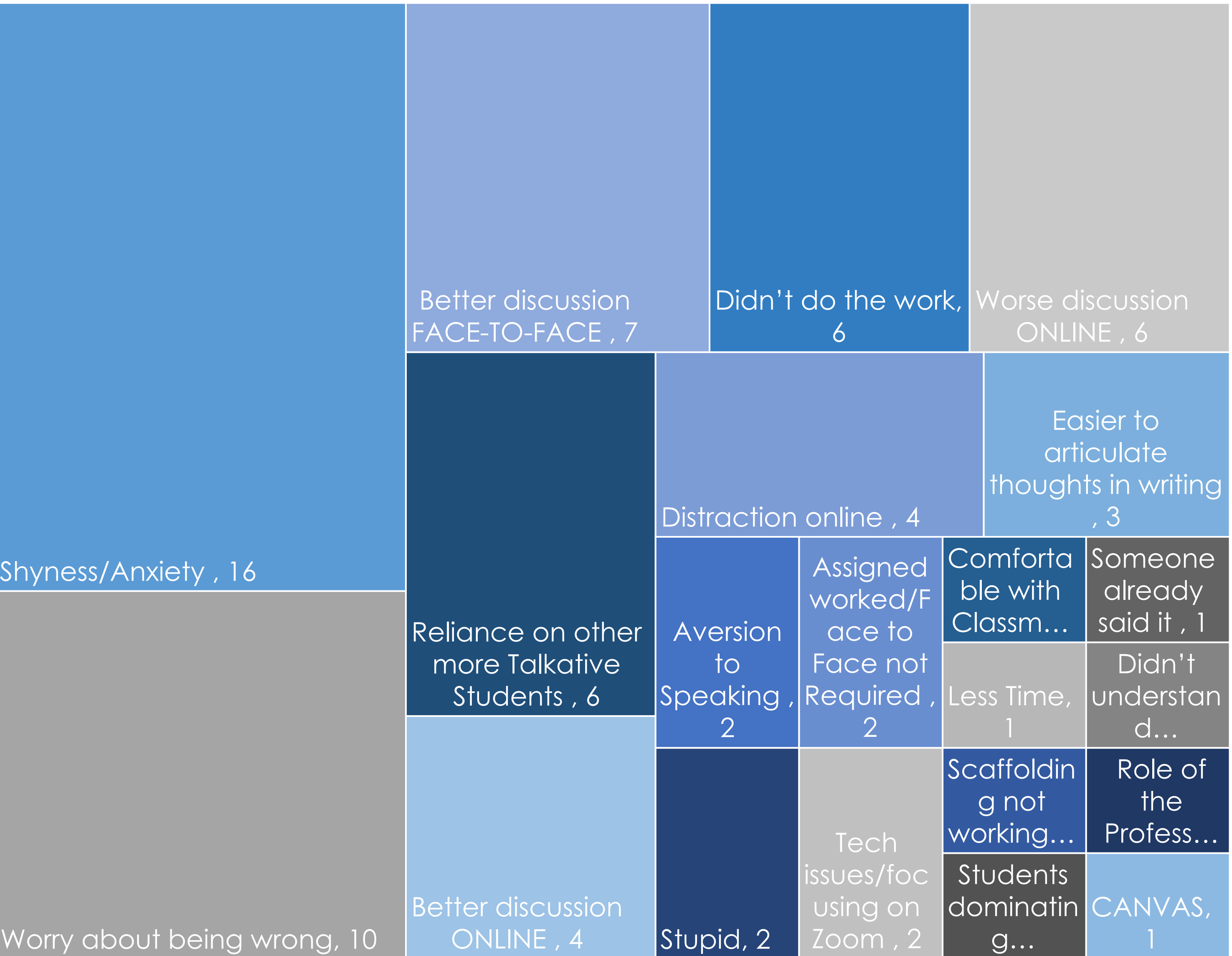


Fig. 2 - Qualitative Analysis of Responses



Discussion

As an exploratory survey, this project was highly valuable, as the factors that I anticipated as limiting discussion were not those raised by students. Anticipated issues such as a lack of understanding, confusion on the argument, preference for online discussion, and discussions procedures were mentioned by students but at far lower rates than other issues. Anxiety and worry about being wrong were easily the two most mentioned issues in student responses. These issues were often mentioned together. Anxiety, the most common issue, was cited by students was mentioned at 2.5 times the rate of the third most common issue, reliance on others to carry discussion (Fig. 2). Anxiety was exclusively linked to in-person discussion with students suggesting that the detachment of online spaces allowed them to mitigate their anxiety. Interestingly, given these feelings, the questionnaire responses presented an inconsistent picture, with a negligible difference when asked which environment students learn better in, learn more in, remember more, or believe produced better discussions (Fig. 1). However, when asked which they prefer 75% of students indicated they prefer face-to-face environments. Mitigating factors may also include general familiarity with in-person instruction, online fatigue, and a desire to return to fully in-person instruction after the pandemic.

A couple of issues with the experimental design became evident as the project was carried out. The first issue was the overall low response rate. This is particularly pronounced in the larger classes where overall participation was drastically lower. These issues may be addressed by presenting the project as opt-out rather than opt-in and allotting class time to complete the questionnaire. The second issue that became apparent after data had begun to be collected was that some students interpreted face-to-face discussion as an online streamed class discussion rather than in-class, in-person discussion. Improving the wording of questions should ameliorate this issue.

Selected Bibliography and Acknowledgments

Specials thanks to Fay Akindes, Heather Pelzel, Valerie Barske, UW System OPID Wisconsin Teaching Fellows & Scholars Program, and the UW-Platteville Provosts Office for supporting this work.

Hamann, Kerstin, Philip H. Pollock, and Bruce M. Wilson. "Assessing Student Perceptions of the Benefits of Discussions in Small-Group, Large-Class, and Online Learning Contexts." *College Teaching* 60, no. 2 (2012): 65–75.
McKee, Robert Joseph. "Encouraging Classroom Discussion." *JSSE - Journal of Social Science Education*, 2015, 66–73. <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-736>.
Meyer, Katrina A. "Student Perceptions of Face-to-Face and Online Discussions: The Advantage Goes To..." *Online Learning* 11, no. 4 (2008). <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v11i4.1715>.