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# Using Structured Reading Groups to Facilitate Deep Learning

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## Abstract

Two significant challenges in teaching college courses are getting students to complete the readings and, beyond that, having them engage in deep reading. We have developed a specific group work format within our courses to facilitate both deep reading and active discussion of course material. Early in the semester, students are assigned to their small groups and a set of rotating group roles: discussion leader, passage master, devil's advocate, creative connector, and reporter. Students meet with their group regularly in class throughout the semester. Before each group meeting, they are to complete a set of readings and a reading preparation sheet for their given reading group role. In this article, we outline how to implement these groups, the benefits of them, and variations to the standard format. We also present quantitative and qualitative student evaluations of this group work format demonstrating the success of this teaching technique.

## Keywords

active learning, classroom participation, student engagement, scholarship of teaching and learning, reading

Two significant challenges in teaching college courses are getting students to complete the readings and, beyond that, having them engage in deep reading. Deep reading is the process through which students employ various strategies to improve reading comprehension and “deep learning,” defined by Roberts and Roberts (2008:125) as “reading to make meaning and construct a strong argument.” We have developed a specific group-work format within our courses to facilitate both deep reading and active discussion of course material. Early in the semester, students are assigned to their small groups with a set of rotating group roles: discussion leader, passage master, devil's advocate, creative connector, and reporter. Students meet with their group regularly in class throughout the semester. Before each group meeting, they are to complete a set of readings and prepare for their given reading group role; for example, the devil's advocate must develop a list

of questions for group discussion that challenge the main points of the work. Though students work together in groups, they are only graded on *their* contributions to the reading groups, primarily through the reading group prep sheets that they prepare for class.

We have implemented these groups a total of 12 times over four different courses: sociological theory (three sections), social movements (one section), sociology of gender (two sections), and race and ethnicity (six sections). This group-work format has helped us meet our overall learning

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objectives in these courses, which have included developing a deep understanding of course material, using course concepts to better understand social processes, and being able to use class information to discuss current social issues. We have successfully used these groups across three different institutional settings: a large public university, a midsize private university, and a small private liberal arts college (see Table 1 for a summary of courses and institutional settings). In the following sections, we provide a more detailed description of reading group roles, describe steps to implementing reading groups into courses, and review student assessments of these groups.

Our structured reading groups improve upon Roberts and Roberts's (2008) deep reading strategies in that students engage with the reading not only on their own, but also in small groups. The reading groups also improve upon small group work as described by Yamane (1996) because students earn their own grades (no free-riding) and do not have to meet outside of class (no transaction costs).

## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND DEEP READING

The structured reading groups we have designed speak to two central areas of research and practice on teaching and learning: collaborative learning and strategies for deep reading. In this section we explore the literature on these two areas and outline how our structured reading groups build on the strengths of and address weaknesses in these areas of research and practice.

Academics have repeatedly pointed out the benefits of collaborative learning groups within the classroom (e.g., Caulfield and Persell [2006]; Lightner, Bober, and Willi [2007]; McKinney and Graham-Buxton [1993]; Rau and Heyl [1990]). While this type of instruction has been shown to increase student understanding of course material (Caulfield and Persell 2006; Lightner et al. 2007; Rau and Heyl 1990), foster connections between students (Caulfield and Persell 2006; McKinney and Graham-Buxton 1993), and develop teamwork skills that are increasingly valued in the workplace (Dickinson 2000; Jones and Jones 2008), students are typically far from enthusiastic about working in groups. In a study of student resistance to group

work, Yamane (1996) cites Goodall's (1990) concept of "groupbate." The two biggest reasons for groupbate are free-rider problems and transaction costs. These problems often result from poor organization of the group (Yamane 1996). We avoid this by requiring students to play a particular role for each meeting and by structuring the content of the class preparation and group discussion. We avoid free-riding problems to the extent that individual students earn their own grade rather than the entire group earning the same grade. However, as we will note in the following, students who fail to prepare for reading groups do mar the group discussion. We also avoid problems with "transaction costs" because students do not need to meet with their group outside of the class period.

As Roberts and Roberts (2008) noted, many college students come in with the surface-learning focus they were taught by the "read to learn" strategies from high school. They believe that if they simply look at every word, they have effectively completed the reading assignment. In college, however, we ask students to engage in "deep reading" and "deep learning." Deep reading is the process of connecting what one reads to what one already knows, and vice versa. By engaging their preexisting knowledge to the new reading materials, students make reading personally meaningful. These new connections also help students develop frameworks for understanding new reading material. This ability to connect reading to students' past, present, and future knowledge and experiences links deep reading to the process of deep learning (Roberts and Roberts 2008).

