

Student Thinking Regarding Entropy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics *

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Context of Investigation

- Part of a broad study of student understanding of thermodynamics in a second semester calculus-based physics course at Iowa State University
- In collaboration with John Thompson at the University of Maine and David Meltzer at the University of Washington in upper-level thermal physics courses

Pre-instruction Testing

- Initial testing took place before all instruction on entropy and the second law of thermodynamics

Spontaneous Process Question

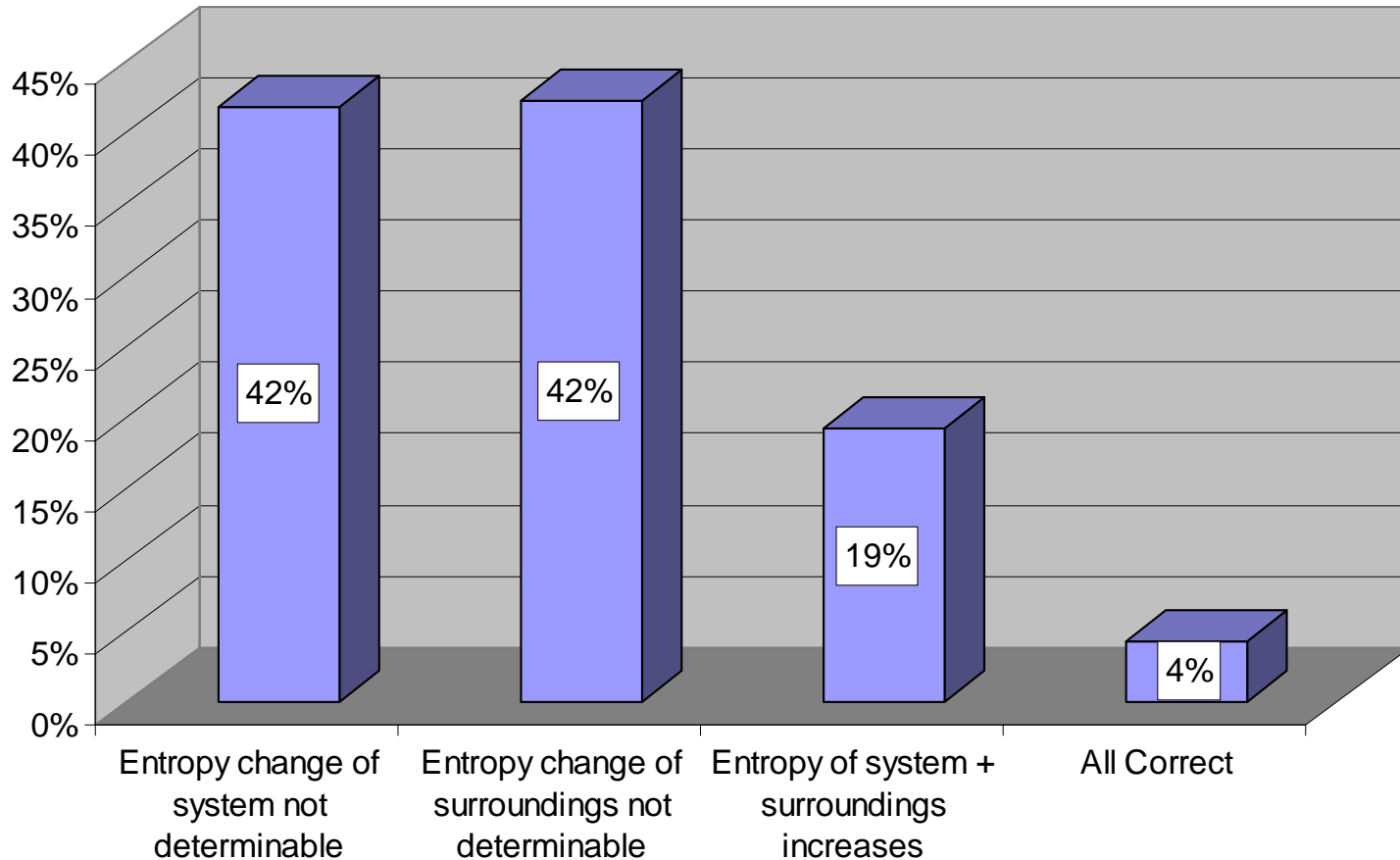
For each of the following questions consider a system undergoing a naturally occurring (“spontaneous”) process. The system can exchange energy with its surroundings.

