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Expressions of Grief and Change in the Poetry Projects of Bereaved VCU Students



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Introduction

Dealing with a loss can be an incredibly traumatic and distressing experience for the individual(s) whom are left to deal with the grief. The mourning process can vary by each individual and culture, and each individual may not process the grief in the same way. Likewise, adult college students are among those individuals whom are unique to their experiences of loss and because of this; oftentimes do not seek the appropriate help or guidance during this emotional and sensitive period of time. According to Holland, Currier, and Neimeyer (2006), at least 40% of College Students have experienced some sort of loss during their college academic career (2006). Still, there is not enough information and further research can be done to understand fully how adult college students cope with their grief and/or loss (Schnider, Elhai, & Gray 2007). According to Schnider et. al, a serious and traumatic loss can change from the normal grief that every individual feels to a more deeply inflicting, Complicated Grief (CG) or at times, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (2007). One of the main causes of CG and PTSD is the lack of a familiar social support and the proper emotional support that many college students lack when they are in school (Schnider et. al 2007). In addition to the proper social and emotional support, Schnider et. al, further propose that it is vital for college students to have efficient emotional and adaptive coping skills which can aid in the healing process as well as helping them grow from their loss (2007). Courses that are designed to help combat stress and teach students to effectively express their thoughts and emotions are helpful. The Stress Management course at VCU has implemented such ideas into the course work and in the process of receiving college credits; students are better able to express their emotions and thoughts, including the feelings of loss or grief.

Expressive writing has been used to express feelings of joy and sorrow (Pennebaker, 1997). As a way for college students to express their thoughts and emotions, expressive writing can be a way for students to engage in effective emotion focused coping and in the process grow from the loss (Pennebaker, 1997). In an effort to understand the different stages of grief that a student experiences through their loss, *Alphabet* poems have been implemented into the course work for Stress Management. These poems are a specific style of writing that were chosen among several expressive/creative writing exercises available to students. Rando (1993) posited a theory which suggests that the bereaved complete six processes while grieving: Recognizing the loss, reacting to it, recollecting/reexperiencing it, and finally relinquishing it, readjusting to the outside world, and reinvesting in new relationships. **The current study aimed to test the hypothesis that stages of grief (based on Rando's (1993) popular "six R's" theory) are expressed by college students in these writing exercises. A further hypothesis was that student would show progress through the stages from the beginning of their exercises to the end.**

Participants

Undergraduate students at Virginia Commonwealth University enrolled in a stress management course were given the opportunity to complete several expressive writing grief assignments. Eighty students completed a writing assignment. Of these, 56 students (mean age: 21.9 years; 80% female; 33.9% African American, 32.1% Caucasian, 12.5% Asian and Latino, respectively) completed an end-of-semester feedback survey regarding the usefulness of these exercises (a 70% return rate). Of these, 47 students produced code-able alpha poems.

Procedures

A stress management course at VCU allows students to complete loss-focused writing exercises, including acrostic "alphabet poems" for course credit. An alpha poem is a form of expression in which an individual reacts to an event (in this case a loss of some kind) by reflecting on the experience in 26 lines. Each line begins with one letter of the alphabet, and progresses in alphabetical order. The current study aims to test the hypothesis that stages of grief (based on Rando's (1993) popular "six R's" theory) are expressed by college students in these writing exercises. A further hypothesis was that student would show progress through the stages from start to finish in the poems.

Data Analysis

- Poems were analyzed using a structured QUALITATIVE coding procedure
- A coding scheme was developed based on knowledge of Rando's (1993) theory and an initial reading of sample poems
- Two teams that include two undergraduate students meet together to code the alphabet poems.
- Poems are coded using a coding scheme based on Rando's "six R's" theory of grief.
 - Each line is read through and analyzed word by word.
 - The lines can be analyzed individually or as a set of lines.
 - As the students read each line, they determine if any of the stages in the theory are represented.
 - Coding begins with descriptive labeling and progresses into more analytical measures.
 - Codes are then compared between the teammates to make agreements
 - A graduate student supervisor determines a tie-breaker when needed.

