

READING TO LEARN: ENGAGING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MEANINGFUL READING AND DISCUSSION

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Reading to Learn is an ongoing interdisciplinary research effort designed to understand university students' reading practices and classroom discussions within the context of reading communities. The goal is to contribute to best practices for engaging students in reading course texts and in meaningful classroom discussion that promotes critical thinking and enhances learning. Preliminary data indicate that students perceive reading communities as being helpful in clarifying their thinking, increasing learning, and improving class discussion.

To enhance the learning that comes from course readings and classroom discussion, two key components must be in place: First, students need to read. Second, students need the skills to process and articulate their comprehension of course content. Both represent significant challenges. University faculty often struggle to ensure students are completing course readings and to engage them in meaningful classroom discussion that promotes critical thinking (Bean, 1996).

COMPLIANCE

Research indicates that university student compliance with course reading assignments hovers at 20-30 percent (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Hobson, 2004). In addition, the 2009 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) revealed that only 24 percent of university students consistently completed course reading assignments (NSSE, 2009).

THE READING COMMUNITIES

The focus of our research effort has been to address the problems of getting students to do assigned reading and developing their higher level reading skills, while creating for them guided opportunities for interpersonal and whole-group discussion. More specifically, Reading to Learn is an ongoing interdisciplinary research effort designed to understand university student behaviors and practices related to course readings and classroom discussions via reading communities. The goal is to establish best practices for engaging students more fully in reading course texts and in meaningful classroom discussion that promotes critical thinking.

In a pilot study using quantitative (online surveys) and qualitative (focus groups) measures, researchers collected data from university journalism students who participated in classroom reading communities. Subsequently, data collection was expanded to include students in

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journalism, Spanish, and psychology classes who had participated in reading communities.

Reading communities are a university-level adaptation of literature circles commonly used in K-12 education. Defined as small, peer-led reading discussion groups, literature circles help students engage in meaningful reading behaviors, thereby encouraging learning. For nearly 25 years, educators around the globe have used literature circles to promote active learning and critical thinking through classroom discussion (Harvey & Daniels, 2009).

Although there are many variations, reading communities typically work in the following way: Three to four students form a reading community for some period of time over the semester. Each time a course reading is assigned, students take roles, such as developing questions and directing discussion (the “discussion director”), making connections between the content and their experience (the “content connector”), or illuminating passages they find important in the text (the “literary luminary”). In our version, students file a written report prior to class for instructor review. Next, they meet with peers during a portion of class. Following the small group discussion, the instructor “debriefs” the entire class by calling on various students from the small groups to share their findings and contribute to the whole-group discussion.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Educational researchers have long discussed the importance of considering the learner in the teaching/learning process. Piaget (1951) outlined the way that learners construct knowledge through performing actions and reflecting on the results. He emphasized the importance of focusing on the active learner throughout the educational process. Dewey (1938) also emphasized active learning, particularly through experiential education. Both Piaget and Dewey tied this constructivist view of education to successful democratic societies. Vygotsky (1986) outlined a process for adult guides or peers to scaffold

students’ active learning through modeling and guidance. In this way, the guides or peers could increase for students what Vygotsky called their “zone of proximal development.” Bruner (1966) and Bloom (1956) emphasized the importance of understanding the psychology behind the learning process, of including the learner in the learning process, and of focusing on developing higher-level thinking skills, opposed to rote memorization.

Various researchers have focused on the construction of higher level thinking skills through reading. Allington (2002) has summarized the research findings: 1. Students who read more, read better. 2. Children and adult learners must have opportunities to respond to their reading and learning. 3. Readers need explicit instruction in the new strategies to decode text. Building on Allington’s (2002) work, Harvey and Daniels (2009) have worked extensively with reading instruction and more particularly with literature circles (also called inquiry circles). Given that good readers monitor their own comprehension, activate and connect to background knowledge, ask questions, infer and visualize meaning, determine importance, and synthesize and summarize their readings, Harvey and Daniels have developed a reading continuum that takes readers from the low level of cognitive understanding to deep understanding of text and active application of learned concepts.

The lowest levels of understanding entail the ability to answer literal questions and retell information acquired from text. At the midlevel, the reader merges the new information with his or her pre-existing knowledge and skills and makes connections. Harvey and Daniels call this “real understanding.” This leads to the acquiring of deep understanding and the active use of new insights.

