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Student Motivation and College Assignments: A Study of the Relationship between Academic Confidence and How Projects are Assigned

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1. Introduction

Motivation compels college students to complete any task towards their quest for a degree. Each student may have different types of motivation as they complete one semester after another. Extrinsic motivation arises from outside factors such as an assignment deadline or a grade. Intrinsic motivation propels students to learn about new concepts or strive for academic greatness due to their own personal desires. Students' extrinsic and intrinsic motivation can be influenced by the goals set for them by educators alongside their own personal drive. Performance-based goals assess students on their ability to simply complete a task or problem. Learning-based goals require that students challenge themselves and persist through an unknown or difficult problem. Performance-based goals create extrinsic motivation to complete the task, while learning-based goals promote students' intrinsic motivation. Motivation can also be influenced by a student's confidence in themselves, commonly referred to as self-efficacy. If an individual's perception of their academic abilities is poor, then they will be less intrinsically motivated to complete an assignment because they believe they cannot complete it successfully. A lack of personal motivation-both extrinsic and intrinsic-can reinforce to a student that they cannot complete the task and there is no reason to even attempt to do so. Performance-based goals can remind students that they can complete basic tasks and restore their self-efficacy, and learning-based goals can then be implemented to promote critical thinking and knowledge expansion. Both academic goals and student motivation contribute to perceptions of self-efficacy, which further influence overall motivation.

The purpose of this study is to observe the correlations between student confidence, motivation to complete projects, and student preference towards the structure of those assigned projects. There is little academic commentary that demonstrates a correlation between assignment structure and students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. There is also little information about how an assignment's significance and requirements should be presented to students in order to increase motivation. If a student has low intrinsic motivation and generally thinks poorly of their academic abilities, a large assignment could easily be overwhelming. The student would complete the project out of fear for failing instead of from a personal drive for growth and success (Heyman &

Dweck, 1992). Presenting the same assignment in smaller stages could potentially allow the student to focus on one component at a time, treating each segment as a separate assignment. This approach would offer performance-based goals for completing each smaller task and could promote intrinsic motivation as the student connects each segment of the project to a larger concept. While the final segmented project would be identical in its requirements to a singular larger counterpart, the project itself could be more refined and detailed, and the student could be striving for success through their work instead of merely avoiding failure. This is a method that students could apply without educator intervention; however, little information is known about assignments and their role on students as well as their work strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Motivation*

Chi Nguyen argues that a student without any motivation would blatantly refuse to complete a task or learn new material despite the best attempts of professors and educators (2008). Even if a student has a particular disdain for a certain topic or project, completing the assignment demonstrates that they still have a drive for finishing the task itself. A student who chooses to attend class and complete extra-credit assignments demonstrates high motivation through those choices and believe that those choices can improve their current academic situation (Moore, 2007; Struthers et. al, 2000). Because motivation fuels academic aspects such as class attendance and assignment completion, educators and scholars seek to better understand the different types of motivation as well as any abilities of increasing student-driven motivation (Kusurkar et. al., 2011; Moore, 2007; Struthers et. al, 2000). Motivational factors vary from each student but can be generalized into two categories: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic motivation refers to motivation outside of personal growth and drive. Examples of extrinsic motivation include finishing an assignment increasingly close to a deadline or passing a class to receive any credit associated with the grade (Singh, 2011). Extrinsically motivated students seek to complete an assignment given to them but fail to make critical thinking and knowledge expansion a priority; while they might retain some information, their main driving force is completing the assignment. Often times an extrinsically motivated student will sacrifice the quality of the assignment in order to complete it and move on.

Intrinsic motivation is motivation initiated by the self without any outside pressure. People who are intrinsically motivated are personally driven

to expand their understanding of a topic and use critical thinking skills without being required to do so by a professor (Singh, 2011). In using those skills, intrinsically motivated students “gladly participate in the activity for the challenge of solving the next problem” and actively seek out those challenges (Nguyen, 2008). Examples of intrinsic motivation include attending extra review sessions or meeting with a professor to discuss an upcoming assignment. Any grades or outside forces are regarded as secondary in intrinsically motivated students; their quest for knowledge dictates their assignment completion.