- A. During this process, does the entropy of the **system** [S_{system}] *increase, decrease, or remain the same*, or is this **not determinable** with the given information? *Explain your answer.*
- B. During this process, does the entropy of the **surroundings** [$S_{\text{surroundings}}$] *increase, decrease, or remain the same*, or is this **not determinable** with the given information? *Explain your answer.*
- C. During this process, does the entropy of the system *plus* the entropy of the surroundings [$S_{\text{system}} + S_{\text{surroundings}}$] **increase, decrease, or remain the same**, or is this *not determinable* with the given information? *Explain your answer.*

Pre-instruction Data

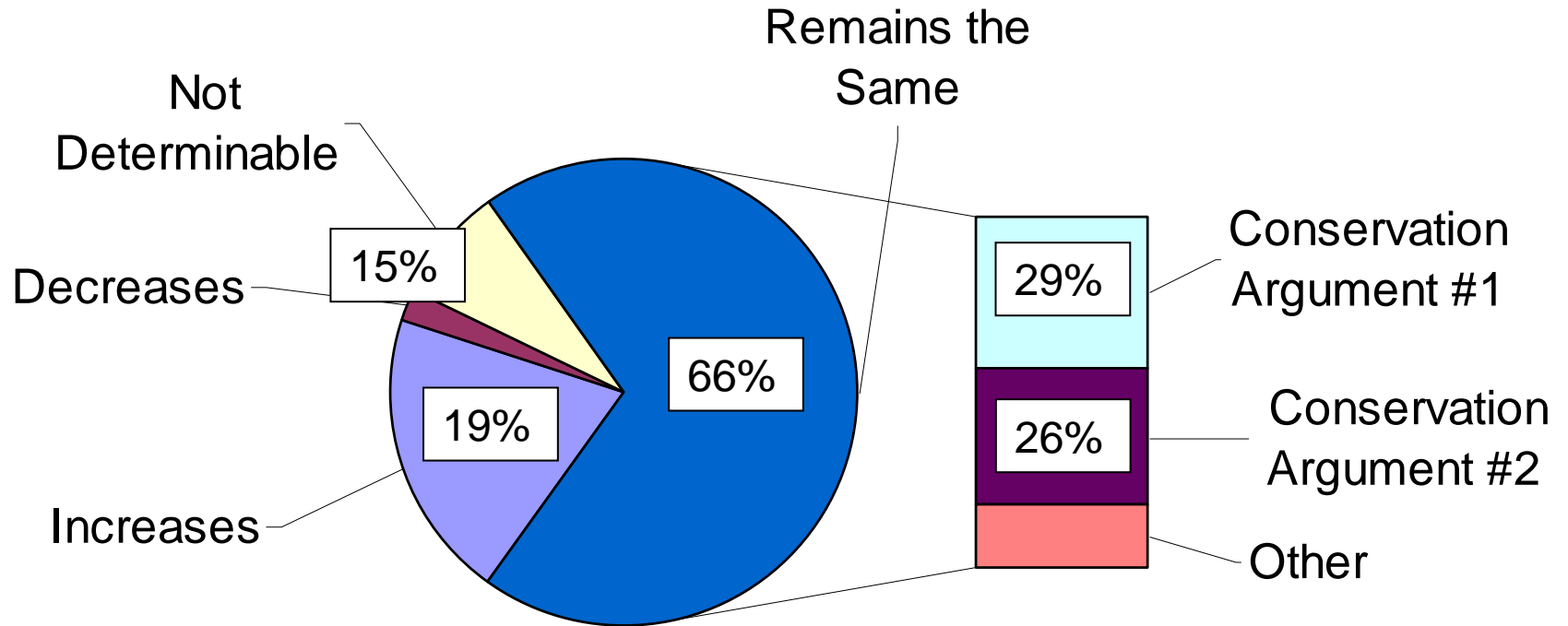
Correct Responses

Fall 2004, Spring 2005, Fall 2005, Spring 2006 ($N = 1184$)



Entropy of system + surroundings...

Fall 2004, Spring 2005, Fall 2005, Spring 2006 ($N = 1184$)



