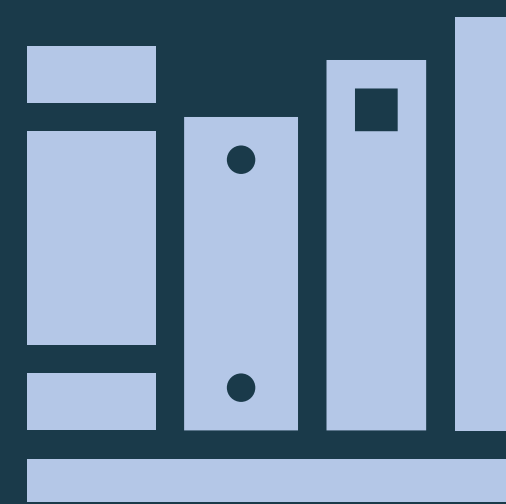




Declaring Preparedness: A Low-Stakes Intervention to Drive Reading Completion and Class Engagement



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THE PROBLEM

Reading non-compliance is a near-universal challenge in university courses — studies consistently find that only 20–30% of students complete assigned readings on any given day (Burchfield & Sappington 2012). The problem is worsening, compounded by the proliferation of GenAI summarising tools that provide a low-effort alternative to engaging directly with assigned texts.

THE INTERVENTION

At the start of each seminar, students declared their reading preparedness via a Google Form using a 6-point Likert scale:

- 0 — Did not attempt
- 1 — Less than half read
- 2 — More than half read
- 3 — Completed, gaps in comprehension
- 4 — Completed, good comprehension
- 5 — Completed, full confidence

Declarations were graded at 10% of the final grade. Three random verification checks were conducted each semester. Students also received a cognitive reading map to support their engagement with assigned texts.

STUDY CONTEXT

Two social science seminar courses in AY2025-26 Sem 1:

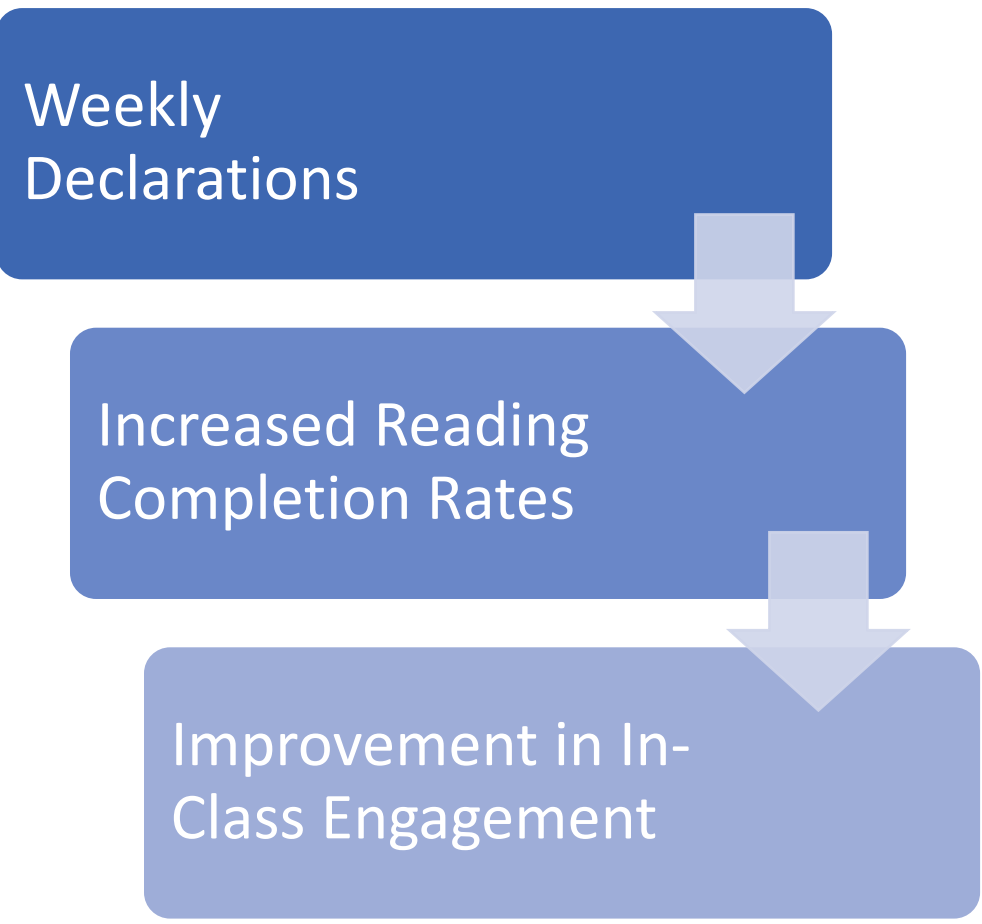
- Course A: Comparative Politics (n=34, 325 observations)
- Course B: Research Methods (n=20, 188 observations)

