

Building a Community of Learners: Communicating with peers as part of the first year experience



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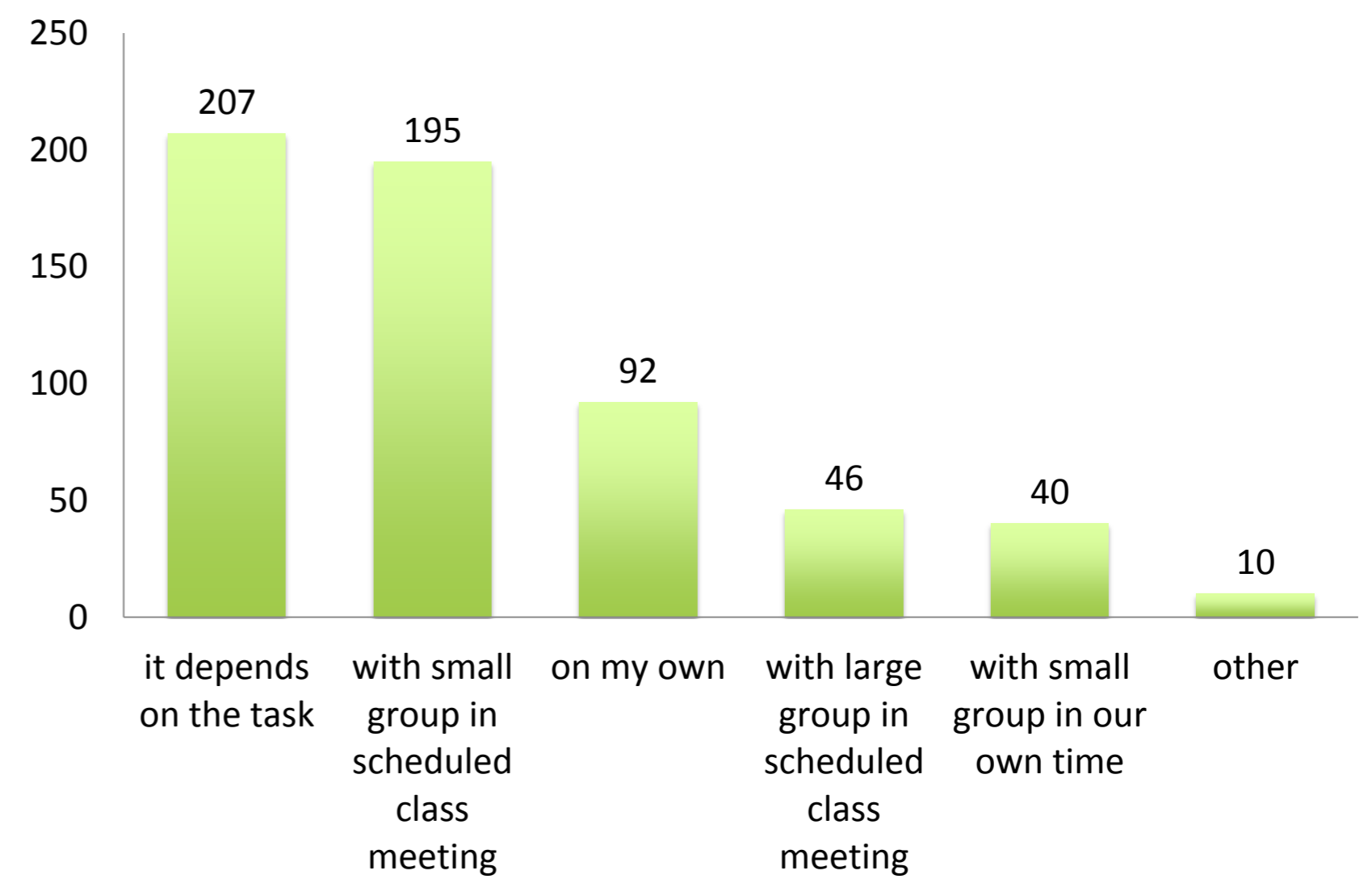
SCOM1101 Introduction to Scientific Practices is a large first year unit designed to improve communication understandings and skills of students in a range of majors in the BSc. It was delivered for the first time in 2012, with an enrolment of 634.

