

Course Evaluation Summary for HIS203: Theories, Methods, and Historical Sources

The survey I produced is presented in the Appendix, along with tables showing all of the results. It contained some general questions about the course and its teaching followed by a series of questions about the auto/biographical readings themselves. Most were structured on a 1-5 scale, though there was also ample scope for students to provide their own qualitative input. Pleasingly, the survey had a good uptake. Almost one-third of students who passed the final exam took part – a much better uptake than previous surveys I have conducted, and especially so given the length of this particular one.

Student evaluations of HIS203 suggest that they found the course to be intellectually rich, pedagogically engaging, and effective in introducing students to the complexities of historical theory and method. Across both quantitative ratings and qualitative comments, students consistently emphasized that the course succeeded in making methodological concepts accessible by grounding them in concrete examples, biographical narratives, and clear thematic structures.

Students described HIS203 as a course that exceeded expectations in terms of engagement and clarity. The lectures were repeatedly singled out as the most impactful component of the learning experience. Many students praised the lecturers' ability to make abstract or traditionally "dry" material feel lively and relevant. One student wrote that the lecturer "kept me very engaged," while another noted that even a roommate from another discipline "ended up joining me for the rest of the semester as she enjoyed [the lectures] so much more than her own." These comments reflect a broader pattern: students felt that the course was thoughtfully designed and delivered with enthusiasm and pedagogical care.

The thematic structure of the course was also appreciated. Students found that organizing lectures around specific methodological or historiographical themes helped them understand how different approaches relate to one another. Several noted that the course offered a rare opportunity to see how historians actually work, rather than simply reading about abstract methodological debates. This is thoroughly in line with the pedagogic approach I have adopted.

One of the most distinctive features of HIS203 is its use of biographical and autobiographical texts to illuminate historical methods (this was explicitly explored in the survey). Student responses indicate that this pedagogical choice was highly effective. Many students reported that these readings helped them understand how historians make decisions, adapt their methods, and navigate the challenges of archival research.

A representative comment stated:

"Tying these concepts to specific case examples makes it a lot easier to grasp, and tying it to a specific person makes it more interesting to follow."

Another student wrote:

“It made the topics feel more tangible.”

Students frequently mentioned *A Spy in the Archives* by Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Caro’s reflections as particularly engaging. These texts were praised for offering vivid insights into the lived experience of historical research: how archives function, how access is negotiated, and how methodological choices emerge from practical constraints. One student noted that these readings “helped me to understand what historians go through in their research projects.”

Quantitative data strongly supports these impressions. Across all eleven statements in Section 1 (“Perceived Usefulness”), students overwhelmingly agreed or strongly agreed that biographical readings:

- made methods more concrete
- clarified how historians respond to archival challenges
- helped them remember methodological concepts
- made abstract discussions easier to follow
- provided insight into the research process as a lived experience

This pattern suggests that the biographical component is not merely supplementary but central to the course’s pedagogical success.

However, some students acknowledged difficulty completing all assigned biographies due to reading load. A few suggested integrating these texts more directly into assignments to ensure deeper engagement. One student wrote:

“Most students don’t care to read these biographies... Perhaps one of the assignments should be to use a story and analyse it.”

This feedback indicates that while the genre is appreciated, its workload implications should be considered in future course planning.

Teaching

The lectures were consistently rated as highly effective. Students described them as clear, engaging, and well-structured. Many appreciated the lecturers' ability to connect theoretical discussions to concrete examples, including personal research experiences shared by guest lecturers. One student noted that hearing professors describe their own methods "showed me that there truly are many different ways to work on historical research."

Students also valued the thematic coherence of the lectures. However, a few commented that sessions covering two distinct themes could feel fragmented, making it harder to follow the overarching narrative. This suggests that future iterations might benefit from either reducing the number of themes per session or providing clearer transitions between them.

A recurring suggestion was the introduction of smaller discussion groups or seminars. Several students expressed a desire for more opportunities to talk through concepts in a low-pressure environment, noting that large lecture settings can inhibit participation. As one student observed, "Norwegians laughing audibly is also theoretical," highlighting cultural barriers to open discussion in large groups.

Readings, Assignments, and Workload

Students generally found the reading list valuable and relevant, though opinions varied regarding the density of certain texts. Some described parts of the literature as "dry" or overly long, which made it difficult to complete all readings on time. One student wrote that "the very heavy dry books led many of us... to struggle with reading the literature in time for each forelesning."

Despite this, many students appreciated the diversity of readings and the way they complemented the lectures. Several noted that the obligatory assignments were particularly helpful in synthesizing material and encouraging deeper engagement. These assignments were described as demanding but meaningful, with one student commenting that they "made me have to reflect on the topics we were supposed to learn."

Workload was generally rated as "about right," though a few students felt that the two 1500-word assignments were heavy relative to other courses. This suggests that while the workload is manageable for most, some students may benefit from clearer guidance on pacing or expectations.

Conceptual Clarity and Course Structure

While students praised the course's thematic organization, a few expressed a desire for clearer definitions of key concepts such as theory, narrative, and comparison. One student noted that these concepts "remained somewhat ambiguous" despite being addressed in the readings. This feedback suggests that future iterations might benefit from dedicating more time to defining and revisiting foundational terms, perhaps through short conceptual overviews or dedicated seminar discussions.

Students also commented on the relationship between the thematic structure of the course and the format of the exam. A few felt that the broad thematic approach made it challenging to prepare for an exam that required synthesizing material across multiple themes. This suggests that aligning exam structure more closely with the course's thematic organization (or providing clearer guidance on how to prepare) could improve student confidence.

Student Engagement and Participation

Participation levels varied, with some students actively engaging in discussions and others feeling hesitant in large lecture settings. Several students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on historical methods through assignments and readings, even if they did not always participate verbally in class. One student noted that "working on the obligatory assignments really made me have to reflect on the topics," indicating that written work served as an important avenue for engagement.

A few students suggested that incorporating more interactive elements, such as small-group discussions or structured peer activities, could help ensure that all students have opportunities to process and articulate their understanding.

Overall Assessment and Recommendations

Taken together, student feedback indicates that HIS203 is a highly successful course that effectively balances theoretical rigor with practical insight. The combination of engaging lectures, thoughtfully selected readings, and reflective assignments provides students with a nuanced understanding of historical methods as lived, adaptive practices.

To build on this strong foundation, the following refinements may be considered:

- Integrate biographical readings more directly into assignments to encourage consistent engagement.
- Provide clearer definitions of key methodological concepts early in the course.
- Consider adding small-group seminars or discussion sessions to support participation.
- Review the density of certain readings to ensure that workload remains manageable.
- Align exam structure more closely with thematic organization, or provide clearer guidance on expectations.

Overall, students expressed deep appreciation for the course and its teaching. Many described it as one of the most engaging and illuminating experiences in their studies, and several noted that it helped them see historical research in a new and more concrete way.

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Survey: HIS203 *Theories, Methods and Historical Sources*

Part I: General Questions

Instructions:

Please indicate your response to the following statements using the scale below.

Scale:

1 = Very low / Strongly disagree

2 = Low / Disagree

3 = Moderate / Neither agree nor disagree

4 = High / Agree

5 = Very high / Strongly agree

1. Student participation

To what extent did you actively participate in the learning activities of this course (e.g., attending sessions, completing readings, contributing to discussions)?

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. Understanding of course themes

To what extent did the course contribute to your understanding of historical theories, methods, or approaches?

