

Results of a Survey of Arts One Student Alumni in Spring 2012

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Introduction

In March and April of 2012, a research assistant (Evan Westra, an Arts One alumnus) and I did a survey of alumni of the Arts One program (a team-taught, interdisciplinary, year-long program for first year students at UBC). Arts One has been in existence since 1967, yet very little research has been done on how it impacts students. I hope to do some research on that broad question in the coming years.

The purpose of the survey of alumni from earlier this year was to see how students themselves thought Arts One impacted them, in two ways: how it impacted their work in other courses, and how it impacted them beyond their work in other courses. Just for fun, and to see if we could isolate that which really sets the Arts One program apart from other first year programs, we also asked them what they thought the most important aspect of Arts One was (a question I had taken from an earlier study on Arts One, by Cheryl Dumaresq (see <https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/3693> for a copy of Dumaresq's survey of Arts One alumni in the 1990s). We surveyed students who had just finished Arts One that Spring, plus those who had taken Arts One their first year and were still at UBC, in their second, third, fourth years and beyond. 116 students answered our email request to fill in an online survey. The questions were all open-ended and subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis only.

The reason for doing this survey, beyond being interested generally, was to gain material for developing research questions to study further later. In other words, this was a pilot study to determine which areas of Arts One to subject to further research, and how/why.

Survey Questions

1. *This question is about whether you feel Arts One has affected your work in other courses at UBC. Even if you are still in your first year, you could answer this question based on courses you took at the same time as taking Arts One. You could consider academic skills such as essay writing and speaking in class, but there may be other ways you could think of that Arts One may have affected your academic work in other courses.*

Do you feel that your experience in Arts One has affected your academic work in other courses in some way? If so, please explain how.

2. *This question asks you to explain which features of Arts One contributed to the impact(s) you noted in your answer to Question 1, on the ways Arts One may have affected your work in other courses at UBC. You may consider things such as the structure of Arts One (the lecture/seminar/tutorial format, e.g.), the particular activities you did in the program (such as discussions, essay writing, peer review), the students and faculty involved, or anything else you can think of.*

If you said "no" to question 1, you do not need to answer this question.

Which features of Arts One contributed most to the impact(s) the program has had on your work in

other courses at UBC, and how did they do so?

3. *This question is about whether you feel that taking Arts One has affected you in some way(s) besides in terms of your academic work in university courses. If you answer yes, please explain what sort of impact Arts One has had on you.*

Do you feel that your experience in Arts One has had a significant impact on you in some way beyond your academic work in courses at UBC? If yes, please explain the kind of impact it has had.

4. *This question asks you to explain which features of Arts One contributed to the impact(s) you noted in your answer to Question 3. You may consider things such as the structure of Arts One (the lecture/seminar/tutorial format, e.g.), the particular activities you did in the program (such as discussions, essay writing, peer review), the students and faculty involved, or anything else you can think of.*

If you said “no” to question 3, you do not need to answer this question.

Which features of Arts One contributed most to the impact(s) given in your answer to Question 3, and how did they do so?

5. In your view, what is the single most important feature of Arts One, and why?
6. Do you have any other comments you'd like to share about the Arts One program?
7. During which academic year did you take Arts One? (E.g., 2011-2012, 2010-2011, etc.)
8. Would you like to be entered into the draw for two \$50 gift certificates for UBC Food Services?
[If participants answer “yes,” they will be directed to a screen that provides them a code to send to Evan Westra at the study email address.]

Results

In some ways, the results of the survey were unsurprising, in the sense that I guessed before doing the survey much of what came out of it. But there were a couple of things I hadn't thought of before, which was the point of doing the survey in an open-ended way (so students weren't stuck with giving only multiple-choice answers to topics we thought of ourselves).

[What follows provides only a discussion of the most prominent answers, or the ones I found most interesting. There were many, many different things said by students, with the result that most of those ended up being said only a few times, and thus are not recorded below unless I found them particularly interesting or surprising.]

How many students said Arts One had a positive impact on their work in other courses

106, or 91% of the 116 respondents. That's good to hear! A few said there was no impact on their work in other courses, and a few said it impacted their work negatively (though some of those also said it had some positive impacts too).

