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A Brief Experiment with Reading Study Groups in an Introductory Literature Course

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A Brief Experiment with Reading Study Groups in an Introductory Literature Course

Abstract

This brief piece explores a method for incorporating reading study groups in an introductory college literature class. It concludes by questioning whether requiring such groups to meet regularly outside of class is the best pedagogical approach, or if making such groups optional helps students to “own” their own reading experience as part of a lower-stakes enterprise.

Keywords

College literature, introductory literature, study groups, reading groups, discussion groups

Amidst the ongoing reading, workshops, and conversations fostered by the Mellon Humanities Grant, one point kept rattling around in my skull. The notion that students from different cultural backgrounds can internalize different cultural messages about education seemed self-evident, but one particular example—that students of color have at times been led to understand that forming study groups outside of class constitutes “cheating,” whereas other students have been led to understand study groups as a legitimate learning strategy—stayed with me.¹ The educational cost of these two different understandings seemed stark, and I decided to experiment with study groups in my 100-level Modern Irish literature course.

The first step was thinking about what study groups might look like for an introductory literature course. I had no real experience of study groups as either an undergraduate or graduate student.² Preparation for literature courses in particular consisted of reading

the assigned text by oneself, with the knowledge that each individual should be ready to speak about the text in class. For some classes, we kept an individual reading journal and occasionally submitted excerpts to the professor, while other professors occasionally split students into small groups to discuss ideas from the reading in class. I regularly use both of these strategies in my classes.

I decided to add a mandatory study group component to my course. I hoped to avoid homogeneity as much as possible, so before the semester started, I split the class into groups of four, based solely on data I could glean from Banner. I looked at gender balance, geography (grouping students from the upper Midwest with students from other geographic regions), class standing (mixing juniors or seniors with first-years and sophomores), and majors (placing non-English majors with English majors). Finally, I considered the cultural diversity of surnames in the hope of producing relatively diverse groups.

I then chose ten class periods (five which focused on poetry, and five on prose) during which one reading group would lead discussion of a poem (on a poetry day) and part of a novel or short story (on a prose day). Each group presented twice—once on a poetry day and once on a prose day—selecting key passages or phrases in the text to help focus our discussion.

While only one group officially led discussion on these days, each group was required to meet outside of class to discuss that day's reading and prepare for our class discussion. Groups that were not presenting were required to turn in a two-page typed description of the discussion that took place in their study groups. This description needed to include a sense of the specific material discussed in each session (passages or poems) and ideas that different members of the study groups brought into the conversation. Keeping in mind A.T. Miller's reminder during our Fall 2016 faculty workshop that tasks tend to devolve to the same few people when individuals work in groups, I required each group to regularly shift the responsibility of writing the description of the group's discussion (each person wrote the description only twice).

Responses

At the end of the semester I asked students to complete an anonymous survey with the following questions:

- 1) Did the meetings of your discussion group help you to understand the reading assignments?
- 2) What was the most positive aspect of having the discussion groups?
- 3) What was the most negative aspect of having the discussion groups?
- 4) Would you suggest that I continue these discussion groups that meet outside of class in future semesters?
- 5) Would any changes make these discussion groups more useful for you?

Fifteen out of the nineteen students filled out the survey. Their responses (though thoughtful) did not always focus directly on each specific question, so I have glossed the main points that came up below.

Thirteen of the respondents stressed how talking with their peers outside of class helped them to understand the reading. Some mentioned that the reading often seemed difficult and the group discussions helped their basic comprehension, while others who were more confident of their reading skills found that the variety of perspectives helped them to change and deepen their initial understandings of the text. Fourteen students said that these outside discussion groups should be required for future courses.

Three students felt that some members of their group were often unprepared, and one wrote that “if a member of the group didn’t show up, or didn’t talk, it was like a black hole in the discussion.”

Seven students mentioned how difficult it could be to find a time when all four members could meet outside of class, and two of them suggested that groups should be chosen based on shared availability times. One student thought that people should be able to “switch groups if there are difficulties” (this student mentioned that his or her group “argued over who should write [the descriptions of the discussions]”).

One student liked that the groups were “randomly assigned” (the students knew that I chose the groups ahead of time, but I never disclosed my rather rudimentary method to the class) and explained “I also liked the fact that my group has two of each gender, rather than one being dominant, or nonexistent.”

My observations, and ongoing questions

I began this experiment with an eye to the Mellon focus on improving my approach to teaching (and being taught by) American students of color. There were four students of color in the course, two of whom I met with regularly outside of class to brainstorm about formal essays. As the class progressed, I never explicitly asked these students about their experiences with the discussion groups (as I did not want to put them on the spot). I therefore had no way of reading how their experiences may be different from, or consonant with, those of the class as a whole.

While I was interested in this experience and hopeful that the students would find it helpful (as the majority seemed to have), I also recognized some conflicts in my approach. On the one hand, I wanted the discussion study groups to be something the students owned outside of the class. We continued to have large and small group discussions in class, but I wanted the students to have a lower-stakes venue for talking about the texts—one in which they could form bonds and try out ideas with peers with whom they became comfortable (four students emphasized how they liked getting to know people better within their groups).

On the other hand, I required each group to meet in advance of ten specific class dates, and required the written descriptions of the

discussions, because I was not confident that students would make the effort to schedule, prepare for, and attend these meetings with their peers without the understanding that this was a class requirement. I collected the written descriptions of the discussions because I wanted to see what was being discussed, but I also wanted evidence that the discussions took place, and that all members of the groups were participating. I deliberately did not grade these written descriptions because I wasn't quite sure what the students would produce, and I did not want to assign specific grades to the members of the groups based on one person's testimony of what was taking place (I made no mention of how or if these descriptions would be graded in the syllabus).

In a sense, I wanted this experience to be both part of, and apart from the course. The evidence suggests this experiment was largely successful, but I will want to think about how or if I can reconcile this conflict the next time I try it.

Notes

1. I cannot, alas, recall whether I gleaned this point from our reading or from a summation of one of the training sessions. I had no initial plan to write about this course experience and thus was not taking notes as scrupulously as I should have.
2. A graduate course on the History of the English Sentence produced the only exception. Each student was expected to diagram multiple complicated sentences—some a half-page long—in preparation for class. I began meeting informally with a handful of peers after each class in order to prepare for the next one.