Using literature on reading comprehension and "learning styles," Roberts and Roberts (2008) created a set of strategies for students to engage in deep learning through deep reading. These five strategies for deep reading included: (1) connecting to the text, (2) summarizing the readings and visualizing the key ideas, (3) keeping a reading response journal, (4) studying as a group, and (5) creating a song or rap. We expand on Roberts and Roberts's (2008) approach in that we attempt to develop more ways of engaging with the text and we incorporate small groups into our pedagogical strategy.

Research has also shown that response papers are more effective than quizzes in preparing for

**Table 1.** Summary of Institutional Contexts, Class Information, and Grading Schemas

Course	Institutional context	Length of course	Number of students	Level and major of students	Grading (percent of final grade) <sup>a</sup>
Race and ethnicity (Heather)	Large public university	3 weeks	30	Freshmen through seniors; variety of majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Large public university	3 weeks	30	Freshmen through seniors; variety of majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Large public university	15 weeks	40	Freshmen through seniors; variety of majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Large public university	15 week	40	Freshmen through seniors; variety of majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Large public university	15 weeks	40	Freshmen through seniors; variety of majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Midsize private university	13 weeks	27	Mostly juniors and seniors; variety of majors	Reading prep sheets 30 percent; class participation 10 percent
Sociology of gender (Heather)	Large public university	15 weeks	40	Mostly juniors and seniors; variety of majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Midsize private university	13 weeks	28	Mostly juniors and seniors; variety of majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
Social movements (Elizabeth)	Small private college	15 weeks	24	Mostly juniors and seniors; mostly sociology majors	Reading portfolio 20 percent; class participation 5 percent
Theory (Elizabeth)	Large public university	15 weeks	37	Mostly juniors and seniors; mostly sociology majors	Reading portfolio 15 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Large public university	15 weeks	44	Mostly juniors and seniors; mostly sociology majors	Reading portfolio 15 percent; class participation 5 percent
	Small private college	15 weeks	13	Mostly juniors and seniors; mostly sociology majors	Reading portfolio 10 percent; class participation 8 percent

a. With the exception of the theory seminar at the small private college, participation in reading groups comprised half of students' overall participation grade.

class discussion and in encouraging students to read more deeply (Hollander 2002; Roberts and Roberts 2008; Scarboro 2004), especially when the reading responses are structured and critical (Brookfield and Preskill 2005). In a study of unstructured small group discussions of assigned readings, Lightner et al. (2007) found that students responded to readings in three primary ways—either they synthesized the material, elaborated on the material, or summarized the material. By asking students to prepare for reading groups ahead of time, we do not risk having an overload of one type of engagement with the material within any group, but rather students benefit from multiple ways of engagement. We are also able to encourage students to work outside of the main discussion roles described by Lightner et al. (2007).

## READING GROUP ROLES

Each of the five reading group roles shapes how the student approaches both the reading and class discussion (see Appendix A for student handout).<sup>1</sup>

The first role is that of *discussion leader*. For this role, students develop a series of questions, along with brief answers, to highlight the main points of the assigned readings. They are also responsible for facilitating group discussion, which typically includes calling on individuals to share questions from their own prep sheets and making sure all individuals have an opportunity to share their insights.

For the role of *passage master*, students must choose and summarize a few important passages from the readings. As noted in the prep sheet guidelines, these passages may give key information, back up the information given, or summarize key information. They may also be passages that are controversial, contradictory with other material, or sections that the passage master simply finds interesting for some reason.

The *creative connector* role requires that students make connections between the readings and other social, cultural, political, or economic ideas. This may include making connections to other reading assignments or artifacts in popular culture (advertisements, YouTube clips, cartoons, discussions of movies, etc.). For example, if the reading were on overcoming sexism and racism in the workplace, someone may bring in a YouTube clip

of “Diversity Day” from the popular TV show *The Office*.

We find that the role of *devil’s advocate* is often the most challenging for students, but it is also the most beneficial role when discussing controversial or emotionally charged issues. When acting as devil’s advocate, students must develop a list of thoughtful questions that may be raised by critics of the authors or by those with differing viewpoints. When discussing race or gender, students are often hesitant to bring up controversial or contradictory viewpoints for fear of being labeled racist, sexist, or homophobic. Assigning someone to bring up these viewpoints allows them to be entered into conversation, and it allows students to develop arguments against them, without any one student having to claim these perspectives.

The *reporter* is the fifth role. In addition to participating in discussion, the reporter must provide a summary of reading group discussion. This summary should include what was discussed, points of agreement and disagreement, any points of confusion, and the readings or ideas that the group found most interesting.