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. Teaching and learning activities

To what extent did the teaching activities (e.g., lectures, seminars, discussions) support your learning?

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. Work with historical sources

To what extent did the readings and assignments help you engage with and reflect on historical sources?

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. Workload and expectations

How appropriate was the overall workload of the course in relation to the learning outcomes?

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

Open-ended question

6. Comments and suggestions

What aspects of the course contributed most to your learning, and what suggestions do you have for improvement?

Part II: Use of Historians' Biographies as Course Readings

The syllabus for HIS203 contains a number of set readings that might be described as “biographical” or “autobiographical”. These include:

- Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*
- Sheila Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia*
- JH Elliot, *History in the Making*
- Robert Caro, ‘The Art of Biography’. Interview

In addition, the lecture materials contained several auto/biographical examples, both from the lecturers themselves, and in the form of citations of other historians.

This survey asks about your experience with historians' autobiographies, biographies, or long-form interviews in this course. Please answer honestly. Your responses will not affect your grade!

If you do not know how to answer any individual question, or did not wish to, please do not feel obliged. You may leave it blank.

Section 1: Perceived Usefulness

Please mark with **X** to indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1. Reading historians' autobiographies or biographies helped me understand how historians actually do research.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

2. These readings made historical methods feel more concrete and understandable.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

3. Biographical readings helped me see methods as processes rather than fixed steps.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

4. I found it easier to grasp methodological ideas when they were connected to a specific historian's experiences.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

5. These readings helped me understand the kinds of decisions historians make during research.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

6. Biographical readings clarified how historians respond to problems such as limited sources or archival gaps.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

7. I understood historical methods better after reading about a historian's research journey.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

8. These readings helped me remember methodological concepts more clearly.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

9. Biographical readings made abstract discussions of method easier to follow.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

10. Overall, biographies and autobiographies were a useful component of this course.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

11. I would like to see more biographies and autobiographies on the course reading list.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

Section 2: Comparison with Other Readings

11. Compared to methodological textbooks or essays, biographical readings were:

☐ Much less useful ☐ Somewhat less useful ☐ About the same ☐ Somewhat more useful ☐ Much more useful

12. Compared to research articles or monographs, biographical readings were:

☐ Much less useful ☐ Somewhat less useful ☐ About the same ☐ Somewhat more useful ☐ Much more useful

Section 3: How Biographies Helped

Which of the following did biographical readings help you with? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Understanding why a historian chose a particular method
- ☐ Seeing how methods change during research
- ☐ Understanding challenges historians face when working with sources
- ☐ Connecting methods to real research situations
- ☐ Remembering methodological concepts
- ☐ Feeling more confident discussing methods
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Other (please describe)

Section 4: Open-Ended Questions

13. In what ways, if any, did reading historians' biographies or autobiographies help you understand historical methods?

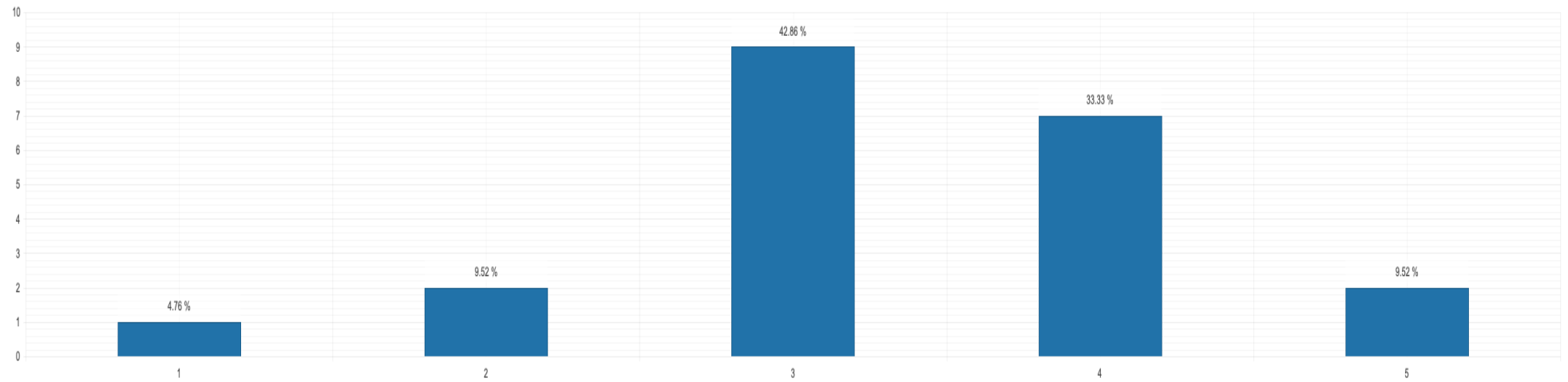
14. Was there a specific biography, autobiography, or interview that stood out to you as especially helpful? Why?

15. Were there any ways in which biographical readings were not helpful for learning methods?

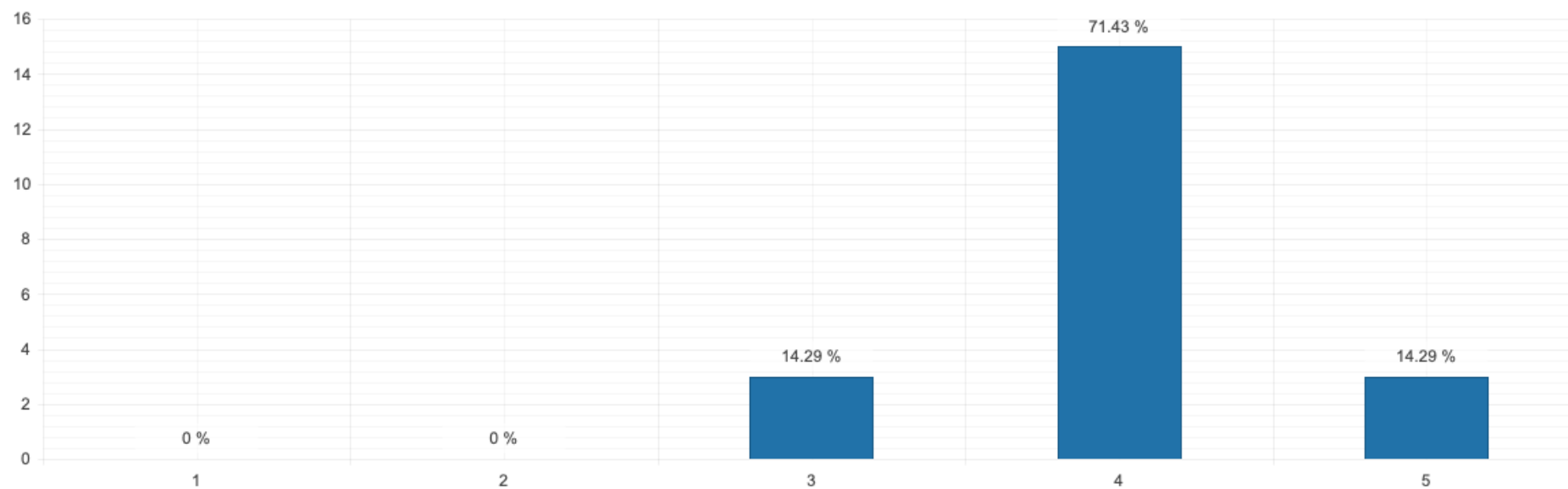
Finally, is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX 2: RESULTS

