Using Reading Groups to Train Students To Read Philosophical Texts

Abstract: Philosophy instructors face the following pedagogical vicious circle: *Many students don't do assigned readings. If the students don't do the readings, instructors resort to summarizing the content of the readings in lectures. But, if instructors summarize the content, students have no particular incentive to do the readings.* Assigning "micro-readings" – short excerpts from primary texts – for students to read in small groups can help us address this challenge. I briefly summarize Silvermintz's research on the effectiveness of reading groups in Philosophy classes before describing my own two attempts to use reading groups to improve lower division students' philosophical literacy. The first attempt failed; the second one succeeded. I propose an explanation for these differing results. Well-constructed reading group exercises in lower division Philosophy courses , I maintain, help Philosophy instructors appropriately balance student-centred and content-centred teaching modalities. I conclude by suggesting possible applications within Canadian Philosophy courses.

The summer just past, my daughter – now a high school senior – took two intensive university courses, both in humanities disciplines. Two things in particular surprised her about the experience – the quantity of reading that was assigned in each of the courses (about thirty pages per day per course) and the fact that none of the other students in the courses were doing the readings. When she dutifully sat down to do the readings, she did so with resentment. "The profs just repeat everything from the readings in their lectures," she complained. "They never ask us about the readings, and none of the other students ever do them. So, why am I even bothering?"

This example points to a tension all too familiar to Philosophy instructors. If the students don't do the readings, instructors resort to summarizing the content of the readings in lectures. But, if instructors summarize the content, students have no particular incentive to do the readings. It is, as they say, a vicious circle. One possible solution is to shorten the length of readings to make them more manageable. Notoriously, though, when students are assigned shorter and fewer readings, they simply recalibrate their expectations such that the new, reduced reading load is now considered unmanageable. You can complain all you like about students' (it seems) increasing resistance to reading,

and you can search for the cause until the cows come home. ("Gen Y's are thus-and-so…" "They're too distractable." "Too much Tumblr!") But, whatever the cause, and whether students are blameworthy or not, once a student decides that an instructor has assigned an unmanageable quantity of reading, she isn't likely to do that reading. And that has consequences for the whole class.

I want to tell you about two strategies I have attempted to try to get students reading Philosophy in small groups. I tried the first method 2009-2010, when it occurred to me that it might be possible to get more students doing more of the readings if I had them work on "micro-readings" – that is, excerpts less than two pages long – together in small groups. I tried the second 2012-2013 when I found myself teaching summer intensive courses in Philosophy at Nanjing University in China. The first of these efforts failed, the second one worked.

My plan to get students reading in small groups was inspired by Daniel Silvermintz's "Reading Philosophy With Friends" (2006). In his article, Silvermintz describes his method of teaching Philosophy by breaking his students into small reading groups. Silvermintz has his students form groups of two or three, and assigns them single paragraphs for close reading and group discussion in twenty minute in-class sessions. During these sessions, reading groups are required to summarize the paragraph in a single sentence and to orient their discussion of the reading around instructor-supplied discussion questions. At the end of the twenty minute sessions, students turn in their summaries for grading, and report on their discussion to the rest of the class in seminar.

Silvermintz reports that the use of reading groups not only improves students' reading competence in Philosophy, it also increases their confidence in class discussions (242). On Silvermintz's account, the confidence students gain in reading short texts in class also increases the chance that they will undertake longer readings outside of class. However, for Silvermintz, there are benefits to short, focused readings, even if they do not lead students to attempt longer ones. He writes "It must be

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acknowledged that mastering a small section of a difficult text is a great advance over reading hundreds of pages without any comprehension of what one has read" (242).

In 2008, I received funding for a two-year study testing the effectiveness of small-group work in a learning commons for lower division Philosophy courses. That study was my first effort with student reading groups. I didn't do things exactly as Silvermintz did. Crucially, I was jealous of class time and didn't want to relinquish any of it to make way for twenty minute reading group exercises. Moreover, I was keen to get students into the habit of hanging out in the Philosophy Department outside of class time to talk Philosophy with each other. And, I wanted slightly larger groups than Silvermintz used because I didn't want any group members to be "orphaned" if one or two people were absent. Finally, while my heart was with the reading group method, it occurred to me that merely getting students together to talk about Philosophy outside of class might have positive effects, quite apart from any reading exercises. To control for that, I simultaneously tested three different small group models: reading groups, journaling groups, and research groups. Time is short; so, I'll just tell you about what I did with the reading groups.