Unit resources: Two lectures were provided weekly and students met most weeks of semester with their tutor in groups of 24. An on-line learning management system (LMS) site was provided with all unit information (unit outline, assignment handouts, lecture notes, tutorial discussion forums). Students used the LMS to communicate with each other. Lecturers and tutors contributed to discussions on the LMS.

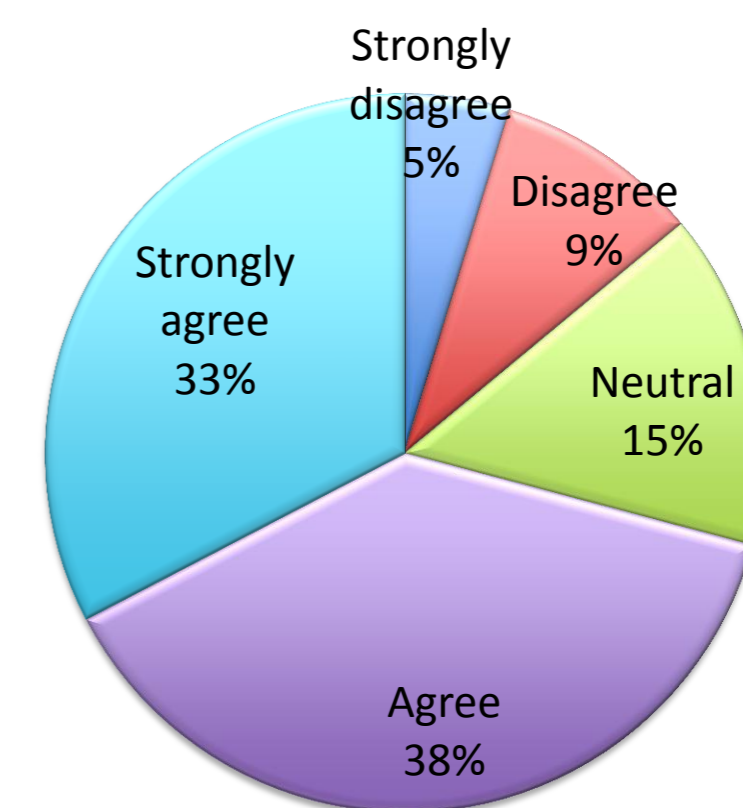
Assessment for the unit comprised four major assignments (information literacy essay, article, a team talk presented in the form of a podcast and a science event planned and run by each of the 30 tutorial groups) and four smaller activities.

An online survey was conducted at the end of the semester. Students were given an incentive to respond; irrespective of how they responded, their response contributed a small percentage of an assignment. Of the 634 students, 594 responded (94% response rate). Students appeared to feel free to be honest, with both negative and positive comments provided.