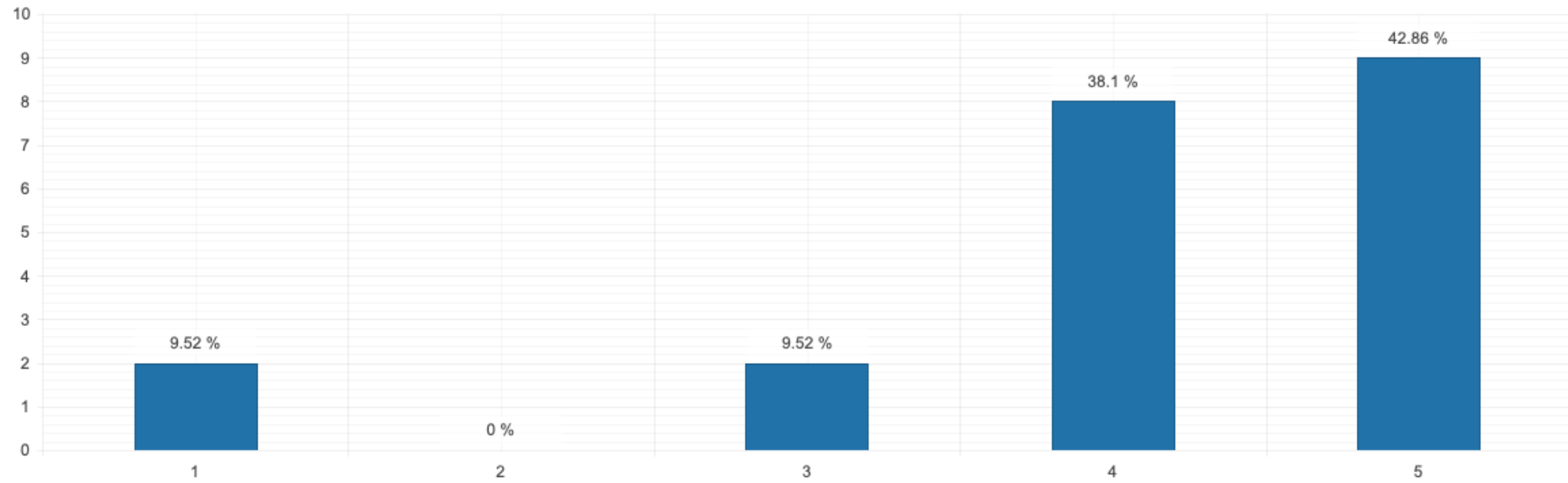
1. Student participation To what extent did you actively participate in the learning activities of this course (e.g., attending sessions, completing readings, contributing to discussions)? Copy



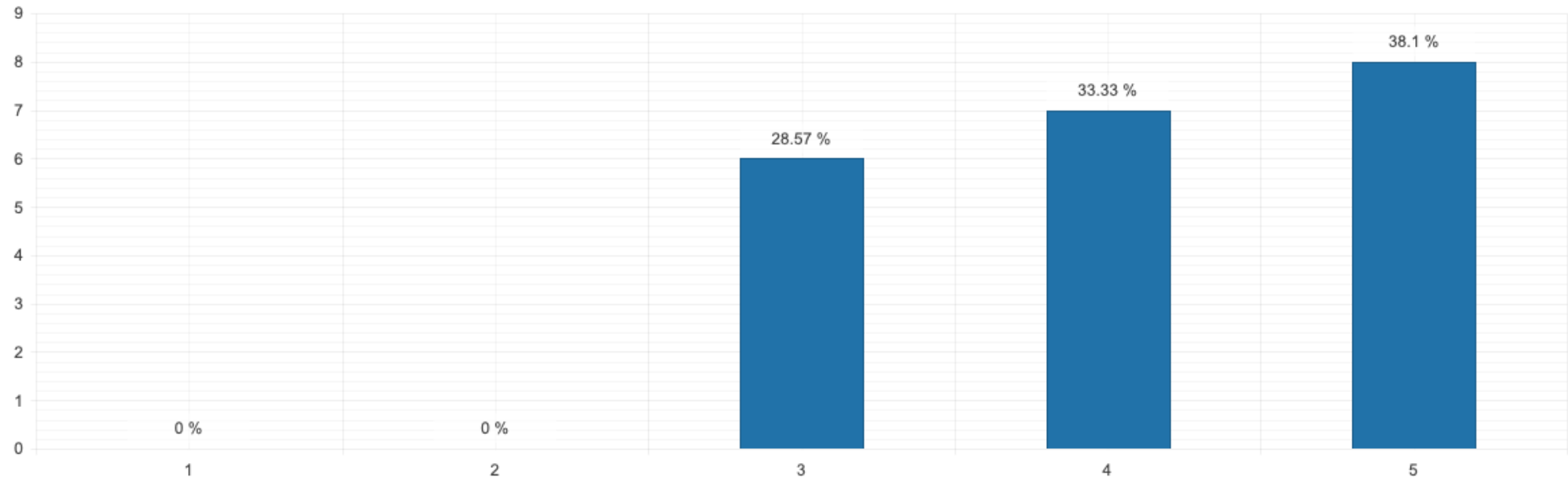
2. Understanding of course themes To what extent did the course contribute to your understanding of historical theories, methods, or approaches?



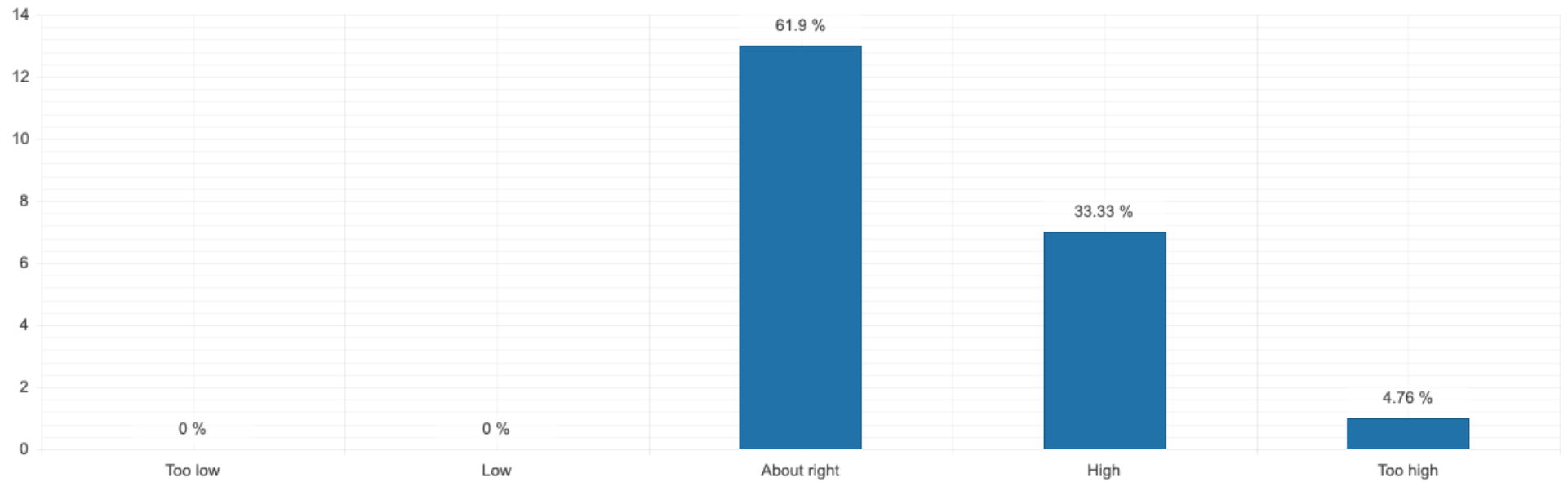
3. Teaching and learning activities To what extent did the teaching activities (e.g., lectures, seminars, discussions) support your learning?



