



From the Agora to the Chinese Room

Shannon Dea

Dept. of Philosophy, University of Waterloo



A word about the title



A bridge between two classroom contexts, two studies

- Lower division
Philosophy gateway
course at Waterloo
- Students typically
majors
- 12 week term
- No EFL issues
- Study abroad
Philosophy course at
Nanjing
- Students typically not
majors
- 6 week intensive
- Most students EFL

Two contexts

- In a class of forty to fifty students, it is virtually impossible to engage every student in the kind of sustained discussion historically associated with the Philosophy.

One similarity

- Learning commons
- Small group work
 - Reading groups
 - Journalling groups
 - Individual centred collaborative research
- Group work grade assigned largely based on individual's contribution to the group

The first study

- 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;
- 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.)
- Very high course evaluation scores. The numbers indicate an equal degree of satisfaction from students in all three styles of group.

Results

- 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 group work encourages student buy-in, and enhances learning

Some lessons

My earlier study showed that well-structured small-group work effectively promotes students' deep engagement with difficult course readings. However, in the summer 2012 courses that will be the site of my new research, the intensity of the class schedule and students' struggles with English will make it difficult or impossible for them to do their readings before class.

A new challenge



**Some inspiration from
the Agora**

Is reading an intrinsic part of study in the humanities, as many professors believe, or is it a mere means to an end?

A radical new question

Is it possible that carefully planned small-group work can constitute not merely a way “into” course readings, but, more radically, a way “around” them – a means of achieving deep learning when students are unable to do the readings at all?

**My new research
question**

- No textbook, no essays
- Daily in-class close reading/journaling small group assignments
- Two major group assignments over the course of the term
- Regular low-stakes quizzes as additional scaffolding

So...

- It is possible to use well-structured small group work in the place of some reading/writing to cultivate deep learning in the humanities, and to maintain the rigour.
- Such group work can actually support future reading and writing in the discipline.

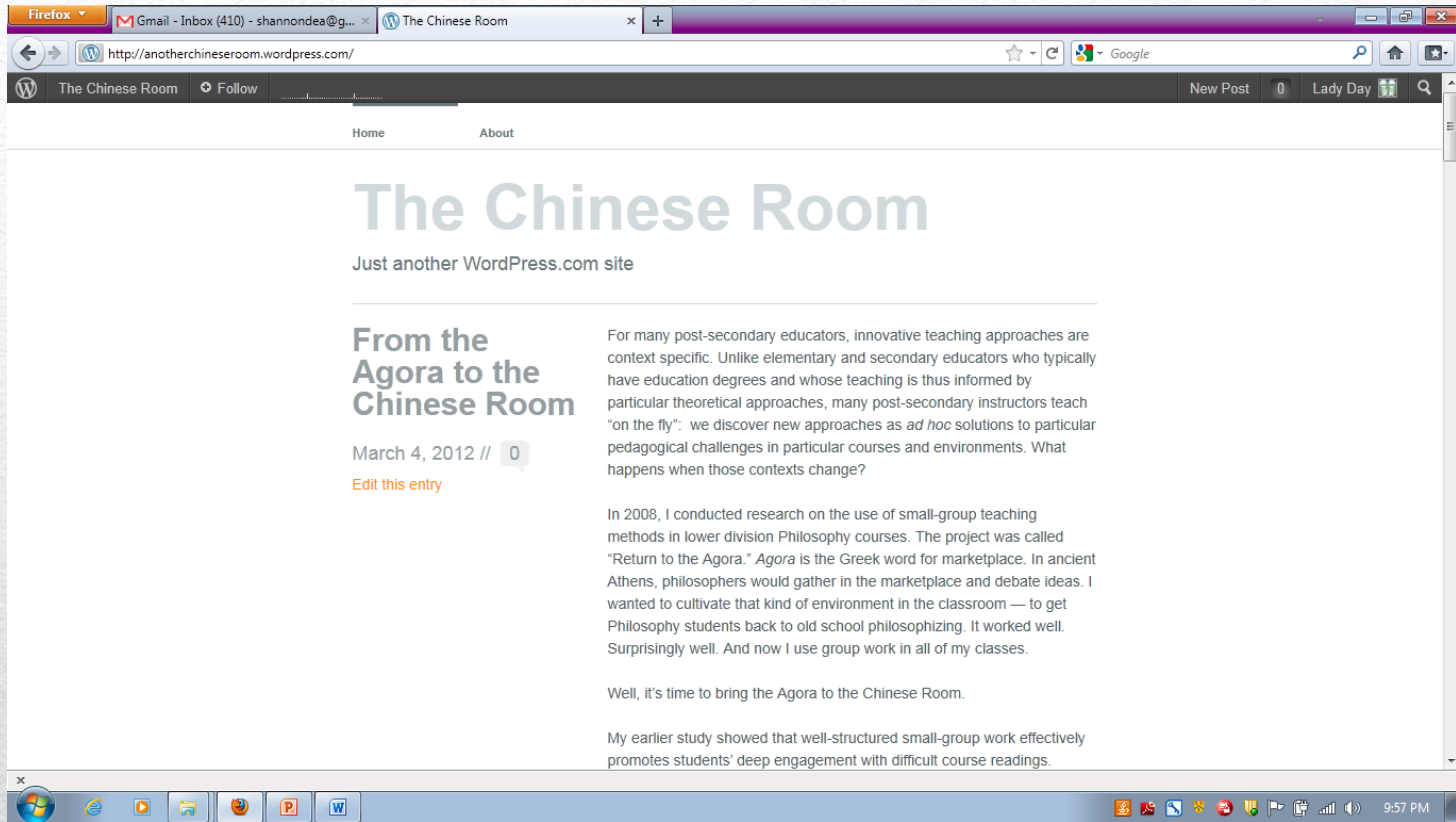
My hypothesis

- Results might be importable back to Waterloo, where new methods could make the discipline more accessible to ESL students and students with disabilities.

**An additional possible
pay-off**

- Method struggles last time
- This time: from mixed mode to qualitative

A final lesson learned...



<http://anotherchineseroom.wordpress.com>

Stay tuned...

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Resources



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