Example of Coding Procedure

Therese Rando's Six R's Theory

- **Recognize** the loss: First, people must experience their loss and understand that it has happened.
 - Person states what loss happened
- **React**: People react emotionally to their loss.
 - Statements about blame (self, other, higher power)
- **Recollect & Re-Experience**: People may review memories of their lost relationship (events that occurred, places visited together, or day to day moments that were experienced together).
 - Could, would, should
- **Relinquish**: People begin to put their loss behind them, realizing and accepting that the world has truly changed and that there is no turning back.
 - Afterlife/Peace
 - Forgiveness
 - Accepting! that the loss has happened and that things are different
 - Beginning to move on
- **Readjust**: People begin the process of returning to daily life and the loss starts to feel less acute and sharp.
 - "washing the feelings away I feel relief"
 - Going back normal / baseline
- **Reinvest**: Ultimately, people re-enter the world, forming new relationships and commitments. They accept the changes that have occurred and move past them.
 - Continuing bonds
 - Able to create/pursue new relationships

Example of a Coded Alpha Poem

A time
Beyond my
Control, came too quickly, ←-----**Recognize**
Disintegrating my heart ←----- **React & Negative emotion**
Ever so quickly,
Fear took over my soul. ←-----**React & Negative emotion**
Gasping for air I
Hit the bathroom floor. ←-----**React**
In tears I asked why, ←----- **Negative emotion**
Just tell me why.
Keep her with me forever.
Let her precious voice play like a
Melody in my ear. ←-----**Recollect**
Never let her leave me.
Open her eyes and bring her to me.
Please, O Lord just bring her back
Quietly not a word was spoken
Realizing no one will resurrect her dear
Soul, ←-----**Relinquish**
This tantalizing voice quietly says,
Understand she will hurt no more
Ventures through one ear and out the other.
Weak and hopeless I felt ←-----**Negative emotion**
Xeroxing our times together in my mind over and over. ←-----**Recollect**
Yet your soul has finally found its resting place.
Zion is where I will see you again. ←-----**Relinquish**

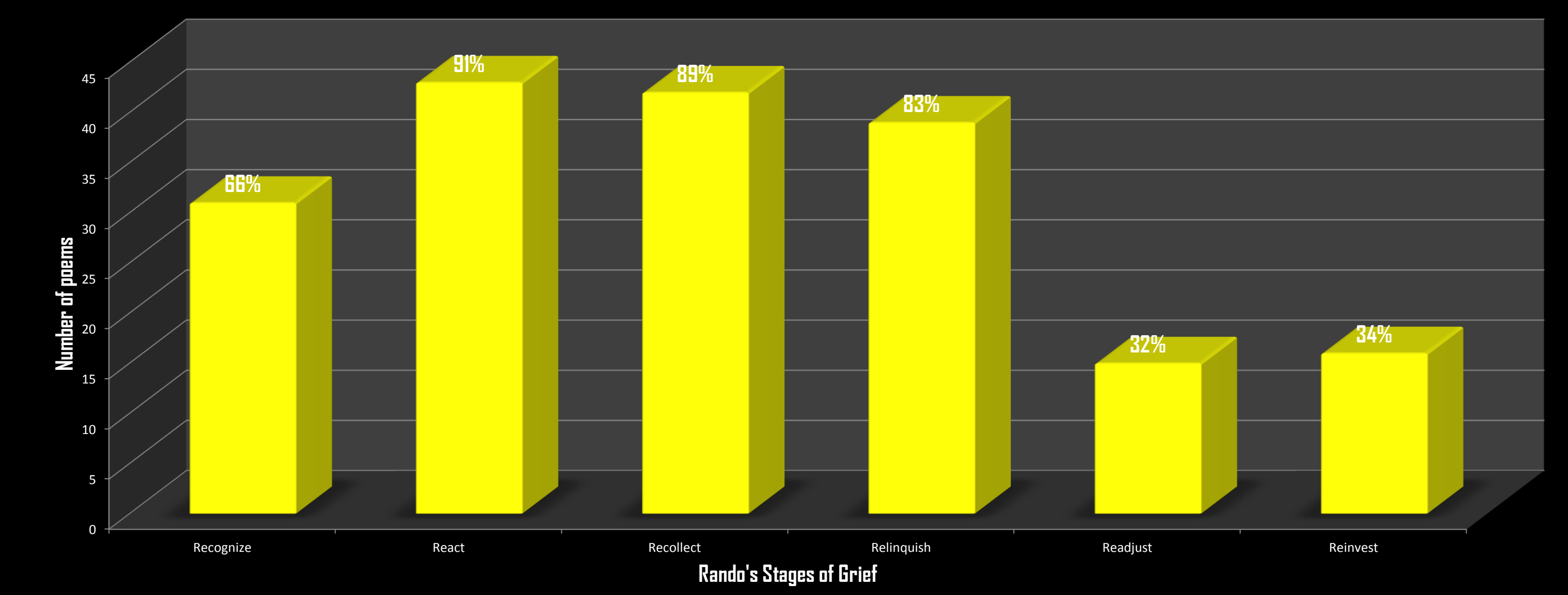
We measured whether each poem seemed to PROGRESS or CHANGE from beginning to end by developing an operational definition:
If a poem demonstrated
• more of the first 3 stages in the first 13 lines
AND
• more of the last 3 stages in the last 13 lines
THEN
• That poem was said to change over time

Conclusions

- Students do express both positive and negative emotions when completing expressive writing assignments. They do tend to express Rando's six grief processes and show change within poems, progressing from early processes to later processes
- A replication in which a different grief process model is used for coding could be done to compare significance of the models with expressive writing and different examples of change.
- Future research should be done to test the change and overall coding of poems to actual stage of the writers grief.

