Student Workloads … What's Reasonable? Expected? Actual?
Measuring student workloads helps kick-start these discussions

Two questions for Instructors

1. How much time should students spend on your course, including class, lab & homework? Your answer: _____
2. How much time do students ACTUALLY spend on your course? How would you find out?

There are no straightforward answers. Students allocate time based on their interest in the subject, its importance to their degree programs, the proximity of due dates, perceptions of difficulty, and of course all the personal reasons we can't even begin to list. At a recent UBC workshop for instructors, estimates for hours per week that students "should" expend on their (the instructor's) course ranged from 6hrs/wk to 13hrs/wk. There are way too many variables to discuss this in a simple manner – but what data could be collected with little or no cost in time and energy to students or to instructors? How could that data be made useful?
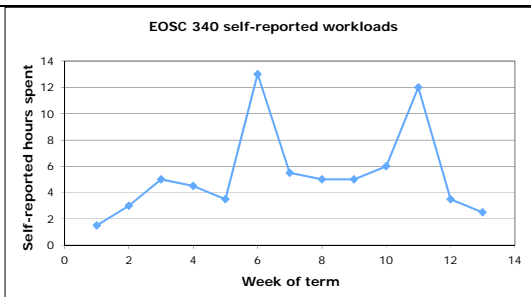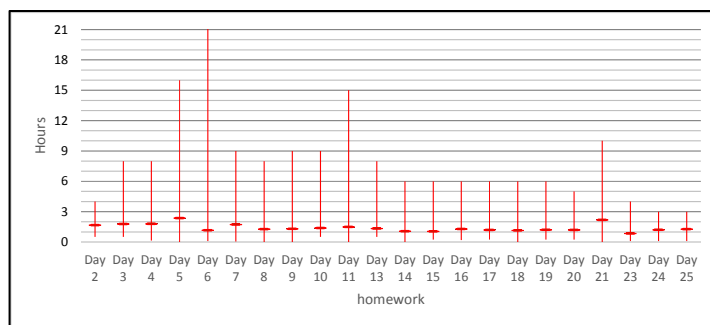
"Measuring" student workloads

In several EOAS courses, we asked students how many hours they spent on specific exercises, and also about the RELATIVE workload of the course compared to each other course being taken that term. The questions are:

a) "*Identify how much time you spent preparing for and completing this <u>specific</u> task, in x.y hours.*" This question is easy to add to any assignment, online quiz, project rubric, or exam. Ask an STLF for details.

b) "*Identify one OTHER course you are taking. Rate the time you spend on OUR course, compared to that OTHER course as i) much more on THIS course, ii) a little more, iii) roughly the same, iv) a little less, v) much less on THIS course*". Then ask again for each "other" course – usually between 3 and 5 other courses for each student. This is an "end of term" question that can be added to an existing assignment or end of term feedback survey.

Asking about time on specific exercises

Question (a) above was added to every homework exercise in a course that has short quizzes prior to every lecture. Student self-reported time on task for these exercises varies very widely.
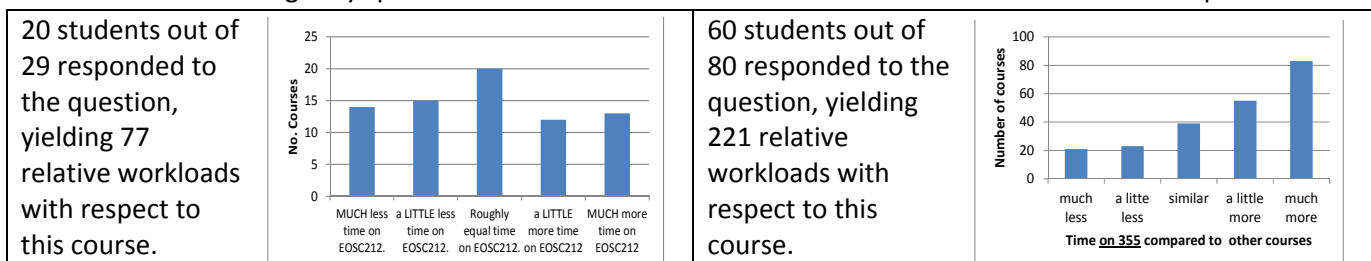