Pre-treatment data drawn from two prior iterations of Course A and one prior iteration of Course B.

THEORETICAL BASIS

The intervention draws on metacognitive theory. Flavell (2004) describes how self-appraisal generates affective "metacognitive experiences" — pride, discomfort — that prompt behavioural adjustment. Paris & Winograd (1990) further distinguish self-appraisal from self-management: the former activates the latter. The declaration functions as a weekly self-appraisal prompt, designed to activate students' self-management of their reading behaviour.

HYPOTHESISED CAUSAL CHAIN

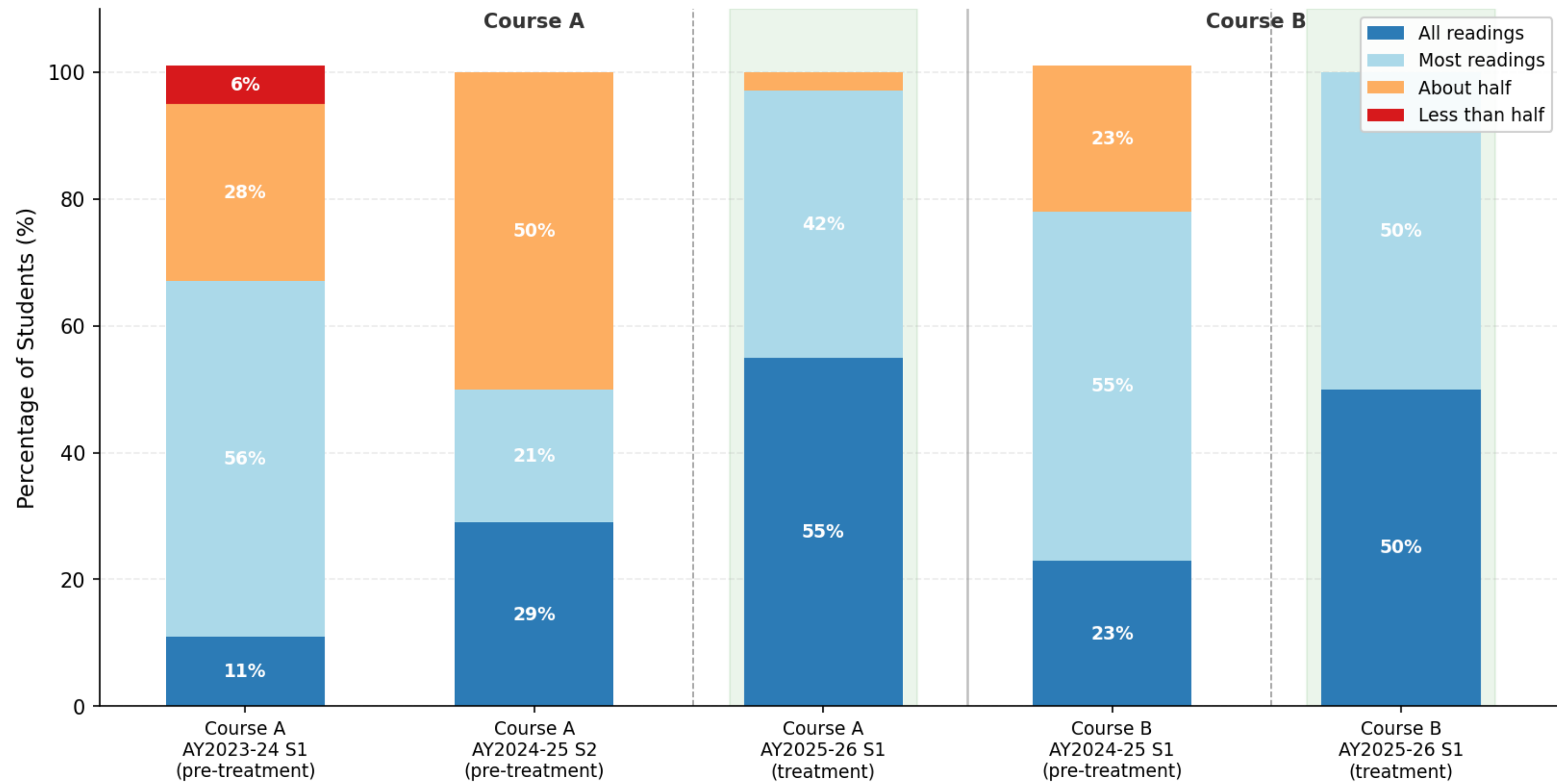


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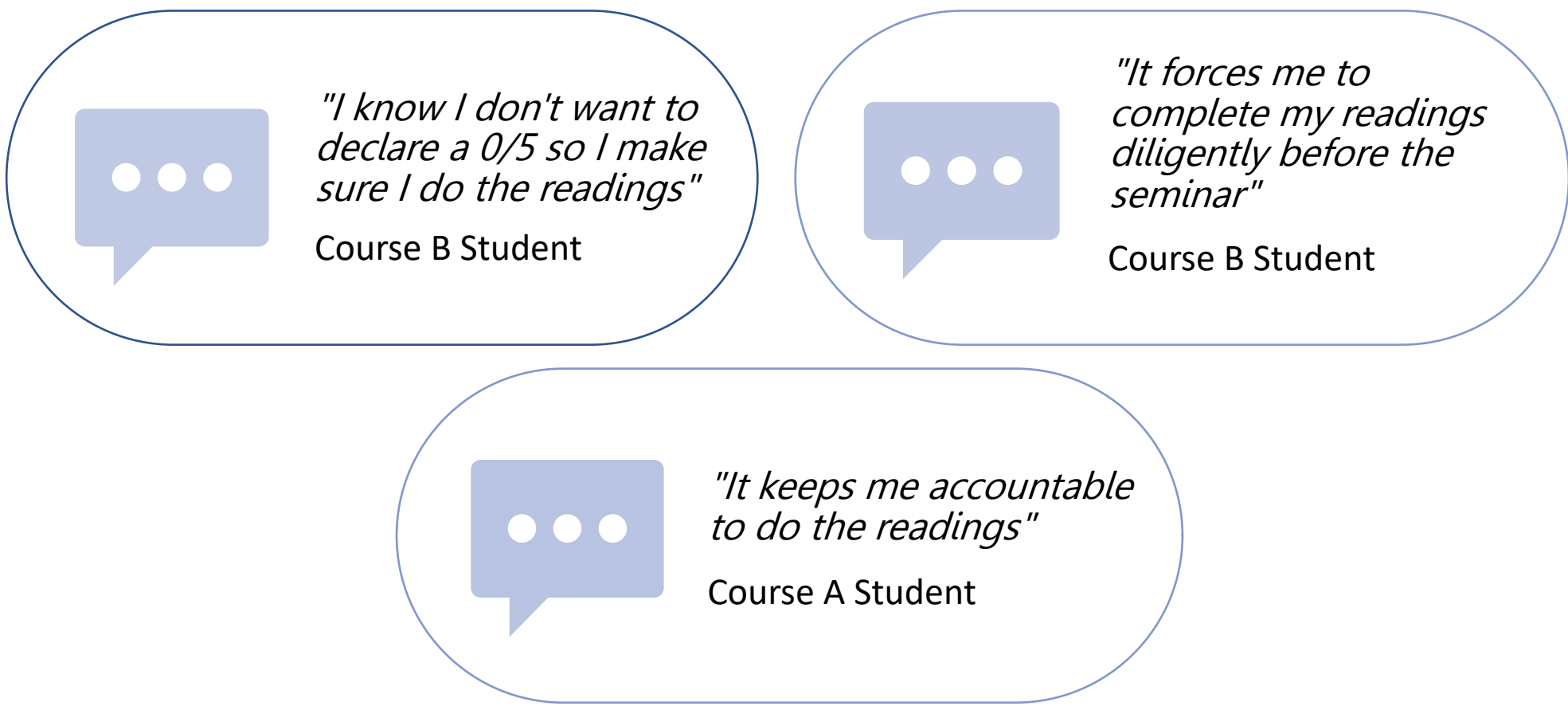
FINDING 1: READING COMPLETION RATES