Frequencies of Coded Content

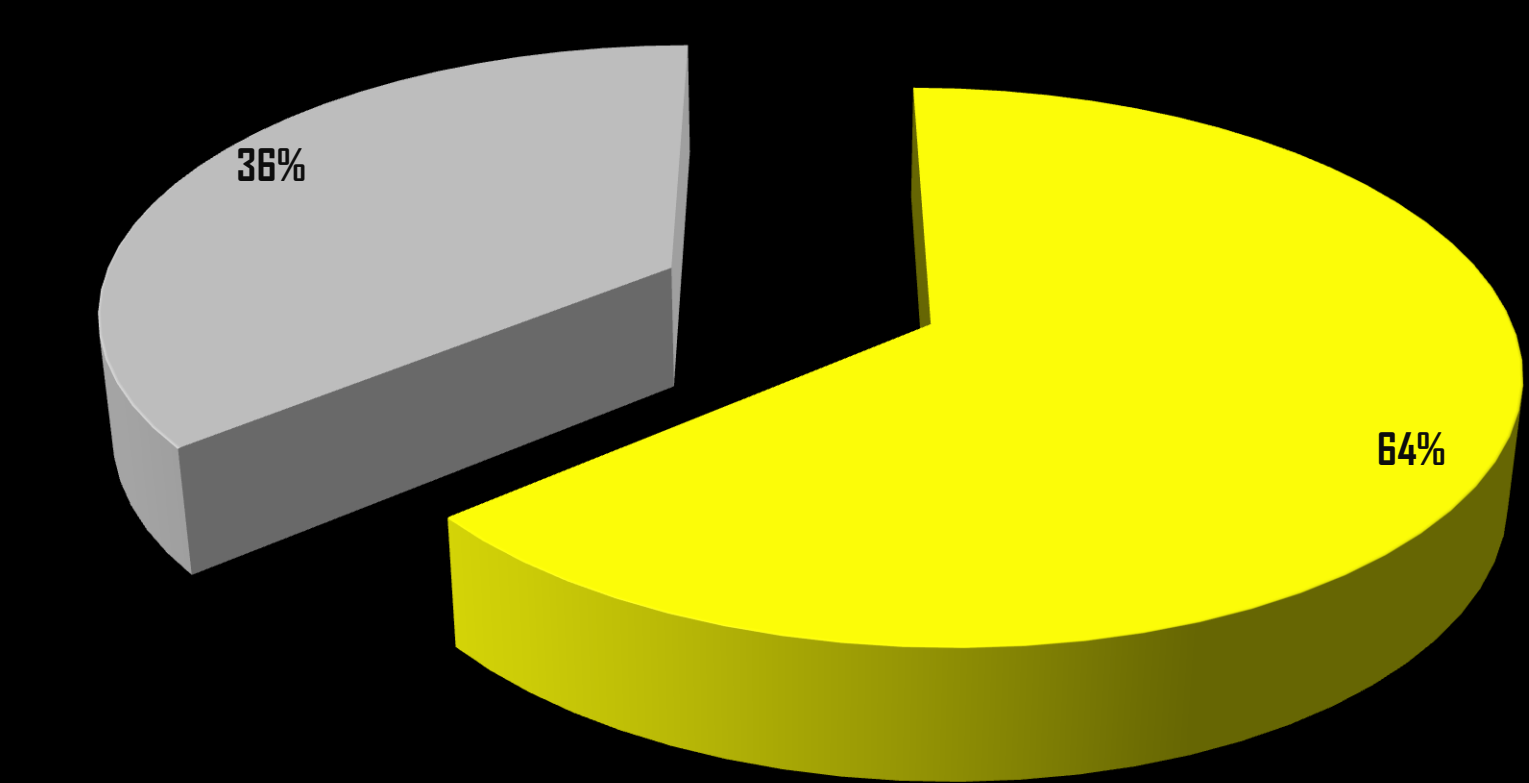
Overall Frequency of Rando's R's



- Examples of the first 4 stages of Therese Rando's grief model were all present in over half of the poems.
- The last 2 stages were not as represented both being less than 35%.

