

**USING READING GROUPS IN THE PHILOSOPHY CLASSROOM  
2007 T-LEC INSTRUCTIONAL INNOVATION AWARD APPLICATION**

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“And the treasures that the wise men of old have left us in their writings I open and explore with my friends. If we come on any good thing, we extract it, and we set much store on being useful to one another” (Socrates as recounted in Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.614)

**1. ORIGINALITY**

The idea of using in-class reading groups as a teaching practice emerged out of personal reflection about the strategies that have been most effective in my own development as a philosopher. I suggest that all effective teaching should be based on a continuing process of self-analysis of one’s own intellectual development. This approach reorients the role of the instructor as not only a dispenser of knowledge, but also a facilitator in the learning process. I would characterize this method of SoTL as initially based on an intuitive approach whose effectiveness can be further validated through empirical research. As someone who has personally benefited from numerous reading groups, it was only natural that I incorporate this practice into my classroom. That said, I do not know of any other philosophy instructor who employs this method in the manner that I have developed over the last several years of teaching.

Reviewing the SoTL research in Philosophy, I have come across only one article (Katherine Hawley, “Project Report: Using Independent Study Groups with Philosophy

Students,” *Philosophy and Religious Studies Learning and Teaching Support Network Journal 2*, no. 1 (2002): 101-109) that discusses the use of reading groups. Unlike my use of the reading groups as an in-class exercise, Hawley encourages her students to form groups outside of class meetings. I believe that the difference between employing this method inside rather than outside of class accounts for substantially different results. Since Hawley merely encourages her students to use reading groups, she found differing results depending on how seriously the students followed the suggestion. She additionally reports that use of reading groups outside of class is significantly hindered by the difficulty students find in coordinating schedules to find mutually available meeting times. This is a particular challenge on a campus such as UHCL with a primarily non-traditional student population.

In contrast to Hawley, I have found across the board positive results from my use of reading groups as an in-class exercise. This allows me to supervise the activity in a way that was impossible for Hawley. Moreover, students are more active in seminars when reading groups directly precede the discussion.

As indicated in the above passage from Socrates, reading groups have been used in philosophy since ancient times; nonetheless, there is little evidence of their use in the modern university classroom. I hope that my article, “Reading Philosophy with Friends” helps to rejuvenate this as a common practice. Like other active learning pedagogies, reading groups engage the student as a critical thinker rather than as someone passively learning about the subject matter.

## **2. RATIONALE**

Many students in an introductory philosophy class are unprepared to engage with primary texts in philosophy since they have not encountered this type of work in their previous studies. (For a statement of the problem, see Keith Crome and Mike Garfield, “Text-based Teaching and Learning in Philosophy,” *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* 3, no. 2 (2004): 114-130 and the conference papers presented at “Teaching the Reading of Primary Texts,” Leeds University, January 8, 2003, PRS-LTSN website). Primary works in the history of philosophy demand that the reader bring to the text certain analytical skills. The philosophy instructor cannot assume that the students already possess the necessary tools to engage with the text. On the contrary, the instructor of an introductory class in philosophy must not only be responsible for conveying content, he or she must be an agent for cultivating the necessary skills to engage with the course material.

I have used in-class reading groups for the last three years in my Basic Texts classes, which typically have about thirty students. During the first class meeting, I break the students up into small groups of two to three students. These groups will be their study partners for the duration of the semester. During each class period, the reading groups are assigned a small passage (two to three pages) to read and discuss. Groups are encouraged to read the passage out loud, pausing for discussion after each paragraph. Each student in the group should contribute to the activity of analyzing the passage, whether by explaining it or by expressing their confusion when it is not immediately understandable. The students in the group thus work together as a team to comprehend the selection.

To help with their analysis of the text, the groups are assigned a specific question to direct their reading. The groups are typically given about fifteen minutes to work on their passage, which should be sufficient time for completing the exercise without losing focus. Although I am always present when the students are doing group work, it is important that these activities are primarily student-directed. Once students have had sufficient time to work in groups, the class convenes with a seminar based upon the group activities.

### **3. EFFECTIVENESS**

The goals sought by this method are to cultivate analytic reading, critical thinking, and clarity in oral communication. I have found the implementation of this method in my classroom to have marked results concerning all of the desired goals. Students report that they are more confident engaging with a difficult text when they do so as part of a team. In this forum, they are afforded the opportunity to learn from one another and to rehearse their ideas in a smaller setting.

I present here several comments from students testifying to the effectiveness of this method. One student writes the following in an email : “I don't always understand the material when I read it at home but subsequent discussion in class is invaluable. Since I came into this class ‘cold’ with no previous philosophy experience, I found it helpful to listen to other people discuss the material. Invariably, there were many who were coming to the material from different points of view that I hadn't considered.” Another student writes, “I really like when we get to work in groups to summarize the text. For some reason, that really helps me understand what is going on.” And regarding

the ability of group work to build confidence, a student writes, “I am not one to speak much in class, but being in groups helps us open up.”

Once students have had the opportunity to express their views in the less intimidating forum of the reading group, they are more confident when expressing themselves before the entire class. Moreover, being a part of a team creates a sense of being accountable to one’s peers. Rather than fostering a notion of learning as a solitary activity, the reading groups create a classroom community that depends upon the active involvement of every participant. Class discussion is much livelier when engaged in after group work. During a seminar discussion, individual groups can be appealed to as the class experts on the particular passage they were assigned.

#### **4. TRANSFERABILITY**

Although this method was devised with the particular difficulties presented by texts in the history of philosophy, it is easily transferable to a wide range of disciplines, particularly those that involve dense theoretical arguments (psychological, social, political, ethical, economic, and literary theory) or that require analytic reading (poetry). I would moreover recommend the use of reading groups as a warm-up exercise preceding a seminar discussion regardless of the discipline. Finally, I believe the method can be implemented in classes of varying sizes, certainly in smaller classes where discussion and participation is a central component, but also as a means of making a larger lecture class more intimate.

I have published a formal discussion of my use of philosophic reading groups as “Reading Philosophy with Friends: Introducing Reading Groups into the Philosophy Classroom,” *Teaching Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (September 2006): 237-43.