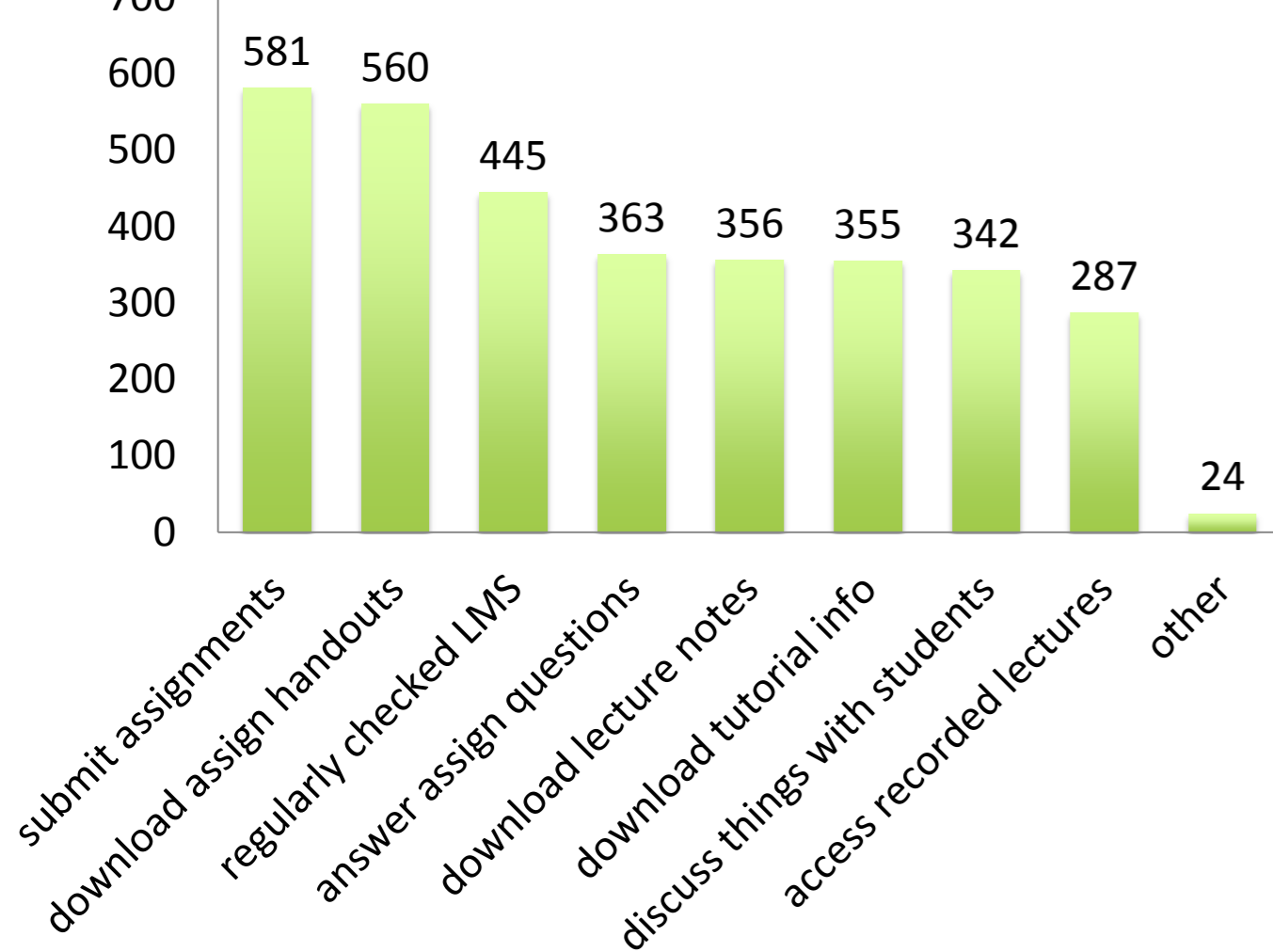
My strongest preference for class work is:



The [team] event assignment was a useful learning exercises.



I used the unit's LMS to:



