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Differences between paper and online student surveys

There are lots of potential benefits for schools and colleges completing a survey online:

- Greater student access: All students in a year group can take part, not just a sample
- Instant access to results at the end of the survey period
- Facilities for instant printing of results in different formats for presentations. e.g. graphs
- Own school and college figures can be compared with the group of other similar institutions who complete online
- It is an intelligent questionnaire, so that students only see questions relevant to them
- Graphics are more friendly
- Option for personal health feedback for students
- Website links for students who finish early

There are also costs:

- Training tutors and talking with students about how to log on and use the online survey
- Booking IT suites and organising classes to use them is less straightforward than handing out booklets
- Technical problems and system crashes are easier to solve when using pen and paper

This all assumes that the answers will come out pretty well the same, regardless of whether classes fill in a paper or a web-based survey. We have looked at this in some detail over the last few years, and this assumption is well-supported. We have had many thousands of students complete parallel versions, and printed off a list of significantly different items.

Most differences that we found initially are thought to be due to differences in the design of questions. It's very tempting when designing a school form for the web to use this format:

1: Who would you like to talk to you about drugs?

Please choose all that apply

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Parents/carers | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Teachers, in school lessons | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Visitors or speakers in school lessons | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| School Nurse | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Doctor | <input type="checkbox"/> |

On paper, we usually adopt the following format, which typically leads to higher numbers responding to each option.

2: Who would you like to talk to you about drugs?

Please circle ONE answer on each line

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| Parents/carers | Yes | No |
| Teachers, in school lessons | Yes | No |
| Visitors or speakers in school lessons | Yes | No |
| School Nurse | Yes | No |
| Doctor | Yes | No |

A design for a web-based form that is more parallel, and which we find yields more similar results, is:

3: Who would you like to talk to you about drugs?

Please choose one answer for each item

- | | | |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | Yes | No |
| Parents/carers | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Teachers, in school lessons | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Visitors or speakers in school lessons | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| School Nurse | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Doctor | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Other differences that we have found over the years have included the influence of graphics; a picture of a cute mother elephant and calf seemed to have a marked influence on how pupils replied to a question about their own mother.

There is one other class of question that is influenced by the medium: questions concerning surveys! Items like the following often show marked differences, depending on whether the question was answered on

paper or online:

Do you think students will be more honest if a survey is done on paper or online?

Paper Online

How would you like to be consulted about your views and opinions?

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|----|
| a Paper questionnaire | Yes | No |
| b Questionnaire on the Internet | Yes | No |
| c A special event, e.g. a conference | Yes | No |
| d Discussion group in school | Yes | No |

In each case, answering online produced responses favouring online completion, and answering paper yielded more pro-paper responses. However, for the overwhelming majority of questions, where questions are asked in the same way on paper and online, pupils seem to respond equally honestly and figures from each medium seem very similar.

One last source of difference is in pupil's propensity to use open-ended text boxes: on paper, a question might look like this:

4: What did you eat or drink before lessons this morning?

Please circle an answer on each line

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----|----|
| Nothing to eat or drink | Yes | No |
| A drink | Yes | No |
| Cereal e.g. Ready Brek, Weetabix | Yes | No |
| Toast or bread | Yes | No |
| Cooked breakfast | Yes | No |
| Other (please write below) | Yes | No |

Online, it seems some pupils enjoy the experience of typing into text boxes so much that they may rush past the options given and start answering the question by typing. So, we might find "Ready Brek" neatly entered in full, when they might more easily have used the 'yes' button for 'Cereal'. If our staff do not review pupils' open-ended responses and 'correct' such answers, the tables of figures may be more complicated to use.