

## **WIP: 10-Minute Talkies – An Easy Method to Encourage Long-Lasting Community**

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## **Abstract**

This Work in Progress (WIP) paper will describe a simple method for increasing students' interacting with each other and establishing a network of academic peers. In the digital age of smart phones and increased device use, students report increasing isolation from their in-class peers [1]. At the author's university, feelings of loneliness and a lack of community are some of the biggest complaints by the student population. I have found that a low-stakes, easy assignment dubbed 10 Minute Talkies (10MTs) has increased student peer interactions and feelings of satisfaction for the community in the class. In 10MTs, the students are semi-randomly assigned to meet in pairs for 10-minutes outside of the scheduled class time with a required submission of a picture of the meeting as evidence. The assignments are easily adaptable for online or in-person meetings and can be used multiple times in a semester to increase the number of connections within the class roster. Students report positive feedback at mid-semester check-ins and during final class evaluations with requests for more interactions and to keep the assignment for future class iterations. Faculty have anecdotally observed increased class participation and engagement with peers during in-class activities. Future studies may include an IRB approved longitudinal study tracking first-year students through the end of their academic careers to assess if their senses of loneliness and community differ from those students who did not participate in the 10MTs assignment.

## **Introduction**

In 2023, the US Surgeon General issued an advisory on the epidemic of loneliness and drew national attention to the growing concern over the feelings of disconnection individuals were experiencing [2]. Loneliness was defined in the report as “a subjective distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or inadequate meaningful connections”. Loneliness is subjective, meaning an experience that may be social for one person may be isolating for another. Attending a party alone may be social for someone who is outgoing but highly isolating for someone who has trouble connecting with others. The definition goes on to clarify that, “inadequate refers to the discrepancy or unmet need between an individual's preferred and actual experience”. Someone with many friends but longs for deeper relationships may feel just as lonely as the person with no social connections at all. This definition helps to explain how college students can be surrounded by roommates, peers, study partners, and so on but still report feeling overwhelmingly lonely.

While most people experience temporary feelings of loneliness without detrimental effects, prolonged loneliness has been shown to affect physical health [3, 4, 5], mental health [6, 7], and educational outcomes [8, 9, 10]. One meta-analysis found that a lack of social connections can have a greater impact on mortality than the daily consumption of 15 cigarettes or six or more alcoholic drinks [11]. A separate review found that having strong social connections can reduce the risk of early death by 50% [12]. Howick, Kelly, & Kelly found that a lack of social connection is, in itself, an independent risk factor for death, separate from other causes [13].

According to an analysis of data from the National College Health Assessment from 2008 to 2019, feelings of being “very lonely” steadily rose to a high of 67.4% of the students surveyed in 2019 [14]. This increasing prevalence poses a growing problem in school as students

experiencing loneliness do not perform as well academically [8, 15]. The problem has become so prominent a concern for college age adults that the Chronical of Higher Education released a report by Alexander Kafka making recommendations about how colleges and universities can strengthen social connections in their students [1]. As the Kafka summarizes, “lonely students don’t learn as well; and students who are academically behind or adrift, or experiencing intense academic pressure, can feel that school and college are not where they belong.”

Loneliness is complicated. Multiple factors have been identified as having strong links to loneliness, including individual, relational, community and societal factors identified in the Surgeon General’s advisory; and social media, changes in parenting styles, and social anxiety by Kafka [1, 2]. Lowering the social barriers to meeting other people and reducing the feelings of social anxiety may help improve loneliness in college students and lead to stronger communities, better mental health, and improved academic outcomes. This study is the first step in looking into a potential intervention to help alleviate student loneliness.

### *10 Minute Talkies*

The concept for 10 Minute Talkies (10MTs) originated as an assignment in a class for biomedical engineering students that included a unit on professional development. Networking was heavily emphasized as an important aspect of career development, and the 10MTs were meant to incentivize the students to network with their classmates by including a small grade component. Students were semi-randomly assigned to meet with a peer for ten minutes to talk about anything. Students were permitted to meet with video chat or in-person with the majority picking to meet in-person. When finished, the students took a picture of themselves with the other person and submitted the picture or screenshot to the learning management system as evidence of the meeting. Students received a grade on whether or not they submitted the photo. The instructor did not know if the students met for the full 10 minutes. These assignments were low-stakes and easy to quickly grade.