How Arts One helps with other courses

1. Most of the respondents said it helped with **writing** (73% of respondents; 80% of those who said A1 had positive impact on other courses at all). This wasn't surprising, as improving writing is one of the main emphases of Arts One. Students write 12 essays over the course of one year (approximately one every two weeks), and each of those essays is peer reviewed in a tutorial meeting of four students plus their professor. Every week students meet in these tutorials and discuss two essays, each for 25-30 minutes.
 - a. Of those, 48% said it was **tutorials** that helped with their writing, and 39% said it was the **amount of writing** that helped (that they do quite a bit of writing, on a regular schedule). Some of these may be the same people (they may have said both things). Out of all respondents, 35% said **tutorials** were helpful for their writing in other courses (39% of those who said A1 had a positive impact on their work in other courses. Of all respondents, 29% said the **amount of writing** was helpful (31% of those who said A1 had a positive impact).
 - b. What could be some reasons students think tutorials are so helpful for improving their writing? In tutorials we discuss particular issues with the papers being commented on, but also general advice about writing academic papers, about the writing process, etc. Some of this advice comes from the professors and some from the students. One thing that several students mentioned as being helpful is the chance to read and comment on others' essays; some noted that this helped them think more critically about their own. One stated that giving comments to peers in front of the professor, and having the professor comment on those comments, was especially helpful. Students likely also feel some pressure to make their writing better because they have to present and defend it in front of peers and the professor. Revisiting work in an intensive way after it's written may also contribute to improvement in writing.
 - c. Some students focused on the particular **feedback given by professors** on their essays, either in writing on the essays themselves, or in tutorials (20% of respondents, 22% of those who said A1 had positive impact on their coursework). Presumably at least some of those who talked about the value of tutorials generally, without specifying what, in the tutorials, was specifically helpful, may have thought the professors gave good feedback. Of those who said A1 helped with their writing in other courses, 27% said the feedback from their professors was helpful.
 - d. Somewhat dismayingly, not very many students cited their **peer feedback in tutorials** as being helpful for improving their writing in other courses: just 9% of the total respondents, and 9% of those who said A1 had a positive impact on their coursework. I'm not sure what to make of this yet; I don't want to conclude that students don't think their peer feedback is important, because the question was open-ended and allowed students to

- say what came first to their minds. Perhaps they ranked other things as more helpful than peer feedback in their own minds, and simply didn't mention it even if they thought it was helpful.
2. A significant number of students said Arts One contributed to their **critical thinking** skills (24% of respondents, 27% of those who said A1 had a positive impact on their other coursework). I expected this to show up in the survey, as one of the things we emphasize in Arts One is providing students with a lot of opportunity to develop their own responses and arguments to the texts and issues we discuss. The seminars are focused on discussion, and many of us try to get the students to lead that discussion as much as possible (with some variation for professor style, of course) and though we provide essay topics for the papers, they are purposefully open-ended so that students have a lot of room to argue for their own readings and emphasize what they find important.
 - a. However, the survey responses did not provide much clarity as to what aspects of the program especially helped with critical thinking, in the students' views. Many of those who said A1 helped with critical thinking did not explain clearly how, and among those that did, numerous aspects were cited such that I couldn't find a clear pattern for which things were most helpful.
 3. The same number of students as said Arts One helped critical thinking said it helped their **confidence** in some way, such as confidence speaking in class, speaking to profs, confidence in their writing skills, or in their own ideas as valuable (24% of respondents, 27% of those who said positive impact).
 - a. I find this one especially interesting, perhaps because I hadn't really thought about it before, and yet it is so important to students' future coursework and life. My rough analysis of the survey data has not yet revealed clear patterns on *how*, exactly, students think Arts One helps with their confidence, which aspects do so and why. I plan to go back over the data and see if I can come up with something clearer on this, or if the answers are simply too thinly scattered.
 4. A good number of students pointed out that Arts One provides a **good foundation for their studies in other courses** in the Faculty of Arts, because **the texts** read and discussed were addressed again in other courses later (22% of respondents, 24% of those who said A1 had a positive impact on their other coursework). This is not particularly surprising, because Arts One emphasizes what some might call "core texts" in literature and philosophy (the course provides credits in English, History and Philosophy, though of late we haven't had as much history as we'd like; that will hopefully be remedied in the coming years). So insofar as students' other courses include readings by authors that are "core" or "classical" in the sense of being agreed upon as valuable reading, then the books we read in A1 will show up again in their other courses. One thing pointed out by only one student, but that we emphasize ourselves, is that in Arts One we read entire books as much as possible, rather than excerpt (with some exceptions--after all, the whole of Hobbes' *Leviathan* or Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* are a bit much to cover in one-two weeks, which is how long we devote to each book). We do this so that students are able to get as well-rounded a picture of the text as possible, seeing each part in context with the rest, and their views are not shaped by which excerpts we pick (as the one student wisely noted).