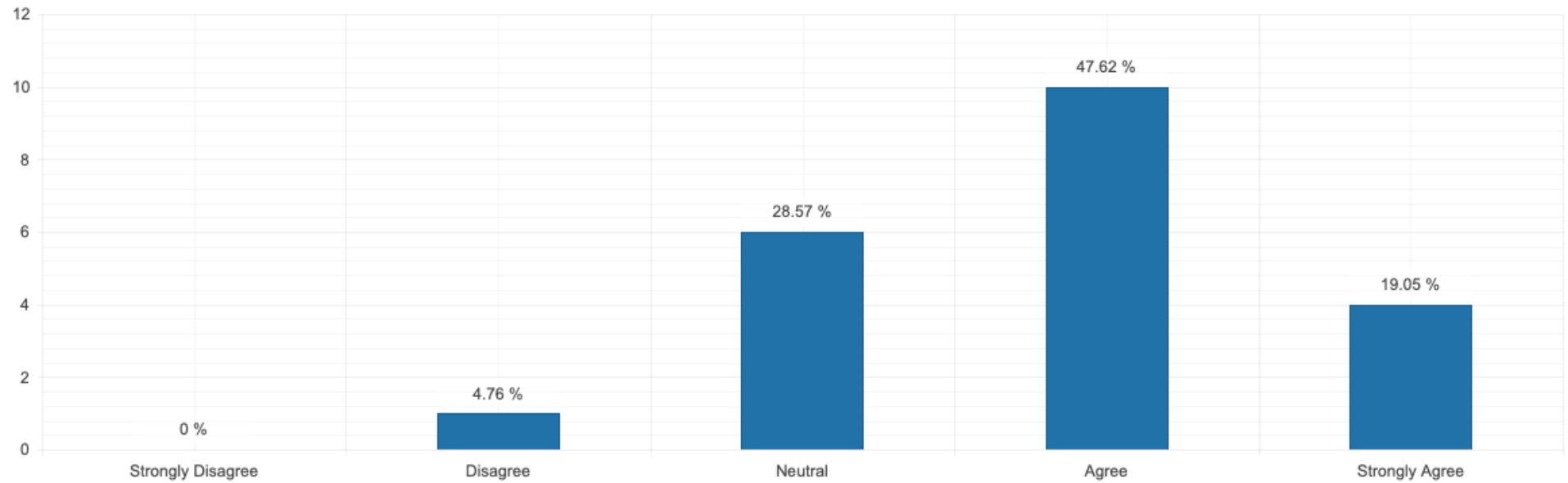
4. Work with historical sources To what extent did the readings and assignments help you engage with and reflect on historical sources?



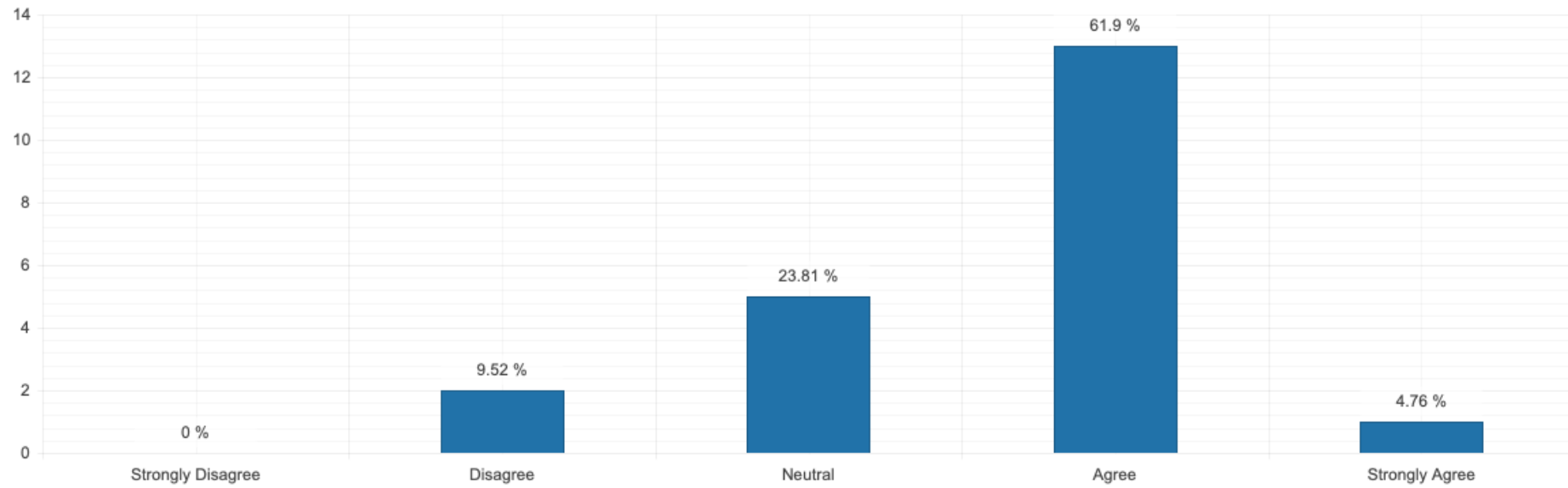
5. Workload and expectations How appropriate was the overall workload of the course in relation to the learning outcomes?



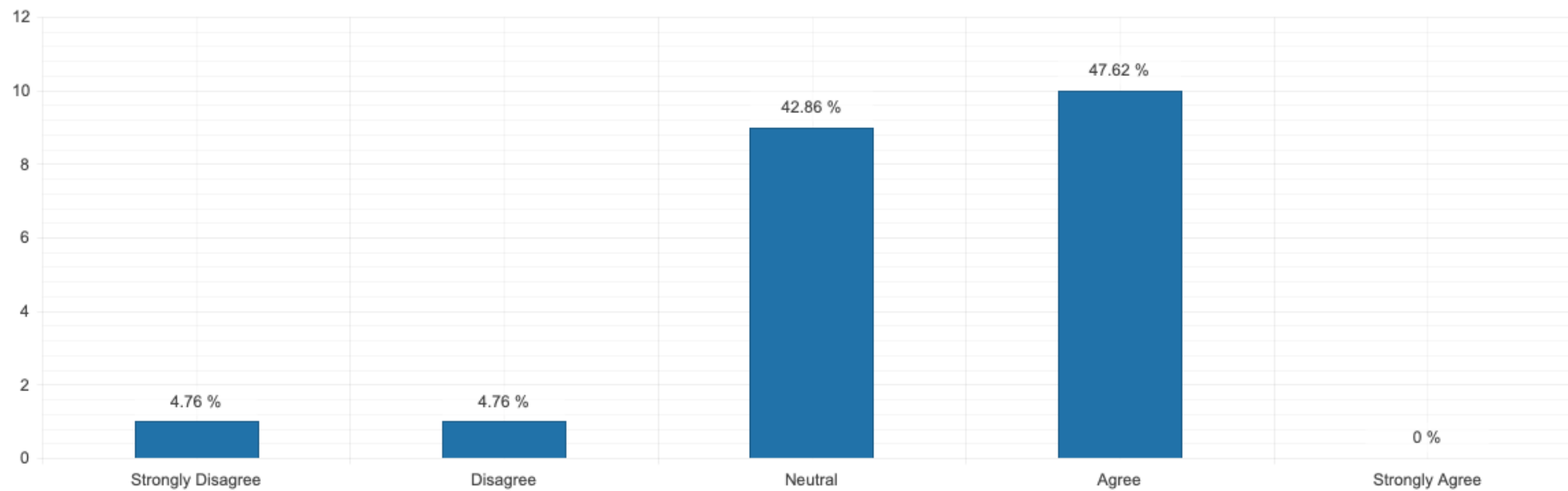
1. Reading historians' autobiographies or biographies helped me understand how historians actually do research.



