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Session: PER: Student Understanding and Student Reasoning
Presentation Number: 188.04
Title: “Is Entropy Conserved?” Student Understanding of Entropy in Introductory Physics
Category: 02. Research Techniques in Physics Education
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As part of our continuing investigation into student learning of thermal physics in an introductory calculus-based course, we are probing student ideas regarding entropy and the second law of thermodynamics. We will present free-response and multiple-choice data collected both pre- and post-instruction from the previous five semesters. These data suggest that many key concepts are challenging for students. For example, as many as 75% of students, both before and after instruction, incorrectly claim that the total entropy of a system plus its surroundings must stay the same during a spontaneous process. Many of these students base their claim by asserting some sort of conservation principle for entropy. Early indications are that use of modified instruction with research-based materials may have yielded significant learning gains with some of these concepts. However, many student ideas remain resistant to change despite the modified instruction.

*Supported in part by NSF DUE-9981140, PHY-0406724, and PHY-0604703

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