

# Students' Perceptions of Paper-Based vs. Computer-Based Testing in an Introductory Programming Course

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Abstract: This paper examines the preferences of students regarding computer-based versus paper-based assessment, in an introductory computer programming course. Two groups of students were surveyed about their preference between paper-based and computer-based tests and respective rationale. All students had already been assessed: one group using two paper-based tests and the other group using two computer-based tests. Both groups expressed an overwhelming preference for computer-based tests independently of their previous programming experience. We conclude that, from the students' point of view, computer-based tests should be used over paper-based ones for introductory programming courses. This adds to existing literature about computer-based testing of programming skills.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The teaching and assessment of programming skills is still an important and difficult topic, as demonstrated by the continuing large number of articles on the subject, e.g. (1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6). Furthermore, the use of computer-based tests has also been the subject of some research, but typically in the context of learning results, e.g. (7; 8; 9). Despite the preference students often demonstrate towards computer-based tests, anecdotal evidence and some published work indicates that paper-based tests are still widely used in introductory computer programming courses e.g. (10; 11). This is probably due to tradition, fraud prevention, and the additional human and physical resources needed to properly apply computer-based tests e.g. (12). This paper presents the results of a study where two groups of students, in an introductory programming course, were assessed about their preferences regarding both types of tests and also the reasons why they prefer one to the other. Both groups had already completed two tests: one group completed computer-based tests, the other completed paper-based tests. The results provide supplemental help when deciding about or confronted with the need to choose one type of assessment over the other.

The paper has the following structure: Section 2 presents the course where students were assessed, the related work and the hypotheses that motivated the study; Section 3 presents the used methodology and characterises the participants; Section 4 discusses the results and Section 5 concludes.

## 2 BACKGROUND

This section presents the course, the structure of the tests, the related work, and the research questions that we set out to answer.

### 2.1 Course Content and Structure

The course is the first programming course and is part of two computer science degrees in a small higher education school. The course uses an objects-early approach, the JavaTM programming language (13), and the BlueJ IDE (14; 15). First, students learn numeric types, arithmetic expressions, variables, constants, and the use of mathematical functions, by analogy with a scientific calculator. After they apply conditionals, loops, and vectors to make more complex calculations. Finally, they use graphical objects and recursion. The grading is based on individual tests and each test can improve the grade of the previous one, i.e., a better second grade will replace the first one. The same is done for each subsequent test. e.g. (16; 17).

## 2.2 Tests

The paper-based and the computer-based tests had an identical structure and content: students had to write small functions to compute numerical values, or to write number or text patterns using loops. For the paper-based tests the grading criteria was extremely tolerant regarding syntax errors and the students only had to write the core functions (no need to write the main method or imports). Even simple output errors were given a small penalty. Regarding computer-based tests, the students had to submit code without compilation errors. Code with compilation errors got a zero mark, just like non-delivered code. The correct output was the main criteria. Wrong output implied a strong penalty, even with a near correct logic.

## 2.3 Related Work

The importance of computer-based assessment in introductory programming is recognised for quite some time. Daly and Waldron concluded that the computer-based tests (lab exams) are more accurate assessors of programming ability than written exams or programming assignments (?). Yet, it is also known that its effective application is more demanding than paper-based assessment. This is attested by Bennedsen and Caspersen (?) where students are assessed by a computer-based test but in small groups, with two teachers in the room and only for 30 minutes. (?) concluded that computer-based tests effective at increasing student motivation even over group assignments. (?) have found that for a specific programming problem, when students were allowed to use the computer to continue a paper-based test they were able to correct remaining errors in the respective programs. (?) found out that students who took a computer-based exam to write a recursive solution to a binary tree operation were more successful than those who took the paper-based exams (58% vs. 17% correct solutions). Rajala et al. present the adaptation of automatically assessed electronic exams and note that computer-based exams have potential benefits for students, including, for example, the possibility to compile, test and debug the program code. They recommend computer-based exams for other educators as well (?).

## 2.4 Research Questions

The research questions were motivated by anecdotal evidence as students seemed to almost always, with very few exceptions, prefer computer-based tests.