For several courses, we have also permitted one “freeloader” sheet that students may submit in lieu of their reading group prep sheet. If students do not use this sheet, they can receive extra credit at the end of the semester. Although students appreciate the option to either skip an assignment or receive extra credit, we believe that group discussion is negatively affected when students use their freeloader sheet—particularly if multiple group members use their sheets on the same day.

## STEPS TO IMPLEMENTING READING GROUPS

Setting up reading groups in a course requires a good deal of planning and explanation, but the groups generally run themselves once they are set up. In the following, we have outlined seven steps for implementing and assessing reading groups.

### *Step 1: Setting Up a Course/Syllabus to Be Reading Group Friendly*

The first step to implementing semester-long reading groups is to structure the course (and syllabus) with reading groups in mind. This involves establishing a

pattern for how often reading groups meet, as well as clearly noting reading group dates and expectations in the syllabus.

We have taught courses using reading groups in 3-week summer sessions, 13- to 15-week semester sessions that meet once a week, and 13- to 15-week semester sessions that meet twice a week. We found the reading groups particularly useful for dividing up lengthy summer session classes and once-a-week classes. We used reading groups nearly every day in these courses, which fostered more consistent completing of reading group roles since preparing for reading group became a more regular part of preparing for class. For courses that meet twice per week during the semester, we try to schedule reading groups once per week and make them as regular as possible (e.g., every Wednesday).

As shown in Table 1, the proportion of the final grades allocated to reading groups have varied across classes. While the portion of the class participation grade has remained relatively consistent (half of the overall 5 percent class participation grade), reading preparation sheets and reading portfolios have comprised between 10 percent and 30 percent of the final grade. These decisions have been based entirely on other goals that we have for the class, such as whether we have other assignments and how many exams we would like for the semester. Although the percentage that the preparations are worth varies widely, we have not discerned any difference in the amount of time and effort that students put into the prep sheets.

In the syllabus, we clearly mark reading group days and what readings are to be discussed on those days. On occasion, Heather adds additional questions to the syllabus that she wants students to discuss on reading group days. For example, when discussing gender and education she has students read two articles—one on female disadvantage and one on male disadvantage in education. She then asks for students to discuss, based on the articles, who they think is disadvantaged in the education system and why.

Finally, at the back of the syllabus we add the description of reading group roles (see Appendix A) and describe these roles on the first day of class. Students are often a bit confused at first, but we assure them that they will catch on once reading groups begin. Many students complain about the

idea of group work, but we point out that unlike many other forms of group work their grades are not dependent upon one another.

## Step 2: Dividing Students into Reading Groups

One of the four key principles of team learning is to create well-formed teams (Kreie, Headrick, and Steiner 2007). Rather than allowing students to self-select or create random assignments, we survey students to assess their skills and their social networks before distributing students across teams. We typically begin reading groups as close to the conclusion of the drop/add period as possible, in hopes that there will be few changes in the class roster after that point. Prior to dividing students into reading groups, we have students complete information sheets including questions about their major, favorite classes taken, whether they work for pay, how they would describe themselves (outgoing, quiet, etc.), whom else they know in the class, and whether they like working in groups. We ask these questions to get a general sense of students' strengths, disciplinary perspectives, social networks, and personalities. In preparation for the first reading group class period, we assign the students into groups of five to six people based in part on these questions. The goal is to have the groups be as diverse as possible in hopes that students will be exposed to a variety of viewpoints within their groups. In our experience, having fewer than five prepared group members tends to lead to shorter groups with less discussion. Therefore, we do not recommend creating groups smaller than five; in fact, we frequently assign six students to each reading group, even though there are only five roles. Establishing slightly larger groups is particularly beneficial in schools with absenteeism problems and for avoiding too-small groups when students use their freeloader sheets. In cases where there are six group members, each student must still complete a role and some roles will be completed twice. We have found that group discussions work best with only one discussion leader and one reporter; thus, we prefer that the sixth group member duplicate one of the other three roles. After we sort students into groups, we list students' reading group assignments on either a

handout or a PowerPoint slide in preparation for the first reading group meeting.

### **Step 3: First Meeting with Reading Groups**

The students do not have any reading prep sheets due the first time they divide into reading groups. Instead, we re-explain reading group roles, students choose their reading group roles for each week of the semester, and they exchange e-mails with one another. We reiterate that students must complete each reading group role at least once during the semester. When the students choose reading group roles, they fill out the reading group role assignment sheet (passed out in class, see Appendix B). Each student keeps one of these sheets and each group turns one in to the instructor. These are helpful for the instructor to have if one of the reading group members was absent on a particular day or in case someone loses her or his sheet. At the end of this class period, we review what is due for the subsequent reading group period—each student should complete the reading group assignment that corresponds with his or her reading group role.