Promoting extrinsic motivation instead of intrinsic motivation in an academic setting could favor task completion over personal growth. The primary reasons these students would complete the task are because of the deadline and the reward of a grade. If these students were assigned a project without a deadline or external reward, extrinsically motivated students would have little or no reason to complete the project. Intrinsically motivated students would presumably still be willing to complete the project without a deadline and could even seek to further improve their understanding of the topic. However, extrinsic motivation allows students to focus on assignments being in presented, through which a student could find new interest and become more intrinsically motivated.

2.2 *Goals*

A student’s motivation also relies on the goals and expectations established by a professor or educator when being presented with a project. Similar to motivation, academic goals can be generalized into two categories: performance-based and learning-based goals (Heyman & Dweck, 1992). Performance-based goals prioritize an individual’s ability to successfully complete and assignment. There is little emphasis on a person’s driving force or personal growth during the task. Assessing an individual’s intelligence based on a performance-based goal creates an illusion that thought processes are less significant; as long as the task can be completed, then the person is regarded as successful.

Alternatively, learning-based goals focus on an individual’s thought process and regard assignment completion as a secondary reward (Heyman & Dweck, 1992). Enforcing learning-based goals deemphasize the external pressure of a deadline for a student; instead of rushing to meet a deadline, a student could instead focus on applying their critical-thinking skills to enhance the project’s significance. Utilizing learning-based goals categorize success as the ability to overcome challenges in work by utilizing problem-solving skills and previous knowledge instead of focusing on a reason to complete an assignment.

The goals a professor instills upon students can influence either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation towards any future classes or assignments. A professor who solely utilizes performance-based goals would grade assignments based on completion, such as checking for homework or assigning in-class work without reviewing the assignment. A test would focus on a student's ability to select the right answer and would not require any work to be shown. There would be little reason to demonstrate an individual's thought process or areas of struggle if the task could be completed without that understanding. This defines the concept of extrinsic motivation: simple task completion because an outside force-like a professor or a grade-required it. Students in this academic setting would complete the problem because they were instructed to do so but could fail to understand the principles behind the problem or subject. Since thought processes could have minimal value, a student could have little drive to learn more about the topics being presented because there would be little or no external benefit to do so.

In contrast, a professor focusing on learning-based goals could utilize each project as a challenge to students' thought processes. Each assignment would require work to be shown to demonstrate how students approached different problems. Even if a student had failed in finding the correct answer, the professor could still emphasize the work that had been attempted. This idea could motivate students to continue expanding their knowledge so they can attempt even more tasks, creating personal drive and interest that intrinsically motivated individuals possess.

While a stark division between performance and learning-based goals exist, a combination of the two can create the most motivated and successful academic students. Heyman and Dweck concluded that an environment best suited for academic development and motivation is one that "focuses on opportunities for growth and development, but also allows individuals to receive recognition for what they do without having this recognition overwhelm other aspects of achievement motivation" (1992). In relation to academic goals, learning-based goals and increased intrinsic motivation could propel a student to actively seek opportunities for further growth and development. Performance-based goals could serve as a checkpoint for recognition of academic accomplishment and act as a foundation for intrinsic motivation and growth to occur.

2.3 *Student Confidence and Self-Efficacy*

The term "self-efficacy" defines a person's judgement of their own ability to complete a task and achieve a certain successful outcome in doing so. An individual's self-efficacy dictates their interest in a topic alongside their ability to overcome any challenges present (Bandura, 1982). A student with a high

perception of efficacy demonstrates a more advanced work ethic and utilizes more behaviors that improve success compared to a student with little or no perceived efficacy (Pajares, 2002). Self-efficacy in students can be developed through the use of either performance or learning-based goals by educators. While performance and learning-based goals assess students on different aspects of an assignment, both types of goals provide an expectation for that assignment upon which students can judge their own capabilities. (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). A student who believes that they meet these goals then may use their abilities and knowledge as a foundation and use critical thinking to expand their understanding of the assignment's topic. This expansion of knowledge would represent intrinsic motivation if it was governed solely by the student, and extrinsic motivation if the student received additional assignments by a professor to complete.