5. Generally, many students said things done in **tutorials**, or something about their experience in tutorials, was in some way helpful for their other coursework (51% of respondents, 56% of those who said A1 had a positive impact on their coursework). 69% of these said tutorials were helpful for writing, and the rest noted other things, such as increased confidence in speaking and own ideas and arguments, learning to disagree respectfully, learning to take criticism well, practice for future peer review, and more). The numbers for **seminars** were just a little lower (44% of respondents, 48% of those who said A1 had a positive impact on their other courses). Students mostly focused on the value of seminar discussions, which helped them learn how to analyze texts, opened their minds to different viewpoints, helped them get feedback on their own ideas, helped them gain confidence in speaking, and helped prepare them for future discussion classes, among other things.

How many students said Arts One impacted them in some positive way beyond their work in other courses

96 out of 116, or 83%. That's also quite a good number. Most of those who did not assent to this simply said it did not impact them beyond coursework. Only two gave negative comments in response to this question, and only one of those was about the program itself.

How Arts One impacts students beyond their work in other courses

1. The most often-cited answer to this question from students was that Arts One provided a **close-knit community** that allowed them to develop **friendships**, get to know their colleagues and the professor, and feel comfortable in the classroom (38% of respondents, 46% of those who said Arts One impacted them in some positive way beyond their work in other courses). I guessed beforehand that this would be important, as the small classes in Arts One facilitate it. Students in Arts One spend most of their time in the course in groups of 20 (for the seminars) or 4 (for the tutorials). In addition, they often get together outside of class for study or social purposes, develop group Facebook pages, etc.
 - a. The **seminars** were cited as more important for developing a sense of community and friendships (25% of respondents, 30% of those who said A1 had positive impact beyond coursework) than **tutorials** (14% of respondents, 17% of those who said positive impact). I suppose this could be a little surprising, since the tutorials are only 4 students plus the professor, while the seminars are 20 students plus the professor. But the tutorials are somewhat stressful for numerous students, as it is where they have to present and defend their essays, listening to and responding to criticism from their peers and professor. They also have to learn to constructively comment on the essays of their peers, which can be difficult for many at first. Though by the end of the year the tutorials are often much more relaxed, I am not surprised that students don't view tutorials as being as much of a space for developing a close sense of community and friendships as seminars, overall.
 - b. Some students pointed specifically to the **small classes** in Arts One as contributing to the ability of students to develop a sense of close community and friendships (21% of all respondents, 25% of those who said A1 had a positive impact beyond coursework). As noted above, the twice-weekly seminar discussions take place in groups of 20 students plus their professor, and the once-weekly tutorials are just 4 students plus their professor.

It's likely that those who focused on seminars or tutorials in their answer also considered, but may not have said directly, that it's at least in part the fact that they are small that explains how they contribute to this result (there could be other reasons, such as that the atmosphere created in the classroom was conducive to it, that students were required to engage in a lot of discussion with each other, or something else).

2. A significant number of students pointed out that Arts One had improved their **confidence** in ways that extended beyond their work in university courses, such as confidence in public speaking, in their own views, and in writing (13% of respondents, 16% of those who said A1 had positive impact beyond coursework). This is less than the number who pointed to confidence in response to how Arts One had impacted their work in other courses, but presumably if it gave them confidence in the above ways for courses, most of that would transfer to their life beyond the university.
3. The rest of the answers to this question were widely spread amongst things like learning how to engage in productive discussions with others, finding texts and ideas that one is interested in generally or that affect one's view of things in the world beyond coursework, improving critical thinking and writing skills that one uses beyond university courses, and more.

The most important aspect of Arts One, according to student alumni

1. Most often cited as an answer to this question was having **small classes** (35% of respondents).
2. A close second were **seminars** and **tutorials**, which were about even. 31% of respondents said something about seminars, and 32% said something about tutorials.
3. 26% said something relating to the quality of the **professors**, a particular professor, or the lectures given by professors.
4. 19% said the most important thing was the ability to have **close connections between students and professors**. This, of course, is closely connected to having small classes (though small classes are not required for it, they can help facilitate it). The 4-person tutorials are especially conducive to students being able to work closely with professors, and to gain confidence in speaking to them.