My study covered two cohorts of a lower division ethics course that I taught in 2009 and 2010. Small groups met biweekly in a Department of Philosophy common room to engage in close re-readings of single paragraphs selected from the longer assigned readings for the course. My expectation, like Silvermintz's, was that students would have already read the longer text from which the micro-readings were excerpted. Group discussion of the assigned paragraphs was structured by sets of questions I assigned. Each question set required students to do three things: (1) summarize the reading, (2) accurately exposit specific details about the reading (definitions, argument premises, rhetorical strategies, etc.), and (3) engage in reflective thought about some aspect of the reading. Group members jointly completed answer sheets, and turned them in for grading and feedback. At the end of the term,

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students who had been assigned to reading groups each wrote a term paper reflecting on and further developing ideas from one of their weekly reading group sessions.

I'll be honest. When I designed the study, I was antecedently committed to the idea that reading groups would be pedagogically effective. I only created the other two group types as controls. But, by every measure, the journaling groups and research groups produced more successful outcomes than the reading groups. Students in journaling or research groups did better on exams, and wrote deeper, more thoughtful essays than reading group members. The answer sheets, too, were disappointing. Groups did well enough at summarizing the readings and expositing specific details from the readings, but their critical reflections on the readings were superficial and quick. And, by the end of the term, they displayed stronger feelings of solidarity with their fellow group members, and the course too. I ran the study for two cohorts. Both cohorts produced the same results.

What a disappointment! I had genuinely expected that if I carved out the space and time for students to linger with philosophical texts among their peers, the result would be a deeper philosophical literacy. In retrospect, though, they didn't have much of a chance at all to linger in this way. In my weekly questionnaires, two-thirds of the questions I asked were the sort that admit of right or wrong answers rather than open-ended questions that encourage deeper learning. I asked as many right-or-wrong questions as I did both in order to assess students' understanding of course texts, and to ensure that they used their reading group time well, zeroing in on the texts rather than chatting about their weekends. I attached grades to their answers for the same reasons.

In retrospect, though, the way I structured the question sheets meant that students had to spend at least two-thirds of their time in reading groups trying to figure out the "right" answer – the answer I was looking for – rather than actively engaging with the texts on their own terms. If the reflective components of their grading sheets were more hastily completed than the first two sections, it

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is because in both the types of questions I asked and the grades I apportioned to them I had implicitly conveyed the message that I valued transmission of content more highly than my students' autonomy as learners. By contrast, in both the journaling groups and the research groups, the majority of the assigned tasks were student-centred. Predictably, this led to greater student autonomy, deeper learning and improved student experience.

Given this result, it would be tempting to nix reading groups and focus exclusively on student-centred models for small group work in Philosophy classes. However, this wouldn't solve the problem of getting students to read. Moreover, despite education researchers' long bias in favour of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, the pendulum has quite appropriately begun to swing back toward content-centred approaches. While student-centred approaches are in general more pedagogically effective than content- or teacher-centred approaches, in every discipline, some content is core, and that content won't teach itself.[1] In Philosophy, students should learn to read philosophic texts.

I didn't use reading groups again until 2012 – in part because of the character of the classes I was teaching between 2010 and 2012, and in part because I hadn't yet worked through why my research and journaling groups were more successful than my reading groups. In 2012, though, and then again in 2013, I got the opportunity to teach summer intensive courses in Philosophy at Nanjing University in China. The students in the courses were Chinese nationals with varying degrees of proficiency in English. The courses – an intro course and an early modern course – were taught in English on the American style, with full American semesters crammed into six week sessions. Classes met daily for an hour and a half. Very few of the students were Philosophy – or even humanities – majors. Indeed, most of them were majors in quantitative disciplines such as accounting, engineering, math and

[1] See "Teaching Styles" for a nice, brief discussion of the need to balance student-centred with content-centred pedagogical approaches.

computer science. Thus, most of them were not in the habit of reading or writing philosophical prose. And all of them were taking two or three such intensive courses during the same period.

It seemed clear to me that such students under such circumstances not only would not but could not manage the reading load that I typically assign my North American students. Under these circumstances, it seemed to be an act of bad faith to make evening reading assignments a mandatory feature of the courses. I reminded myself that Socrates was illiterate, that the founder of our discipline engaged in excellent philosophical work without ever cracking a book, that reading is a mere means for Philosophy, not the end in itself. I persuaded myself that it is possible to teach rigourous, intellectually generative Philosophy classes without assigning any reading outside of class. However, even as I persuaded my inner-bibliophile that philosophical prose is not the *sine qua non* of Philosophy, I nonetheless felt very strongly the benefits of turning these students toward the texts. *After all, this might be the only Philosophy classes these students take*, I thought*, even if it turns out they love Philosophy. If I don't help them learn how to read philosophic texts, then they won't be able to pursue further philosophic study on their own.* Re-enter reading groups.