By gradually assuming more responsibility for their reading, learners eventually are able to merge their thinking with different levels of text, acquire knowledge, and actively use that knowledge. However, it is likely that explicit

strategies and instruction are needed before students can acquire the skills necessary for all levels of the reading continuum. For example, explicit instruction on how to infer from, connect to, and question the text likely increases comprehension (Langenberg, 2000; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Block, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2002; Block & Pressley, 2008; Rudell & Unrau, 2004).

While the research on reading comprehension for children and adults is extensive, there is another factor to consider as well—student motivation for reading. Motivation has been found to be a key concept in success at the college level (Mealey, 1990). Transaction models, in particular, such as literature circle strategies, have been shown to increase motivation to read by valuing the meaning-construction process and by increasing the opportunities for students to use the skills to infer, generate hypotheses, and construct meaning from the text (Schraw & Bruning, 1999). Some instructors use reading quizzes to force students to do the required readings. However, the fear and the threat of assessment that traditionally occur in the classroom have been shown to disturb the reading process and discourage reading, even for students who normally feel positive or neutral about private reading (Mann, 2000).

This finding is important for university instructors because aliteracy—adults who can read but choose not to—and noncompliance—students who do not read assigned texts—have been found to be problems at the college level (Burns, 1998; Nathanson, Pruslow, & Levitt, 2008; Sikorski, et al., 2002; Tanner, 1987). Even students who do read have been found to not spend much time on their academic reading (Harl & Jolliffe, 2008). Dupuy (1997) did a study in a college-level psychology class to discover the extent to which students read their textbooks and found that students read on average 27.46 percent of the assigned readings before class and 69.98 percent before an exam. Students reported spending little time reading their textbooks and felt that it was the instructor's responsibility to

review material during class. When students do read, it has been found that they often do not have the skills needed for higher-level thinking in relation to the text. They tend to read by skimming the text and looking for facts that can be memorized, which does not lend itself to critical analysis of complex ideas (Linderholm, 2006). Burchfield and Sappington (2000) found a consistent decrease of reading compliance over a 16-year period.

Using literature circles is a methodology teachers developed to motivate students and get them to comprehend what they read (Daniels, 2002; Harvey & Daniels, 2009). Although few researchers have looked at how this strategy is applied in higher education, some findings imply that the use of literature circles in college classrooms is effective (Dupuy, 1997; Hsu, 2004a, 2004b; O'Brian, 2004). The key factors for a literature circle include: small, temporary groups; different groups reading different books or articles; groups meeting on a regular, predictable schedule; students using notes to guide their reading and discussion; discussion topics coming from students; and the groups aiming to have natural conversations. Also, the teacher should work as a facilitator, instead of as a participant or leader, and the students should be given roles or jobs to complete for each group meeting. The teacher should model how to complete each role. The activity should be open and lively, and new groups should be formed around new reading choices (Daniels, 2002). For the purposes of this paper, the "reading communities" will borrow from Daniels' literature circles criteria in as much as these reading discussion groups to be studied are peer-led.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions reflect our effort to assess student behaviors and attitudes related to course readings and in-class discussions within the context of reading communities.

RQ1: How are reading communities related to student course reading and discussion behaviors?

RQ2: How are reading communities related to student perceptions of/attitudes toward course texts and classroom discussion?

RQ3: How are reading communities related to student perceptions of overall learning?

METHOD

This study investigates university student behaviors and attitudes related to course readings and classroom discussions when reading communities are used. The study also seeks to explore how reading communities influence students' perceptions of overall learning. Researchers selected both quantitative and qualitative measures to gather data about college student behaviors and attitudes regarding assigned course readings and classroom discussion when reading communities are used.

Participants

A pilot study involved 20 journalism students enrolled in an upper division reporting course during one semester. Subsequently, the study was expanded to include 112 students enrolled in four different journalism courses, 32 students in a 200-level psychology course, and 65 students in three, 300-level Spanish language courses ($N=209$).