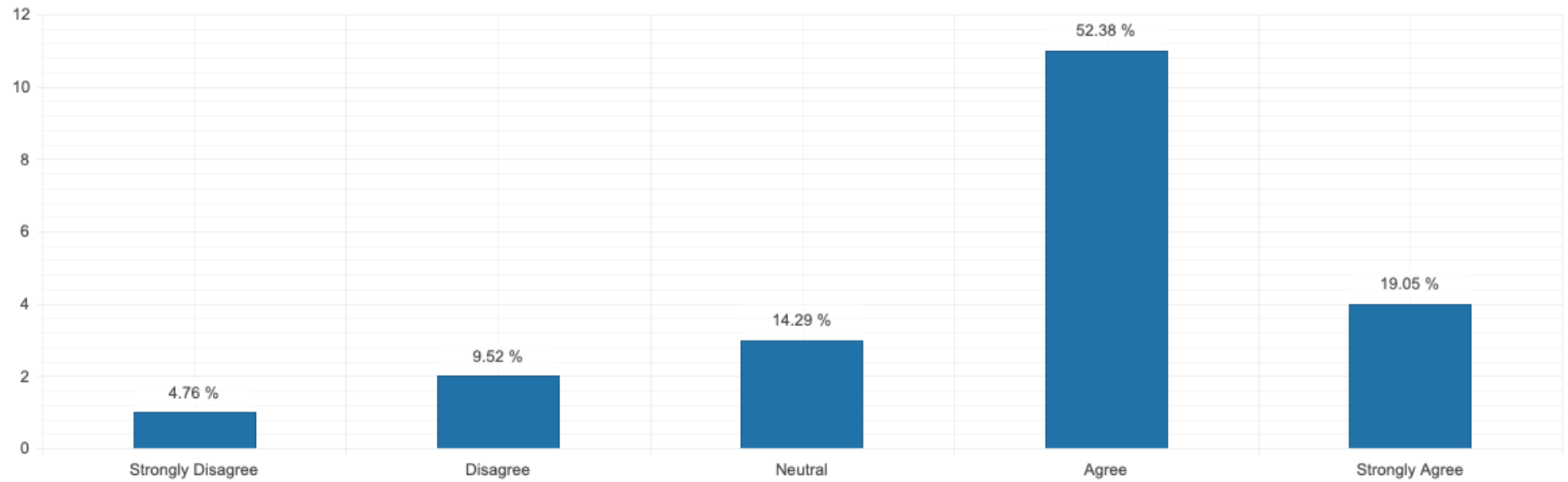
2. These readings made historical methods feel more concrete and understandable.



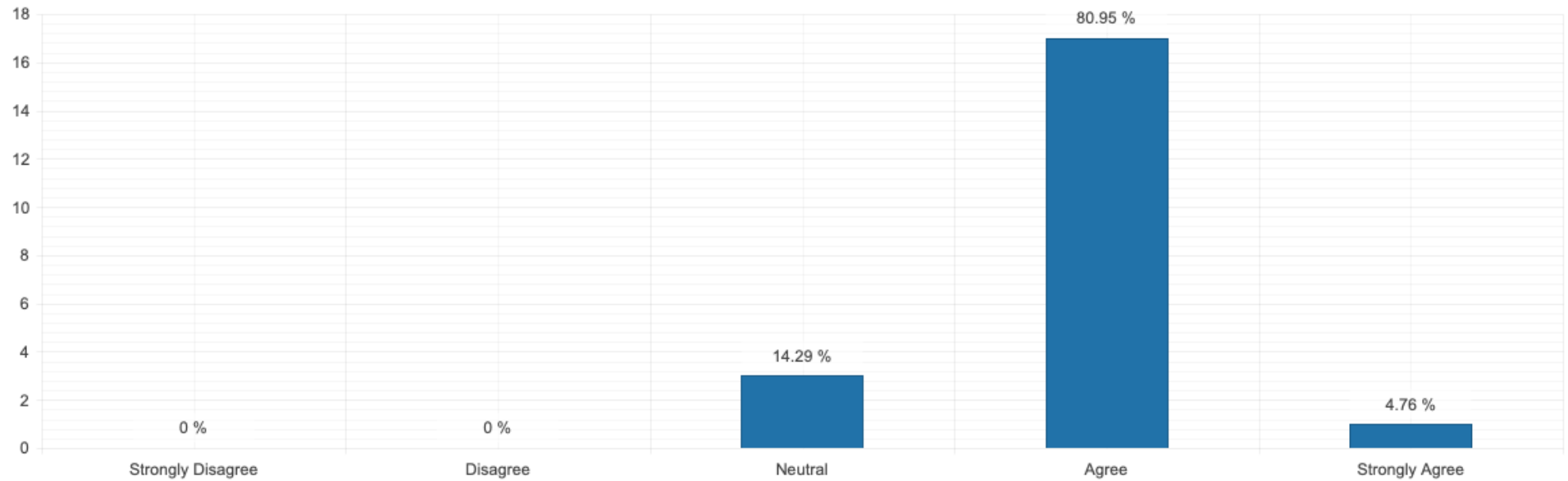
3. Biographical readings helped me see methods as processes rather than fixed steps.



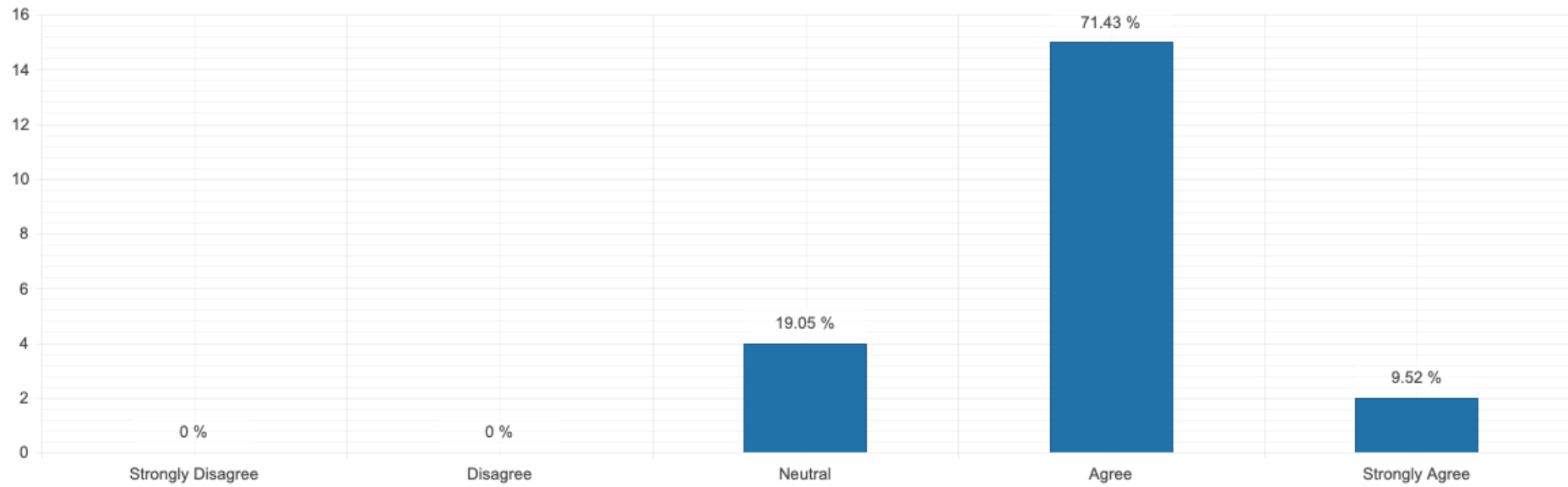
4. I found it easier to grasp methodological ideas when they were connected to a specific historian's experiences.