### **Step 4: Monitor Reading Groups**

Once students understand how reading groups work, all you need to do is make time for them in the course schedule and monitor the discussions to make sure they are running smoothly. We typically allot 20 to 30 minutes for each reading group, but Elizabeth has had groups discuss the readings for up to 60 minutes in theory classes. It is important to let the students know the amount of time the group will meet per class so they do not prepare to discuss for the entire class period if you have other material to cover that day. If a group seems to be having trouble (e.g., not talking or not talking about course material), we sit in on the group and help to facilitate (relevant) discussion. Monitoring groups also gives us a sense of who is adequately preparing and actively participating in groups and who is not. This allows us opportunities to either praise hard work or remind students of class expectations. It also allows us to note interesting points that students make in order to bring them up

in full class discussion. We often engage in full class discussion immediately following the groups, where we actively encourage students to share their group discussions and creative connections with the larger class.

### **Step 5: Evaluation of Reading Group Prep Sheets**

For each scheduled reading group, students complete a specific reading group role and corresponding reading group prep sheet. Students must bring a hard copy of their reading group preparation to class. We have collected and evaluated these prep sheets in a variety of ways, such as having students compile sheets into a reading portfolio that they submit at the end of the semester, posting sheets on WebCT/Blackboard in a sort of e-portfolio, and having students turn in their prep sheets at the end of each reading group session. There are positives and negatives to each approach, as discussed in the following. In addition to providing feedback on individual preparation sheets, we score the students' prep sheets for the entire semester using a rubric (see Appendix D), which we provide to the students at the beginning of the semester.

#### *Compiling printed sheets into reading portfolio.*

Under this method of assessment, students are asked to complete their reading group preparation, bring a hard copy to class, then save the hard copy to submit as part of their "reading portfolio" at the end of the semester. The reading portfolio is simply the compilation of an individual's reading group prep sheets. Students are not required to include anyone else's prep sheets in their portfolio. The main benefit of this format is that the prep sheets are all graded at one time—when the portfolio is submitted. Thus, students are continually preparing for class without the instructor having to consistently collect and grade work. An additional benefit is that students have to compile all of their sheets at the end of the semester, which can help them reflect on the semester. For example, when turning in a reading portfolio in a race and ethnicity class, one student said to Heather, "This is kind of cool, I'd forgotten I'd learned so much!" The main problem with this method is that the instructor is limited in his or her ability to monitor whether prep sheets are being completed and the quality of the prep sheets.



If students do not receive feedback throughout the semester, they do not have opportunities to improve their work. The hope, however, is that ill-prepared students will see good examples of preparation within their groups and adjust their work accordingly.

*WebCT/Blackboard.* Each of us has used either WebCT or Blackboard with reading groups for at least one semester. On these programs, we set up the discussion section into groups and limited visibility to only members of that group and the instructor. Students are instructed to post their reading group preparations to their group's discussion section. We do not grade the prep sheets—the electronic reading portfolio—until the end of the semester, but we are able to monitor the amount and quality of preparation throughout the semester. The main problem with this method is that students sometimes have issues with this technology and do not successfully post their prep sheets.

*Turning in sheets each class period.* The final way that we have assessed reading group prep sheets is by collecting them (and grading them) after each reading group. This is definitely the most labor-intensive option for the instructor, as it involves a steady stream of papers and grading. However, this seems to be an effective way of encouraging students to keep up with the work and providing them with feedback on their work.

### **Step 6: Students Evaluation of Group Member Participation**

In addition to grading reading group portfolios or reading group prep sheets, we also include participation in reading groups as part of the course participation grade. As noted on our syllabi, each student's participation grade is comprised of two things: the instructor's evaluation of the student's participation in reading groups and the larger class and the group's evaluation of the student's participation in his or her reading group. Students are asked to anonymously evaluate their own participation and their group members' at the end of the semester (see Appendix C). We have found that students tend to be very honest on these evaluations, and some students welcome the opportunity to relay their frustration with other students' consistent lack of preparation or their admiration for a particularly

hard-working student. We have found that student evaluations of participation typically confirm our own impression of the group dynamics.

### **Variations to Standard Reading Group Format (Seminar Format)**

In one section of a theory class, Elizabeth implemented a variation of the reading groups. With a small class of only 13 students, Elizabeth decided to forego the small group work and have students discuss the readings as a whole class. Students completed the reading preparation sheets, and each class period students enacted all of the reading roles; the only difference was that the discussion included all 13 students rather than three small groups. The students still benefited from the deep reading strategies encouraged by the different reading roles; however, Elizabeth found the full class discussions lacked quality and depth when compared to the small group discussion of previous theory classes. We discuss the positives and negatives of this format in comparison to the small readings groups further in the following.