Assigned pairings mattered to the design of the assignment, as the goal was to network with unknown peers. The pairs were initially randomly matched and then adjusted so that students known to have social relationships were reassigned to unknown students.

The usefulness of the 10MTs to build better community and social relationships between students became increasingly visible. Students wrote comments in the end-of-semester course evaluations and provided verbal feedback indicating the want for similar assignments earlier in their academic careers to form study groups, create friendships, and simply break the communication barrier with peers seen regularly in other classes but never talked to. The number of repetitive positive comments and the differences seen in class participation at the beginning of the semester versus after the 10MTs inspired a more critical look into the use of 10MTs to increase social connectivity in the classroom.

### **Methods**

For this work-in-progress, a simple survey measured various aspects of the 10MTs to inquire about the students’ engagement with the networking assignment, measures of their willingness to engage with other students in the class, and demographic information about nationality, commuter status, academic rank, and introvertedness. An exemption was provided by the University’s IRB given the nature and intended use of the data. Students from two courses

participated in the 10MTs and the end-of-the-semester survey as part of their grades. The two courses represent an undergraduate version and a graduate version of the same class and were taught at the same time with the students paired across the sections for the 10MT assignments. The 10MTs counted as 10% of the final grade for the graduate level class and 15% of the final grade for the undergraduate level class. Both classes were required to meet for 15 10MTs with an optional bonus 10MT the students could arrange for themselves. Completion of the survey assessing the 10MTs counted as a quiz grade for both sections contributing 3% of the final grade of the undergraduate class and 3.33% for the graduate class. Surveys were administered anonymously through the learning management system during the last week of class which recorded completion but did not provide identification of the students with the responses.

Fifty students participated in the class across both sections with 32 undergraduates, 4 undergraduates completing the class for graduate credit, 11 master students, 2 doctoral students, and one student listed as a graduate student. Students completed 99.2% of the 750 required meetings, and 82% of the students completed the optional bonus 10MT. The survey had a 96% completion rate with two of the undergraduate students who did not complete the survey.

## **Results**

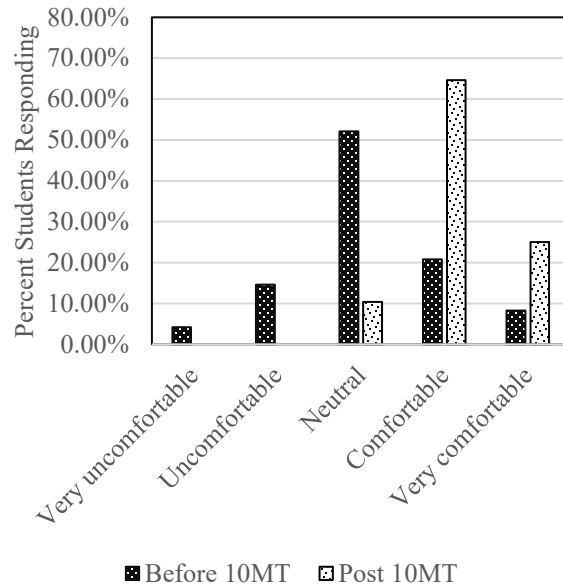
The survey collected demographic information about the student's academic level, whether they were international or domestic, if they commuted more than 15 minutes to campus, and if they identified as an introvert, extrovert, or somewhere in-between. Quantitatively, the students were asked about the shortest, longest, and average lengths of their meetings. Qualitatively, the students provided comfort ratings about talking to their partners and asking about class assignments before and after the 10MT. The students also provided open feedback on the perceived value of the 10MTs to the class and how the 10MTs could be approved. The open feedback responses are not included in this work in progress as they were mostly meant for improving the class and assignment.

Overall, students talked for an average minimum of 13 minutes (SD 0.6) with the shortest reported meeting at 3 minutes and the longest at 60 minutes (see Table 1). The average of the shortest 10MT conversation was 7 minutes (0.4 SD) and ranged from 3 to 15 minutes. The average of the longest time a pair of students talked to each other was 27 minutes (SD 2) with a range of 7-60 minutes. The number of students in some of the academic levels or nationality demographic categories were too few for comparison, and the values between the commuter and extroversion categories did not differ largely.