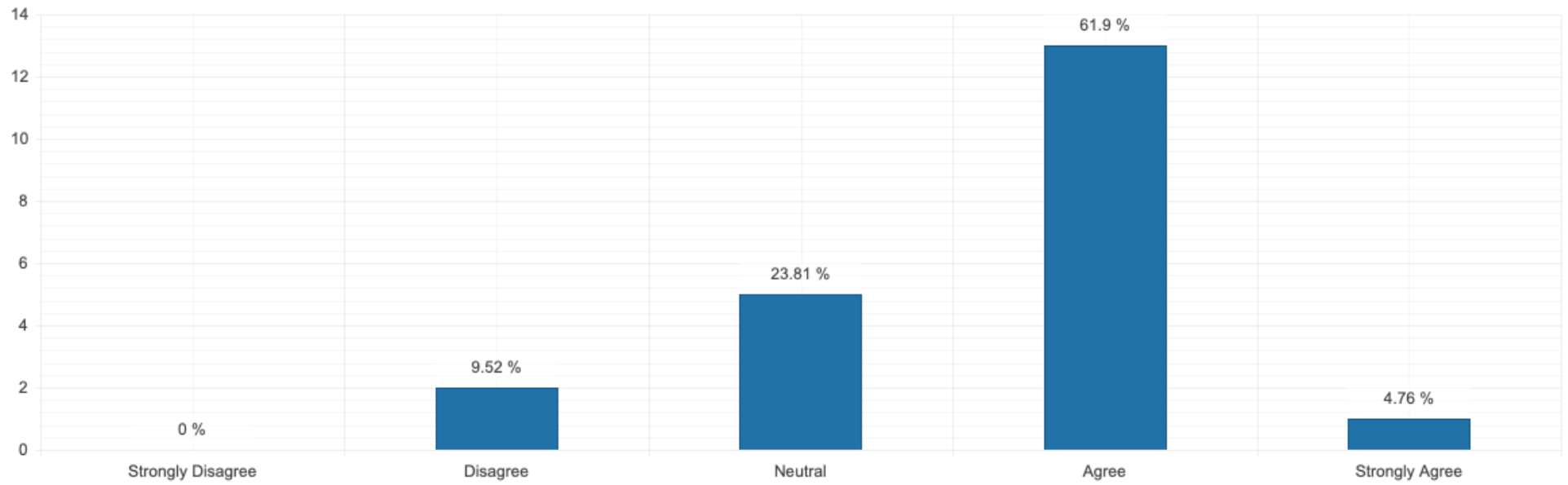
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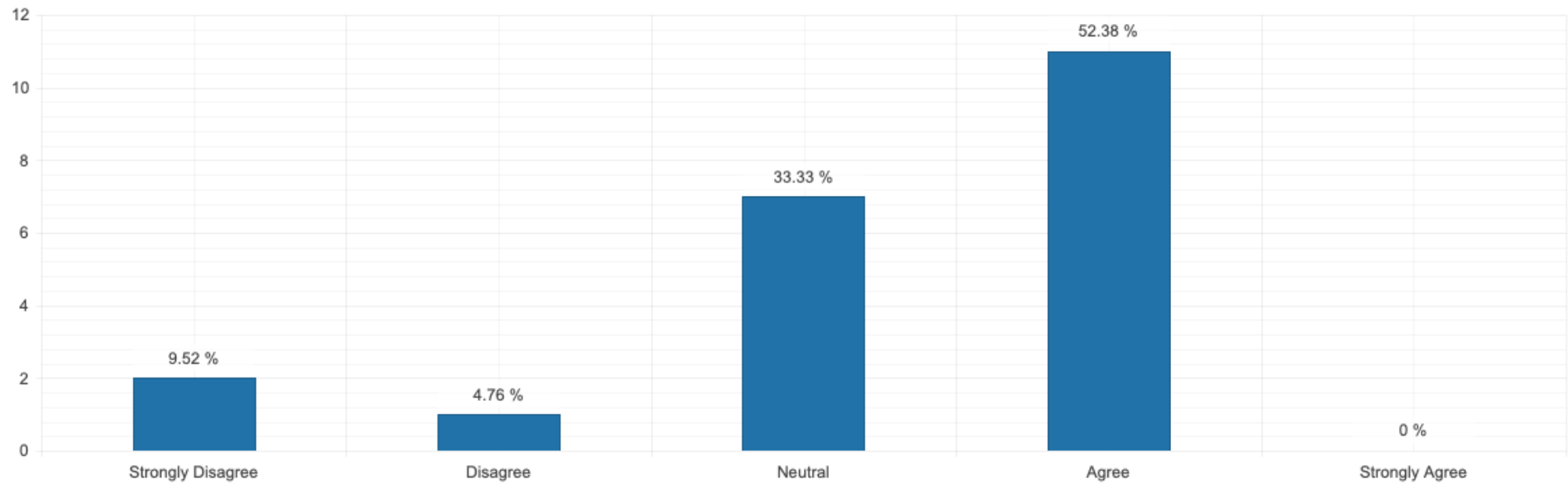
6. Biographical readings clarified how historians respond to problems such as limited sources or archival gaps.