Mid-semester survey data across pre-treatment and treatment iterations shows a clear improvement in reading completion rates in both courses. Notably, Course A reversed a worsening downward trend despite having its largest enrolment (n=34) in the treatment semester.



FINDING 2: CAUSAL MECHANISM

Qualitative feedback from the mid-semester survey suggests the primary driver of improved compliance was the act of declaration itself rather than the grade incentive — consistent with the metacognitive self-appraisal mechanism theorized previously.



FIDELITY OF DECLARATIONS

The declaration data is broadly reliable. Anonymous mid-semester survey responses showed near-perfect alignment with graded declaration scores across both courses:

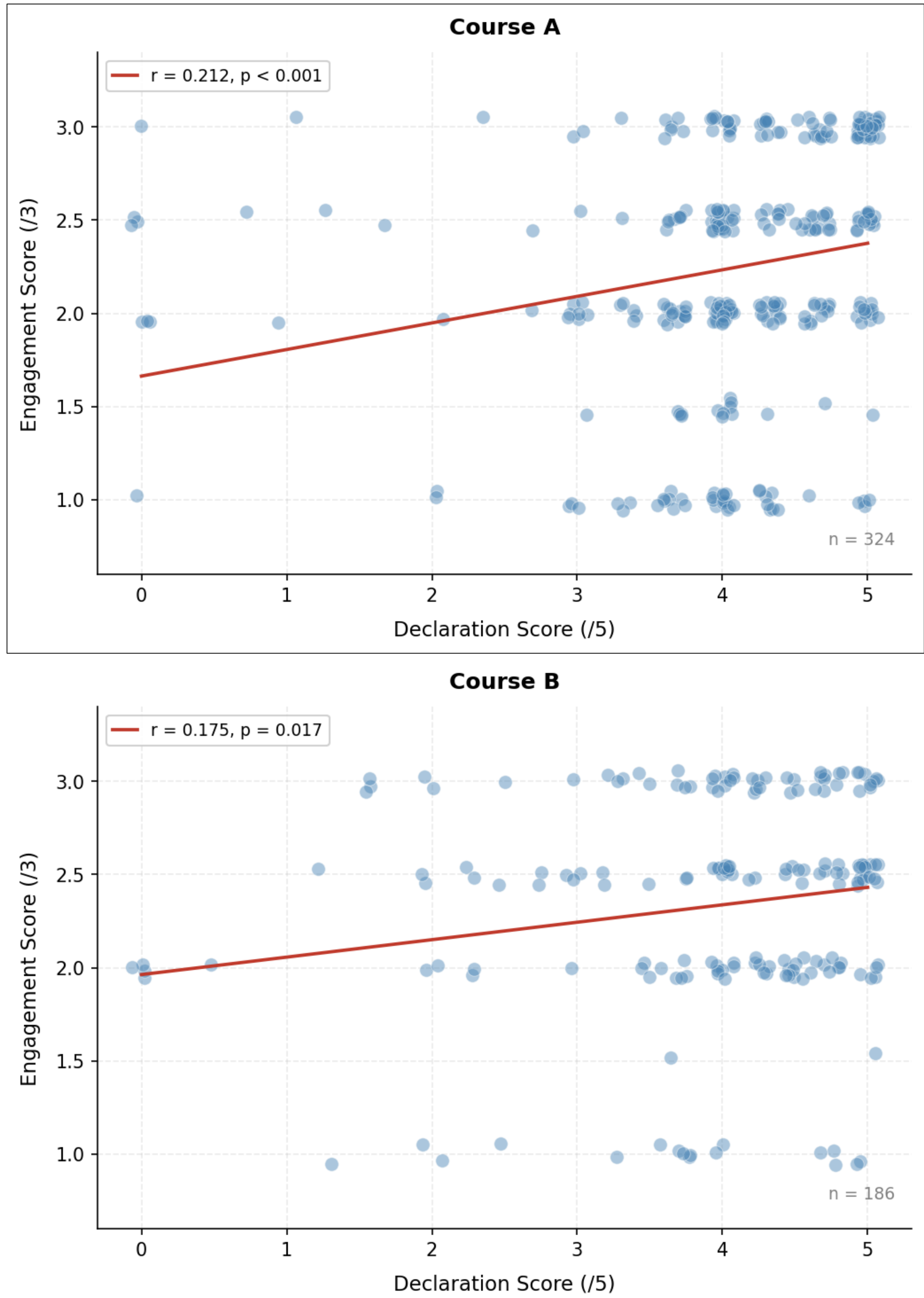
- Course A: 97% reported completing all/most (survey) vs 97% averaging ≥ 3 (declarations)
- Course B: 100% reported completing all/most (survey) vs 90% averaging ≥ 3 (declarations)