Aggregating data from every exercise gives a "measured" estimate of weekly workload for students in this course. Guess when midterms were given.
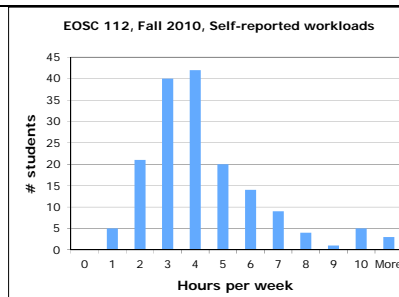
Aggregating slightly differently can yield a distribution of self-reported weekly workloads, based on times reported for specific exercises.

Asking about relative workloads comparing one course to others

Question (b) has been asked in many EOAS courses over the past few years. Data consist of roughly 4 values for each student indicating they spend "much more … to … much less time" on THIS course. Two examples are:

20 students out of 29 responded to the question, yielding 77 relative workloads with respect to this course.		60 students out of 80 responded to the question, yielding 221 relative workloads with respect to this course.	

Which of these courses appears to have a "heavy" workload based on student feedback? Which has a workload that seems "about average" from students' point of view? What implications are there?

How do workloads in EOAS courses compare to other courses our students take?

In service courses there are many students with a very wide range of "other" courses being taken. Results can be quickly sorted by faculty and year to visualize how "heavy" this course is considered by students.

	Arts 1/2	Arts 3/4	Sci 1/2	Sci 3/4		Arts 1/2	Arts 3/4	Sci 1/2	Sci 3/4
Much more time on this	9.8%	14.9%	4.8%	1.1%		66.7%	54.2%		
	19.6%	4.6%	7.8%	5.7%		22.2%	22.0%	25.9%	25.3%
Roughly the same	24.0%	18.4%	18.8%	12.6%		11.1%	16.9%	18.8%	19.3%
						0.0%	5.1%	8.2%	8.4%
Much less time on this	20.2%		41.5%	48.3%		0.0%	1.7%	3.5%	3.6%
	521	87	335	87		18	59	85	83

Which of these two courses is most likely the science elective for 3rd and 4th year science students?
Which is most likely a first year elective open to all students?

Can absolute workload data help "calibrate" relative workload data?

Absolute data were gathered during one term in EOSC 340. Relative workload data were compiled for 14 other courses in EOAS. Their relative workloads are plotted to compare against EOSC 340 as the "zero".
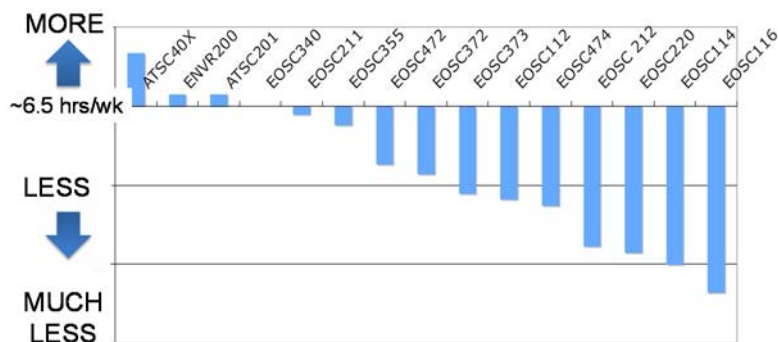
What does all this mean?

- Considering how much time students work on a course is interesting generally, and probably even more interesting if we could learn exactly what students DO when they say they work on the course. But that is second order information.
- Time spent on SPECIFIC exercises can be interesting; was that new problem particularly time consuming?
- Aggregate time on "all" tasks for a module or term can help map WHEN students work the hardest.
- Comparing student perceptions of RELATIVE workloads can reveal which courses are "heavy".

ALL these points (and others) certainly help initiate interesting discussions about how much, and when, students work on our courses. These discussions should lead to more knowledgeably designed curricula, and more awareness of how your particular course sits within the widely ranging things students have to do to succeed.