The biggest change I made in my second kick at the reading group can was in having groups do their work in class rather than outside of class. This was a matter of necessity, given the students' tight schedules. However, there were further reasons for this shift. Whereas my first readings groups met for an hour a week outside of class, having reading groups work together in class afforded me the flexibility to assign them two minute tasks or twenty minute tasks, as the occasion or the text demanded. It also meant that I could move around between the reading groups and offer them support and advice as they worked through their "micro-texts". The other big change was that I no longer assigned readings outside of class, and hence no longer expected that students had already read the texts by the time they met with their groups. I created custom course readers comprising summaries and discussions I had written,

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and short excerpts by the philosophers we were studying . These excerpts were suitable for consumption in small groups, in class.

Assigning reading only in class meant that students who didn't read at home didn't feel guilty and thus didn't start their reading group (and class) activities on their back foot. It also meant that none of the students had spent hours late at night fruitlessly struggling over prose that refused to open itself up to them, and thus none of them came to class already convinced that they were stupid, Philosophy was stupid, or both. It meant that all of the students did all of the readings. Holding the reading groups in class rather than outside of class obviated the need for me to assign and grade questions to ensure that the students were working. This, in turn, allowed me to avoid sending the unintentional message through course assignments that I valued the "right" answer over students' own philosophical reasoning. In this way, I was able to shift course readings from a teacher-centred exercise to a student-centred one, while nonetheless retaining a tight connection with disciplinary content.

Most of the students – and certainly a greater proportion than is typical in the traditional Canadian Philosophy classes I've taught – were by the end of the course able to compare the writing of the various philosophers we studied, had reading preferences among the philosophers, and spoke and wrote effectively about the experience of reading Philosophy. By the end of the term, not just the great students but the good ones were asking me for further reading suggestions for their favourite philosophers. Moreover, the combination of course readings and other course activities overall produced impressive outcomes – competitive with North American intensive courses – on exams and final projects. The Nanjing reading groups produced all of the benefits attested by Silvermintz: philosophical competence, confidence in class discussions, and improved ability to read longer works outside of class.

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So, what was different about my second attempt at reading groups and Silvermintz's model? In a word: flexibility. While Silvermintz used a regular format of twenty minute reading group meetings, followed by seminar presentation and submission of written work for grading, I broke my students into their groups on the fly whenever it was useful, sometimes for two minutes, sometimes for twenty. Here's an example. Early on in the intro course, during a session on critical thinking, I introduced students to the concept of inference indicators. Then, I broke them into their reading groups for two minutes to circle all of the inference indicators they could find in an excerpt by Berkeley in the course reader. Then, I asked each of the groups in turn how many inference indicators they had found. Inevitably, friendly competition between the groups meant that if Group A claimed to have found twelve inference indicators and Group B only ten, the second group challenged the first. Thus, we very naturally moved into a whole-class debate about whether particular words and phrases were in this instance inference indicators.

Think about what a rich exercise this is for a lower division class. It allows them to apply their new knowledge of inference indicators, and to better understand its relevance to course objectives. It gives them a non-threatening, accessible point of entry to an (in this instance) historical text. For the non-philosopher, turning to Berkeley for the first time and being asked to summarize one of his arguments for immaterialism can be overwhelming. Being asked to identify his inference indicators is a much less intimidating task, but one that helps to make future encounters with Berkeley more productive. Once you know how to identify inference indicators, you can start to piece together the argument. Soon, you're reading philosophical prose.

Would I entirely replace long readings outside of class with short in-class group readings in the Canadian classroom? Probably not. Even though I think the method I've just described is pedagogically sound, in the typical Canadian university context to do away with reading assignments entirely would

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convey the impression that a course (and perhaps the program of which the course is a part) is a bird course, and that the students who've taken the course didn't really earn their grades. It might also produce an undesirable selection effect, filling the course with precisely the sort of students who would choose a class precisely because they don't have to do any reading at home. Much as I think it is possible to teach lower division Philosophy well without assigning readings outside of class, I don't want to have to do it primarily to students who make a concerted effort to avoid reading. To be clear though, what prevents me implementing this approach, unaltered, in the Canadian classroom is worry about the knock-on effects, not doubts about the pedagogy.

The solution might be a hybrid approach: assign some longer readings outside of class and assign some different, shorter excerpts for in-class small group work. Perhaps start with the short, in-class readings at the beginning of term, and move on to lengthier, independent reading towards the end. It won't work in every class, to be sure, but where it is possible to implement such an approach, there is good reason to expect that it will improve students' philosophical literacy and scholarly autonomy. With luck, your students will stop asking themselves "why bother?" And perhaps, so will you.

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