Materials and Procedures

An online survey was used to collect information from university students at a public four-year liberal arts university in the Midwest. Participation was voluntary. No rewards were offered for participation. Students completed the 15-minute survey either on their own time or during a lab setting related to the course. All survey submissions were anonymous but grouped by discipline to allow for additional data analysis options. Each student could take the survey only once.

To personalize the request for participation, the researchers chose to use an online survey

distributed via instructors' e-mail and class announcements. Instructors limited themselves to three e-mail requests for participation. Surveys were distributed the final week of the fall 2009 semester, which may have negatively impacted the 35 percent response rate.

Researchers designed the 33-statement questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, with "1" being "strongly agree" and "5" being "strongly disagree." The format of the survey did not allow students to change responses after answering each question, and students could not go back to questions after answering them. Students could choose not to complete all survey items. Questions were developed to gain information about student attitudes and behaviors toward reading course texts and classroom discussion, as well as information about changes or differences in attitudes as a result of the instructor using reading communities in the course.

Students were asked to respond to statements about their personal reading habits, as well as about their reading behaviors and observations for academic courses. In addition, students were asked about their participation in small-group reading communities and about specific roles within reading communities.

The survey also asked students to respond to statements about how participation in reading communities affected their reading behaviors and to provide feedback about how reading communities contributed to learning course material.

In an effort to better understand student experiences with reading communities, researchers also developed focus group questions. The questions covered three areas: student behaviors and attitudes toward general college course readings and readings in courses employing reading communities; student behaviors and attitudes toward participation in course reading and discussions as part of a reading community; and student perceptions of learning and discussion in courses using reading communities.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. No incentives were offered for participation.

Focus groups were scheduled by discipline. Procedures for administering the focus group and the questions were reviewed and approved by the campus Institutional Review Board. Focus groups consisted of between three and four students enrolled in the courses employing reading communities. Each focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes. Students were asked to respond to nine questions. During the fall 2009 semester, eight students participated in a focus group interview. Five were enrolled in journalism courses and three in Spanish.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

The online survey focused on identifying student behaviors related to reading in their disciplines where reading communities were involved, as well as their behaviors for their general college reading. The survey also sought to gain information about student perceptions of their learning and peer learning where reading communities were present.

While nearly all students identified that they enjoyed reading for pleasure and that reading is an important part of learning, few agreed that they enjoy reading for college courses (see Table 1).

Against that backdrop, students were asked to respond to a series of questions about their reading communities. While students may not enjoy reading for courses, they find value in reading communities. The majority found reading communities led to greater understanding of the text, exposed them to new ideas and improved both

learning and discussion. Students also reported that being a member of a reading community held them accountable for assigned readings (see Table 2).

In an effort to determine whether the specific strategy of using assigned roles to shape reading and discussion proved useful, students were asked a series of questions about the “discussion director,” “content connector,” and “literary luminary” roles used in their reading communities. Students agreed that reading roles contributed positively to both their individual learning and to classroom discussion (see Table 3).

Students completing the online survey also responded to questions about their reading behaviors and observations in academic courses across the university. Students reported completing assigned readings at much higher rates than the NSSE survey indicates (see Table 4).

Participating in reading communities did alter some students’ reading behaviors. A majority of students also reported that reading communities made the text more meaningful and that they would recommend reading communities to other instructors. A smaller number said they would be more likely to keep their course text because of reading communities (see Table 5).

A final set of questions asked students to share perceptions of classroom discussion and peer learning as a result of reading communities. In every category, students reported overwhelmingly in favor of reading communities (see Table 6).

Table 1
Reading Enjoyment Question Responses

Question	Strongly Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Responses	Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation
	Agree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree				
I enjoy reading for pleasure.	34	32	4	4	0	74	1.70	0.65	0.81	
I enjoy reading for courses.	3	24	20	22	5	74	3.03	1.07	1.03	
Reading is an important part of learning.	25	42	7	0	0	74	1.76	0.38	0.62	