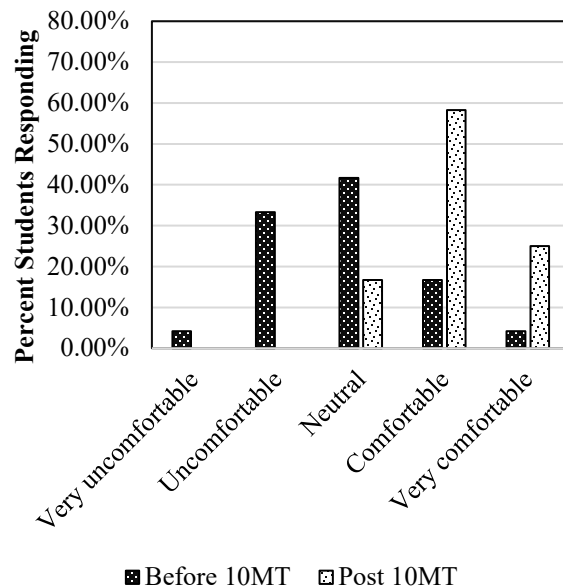
**Table 1. Mean time of typical, shortest, and longest 10MTs broken down by collected demographic information**

	n	Mean time talked (minutes, SD)	Range of mean time talked (minutes)	Mean of shortest 10MT (minutes, SD)	Range of shortest 10MT (minutes)	Mean of longest 10MT (minutes, SD)	Range of longest 10MT (minutes)
All Students	48	13 (1)	8-30	7 (0.4)	3-15	27 (2)	7-60
Bachelors	29	14 (5)	8-30	7 (3)	3-15	30 (14)	8-60
Bachelors taking for graduate credit	5	11 (3)	8-15	6 (1)	5-7	18 (7)	15-30
Masters	12	12 (2)	10-15	8 (3)	3-12	21 (9)	7-40
Doctoral	2	12 (4)	9-15	8 (4)	5-10	38 (32)	15-60
Domestic	42	13 (4)	8-30	7 (3)	3-15	26 (13)	7-60
International	6	14 (2)	11-15	8 (2)	6-10	34 (16)	15-60
Do not commute 15 minutes or more	23	12 (3)	8-20	8 (3)	3-15	24 (13)	12-60
Commute 15 minutes or more	25	14 (5)	8-30	7 (2)	3-10	29 (14)	7-60
Self-identify as introvert	24	12 (3)	8-20	7 (3)	3-15	23 (12)	8-60
Self-identify between introvert and extrovert	21	14 (4)	8-30	8 (2)	3-10	29 (15)	7-60
Self-identify as extrovert	3	17 (4)	15-22	7 (3)	5-10	38 (7)	30-43

The overall comfort levels of talking or discussing assignments with classmates shifted from a mostly neutral feeling of neither comfortable or uncomfortable (52% and 42% respectively) to most of the students reporting being “comfortable” (65% and 58%, respectively) after participating in the 10MTs (see Figure 1). The portion who were “comfortable” or “very comfortable” talking to other students tripled from 14 students to 43. More dramatically, the portion who were “comfortable” or “very comfortable” discussing an assignment quadrupled from 10 students to 40 (see Figure 2). In all cases, the number of students who said they would be “uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” dropped to zero after the 10MT.



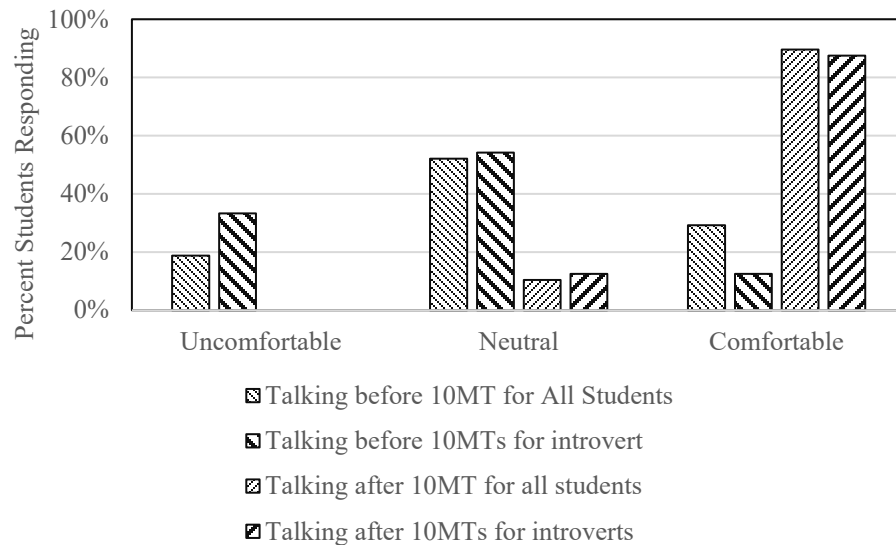
**Figure 1. Comfort levels for all participating students (n=48) regarding talking to 10MT partners prior to meeting them or meeting them again in the future**