Also, due to insufficient human and physical resources, we were forced to apply paper-based tests to one group of students, while the remaining ones, in the same course, completed computer-based tests. Hence, we decided to ask both groups of students about what kind of tests they prefer. Then, with the intention of exposing students to the perceived advantages of each type of test, they were asked to select from a list the advantages of each approach. Each student could also point out additional advantages for one or both approaches. Hence, the research questions were the following: RQ1 Do students prefer computer-based tests over paper-based tests? RQ2 What are the perceived advantages students find in each type of tests?

RQ3 Students' opinion changes after being con- The third research question (RQ3) was assessed by asking the first one (RQ1) before and after students were asked to point out the perceived advantages of each type of test.

## 3 METHOD OF STUDY

The method of study was an anonymous questionnaire. All students were invited to complete it. The invitation was by a post (delivered by email) on the course forum. There were two additional reminders to answer the questionnaire with a three days deadline. The students were divided in two groups (A and B) and the same questionnaire was applied to both:

Group A The students who had completed computer-based tests;

Group B The students who had completed paper-based tests.

First, students were asked about their previous programming experience to allow checking eventual differences in preferences between them. Then, the following slider scale was used. An even number of options was used to force the respondents to choose between paper-based and computer-based testing, but in a non-binary way:

Question: In what measure do you prefer tests to be made in paper or computer?

Answer:

This slider scale provided the answer to RQ1. In the following question, students were asked to select items that contributed to the rationale for their preference, thus providing data for RQ2. From now on we name that question the "rationale question". After being asked to make this selection (answering the rationale question), students were asked the same question with the same slider scale. This provided the data for RQ3.

#### 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The populations for Group A and B had a size of 92 and 21, respectively. For each group, the total number of responses was 35 (38%) and 16 (76%), respectively. We used those as the two samples: Group A and Group B.

Figure ?? shows the frequencies for the preferences from 1 (strong preference for paper-based tests) to 10 (strong preference for computer-based tests) before and after the rationale question. It is very clear that both groups prefer computer-based tests. Interestingly, the group of students who in fact completed computer-based tests are even more in favour of that type of tests.

After the rationale question, it is possible to observe a slight decrease in the highest preferences for computer-based tests. Table ?? presents the mode and median for all the students in Group A and Group B, before and after the rationale question and it makes more evident that only the students completing paper-based tests become slightly less critical of those tests after answering the rationale question. Possibly, this is due to increased awareness about the perceived relative disadvantages of computer-based tests that resulted from the pondering over the advantages of paper-based tests in the rationale question.

Table ?? and ?? additionally show that this change, although very weak, is more pronounced in students with previous programming experience even for the ones already completing computer-based tests.

Figure ?? shows the percentage of students in each group that selected each one of the items in the rationale question. The prefixes "C" and "P" identify alleged advantages of computer and paper based tests, respectively. Students could also add other reasons, but only two students, both from Group B (doing paper-based tests) used that possibility: one said that "with paper everything stays in the head"; this student was the strongest supporter of paper-based tests (having answered 1 both times) and had no previous programming experience; another student, this time a strong supporter of computer-based tests, added that "in the computer I can add variables I had forgotten to add before".

It is very clear that the advantages of computer-based tests are much more frequently pointed out. This is especially relevant as the question was written as "Check what are, in your opinion, the advantages of paper-based tests and computer-based tests". Hence, the students are much less willing to recognise the advantages of paper-based tests. Apparently, the preference for computer-based tests goes to the point of demotivating students to select the advantages of paper-based tests. In fact, even obvious advantages of paper-based tests like "P - in the paper there is no risk of a computer malfunction" were chosen by only 19% of Group A and 31% of Group B.

Interestingly, the preference for "copying code that it is possible to bring" to a computer-based test (in the context of an open book test) is arguably a disadvantage of computer-based tests, as students, especially weaker ones, tend to just copy paste some code and then try to solve the problem by trial and error. In simple problems they can even succeed without really understanding why or how the program really works. Finally, it is important to note that the significant difference in the sample sizes (group A and group B) and response rates are important limitations of this study. Besides larger and more similar group sizes, a more detailed characterisation of student background would be desirable. Yet, this may imply a non-anonymous questionnaire.