The structure of collegiate assignments provided by different educators could provide students with various abilities to determine their efficacy, therefore enabling them to improve their efficacy and develop features of intrinsically motivated individuals. The following study was conducted to determine if college students preferred a large project to be divided into smaller sections or remain as a singular assignment, and how each preference related to the students' motivation and perceived efficacy.

3. Methods

Gathering primary data from current college students was critical because it provided a current understanding on student motivation at Bowling Green State University. A University student is considered full-time when enrolled in twelve credit hours for one semester. An online survey created on a platform like Google Forms was easy to share through different networks such as e-mail chains or student group chats and had the potential to yield a large sample size.

This survey required little personal information about each participant. Those who completed the survey were asked what academic year they were currently completing, as well as their major (See Table 1 in *Appendices*). This information made it possible to determine a general demographic of the participants and if there was a correlation between a certain academic program and its number of projects being assigned. Participants were then asked how often they were assigned large projects or papers that involved five pages of writing or more. Participants could state what classes were responsible for those assignments, which could determine if there was a common class or subject that assigned the most work. This question was not a required question and was asked to determine if a particular course was responsible for a large amount of

the assignments across each response. It also determined if students are subjected to more writing in an introductory course instead of a course specific towards a certain major or minor. These questions were either in a multiple-choice format or a short answer format where appropriate.

The next questions discussed beginning an assignment and student attitudes towards the assignment. Participants were asked how many days they waited to start a project after it was assigned, then were given different options to describe the manner in which they worked on an assignment. These options included “completing the project at once,” “dividing the project into smaller sections,” and “working on the project over time.” Participants also had the option to select “other” and write a statement that best described their method of assignment completion (Table 1). Participants were encouraged to select as many or as few options that described them. Another survey question with multiple response options asked students to best describe how professors handled assigning large projects, with options such as having “one large project with a singular due date” or “one project with several smaller due dates.” Again, participants were given an “other” option and allowed to write in responses that best described their situation.

After these questions, participants were asked to consider their motivation towards the assignments they had received. The next question in the survey asked students how often they felt that they sacrificed an assignment’s quality in order to complete the assignment (Table 1). This was formatted with a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with one representing a complete lack of quality sacrifice and five representing a total sacrifice of quality. The following question asked how confident students felt when submitting an assignment in terms of its quality. This was also a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with one representing total insecurity and five representing incredible confidence. A third question formatted the same way required participants to rate their willingness to complete an assignment when it was divided into smaller tasks. One represented a refusal to complete the assignment, while five represented total willingness to complete the project. Creating questions with a Likert scale created an easy visual representation of how most students generally felt about their assignments.

The final three questions contained an open-response answering format to allow individualized responses and explanations. The first question of this series asked students to explain why they preferred either one large assignment or several smaller assignments. The second question asked to explain how the quality of an assignment would change if the assignment had been broken into smaller tasks. The final question in the survey allowed participants to give any additional feedback they wanted to share but were not required to.

This survey featured five different question-and-answer formats and contained multiple questions within each format (Table 1). This variety was introduced in order to access the best and most accurate information among students taking the survey. Allowing for feedback in the form of written explanations and short answer question provided participants the ability to personalize their thoughts and communicate those thoughts effectively.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 General Information

This survey was distributed to several student organizations at Bowling Green State University and shared on social media platforms with other BGSU students. Twenty-four students responded to this survey. Twenty-one students (87.5% of the students who responded) identified as first-year students. The other three students identified as second, third, and fifth-year students respectively. Majors and minors varied between each student, but 58% of the stated programs belong to the College of Arts and Sciences. 67% of students reported that they received anywhere from two to five large assignments during the semester. When asked which classes contributed those large assignments, both HNRS 2020: Critical Thinking about Great Ideas and GSW 1120: Academic Writing were stated in 45.8% of the responses.

4.2 Student Habits of Assignment Completion

70.9% of students reported that they began working on a large project within ten days of its assignment by the professor. When asked about their methods of assignment completion, 58.3% of students reported that they try to complete their projects all at one time. 50% of students stated that they prefer to work on an assignment over time, and 33% of students reported that they divide larger assignments into smaller tasks. This was a question in which students could choose multiple answers, hence the overall percentage of responses exceeds the standard of 100%. 91.7% of students claim that professors typically assign one large project with a singular due date, emphasizing that this could be the usual method of project assignment. When asked about their willingness to complete a project divided into smaller tasks through a Likert scale, 71.9% of students selected a “3” or above, indicating that they were at least somewhat willing to complete the task despite their preference of assignment completion.

