

Return to the *Agora*: Small Group Work in a Philosophy Learning Commons



Shannon Dea and Kurt Holukoff, Department of
Philosophy,
University of Waterloo

Individual Centred Collaborative Research (ICCR)

- Students collaborate with two or three other students to jointly write a single journal-length (i.e., 15-25 pages) article
- Individual sections
- Collaborative sections
- Peer review and peer evaluation
- Participation and attendance

Reading Groups

- Students work together on closely reading a tricky passage or selection of passages, stopping to discuss the material, especially its connection to the weekly discussion questions
- Each week, the students collaborate in answering a questionnaire
- Each member must also produce an individually-authored report on the content of one week's meeting

Group Journaling

- Students work together to create a journal of philosophical reflections with both individual and group components
- Before the weekly meeting, each member makes an entry based on a philosophical problem or puzzle posed by the professor as well as other student's entries
- During the weekly meeting, students discuss the assigned problem and produce a collaborative entry for the week
- Each member must also produce an individually-authored report on the content of one week's meeting

Some early evidence

- Qualitative:

Journaling and ICCR group members credit the small-group work with helping to deepen their understanding of the course material, and with making them feel more connected with the Philosophy programme;

No comments (negative or positive) from Reading group members.

Some early evidence

- Quantitative

While all group members received comparable average term grades for their group work, ICCR participants had higher course grades than Reading group members. (The same is true for Journaling group members. However, the sample size is too small to make this result reliable.);

Instructor evaluation scores were the highest the professor has ever received, and were markedly higher than the previous two iterations of the course (under another instructor). While the forms are anonymous, the numbers indicate an equal degree of satisfaction from students in all three styles of group.

Pros and cons of each group

ICCR

Pros:

- High satisfaction with course and with groupwork
- Based on grade data, ICCR work seemed to better prepare students for other aspects of the course than RG
- Authentic assessment – final product aligns with what philosophers themselves produce

Pros and cons of each group

ICCR

Cons:

- Students expressed a higher degree of frustration with other group members than was the case in JG or RG
- Less structure and oversight left students feeling adrift and struggling to meet deadlines

Pros and cons of each group

Reading Groups

Pros:

- High satisfaction with course
- Closely reinforced work being done in the classroom
- Very structured assignments helped to keep meetings on track. Best organized of the groups

Pros and cons of each group

Reading Groups

Cons:

- Extremely time-consuming for instructor
- Seemed to support surface rather than deep learning
- Early grade data suggest that this group work did not prepare students for other course tasks/assessments as well as ICCR or JG

Pros and cons of each group

Journaling Groups

Pros:

- High satisfaction with course and with group work
- Journaling supports higher level learning outcomes – creativity, synthesis... Deep learning
- Relatively low maintenance for instructor

Pros and cons of each group

Journaling Groups

Cons:

- Students found it difficult to journal twice per week
- Students very often journaled in the same order each week, and therefore allowed the tone of the discussion to be set by the same person
- Tasks often took longer than allotted meeting time

Some lessons

- The work that the professor sees as the most promising/valuable isn't necessarily the work that helps the students the most (case in point: Reading groups)
- Student “struggles” (e.g., ICCR conflicts) aren't necessarily obstacles to learning or engagement
- Well-structured groupwork encourages student buy-in, and enhances learning





Resources

- Bolling, Anne L. "Using Group Journals to Improve Writing and Comprehension," *Excellence in College Teaching* 5 (1994) 47-55.
- Sadler, Brook J. "How Important is Student Participation in Teaching Philosophy?" *Teaching philosophy* 27.3 (2004) 251-267.
- Silvermintz, Daniel. "Reading Philosophy With Friends: Introducing Reading Groups into the Philosophy Classroom," *Teaching philosophy* 29.3 (2006) 237-244.
- Stanlick, Nancy. "Individual-Centred Collaborative Research: Method and Theory," *Teaching philosophy* 30.1 (2007) 85-111.

Thanks to the University of Waterloo Learning Initiatives Fund for financial support for this research.