#### 5 CONCLUSION

The study allowed us to conclude that students in our sample have an overwhelming preference for computer-based tests, to the point that they tend to resist recognising the advantages of paper-based tests. Students also maintain to a great extent their preference even after going through a list of advantages of one type of testing over the other. We believe this strong preference for computer-based tests has a significant effect in students' motivation. In that sense, our study reinforces previous ones that pointed out the learning advantages of computer-based tests e.g. (?; ?).

As future work, we intend to ask third year students and also older students already in the work-place about their preferences regarding paper-based vs. computer-based tests. Also, it would be interesting to search for eventual correlations between performance in the tests and test style preferences. Finally, an interesting alternative approach would be to have all students experienced both test styles, in different order, before asking the preference.

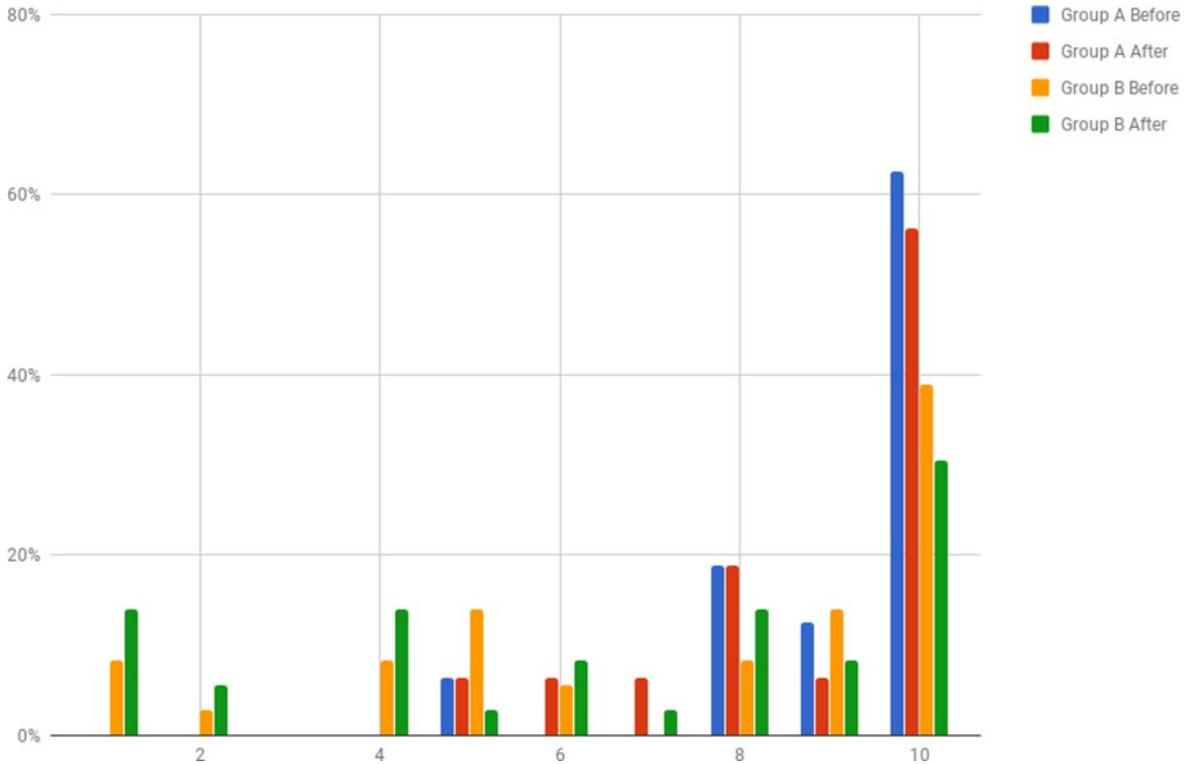


Figure 1: Percentage of chosen values in the scale 1 (strong preference for paper-based tests) to 10 (strong preference for computer-based tests).

Table 1: Expressed preferences for paper versus computer based tests, before and after choosing relative

| Group A (completed computer tests) |       |        |       | Group B (completed paper tests) |       |        |       |
|------------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Mode                               |       | Median |       | Mode                            |       | Median |       |
| Before                             | After | Before | After | Before                          | After | Before | After |
| 10                                 | 10    | 10     | 10    | 10                              | 10    | 9      | 8     |

advantages.