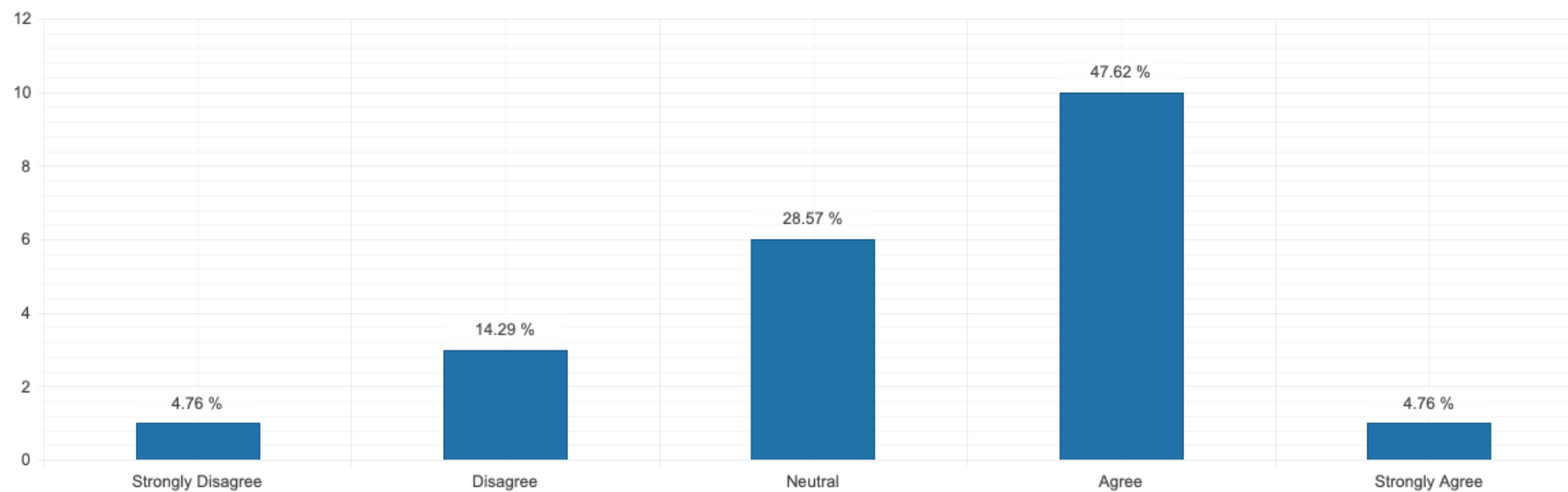
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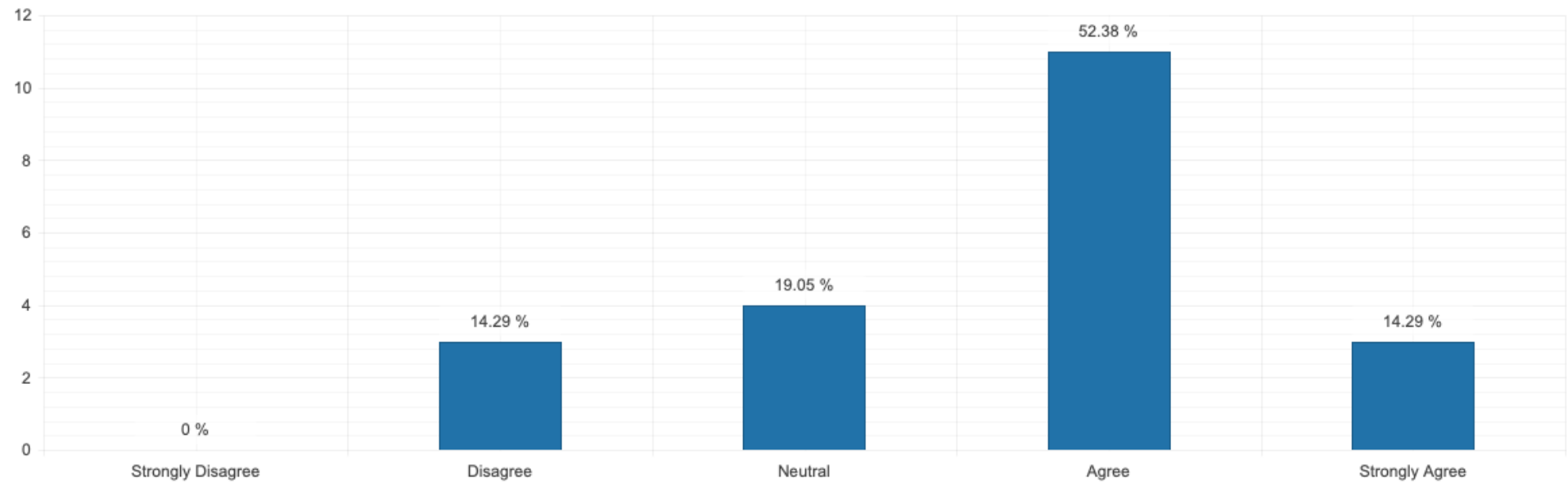
8. These readings helped me remember methodological concepts more clearly.



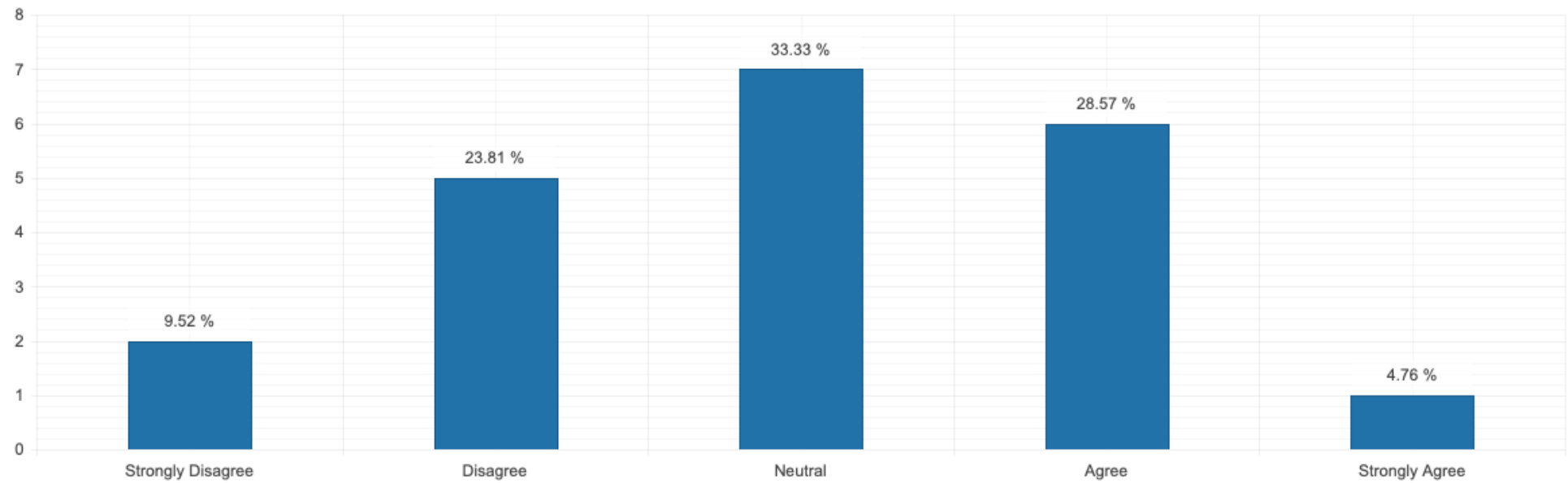
9. Biographical readings made abstract discussions of method easier to follow.