Conservation Arguments

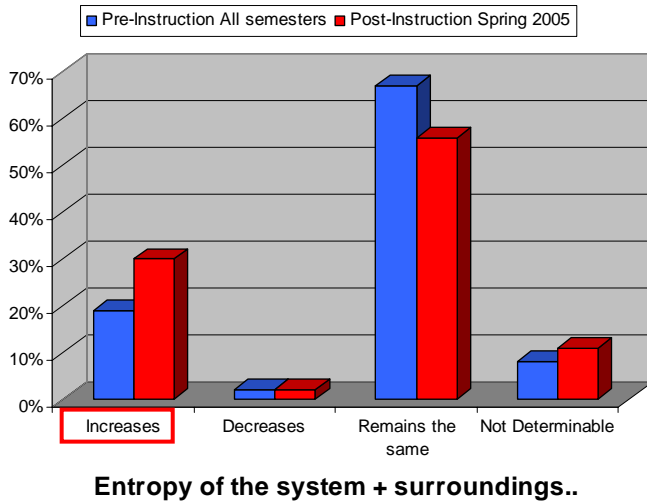
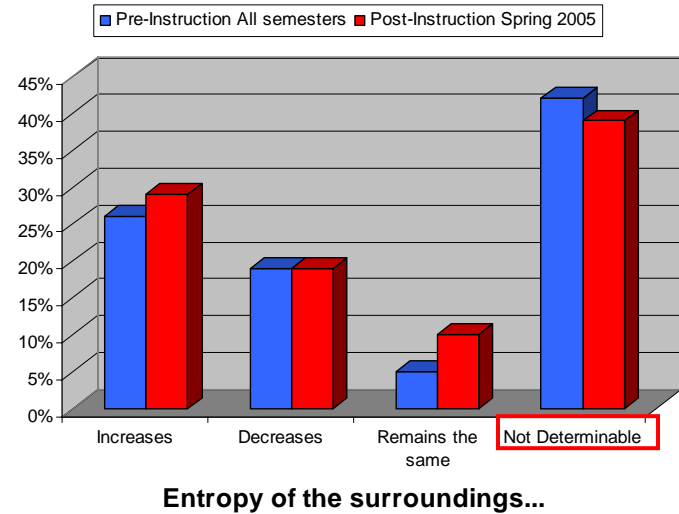
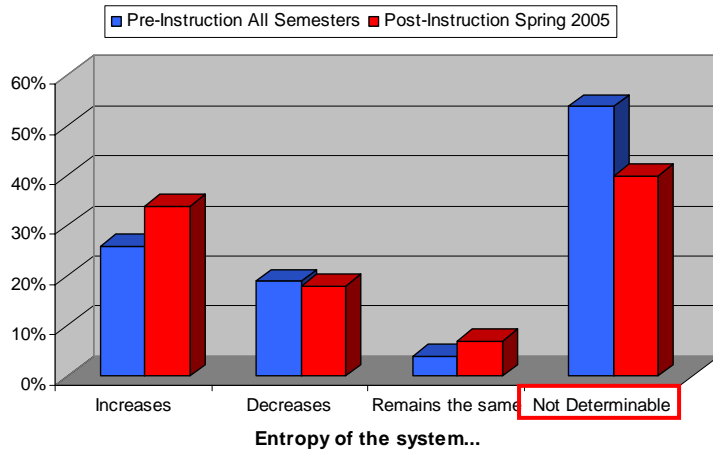
- **Conservation Argument #1 (29%)**

S_{System} increases [*decreases*],
 $S_{\text{Surroundings}}$ decreases [*increases*], and
 $S_{\text{System}} + S_{\text{Surroundings}}$ stays the same

- **Conservation Argument #2 (26%)**

S_{System} not determinable,
 $S_{\text{Surroundings}}$ not determinable, and
 $S_{\text{System}} + S_{\text{Surroundings}}$ stays the same

Pre- v. Post-Instruction Data

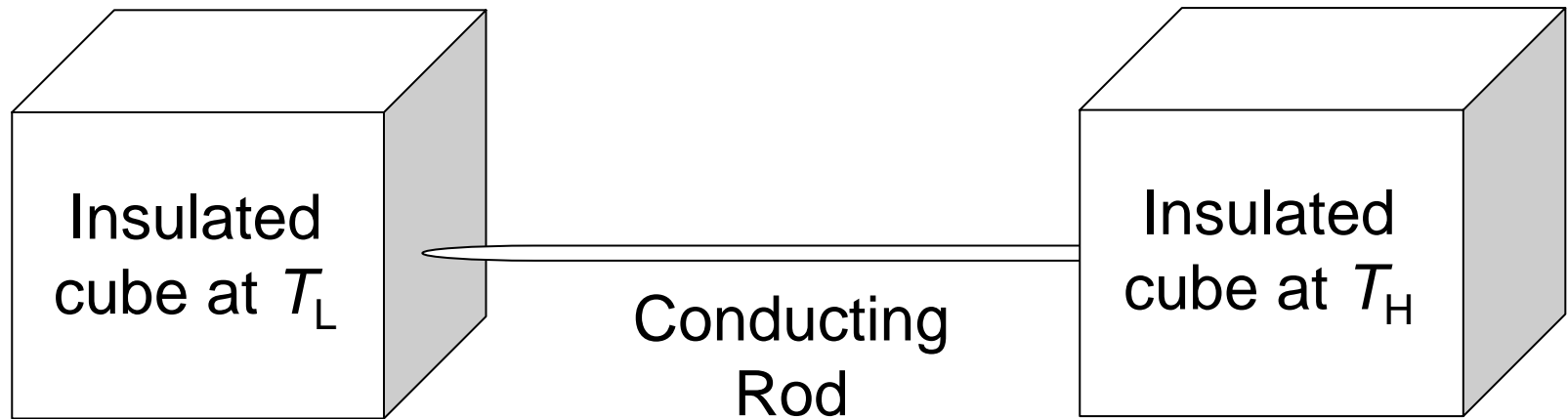


Post-instruction testing showed small or negative gains

A Research-based Tutorial

- We created a worksheet to address these ideas for use in the Spring 2006 course.