Table 2: Expressed preferences for paper versus computer based tests, before and after choosing relative advantages by students with previous programming experience.

| Group A (completed computer tests) |       |        |       | Group B (completed paper tests) |       |        |       |
|------------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Mode                               |       | Median |       | Mode                            |       | Median |       |
| Before                             | After | Before | After | Before                          | After | Before | After |
| 10                                 | 10    | 10     | 10    | 10                              | 10    | 9      | 8.5   |

Table 3: Expressed preferences for paper versus computer based tests, before and after choosing relative advantages by students without previous programming experience.

| Group A (completed computer tests) |       |        |       | Group B (completed paper tests) |       |        |       |
|------------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|---------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Mode                               |       | Median |       | Mode                            |       | Median |       |
| Before                             | After | Before | After | Before                          | After | Before | After |
| 10                                 | 8     | 9.5    | 8     | 10                              | 10    | 8      | 7     |

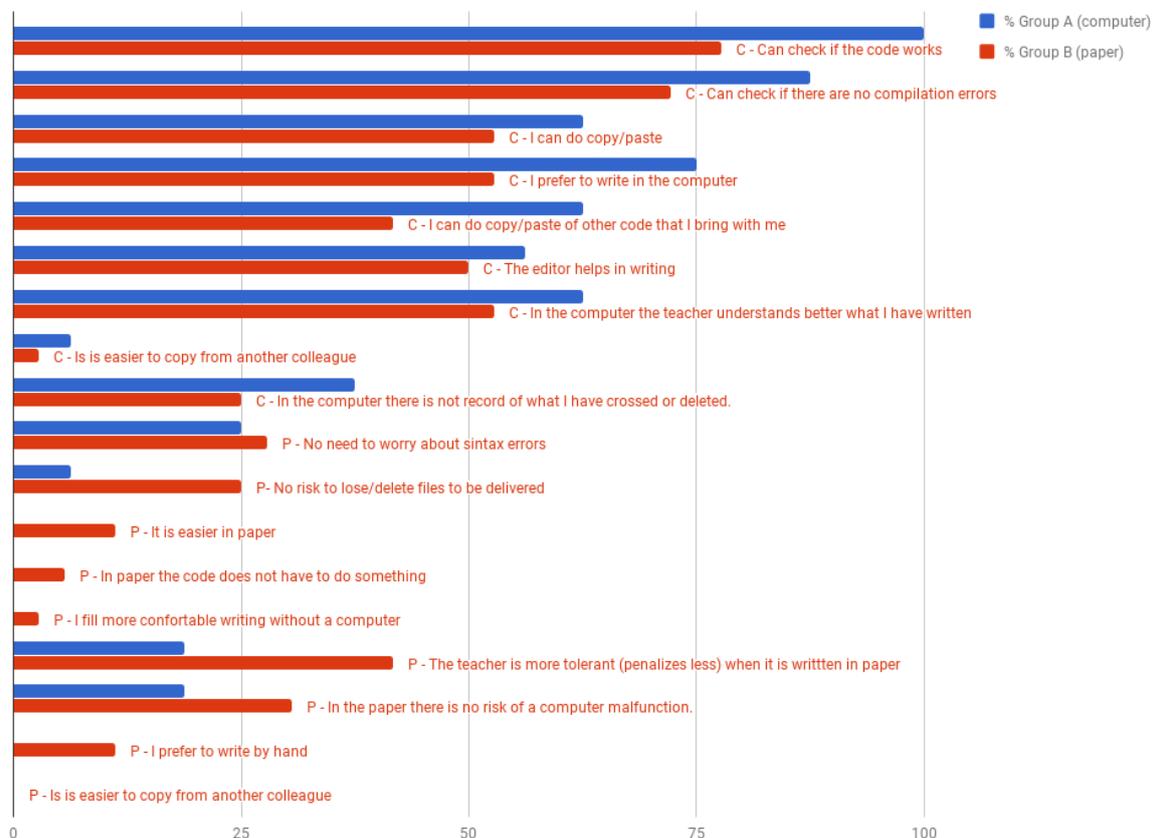


Figure 2: Percentage chosen for each item in the rationale question.

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