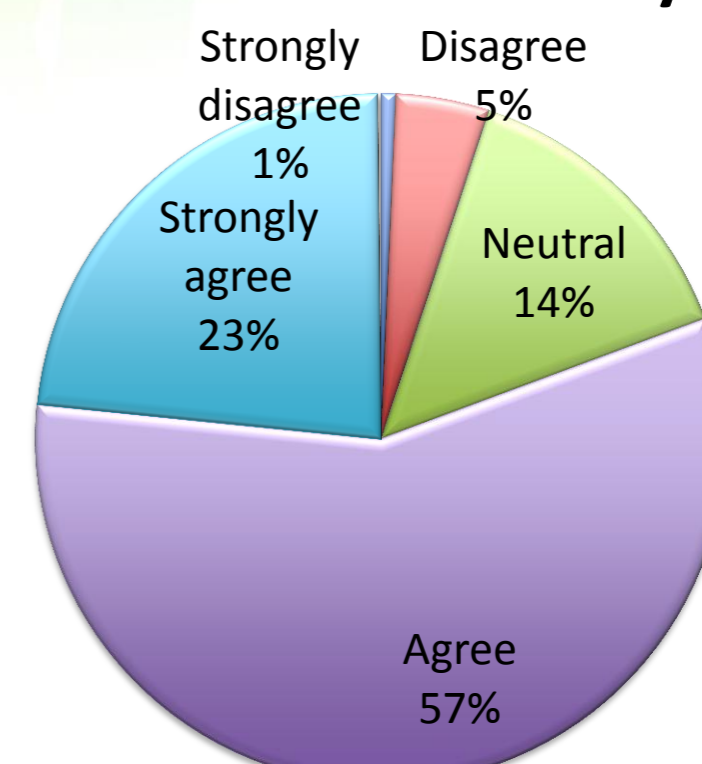
SCOM really helped me improve my verbal communication skills. Before this year I was never that confident with public speaking but after the prepared talks in our tutorial class it showed that I had made some significant improvements.

I had incredible problems with communication before taking the unit. I was shy, mumbled and too afraid to discuss my ideas with anyone, even if they were really good. After taking SCOM, that has changed and I have improved, perhaps not yet to the level I would like to be at, but definitely a lot better.

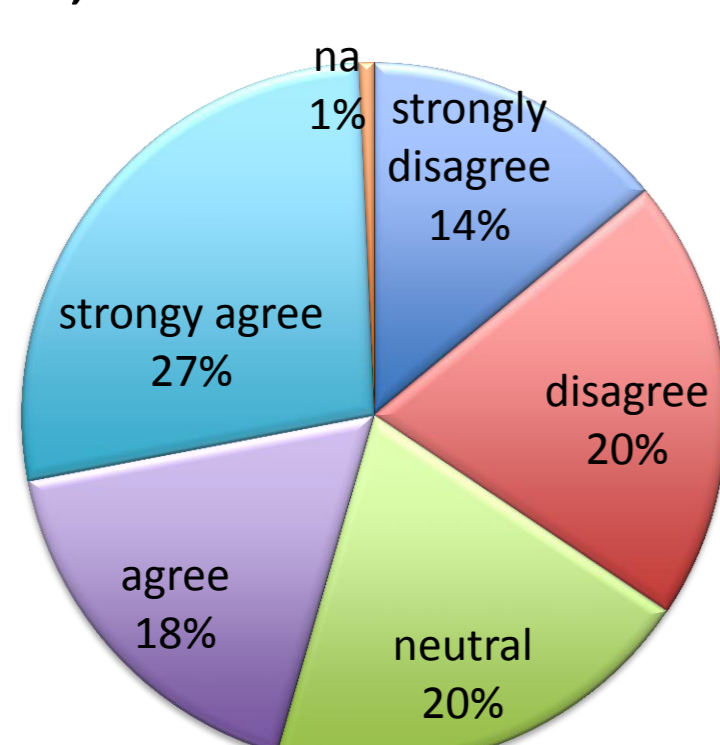
I really enjoyed working in small groups because I got to know some of my tutorial friends better. Also, learning in groups enabled me to get help from my group mates, learn from them and at the same time help them out with things they are not sure about.



I have developed my ability to work independently and collaboratively.



I prefer Facebook to LMS for communicating with classmates, tutors and lecturers about unit work



While 45% of students prefer Facebook over LMS for communicating about unit work, 34% prefer not to use Facebook for this purpose.

The unit is designed to encourage communication amongst peers. Most students valued the opportunity to work with their peers and improve their communication skills. Many students improved their confidence to participate in a community of learners.