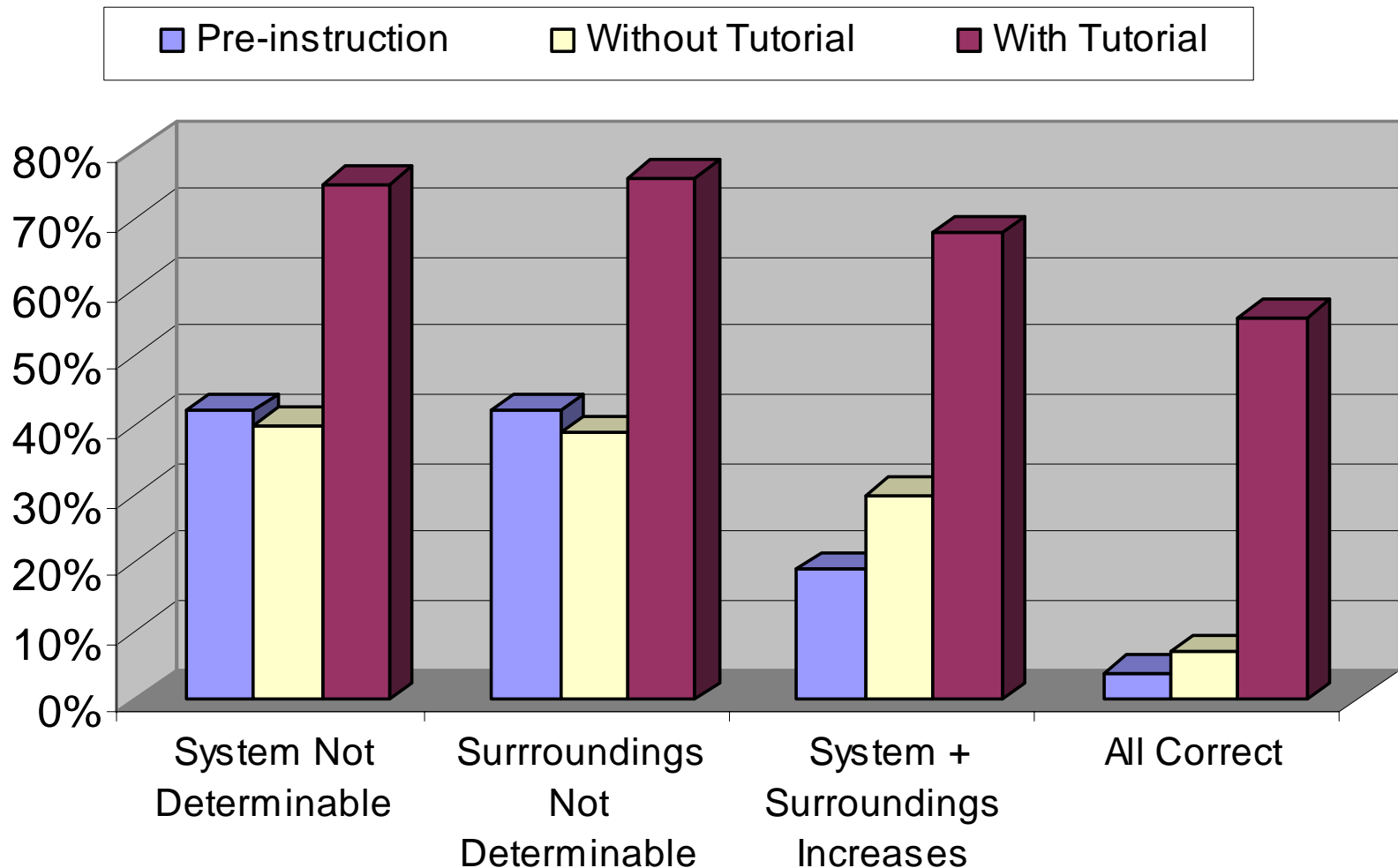
Tutorial Design



- Identify Q_H , Q_L , and discuss energy conservation
- Calculate ΔS_H , ΔS_L , compare the magnitudes, and deduce entropy non-conservation

Pre/Post-instruction comparison

Correct Answers



Conclusions

- Before instruction students often apply ideas about energy conservation to entropy
- Instruction with tutorials showed improved responses from students for some questions
- This instruction is still in the early stages of testing and many questions are yet to be answered