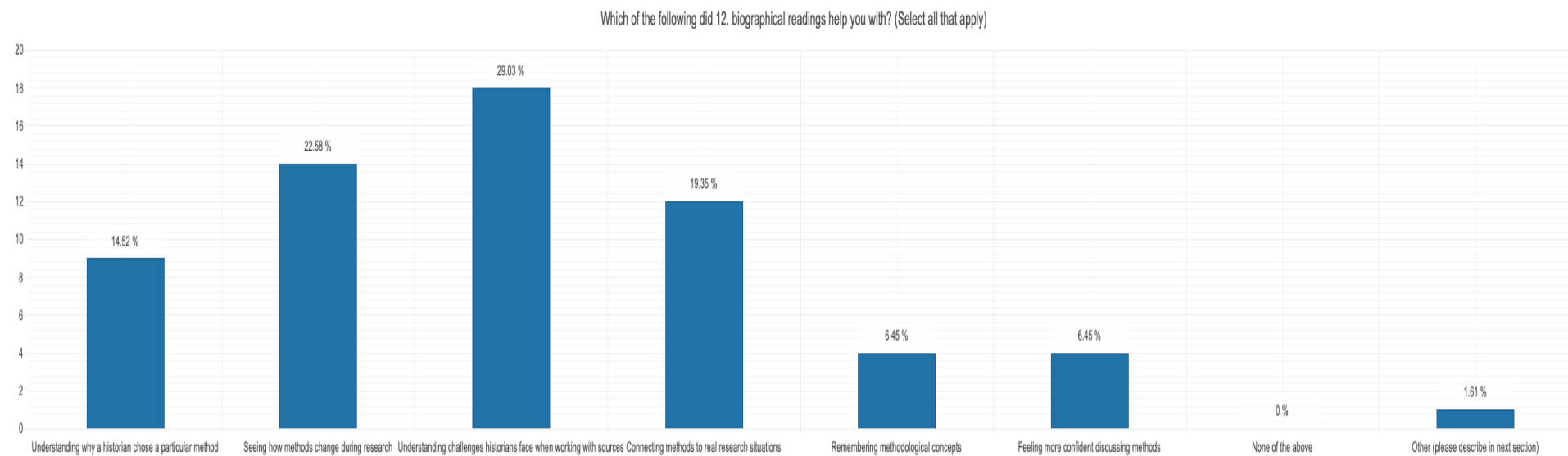


10. Overall, biographies and autobiographies were a useful component of this course.



11. I would like to see more biographies and autobiographies on the course reading list.





6. Comments and suggestions

What aspects of the course contributed most to your learning, and what suggestions do you have for improvement?

I thought the themes of the lectures were very interesting, and your fantastic rhetorical ability and humorous approach kept me very engaged. It is not your fault that norwegians laughing audibly is also theoretical, and that janteloven still has a death grip on our urge to share our thoughts. I particularly enjoyed the case examples included, and i have purchased several of the books you recommended in regards to them. I thought the readings were interesting, and an appropriate amount, although I did not complete them all due to taking other courses. The only one I was frustrated by was the book Å gripe fortida, as I felt that as a "textbook" it was lacked a more "concrete/clear" answer to most of my questions.. although I realise that a lack of clarity was the point in the bigger picture.

Jeg likte Marcus forelesninger veldig godt, engasjert og forklarer på en god måte. Likte også klimahistorie, men noen av de andre temaene når vi hadde 2 forelesninger delt i 2 temaer var det lett å falle av å ikke forstå helt. Forsto ikke helt meningen med alle små teamene.

The assignments helped a lot and that each lecture had a thematic theme. The exam was broad which is good for an exam, but i felt that since the course was thematic and also the assignments, it was a bit difficult. Maybe have fewer specific lectures about themes and more broad understanding of sources? Or change the exam to a bit more thematic approach perhaps?

The lectures,

Learned most from lectures, found some of the reading to be a little irrelevant

Å lese pensum var det mest lærerike, men også å arbeide med de obligatorisk oppgavene. Selv om jeg synes 2 oppgaver på 1500 ord er litt mye. Tar vekk mye tid fra andre fag.

While I think the lectures well thorough and well made and the lecturers were all great, I did not find much use for the powerpoint slides or my own notes when the exam came. The reading list was more useful in this regard, but that might also be in part due to the at-home nature of the exam which required digging deeper into sources.

What i really liked was to reflect how different historians can be, and how different fields needs different methods.

I think the obligatory assignments were of great use and it made the course very enjoyable and interesting. The lectures were also quite interesting, even if I couldn't attend all of them.

the aspects that brought me to learning alot was reading trough simple explanations of everything. Reading simple direct and easy articles and books was effective. when it came to the very dry literature i struggeld and i often became bogged down and it took a long time for me to read them. The only improvements i would wish is for more direct approach instead of lots of dry boring reading material. focus on the core with direct books that portray the materials we read about in a more direct manner instead of bogging it down with tons of pages to read. the very heavy dry books led many of us not me but also others to struggle with reading the literature in time for each forelesning. bassicly my suggestion for improvement:More direct literature and more time between each forelesning to read the materials.

I found that working on de obligatoriske oppgavene really made me have to reflect on the topics we were supposed to learn, and with making me connect the content of the lectures with the pensum. It might not always be super fun to write them, but actively engaging with litterature and producing text based on that is an important part of the historian's craft i guess.

The lectures were very good, and Marcus Colla is amazing at making boring things interesting, but I think maybe some kind of seminar would be good too? So students could talk in smaller groups and make sure everyone understands

Which of the following did biographical readings help you with? (Other)

I will say this here that i think most students dont care to read these biographs (stories) because they already have a lot of readings, even tho they would probably help a lot. This was for my instance that i focused more on the "Penusmliste" and not the stories. I dont know how to incorporate these stories. Perhaps one of the assignments should be to use a story and analyse it with the correct pensum?

robert carro allure of the archives and a spy in the archives were actually pretty fun to read and helped me to understand what historains go trugh in their ressearch projects.

It made the topics feel more tangible

13. In what ways, if any, did reading historians' biographies or autobiographies help you understand historical methods?

Tying these concepts to specific case examples makes it a lot easier to grasp, and tying it to a specific person makes it more interesting to follow. Overall more engaging than more sterile descriptions of what a method should be.

It helped me understand how history as a discipline has evolved based on their times challenges and resources

it helped significantly once i got past the very dry boring long pages. i read key terms and key portions of most of the biographies and it helped but it still suffered because the literature was often dry and had long paragraphs that looked like they never ended.

The connection between the practical and the theoretical aspects of doing historical research became clearer.

I find the genre of the biography/autobiography is way more fun to read than the genre of regular discourse analysis. This made it easier to grasp the concepts they tried to explain, and made long days at the library a bit more bearable. I don't think one should take away all other genres, of course, but it made it easier to see how some the very abstract concepts described in other texts were put to use in practice.

14. Was there a specific biography, autobiography, or interview that stood out to you as especially helpful? Why?

Particularly enjoyed a spy in the archives

Alette Farge, because it illustrated how it is to work in the archives

most of the literature was helpful but what stood out was spy in the archives it made me learn about how archives operate in different countries and how historical knowledge can be accessed but at the same time be restricted depending on national governments and also access if you are a researcher.

The one written by the Soviet-historian was very helpful in setting the tone for the rest of the course. She wrote mostly about working with archival material, but made a lot about history as a study of details about the past more "approachable" than some of the other texts on the reading list managed.

I found the discussions of comparison interesting, by Elliot and Kocka, but this is probably because I personally find comparison interesting as a historical tool.

I liked that the course started out with reading two autobiographies, because it made the topic feel the most approachable. When it comes to the content of the text, I found the Caro-text especially helpful because he gave a very clear runthrough of his actual method

Finally, is there anything else you would like to add?

You did great, and I really enjoyed the course. Although the subject matter can be on the dryer side, the lectures were very engaging. My roommate who is writing her bachelors in anthropology joined me one time, and actually ended up joining me for the rest of the semester as she enjoyed them so much more than her own lectures, which I can confirm were indeed boring. I hope you have a great summer!

Nothing

Personally, I feel that some of the concepts could have been more clearly explained/defined (theory and narrative as clear examples), as these remained somewhat ambiguous to me as we approached the autobiographies. Despite being discussed in literature, I would have liked a clear (and if necessary, also abstract) definition.

I found it very helpful in the course that several professors in the lectures also gave some personal examples of their methods, as this showed me that there truly are many different ways to work on historical research. This, together with the biographical/autobiographical literature gives a good peek into what it really means to be working as a historian.