## **EVALUATING READING GROUPS**

As noted earlier, we have successfully implemented this reading group format in a total of 12 classes. Prior to our formal evaluation of reading groups in our two most recent classes (described in the following), students often commented on the success of the groups either in our institutional instructor evaluations or in response to an open-ended question at the end of their group evaluation forms (i.e., "Do you have any further comments about your reading group or the reading group process?"). Many of the sentiments expressed in these forums were echoed in the following formal reading group evaluation.

In fall 2010, both authors used versions of the reading group format in upper-level sociology classes at their respective institutions. Heather implemented standard reading groups in a race and ethnicity course ( $n = 27$ ), and Elizabeth employed the variation to the reading group format in a theory seminar (described previously), where the 13-student class engaged in a larger group discussion rather than dividing into smaller reading



groups. Both authors administered identical surveys in each of these classes to assess the effectiveness of the reading group format (see Appendix E).

The survey we administered assessed students' likelihood to read course material, the helpfulness of reading group prep sheets for understanding readings, the helpfulness of reading group meetings for understanding readings, and how beneficial the groups as a whole were for understanding the connections between the readings and everyday life. We also included open-ended questions to assess the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the reading group process. The only differences in the survey across the two classes were that references to "reading groups" were replaced by "class discussion" on Elizabeth's version to reflect the differences in discussion format.

In each of these two most recent classes, we administered the IRB-approved survey at the end of the semester, after the completion of all reading groups. We verbally reminded students that their participation in the survey was voluntary, would have no impact on their grades, and that their survey responses would remain anonymous. We instructed students *not* to put their names on the surveys and to place them in a common envelope when they were done.

Student responses to the reading group format were overwhelmingly positive (see Table 2) and indicated that this format increased their likelihood of reading course material, helped them understand the material, and helped them to make connections between this material and everyday life. Out of the 40 students surveyed, 97.5 percent noted that they either usually (46.2 percent) or always (51.3 percent) completed the readings for the course. *All* students noted that they were as likely or more likely to complete the readings for these courses as compared to their other courses. A total of 9 students (22.5 percent) stated that they were equally likely to read for these courses, including 5 students who specifically noted that they always complete the reading for all of their courses. The remaining students marked that they were either more likely (32.5 percent) or much more likely (45.0 percent). An analysis of the qualitative responses revealed two main reasons for this. First, 11 of our students noted that they completed the readings because the prep sheets

were collected and comprised part of their grade (prep sheets made up 30 percent of students' final grades in Heather's class and 10 percent in Elizabeth's class). For example, one of Elizabeth's students noted: "I would NEVER do the readings. I would most likely skim at most. But because we HAVE to do the reading prep sheets I am FORCED to read." While this particular response may imply a disdain for the process, this student positively rated the reading preparation sheets and class discussions. More often, these students mentioned that they completed the readings because it was part of the assignment, but also because it helped them to prepare for class:

- Because I needed to fully read and comprehend in order to complete a reading prep sheet with adequate analysis, as well as participate in class discussion. (Elizabeth's class)
- The readings pertained to class discussion and were also graded assignments. (Heather's class)

A second theme that emerged was that nine of Heather's students responded that they were more likely to complete the readings than in other classes because they did not want to disappoint their reading group. We also consistently found this in our institutional and informal evaluations from previous classes in which we used reading groups. We did not find, however, this theme in the full-class discussion variation, which leads us to believe that the small-group format brings an added benefit. For example, Heather's students wrote they were more likely to read because: "It isn't cool to come to class unprepared for reading groups," "didn't want to let the group down," "to have a good group discussion," and "for the sake of discussion—I don't like sitting there having nothing to say or contribute." In this sense, we found students actively avoiding the free-rider role described by Yamane (1996). In these reading groups we incorporate student evaluations of their classmates, which Brooks and Ammons (2003) found helped reduce free-rider problems. However, more than simply reducing these problems, we found students actively engaging in "joint responsibility" (Billson 1986) for the small group's success by

**Table 2.** Summary of Quantitative Student Evaluation of Reading Groups Prep Sheets and Meetings ( $n = 40$ )

	1		2		3		4		5		Average evaluation
	Responses	Percent	Responses	Percent	Responses	Percent	Responses	Percent	Responses	Percent	
How often did you complete the readings for this course? (1-5 scale, 5 = <i>always</i> )	0	0	1	2.6	1	2.6	18	46.2	20	51.3	4.25
In comparison to other courses, how likely were you to have completed the assigned readings in this class? (1-5 scale, 5 = <i>much more likely</i> )	0	0	0	0	9	22.5	13	32.5	18	45.0	4.23
Were the reading group preparations sheets helpful for understanding the assigned readings? (1-5 Scale, 5 = <i>Always</i> )	0	0	2	5.0	6	15.0	22	55	10	25.0	4.00
Were the actual reading groups/class meetings helpful for understanding the readings? (1-5 scale, 5 = <i>always</i> )	0	0	1	2.5	3	7.5	17	42.5	19	47.5	4.35
Were the reading prep sheets and class discussions (as a whole) helpful for understanding the connections between readings and everyday life? (1-5 scale, 5 = <i>always</i> )	0	0	0	0	3	7.5	17	42.5	20	50.0	4.43

completing high-quality work not just for a grade, but in order to “not let their group down.”