- A Z-proportion test was done to determine if the majority of the poems exhibited change from the beginning to the end of the poem. The test showed significance that proportion of poems that changed ($p = .638$) was significantly greater than ($p_{null} = .5$), $P(Z > z) = .0287$, $p < .05$. Therefore we have sufficient evidence to that the majority of poems show change in expressed stages of the grief process from beginning to end.

Overall Proportion of Change



Selected Student Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Think back to when you were actually doing the writing. Please describe your experience. What feelings or emotions were triggered? Was it a positive experience, or a difficult experience, or both? Please explain if possible.

• "The emotions that were triggered were extremely overwhelming for me. I didn't face any of the issues or really talk about them into detail until I had to complete the assignment. I think that helped pave my way to forgiving him and forgetting."

Think back to how you felt and what was on your mind in the hours just after finishing the writing project. What emotions or physical feelings were you experiencing? At this point, did you feel that the writing exercise was a positive or negative experience, or both? Please explain if possible.

• "I cried after I finished writing my poem. I shared it with a friend. Before, I got to the end I was choked up. The experience was really helpful and elicited a positive experience (even though I cried). Every time I speak about my dad in the past tense it just reminds me that he's really not here. It helped me practice speaking about him openly."

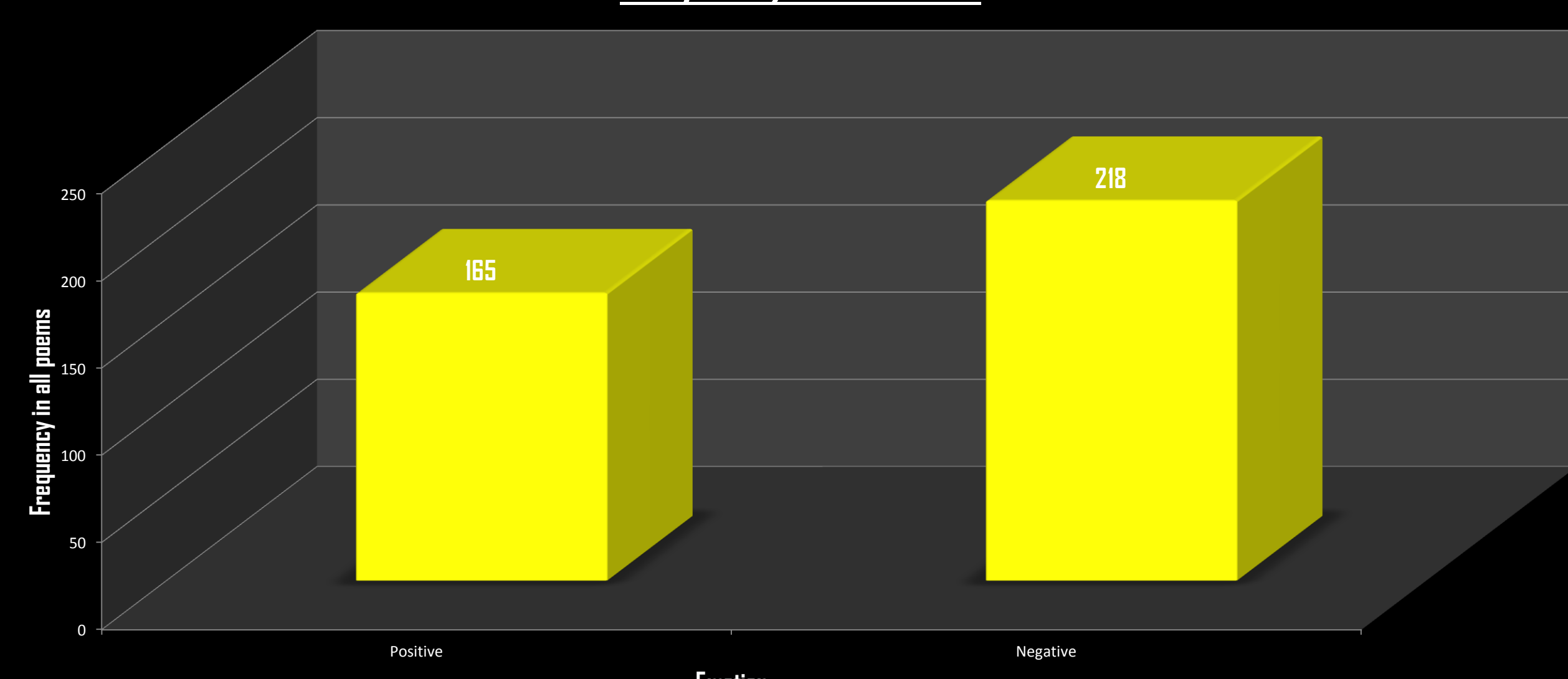
Overall, evaluate the writing exercise. Was it helpful to you? Was it a positive experience? A negative experience? Would you use expressive writing again in the future? If so, why? If not, why not? Would you recommend this as an extra-credit or assignment for future classes?