Table 2
Reading Circle Question Responses

Question	Strongly Agree			Neither Agree nor Disagree			Strongly Disagree			Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Disagree			
I look forward to reading for my reading circle.	4	27	24	16	0	71	2.73	0.77	0.88			
Small group reading circles help me understand the text.	13	45	4	6	2	70	2.13	0.84	0.92			
Small group reading circles help me clarify my views.	15	41	8	6	0	70	2.07	0.68	0.82			
Small group reading circles expose me to new ideas from my peers.	23	40	3	4	0	70	1.83	0.58	0.76			
Small group reading circles hold me accountable for assigned readings.	23	36	7	3	1	70	1.90	0.73	0.85			
Small group reading circles improve my learning.	14	40	13	2	1	70	2.09	0.63	0.79			
Small group reading circles improve class discussion.	24	39	6	1	0	70	1.77	0.44	0.66			

Table 3
Assigned Roles Question Responses

Question	Strongly Agree			Neither Agree nor Disagree			Strongly Disagree			Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Disagree			
The content connector role helps me make connections between the text and what I am learning.	15	43	9	3	0	70	2.00	0.52	0.72			
The content connector role helps me make connections between the text and what I have learned in other classes.	6	46	13	5	0	70	2.24	0.51	0.71			
The content connector role helps me make connections between the text and what I have learned outside the classroom.	15	46	4	5	0	70	1.99	0.57	0.75			
The discussion director role helps me focus on key themes and concepts from the text.	17	40	8	5	0	70	2.01	0.65	0.81			
The discussion director role helps me learn to ask open-ended questions.	22	32	11	4	0	69	1.96	0.72	0.85			
The discussion director role helps me think critically about the text.	19	40	7	3	0	69	1.91	0.55	0.74			
The literary luminary role helps me analyze the text.	12	37	13	7	1	70	2.26	0.83	0.91			
The literary luminary role helps me identify key concepts in the text.	13	39	14	3	1	70	2.14	0.67	0.82			

Table 4
Behavior and Observation Question Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Responses	Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation
I complete assigned readings in my academic courses.	22	29	9	10	0	70	2.10	1.02	1.01
I find assigned readings in my academic courses meaningful.	8	36	20	6	0	70	2.34	0.63	0.80
My instructors integrate assigned readings in my academic courses.	18	37	7	8	0	70	2.07	0.82	0.91
Knowing my instructor integrates assigned readings into the course positively influences my decision to complete assigned readings.	19	34	10	7	0	70	2.07	0.82	0.91
Knowing my instructor will assign points for assigned readings positively influences my decision to complete assigned readings.	28	35	7	0	0	70	1.70	0.42	0.64

Table 5
Text and Recommendation Question Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Responses	Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation
Reading circles have changed the way I read the text.	6	31	13	20	0	70	2.67	0.98	0.99
Reading circles make reading the course text meaningful.	15	36	9	10	0	70	2.20	0.89	0.94
I would recommend reading circles to other instructors.	18	35	9	6	2	70	2.13	0.98	0.99
I am more likely to keep my course text.	8	19	18	21	4	70	2.91	1.27	1.13

Table 6
Classroom Discussion and Peer Learning Question Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Responses	Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation
My classmates are better prepared for discussion because of Small Group Reading Circles.	17	39	11	3	0	70	2.00	0.58	0.76
My classmates ask better questions because of Small Group Reading Circles.	18	40	9	3	0	70	1.96	0.56	0.75
Small group discussion is improved because of Reading Circles.	23	34	9	4	0	70	1.91	0.69	0.83
Class discussion is improved because of Reading Circles.	18	38	8	4	0	68	1.97	0.63	0.79
My classmates make better connections between the text and their learning because of Small Group Reading Circles.	14	41	14	0	0	69	2.00	0.41	0.64
My classmates demonstrate better analytical skills because of Small Group Reading Circles.	13	39	13	5	0	70	2.14	0.65	0.80

Qualitative Data

During the fall 2009 semester, researchers conducted focus groups with students enrolled in journalism and Spanish language courses that used reading communities to engage students in course readings and classroom discussion. Eight students agreed to participate in focus group interviews. The transcribed interviews revealed several themes.

Overall, students in the focus group view reading for reading communities as different from reading for other classes.

I had one class this semester and it just, I didn't read the book because he never used it in class, not once. So it seemed pointless.

And,

I mean, a lot of my teachers don't tell me, don't even assign reading the book. It's kind of like you probably should, but they don't check it like there's homework...

Students in reading communities do the reading before class. They know they will be accountable to their reading community to be prepared.