Students across both courses confirmed they declared honestly, with most citing personal integrity rather than fear of detection as their reason.

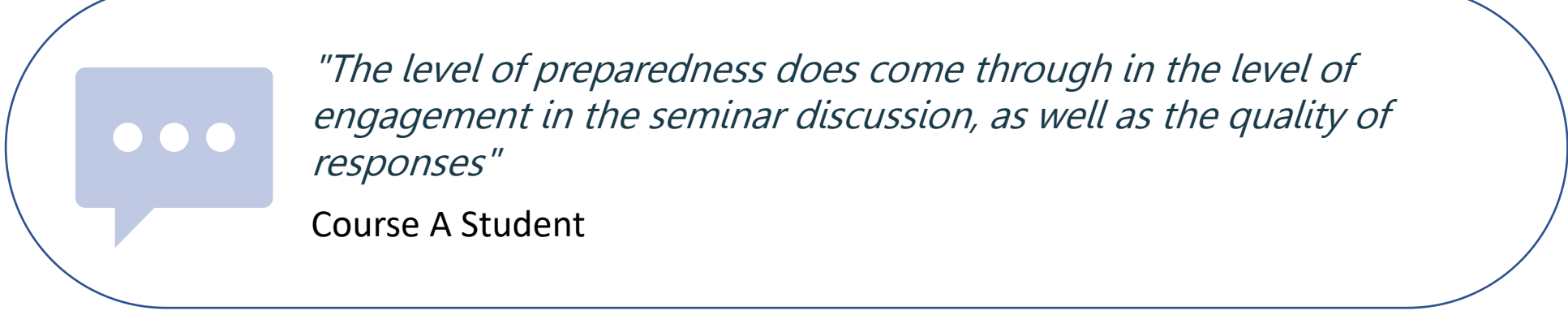
FINDING 3: IN-CLASS ENGAGEMENT

Instructor observation across both courses showed a marked reduction in time spent covering foundational knowledge at the start of discussions, enabling more advanced comparative and analytical discussion.

To test this quantitatively, weekly declaration scores were mapped against weekly engagement scores (0.5–3 scale based on quality of contribution to in-class discussion). A statistically significant positive relationship was found in both courses:



The modest R^2 (3–5%) is unsurprising: verbal participation is shaped by many factors beyond reading preparation — class size, personality, discussion topic, and instructor facilitation (Goyette 2025).



CONCLUSION

This study suggests that a low-stakes, low-labour self-declaration exercise can meaningfully improve reading compliance rates, and that the mechanism driving this improvement is less the grade incentive than the metacognitive act of declaration itself. That students described reading in order to be able to declare honestly — rather than to obtain a higher grade — points toward the pedagogical potential of self-assessment instruments that operate through internal self-regulation rather than external enforcement.