**Figure 2. Comfort levels for all participating students (n=48) regarding approaching 10MT partners about an assignment prior to meeting them or meeting them again in the future**

The demographic breakdown for the comfort levels encountered the same issues for academic level and nationality as earlier, and the comfort levels for the commuters and non-commuters did not differ by more than a few percentage points in any category. However, introverts had larger portions of students who were “uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” talking to other students (33%) or talking about assignments (54%) prior to the 10MTs compared to the overall group

(19% and 38%; see figure 3). The discomfort dropped to zero after the 10MTs for the introverts in both categories as their levels matched those for the overall group.



**Figure 3. Combined comfort ratings for all students (n=48) and for the subset of students (n=24) identifying as introverts**

## Discussion

For the 10MT assignment, students were required to talk for 10 minutes about any topic and to submit a picture of the participants for a grade. Actual values were not recorded as a part of the grade, meaning the students could have met, taken a picture, and left without talking and still received full credit. The shortest conversation reported was three minutes indicating that these transactional types of meetings may have happened, but the median overall meeting length was 12 minutes with the average closer to 13 (SD 1 minute) minutes indicating the majority of the meetings actually went longer than the required minimum (see Table 1). Indeed, 19 of the students reported having at least one meeting that lasted for 30 minutes or longer. While most students' meetings were closer to the required time, many seemed to have engaged in conversations beyond the minimum. Amount of time may not be a direct measure of the quality of the conversation but could be said to approximate enjoyment as most people tend to get out of conversations they do not like.

Comfort levels for the overall class shifted more positively after the 10MTs took place (see figure 1 and figure 2). Most noticeably, no one chose "very uncomfortable" or "uncomfortable" after the 10MT took place regarding talking to their partners or asking partners about assignments. Ratings of "comfortable" or "very comfortable" for talking to their assigned partners increased from a combined 29% to 90% and 21% to 83% for discussing assignments. While outside of the scope of this study, the lower comfort rating discussing assignments than just talking with their partners may be due to a combination of factors, including the vague phrasing of the statement (i.e., were they discussing grades or assignment details?) or to keep from looking confused in front of an acquaintance.

Most promising is the data from the self-identified introverted students in the class who had high ratings of discomfort in engaging with their partners prior to the 10MTs that disappeared after they had their discussions (see figure 3). Of the introverts, 33% and 54% reported they would have been “uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” talking to their partner or discussing an assignment with them prior to their 10MT. Those numbers shifted to 88% and 83% “comfortable” or “very comfortable” after the 10MTs. The survey did not ask for reasons why the students felt more comfortable with each other after the 10MTs or if the students would have likely met if not required by the class. Anecdotally, students reported in class that requiring them to meet took off the initial pressure of having to approach someone they did not know.

### Shortcomings and Future Directions

As a pilot study, there were many shortcomings to this research. The study lacked a comparison group that did not go through the 10MTs or baseline data to know what a class normally looks like. Ratings for the comfort levels prior to the 10MTs were reported at the end of the semester, after the 10MTs had taken place which provides room for bias and misjudgment on what the ratings would have been. As previously mentioned, the study did not ask about why ratings changed over time or if the students would likely have met outside of the requirement. The meeting times were self-reported and based on estimates instead of having an accurate measurement.

Despite these areas for improvement, the preliminary data is encouraging in that the students are engaging with each other and feeling more comfortable talking after the 10MT assignment. Along with addressing the comments in the previous paragraph, a longtime goal of this study is to measure the long-term effectiveness of creating community and reducing student loneliness. Starting the 10MTs in the first-semester for a first-year student could introduce them to a cohort they will see repeatedly throughout their academic career with reduced barriers to socialization. Additionally, the use of 10MTs in online courses may benefit classes where students rarely speak to each other directly and increase class participation.

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