Our analyses revealed that the reading group process was beneficial for students’ engagement with and understanding of course material. As shown in Table 2, the vast majority of students felt that the reading prep sheets were helpful for understanding the readings (mean = 4.0), the meetings were helpful for understanding the readings (mean = 4.35), and the process as a whole was helpful for making connections between the readings and everyday life (mean = 4.35). Making such connections is a key component to deep reading, as Roberts and Roberts (2008:128) explain: “Reading is a complex mental process that involves making meaning by making connections.” This was also evident in qualitative responses. Students indicated that both the reading preparation sheets and class discussions helped them to understand the readings, as well as to gain a different perspective on the readings and topics. Interestingly, we found that students believed these two components complemented one another but worked in different ways.

Some students reported that the reading preparation sheets primarily helped them to better understand the readings. This sentiment was more common among Elizabeth’s students, which we believe is due to this being a theory class with difficult, dense readings where the primary course objective was to comprehend the theories and concepts in the readings and to be able to apply them to real life. This is also a key component to deep reading: “Reading involves problem solving; the reader makes sense from the words on the page as she/he relates new materials to pre-existing ideas, memories, and knowledge” (Roberts and Roberts 2008:128). For example, in regard to the preparation sheets, Elizabeth’s students noted:

- They [reading prep sheets] helped me to understand the reading because I could relate it to something I know/understand. They also helped me generate questions that in turn helped me understand the concepts.
- I feel the discussions were insightful/beneficial because of the preparation. The prep sheets helped to gain a basic understanding and the discussion often helped to apply the theory.

Additionally, students in both classes also noted that the reading preparation sheets helped them see the reading or theory from a different perspective:

- I enjoyed the devil’s advocate role because it allowed me to take a critical perspective of the theory, instead of accepting it as truth. (Elizabeth’s class)
- The different roles that we each had allowed us to examine the article from different perspectives. (Heather’s class)
- I liked the devil’s advocate and creative connector the best. It’s good to see different perspectives and the flip side of things. (Heather’s class)

Roberts and Roberts (2008) argue that readings that require “perspective-taking” are a key process in deep learning, and they help students become more engaged in the material. We found this to be true, but we found that many students reported finding the class discussions more beneficial than reading groups primarily because of the different perspectives gained. The vast majority of students who reported the discussions to be more beneficial for this reason came from Heather’s class. For example, Heather’s students noted they appreciated the different perspectives of their classmates:

- I liked the fact that we all had different roles and took on different viewpoints.
- Randomly assigning the groups forced us to meet people we may not have and get fresh feedback and different outlooks.
- I thought that, as a group, we were idealistically diverse which brought good discussion to the table, so I found the meetings helpful.

We believe that more of these comments arose in Heather’s class because her reading groups followed the standard small-group format rather than the full-class variation used by Elizabeth’s class. In the standard small-group format, students necessarily engage with five different perspectives on the reading and topic. This may be particularly valued in a course that presents and discusses controversial issues.

A second, more minor theme that emerged from student comments in both classes was that the class discussions helped them to understand the readings:

- Class discussion was helpful in explaining parts of the readings I didn't understand and connecting the readings with different/new ideas. (Elizabeth's class)
- Discussion in general was most beneficial—could talk about confusions/misunderstandings. (Heather's class)
- It was good to talk with a group of people and see others points of view. It lifted the pressure of understanding it all on your own. (Heather's class)

Thus, students were able to openly ask questions and engage course material, ultimately increasing their understanding of the material.

Both Heather and Elizabeth have found that when students participate in small groups, many of them bond with their groups—bonds that lead to study groups outside of class and/or continuing friendships. This is reflected in such comments as “I LOVE my group!” and “It was a success because of the people in my group!” that appeared in Heather's evaluations of reading groups. This finding is also entirely consistent with other research on collaborative learning groups that shows increases in student social skills and connections between classmates after engaging in collaborative learning groups (e.g., McKinney and Graham-Buxton 1993; Rau and Heyl 1990). We have also both found that absenteeism and poor preparation can negatively affect the reading group experience. However, only 3 of Heather's 27 students noted that these were ever issues in their groups.