4.3 Student Confidence and Assignment Preferences

How often do you feel that you sacrifice the quality of an assignment in order to complete it?

24 responses

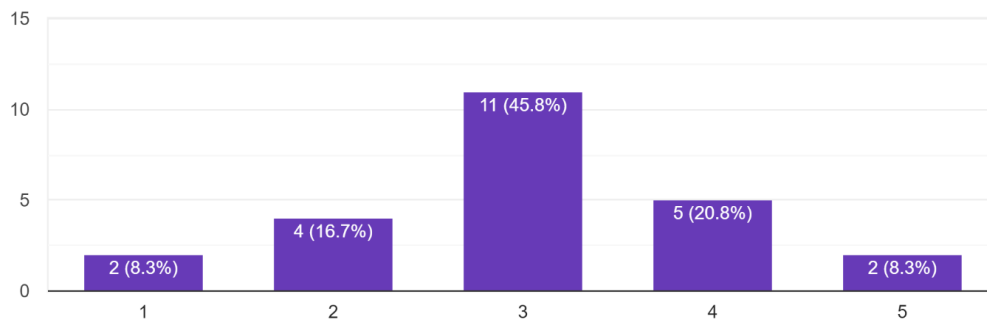


Figure 1: Student opinions on quality sacrifice when completing an assignment. Option #1 on the scale indicated that a student never sacrificed quality on an assignment, while option #5 indicated that a student almost always sacrificed an assignment’s quality in order to complete it.

How confident are you when submitting an assignment in terms of its quality?

24 responses

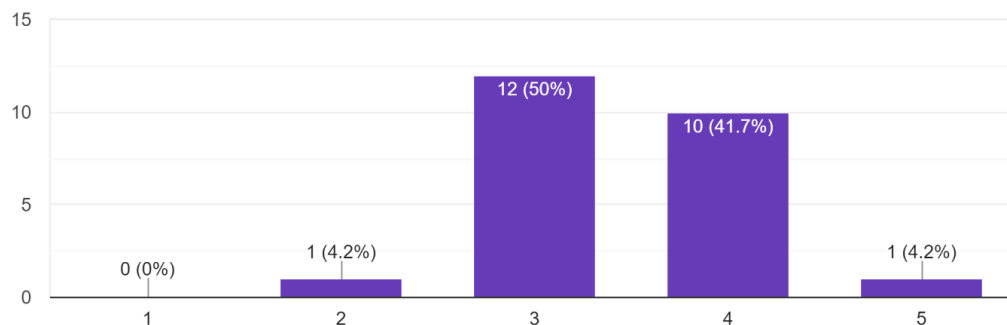


Figure 2: Student confidence about an assignment’s quality upon its completion. Option #1 on the scale indicated that a student lacked confidence in the assignment, while option #5 indicated that a student had total confidence in the assignment’s quality.

When asked how often the quality of assignments was sacrificed, 45.8% of students selected a “3” on a Likert scale, indicating that they were sacrificed some quality while completing the assignment (Figure 1). In terms of students’

confidence towards the quality of their assignments, a combined 91.7% of students either selected a “3” or “4” on a Likert scale, indicating that they were either somewhat confident or mostly confident in their assignments (Figure 2). Thirteen students (54.2%) indicated that they preferred to have one larger project with a singular due date, stating that a larger assignment allowed for the freedom to work at one’s own pace. Eleven students (45.8%) preferred to have an assignment divided into smaller sections, stating that the workload was easier to manage, and it allowed for progressed to be closely monitored (See Table 2 in *Appendices*). Thirteen students indicated that they would feel more confident in an assignment’s quality if the assignment was divided into smaller tasks, while ten students stated that they would not feel more confident with smaller assignments. One student’s response could not be accounted for because it did not provide a definitive answer to the question being asked (See Table 3 in *Appendices*).