• "This exercise was extremely helpful. I did not think that it would help as much as it did. I am not a "writer" and would usually not try exercises like that on my own. Primarily I attempted this exercise for the extra credit benefit and it unexpectedly positively helped my own personal life. I would definitely recommend this as an assignment for future classes. People may not be aware of what can come out of an exercise like this."

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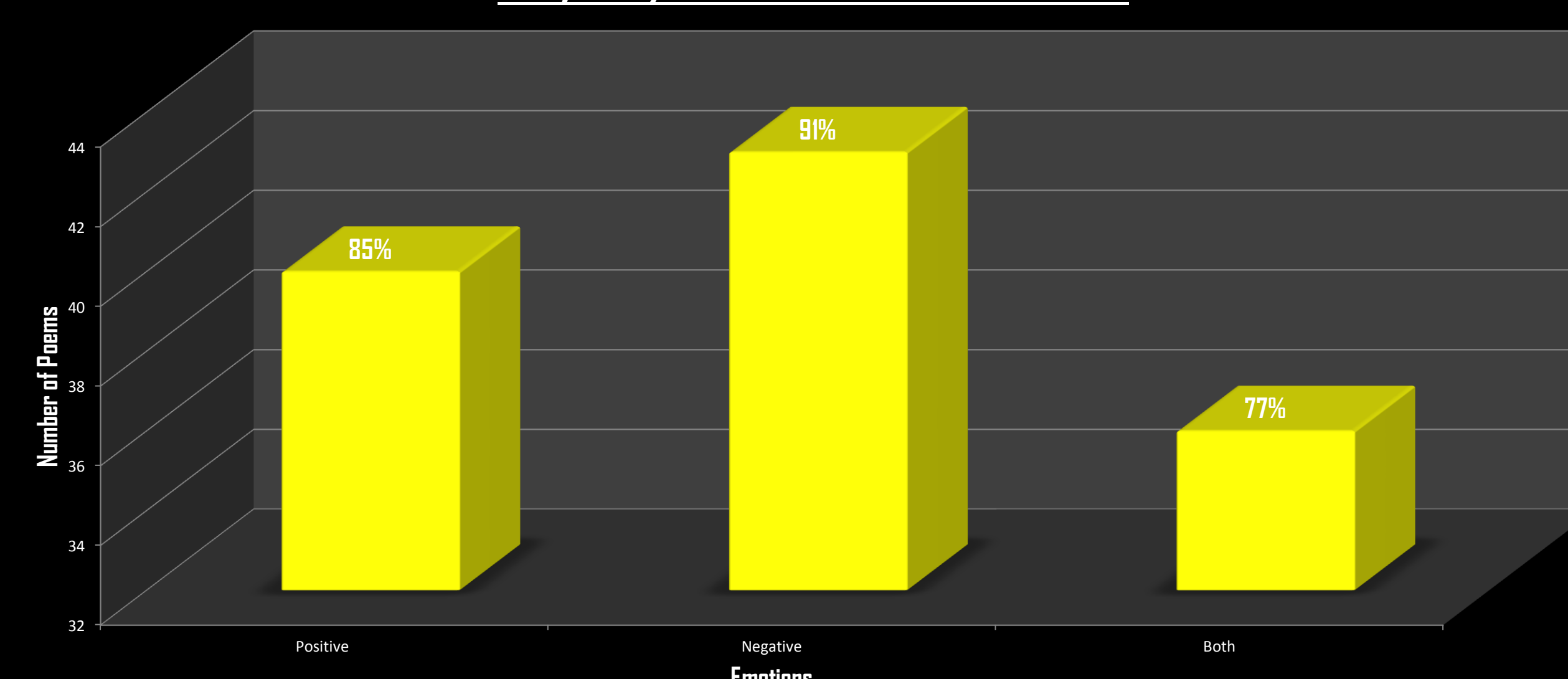
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Frequency of Emotions



The poems had more frequent negative emotions than positive overall, but a significant majority (77%) had at least one of both.

Frequency of Poems With Each Emotion



On average, each poem included 3.5 positive emotional statements, and 4.5 negative.

Average Frequency of Emotion