## CONCLUSION

After successfully using reading groups 12 times in four different courses at three institutions, and after completing a formal evaluation of reading groups in two different courses at two institutions, we believe this reading group process can be successfully implemented in a variety of courses and institutions. The reading preparation sheets encourage students to engage in deep reading and

multiple perspective-taking on their own, and the small group discussions further this comprehension and ability to understand a reading or topic from multiple points of view. This reading group process improves upon Roberts and Roberts's (2008) deep reading strategies in that students engage with readings not only on their own, but also in small groups. The students in our assessment noted that the small group work gave them positive pressure to complete the reading to be able to participate in the discussion, helped them understand multiple perspectives on the readings and topics, and helped them better comprehend the theories and concepts in the readings themselves. Our reading group process also overcomes some of the typical problems of group work—students earn their own grades, thus avoiding free-riding problems, and students do not need to meet outside of the regular class periods, thus avoiding transaction costs (Yamane 1996).

There are specific challenges, however, to using these reading groups. First, there is the possibility of negative group dynamics. On two occasions, Heather has encountered students who continually expressed viewpoints that were considered offensive by other group members. She found that these groups required more monitoring and instructor participation. This dynamic was certainly not the norm—generally we have been impressed with how well students engage with difficult and often highly politicized subject matter within their groups. Second, while this process typically encourages students to complete all of the readings, this does not mean that students always complete all of the readings. If most students do not complete a reading or readings, then the reading group will not go well. Finally, having fixed reading groups presents challenges when students have high rates of absenteeism. We have addressed this problem by adding a sixth member to the groups.

We believe the differences we found in the full-class variation for seminars highlights the positive aspects of our reading group process. In the full-class variation, students completed the reading preparation sheets and engaged in full-class discussion rather than small group discussions. As is common in classrooms, in the seminar a few students actively participated, some did not participate at all, and most participated from time to time.

Thus we believe that completing the reading preparation sheets alone is not ideal, but rather the reading preparation sheets in combination with small group discussion delivers the best results for student engagement and learning.

We also foresee ways to improve this reading group process based on best practices in the scholarship on teaching and learning. For example, instead of simply having students compile and turn in their reading preparation sheets at the end of the semester, we could augment this process to turn it into a portfolio by having students complete a reflection paper on their work throughout the semester. Trepagnier (2004) found that portfolios encouraged students to take more responsibility for their learning and that they improved students' ability to evaluate, reflect, and write. While this may be a beneficial addition, we have found that the reading group prep sheets and group meetings alone positively affect students' engagement with the readings and subject matter. The group format described here can provide the basis for collaborative learning within a range of courses within and beyond sociology.

## APPENDIX A

### *Reading Group Roles and Reading Preparation Sheet Guidelines*

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Below you will find descriptions of the different preparation sheet tasks and guidelines. These include descriptions of what you should prepare before class. Please bring a copy to class to use in group discussion and turn it in at the end of class.

**Discussion Leader.** Your job is to develop at least three possible discussion questions that you can discuss in groups to help everyone understand the main points of the assigned reading. Don't worry about the small details. Your task is to help people talk over the big ideas in the reading and to share reactions to the text. Be prepared with your own brief answers to your questions. You will also be responsible for facilitating the class discussion.

You will need to turn in at least three discussion questions with your own brief answers. If there is more than one reading, you will need to include at least two discussion questions per reading.

**Passage Master.** Your job is to locate a few special passages that are important in the reading

assignment. These may give key information, back up the information given, or summarize the author's key points. They might also be passages that strike your fancy for some reason, are particularly well written, or might be controversial or contradictory with other passages or other information learned in class. You will need to turn in at least two important passages per reading, including a summary of the passage in everyday terminology (in other words, how you would explain the passage to your roommate), and an explanation of why you think the passage is important.

**Creative Connector.** Your job is to help everyone make connections to other important ideas, both to ideas from this class and also to other cultural, social, political, and economic ideas. You may make connections to other reading assignments, lectures, TV shows, movies, or other experiences. You will need to turn in at least two connections, including a summary of the connections and discussion questions to help others make the connections themselves.

**Devil's Advocate.** Your job is to challenge the ideas in the article by developing a list of critical, thoughtful questions and arguments that might be raised by critics of the authors or by those with different points of view. You will need to turn in at least two challenging questions or arguments, including a brief explanation of why you are making this critique. You should have at least one challenging question per reading.