When observing individual student responses, an interesting correlation occurred between student confidence and their preference of assignment structure. Of the thirteen students who ranked their assignment quality with a value of “3” or lower, eight of those students preferred to have an assignment divided into smaller tasks. Four of the five students who preferred larger assignments rated their confidence at a “3” on the scale, while one student rated their confidence at a “2.” Additionally, eight of the eleven students whose confidence was a “4” or higher favored having one large assignment. The remaining three students favored smaller assignments, and all had a confidence level of “4.”

This correlation supports theories developed in literary research surrounding goal enforcement and self-efficacy. Students who exemplify lower confidence could benefit from the structure of smaller assignments, which could allow the “checkpoints for progress” mentioned in the survey results (Table 3). Enforcing the completion of smaller assignments could both provide the performance-based goal of completing an assignment while also allowing a student to focus on the material being presented. Once a student understands the material, then they can move to another section of an assignment that would allow them to critically think about or apply the material. This would utilize both performance and learning-based goals, creating the “optimal achievement environment” established by Heyman and Dweck (1992). As the project moves to more topics, a student’s confidence of both the material and their work could increase with each completed segment. The divided segments serve as a basis in which a student can judge their own efficacy and become more intrinsically motivated for future segments (Bandura 1982). The later segments of the project would allow confident students to “work at [their] own pace” and create their

own plan of completion that less confident students would potentially find intimidating without previous sections (Table 3). These students possess the intrinsic motivation and efficacy to create their own plans of assignment completion, and segmenting an assignment provides less confident students with a structured plan of completion that they could use for future assignments.

5. Conclusions

While the final results of a larger project might be the same as one that was divided into smaller sections, a segmented project would allow a less confident and motivated student to focus their attention towards one aspect of the project at a time. This could eliminate fear or failure towards the larger project and increase a student's perceived efficacy, which would increase motivation. Students and educators could benefit from a survey like this in order to maximize the effectiveness of assigned projects.

If a student is struggling with a particular class or project, this survey could be used as a tool to determine their preference on assignment structure. If the project assigned was one large task, the student could work to divide it into several smaller tasks and work to create an informal timeline of when those smaller tasks would be due. Educators could work closely with the student to divide a project into smaller sections, thereby creating a close relationship that could help the student with future assignments. The educator and student could also work together to create a manageable project that is also interesting to the student, creating an intrinsic desire to study and learn. Providing students with various means of improving intrinsic motivation can not only yield academic success but can potentially yield professional success in a student's life after formal education.

6. Appendices

Table 1:

Motivation and College Assignments Survey Questions

1. Please select the option that best represents your academic status at Bowling Green State University.
 - a. First-Year Student
 - b. Second-Year Student
 - c. Third-Year Student
 - d. Fourth-Year Student
 - e. Fifth-Year Student
 - f. Graduate Student
 - g. Other (please specify)
2. Please state your declared major(s) and/or minor(s).
3. How often are you assigned large projects/papers greater than five pages of writing?
 - a. Not often (once a semester or fewer)
 - b. Somewhat often (two-three times a semester)
 - c. Often (four-five times a semester)
 - d. Frequently (more than five times a semester)
4. Please state what classes you are currently enrolled in that assign large projects/papers.
5. How many days do you wait to start a project/paper after it is assigned?
 - a. 0-5 days
 - b. 6-10 days
 - c. 11-15 days
 - d. 16-20 days
 - e. 21-25 days
 - f. 26-30 days
 - g. More than 30 days
 - h. Other (please specify)
6. How do you begin working on a large assignment? Please select all that apply.

- a. Dividing the assignment into smaller tasks.
 - b. Completing the project all at once.
 - c. Work on the project over time.
 - d. Other (please specify)
7. How often do you feel that you sacrifice the quality of an assignment in order to complete it?
- | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|--------|
| Never | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Always |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|--------|
8. How confident are you when submitting an assignment in terms of its quality?
- | | | | | | | |
|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| Not Confident | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Very Confident |
|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
9. Can you describe how your professors assign projects/papers? Please select all that apply.
- a. One assignment with a given due date.
 - b. One assignment with different due dates incorporated in.
 - c. Several assignments focused on the same concept, each with a different due date.
 - d. Other (please specify).
10. Please rate your willingness to complete an assignment divided into smaller tasks with individual due dates.
- | | | | | | | |
|-------------|---|---|---|---|---|--------------|
| Not Willing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Very Willing |
|-------------|---|---|---|---|---|--------------|
11. Would you prefer to have an assignment divided into smaller tasks with individual due dates, or one large assignment with a singular due date? Why?
12. Would you feel more confident in the quality of your work with an assignment that was divided into smaller tasks? Why?
13. Do you have any other feedback regarding assignments and your motivation to complete them?
-

Table 2:

Student responses to specified survey questions.