For my journalism reading assignments, since we've been doing the reading discussion activities and assignments, I've read absolutely everything.

Students in reading communities know they will get a chance to talk.

I like it because it's sort of a level playing field. I think everyone has an opportunity to share their input in a nonthreatening and nonjudgmental way since we're kind of in it together.

Students in reading communities feel more comfortable contributing in whole-class discussion because they've had a chance to try out ideas and get affirmation during the small-group discussion.

I'd say it's positive just because I know a lot of people get really flustered or nervous if the teacher asks the question and they don't have anything to say or they haven't thought of it before, so it's nice when you already have your ideas written down and you already know what you want to talk about. ... Knowing at least one person thought it was interesting makes me, like, want to share it with others.

And,

I think it greatly promotes discussion in the ... large-class setting. First, because I guess you get to read the textbook in your own personal time and you get to synthesize that information within a smaller group. I think that sort of helps build a sense of community and a team within the group; also a sense of confidence because when you go to share what you've discussed with a larger group, you kind of have a group of students that are sort of within your team and ... it's sort of an encouraging, enforcing sort of effect.

Students in reading communities appreciate hearing what happened in other group discussions.

I think it's helped with critical thinking. ... Sometimes, I think of an answer or I think of a topic in a certain way, but someone else gives a whole different angle on it, including, sometimes, the instructor. But something I had never even thought of would be pointed out to me.

Students recommend reading communities.

[I]t encourages the reading and it helps you delve deeper into ... understanding and actually caring about the material, rather than just reading it to read it.

DISCUSSION

Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this research effort indicate reading communities offer added value to the university learning experience by promoting active learning and critical thinking through course readings and classroom discussion. As noted earlier, reading communities quickly move beyond the first level of Harvey and Daniels' (2009) Comprehension Continuum. For example, faculty members commonly use online and in-class quizzes to encourage students to read course materials. Quizzes, indeed, offer a punitive approach to gain compliance with reading assignments, but the very nature of a quiz on an assigned reading limits its value as a teaching tool. Quizzes typically test literal knowledge—who did what where—rather than stimulating students to demonstrate higher levels of thinking—explaining how and why—that ultimately promote critical thinking.

Whole-class discussions also may prove problematic. Professors can find themselves standing at the front of the room, posing a question whose response is a sea of blank faces or, at best, a “retelling” of the book that does not demonstrate real understanding. When discussion does get going, it is often the same few students who dominate while the others withdraw into their private thoughts.

Although group work and group discussion have gained footholds in higher education, students, themselves, identify that random attempts to foster classroom discussion through these methods do little to contribute to learning unless handled properly. Students say they need and want faculty to make course readings relevant and to provide both the tools and opportunities for meaningful discussion. Reading communities are one method of engaging students in active learning that moves further along the Comprehension Continuum, allowing students to merge their thinking with the content, and to both acquire knowledge and actively use that knowledge in and outside the classroom.

One of the strengths of reading communities is that they are highly adaptable to meet course objectives and student needs. Faculty researchers for this study used reading communities with course texts and with supplementary readings. While all the researchers used some kind of guided role, the roles could be easily adapted to fit varied disciplines. Some researchers used reading communities every week; others used them several times over the course of the semester. While one researcher kept students in the same reading community for the entire semester, another changed reading communities multiple times. Although promoting interpersonal and face-to-face communication is an objective in some of the courses included in the study, some of the classroom discussion could occur online as well. As teachers, we appreciate being able to review the reading reports before class. We can find out ahead of time what students are getting, or not getting, from the readings. It can be amazing that teachers may not even consider something to be an issue that may, indeed, trouble a large number of students. Students also offer wonderful examples of experiences from other classes and internships that can be pulled into the discussion to benefit everyone. Finally, we find that if faculty members are willing to surrender a bit of lecture time, reading communities can transform classroom monologues into rich dialogues.

Future Directions

Because the project is an ongoing interdisciplinary effort, there is much room for further research and data analysis. Using reading communities in other disciplines would provide an opportunity to assess whether reading communities have value in other academic domains. Collecting gender and year-in-school data could reveal differences in reading attitudes and behaviors based on those factors. Examining success of the method in general education courses versus upper division, discipline-specific courses also could reveal the value of reading communities across the university.

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