**Reporter.** The reporter is the only role that will be prepared during and after class. Your job is two-fold. First, during the discussion, you will take notes on the discussion and will summarize its main points. Be certain to also participate in the discussion! You are not tasked with acting as a scribe who tries to furiously write down what everyone says. Rather, you will act as a meta-discussion observer, looking for any areas of confusion or disagreement, which you can bring up for discussion. Second, after the discussion you will need to write a brief summary of the group discussion. Address such questions as: What did you discuss? What did you agree/disagree on? What readings or ideas did the class find most interesting or controversial? In general, how did the discussion go? Was it beneficial? You will need to turn in your report of the group discussion (described above). This will be due at the following class meeting.

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## APPENDIX B

*Sample Reading Group Role Sign-up Sheet*

On September 20th, you will decide who is completing each role on each day. The roles should rotate, and each of you should complete each role approximately twice.

Group Number:

Names of Group Members:

Date	Discussion Leader	Passage Master	Creative Connector	Devil's Advocate	Reporter
Wednesday, Sept. 22					
Wednesday, Sept. 29					
Wednesday, Oct. 6					
Wednesday, Oct. 13					
Monday, Oct. 18					
Monday, Oct. 25					
Monday, Nov. 1					
Monday, Nov. 8					
Monday, Nov. 15					
Monday, Nov. 22					

## APPENDIX C

*Group Evaluation Forms*

As noted in the syllabus, your participation grade will be based on two things:

- my evaluation of your participation in reading groups and the larger class
- your group's evaluation of your participation in your reading circle, including your self-evaluation

Please use the following form to evaluate the participation of your group members. You will complete this at the end of the semester and turn it in on the day of your final exam. Evaluate each group member, including you. DO NOT put your name on this sheet.

Group Member 1:

Overall, how well was this person prepared for reading circle discussions?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not prepared									very well prepared

Please rate the quality of this person's participation in reading circle discussions. Were their contributions generally helpful and/or insightful? Were their questions/arguments well thought-out?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
low quality									high quality

(continued)

**APPENDIX C (continued)**

Group Member 2:

Overall, how well was this person prepared for reading circle discussions?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not prepared									very well prepared

Please rate the quality of this person’s participation in reading circle discussions. Were their contributions generally helpful and/or insightful? Were their questions/arguments well thought-out?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
low quality									high quality

Group Member 3:

Overall, how well was this person prepared for reading circle discussions?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not prepared									very well prepared

Please rate the quality of this person’s participation in reading circle discussions. Were their contributions generally helpful and/or insightful? Were their questions/arguments well thought-out?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
low quality									high quality

**APPENDIX D:**

*Sample Rubric for Reading Group Portfolios/Prep Sheets*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria for grading portfolio entries:

- Are all entries included in your portfolio? You should have ten prep sheets.
- How well have you prepared for each day?
- Have you adequately read and understood the readings?
- How much effort have you put into your contribution?

*(continued)*



## APPENDIX D (continued)

	Possible Points	Points Earned	Comments
September 22	10		
September 29	10		
October 6	10		
October 13	10		
October 18	10		
October 25	10		
November 1	10		
November 8	10		
November 15	10		
November 22	10		
Total	100		

## APPENDIX E

*Evaluation of Reading Groups Process as Distributed to Students in Select Classes  
Fall 2010*

1. How often did you complete the reading for this course?

1	2	3	4	5
never	rarely	about half the time	usually	always

2. In comparison to other courses, how likely were you to have completed the assigned readings in this class?

1	2	3	4	5
much less likely	less likely	the same as other classes	more likely	much more likely

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Were the reading group preparations helpful for understanding the assigned readings?

1	2	3	4	5
never helpful	generally not helpful	don't know/neutral	generally helpful	always helpful

4. Were the actual reading group meetings helpful for understanding the assigned readings?

1	2	3	4	5
never helpful	generally not helpful	don't know/neutral	generally helpful	always helpful

APPENDIX E (continued)

5. Were the reading groups (as a whole) helpful for understanding the connections between readings and everyday life?

1	2	3	4	5
never helpful	generally not helpful	don't know/neutral	generally helpful	always helpful

6. Were there parts of the reading group process (prep sheets, meetings, etc.) that you thought were beneficial? If so, what?

7. Were there parts of the reading group process (prep sheets, meetings, etc.) that you did not find beneficial? If so, what?

8. Do you have any additional comments about reading groups? Was there anything that you particularly liked or did not like? Please include your comments below.

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1. One could call these reading group positions “statuses,” as they describe the students’ positions within the group. However, following other researchers (Billson 1986; Scarboro 2004; Yamane 1996), we use the term *role* as that more specifically describes the set of expected behaviors attached to these positions and because it avoids creating a hierarchy of statuses within the reading groups. For clarity, we use the term *role* throughout the article and when we explain the reading groups to our students.

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