“Would you prefer to have an assignment divided into smaller tasks with individual due dates, or one large assignment with a singular due date? Why?”

- 1. Smaller, keep on track with writing.

2. One large with one due date because small assignments often are tedious and feel like someone is holding my hand.
3. No people work at different paces.
4. One large-singular. Because the other way is too much micro-managing.
5. One singular one so I can set my own goals based on what else is going on in my life at the time.
6. One split into smaller tasks because I feel like more motivated to get it done and out of the way.
7. One large so I can procrastinate at my own pace.
8. One large assignment, because then I would have time to make revisions and make the most of office hours opportunities.
9. One singular due date because I feel as if it is one less thing I have to do with less due dates and the quality of work ends up being about the same.
10. Smaller tasks because it allows checkpoints for progress.
11. A smaller assignment as a time, because I will be less likely to want to start a large assignment. It overwhelms me to think about a large assignment all at once,
12. Smaller because it's easier to manage.
13. Smaller tasks; less I have to do in the long run.
14. One large assignment so I can det it all done at once.
15. Yes, I would like the assignment to be divided into smaller tasks so Yes, I could be more successful with the assignment by breaking it down and doing it in parts.
16. One large because it gives people time to plan what they want to say and how they want to organize it and divide it up if they so choose.
17. Depending on the assignment, in REVIT it is easier to have one large assignment divided up into small pieces because it makes it easier to understand the larger concept we are working on and it gives us more time to make every piece of our drawinfs perfect.
18. Smaller, I think it's easier to manage.
19. One large assignment because then it's more meaningful.
20. Larger assignment, because I like to work on one thing as a whole rather than attempting to make smaller parts cohesive.
21. One large because I'm probably going to do it that way anyway right before the due date.

22. Divided into smaller assignments with individual due dates because it makes large assignments feel less stressful and there is more guidance.
 23. One large with one due date; more flexibility to incorporate the assignment into my schedule.
 24. Smaller tasks with individual due dates.
-

Note: These are the direct responses submitted by those who completed the survey.

Table 3.

Student responses to specified survey question.

"Would you feel more confident in the quality of your work with an assignment that was divided into smaller tasks? Why?"

1. Yes, more time and pressure to make them better.
2. No, it makes everything feel choppy.
3. No
4. No, quality is a product of effort and time. I doubt deadline changes would change the effort and time that goes into each section.
5. Not really. I don't think due dates have a big effect on my quality.
6. Yes because I can focus on that one part and put my best work into it. Instead of half trying on a large project.
7. No. I make sure I have enough time to do the work I need to get done to my best ability.
8. Perhaps, because then I would be more motivated and the final assignment would not be so intimidating.
9. NA
10. Yes because I have more opportunity to check my work.
11. Yes! Because I would have more time to work on each individual chunk of work.
12. Yes, because then I will not feel overwhelmed.
13. I spent a good amount of time on each section or small assignment.
14. No I think I do best when it's one big assignment.
15. Yes, I feel as if I'd focus more.
16. No because that's not how I like to complete things. I find that I do my best work under stress.

17. Yes! I always feel confident when my professor assigns smaller assignments that eventually turn into bigger ones. I feel this way because the way we do homework, my professor makes us youtube videos to follow to help us with exact measurements and placements.
 18. Yes, I can assure the quality and it keeps you on task.
 19. I feel it is limited because I just wait for the final one to really put my best effort.
 20. No, because it will feel disjointed when broken into smaller tasks.
 21. Yes because I most likely put more time into it.
 22. Yes because I could receive feedback sooner.
 23. No, I would just work on it in bursts and likely abandon the work that has already been deemed complete and satisfactory.
 24. Yes, I would feel more confident about my work because I would take my time on the smaller tasks.
-

Note: These are the direct responses submitted by those who completed the survey.

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