

## Raising the Quality of Discussion by Scaffolding Students' Reading

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Many college students fall into the habit of coming to class unprepared, without having read assigned texts, or having read partially and superficially. As a consequence, they may take a passive stance, discussion can fall flat, and learning can be diminished. This article describes an instructional strategy for engaging students as active learners in preparing for class discussion and in the discussion itself. Using a modification of the literature circle model originated by Daniels (2002) and adapted for college learners by Larson, Young, & Leipham (2011a), the author describes a procedure in which students read, use organizing templates to write about their reading, and then draw on that writing for small-group and finally whole-class discussion. Grounded in research on active learning, reading compliance, and reading and writing to learn, the strategy presented here is a way to achieve higher quality discussion, and therefore deeper learning.

Several years ago at a teaching conference, I attended a presentation entitled "Reading to Learn: If Students Won't Read, How Can They Learn?" (Larson, Young, & Leipham, 2011b). It was the second part of that title that caught my attention. Like many of my colleagues, I continually found myself in a quandary over students' coming to class without having completed their reading assignments. Believing that students learn best when lecture is combined with other instructional methods, including discussion (Brookfield, 2015; Fink, 2013; Weimer, 2013), I have always planned for discussion to be a significant component of each class meeting. Whole-class discussions often fell flat, so I shifted to heavier reliance on small-group discussion as a warm-up for talk in the larger group. This change got students talking, but not necessarily reading, and the talk frequently seemed to sit on the surface of the issues, or even to skirt them altogether in favor of personal storytelling that might be tangentially related to the central course concepts. Seeking solutions, I flocked to the conference session along with a roomful of faculty members from other colleges.

We professors cajole, incentivize, prod, and even punish to get students to read, in hopes that if they read, they will be prepared for class, discussions will be more meaningful, and learning will increase. Sometimes, when my students insist they have read the material, I wonder what that reading looks like. Do they breeze through the pages in order to finish and move on to the next assignment? Do they read with marker in hand, highlighting whole paragraphs so that the text ends up drenched in yellow? Or do they read laboriously, sentence by sentence from beginning to end, with little idea of why they are reading or how to make useful sense of it? I wanted my students not only to read, but to read thoughtfully and purposefully so that when they came to class, the work we did together would also be more meaningful.

The conference presenters gave me a strategy: *reading communities*, to use their term (Larson, Young,

& Leipham, 2011a; 2011b), more commonly known as book clubs or literature circles (Daniels, 2002). In fact, as a literacy educator, I knew the strategy very well; I had even used the strategy when the preservice teachers in my literature courses gathered to discuss children's novels. It had never occurred to me to adapt the strategy in other courses for discussion of college-level texts. I returned from the conference in the fall of 2011 and revised my approach to a literacy education course the very next semester. In this article, I will provide a foundation for using the literature circle approach in college classrooms and then describe in detail how I have shaped the approach, initially inspired by Larson et al. (2011b), over nine semesters in order to achieve higher quality discussion—and therefore deeper learning.

### Review of Literature

#### Discussion as Active Learning

Notable voices on teaching and learning in higher education, such as Brookfield (2015), Fink (2013), and Weimer (2013), have argued effectively for approaches that engage students as active learners and critical thinkers. In his review of research on active learning, Prince (2004) defined *active learning* as "any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. In short, active learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing" (p. 223). Active learning, then, refers primarily to mental activity that is meaning-seeking and reflective in nature. Reading and listening, acts that are often viewed as passive, can be quite active, especially when readers have developed skills for critical reading and thinking. Teaching to support active learning requires instructors to do less telling so that students do more of the work of learning (Weimer, 2013). When professors encourage students to engage in tasks like asking questions, making connections, and summarizing discussion, students necessarily take a

more active role in their learning, and delivering information need not be the instructor's central instructional approach.

Faculty often come to active learning strategies as "an antidote to passive learners" (Weimer, 2013, p. 124), wanting to reduce boredom and engage students; additionally, faculty often discover the power of active learning for achieving a variety of educational outcomes (Fink, 2013). Benefits of approaches associated with active learning in a variety of disciplines are well documented; a review of that research is beyond the scope of this article. Some of the most commonly identified benefits, however, include improved concept learning (Akinoglu & Tandogan, 2007), improved exam performance (Freeman et al., 2014; Lento, 2016; Pierce & Fox, 2012), persistence in the course (Ueckert, Adams, & Lock, 2011) and course pass rates (Freeman et al., 2014; Lento, 2016), as well as more positive reactions from students (Armbruster, Patel, Johnson, & Weiss, 2009; Cavanagh, 2011) and greater motivation for learning (Miller & Metz, 2014).

Students often express a preference for discussion-oriented classes over those that are heavily lecture based, and many faculty members agree (AlKandari, 2012; Jensen & Owen, 2010; Nunn, 1996). Among the potential benefits of discussion as a mode of learning are stronger communication skills (AlKandari, 2012; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008), increased achievement in courses (Dudley-Marling, 2013), the development of critical thinking skills (Hamann, Pollock, & Wilson, 2012; Jones, 2008), and exposure to a greater variety of ideas (Parker & Hess, 2001). When students discuss texts they have read, "discussion widens the scope of any individual's understanding of a text by building into that understanding the interpretations and life experiences of others" (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 275). Small-group discussion can be especially appealing to students because they find that it supports their learning more than whole-class or online discussion (Hamann et al., 2012).

These benefits, however, are not always present with discussion (Dudley-Marling, 2013). Factors such as the instructor's skill at facilitating discussion (Dudley-Marling, 2013) and students' level of comfort in the classroom setting (Dallimore et al., 2008) influence the quality of discussion. Any professor who has incorporated discussion into a course knows well the tendency for a small percentage of students to do most of the talking (Nunn, 1996; Weaver & Qi, 2005) and for discussion groups to get off task occasionally. Additionally, the quality of discussion suffers when students have not adequately prepared by reading or doing other foundational assignments (Foster et al., 2009).

Faculty members have proposed a variety of remedies for these challenges. For example, providing incentives through grading (Foster et al., 2009; Quinn & You, 2010) and providing instruction in the purposes of discussion and discussion skills (Brank & Wylie, 2013; Bruss, 2009; Parker & Hess, 2001) can increase students' preparedness and raise the quality of discussion. Simply incorporating small-group discussion rather than relying solely on whole-class discussion can be helpful in engaging more students (AlKandari, 2012). Many strategies have been offered (e.g., Brookfield & Preskill, 2016) including ensuring that each student has a specific role within the group (AlKandari, 2012; Daniels, 1994, 2002).

### Reading Compliance

Regardless of the format employed for discussion, when students read, discussion is likely to be more engaging and fruitful (Carkenord, 1994). Studies confirm, however, what many faculty members experience: most students spend very little time reading in preparation for class, or they do not read at all (Baier, Hendricks, Gorden, Hendricks, & Cochran, 2011; Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004). When asked what would motivate their reading, students say they want incentives, including quizzes and supplementary assignments that help them understand the readings (Hoelt, 2012). Students also want more guidance from their professors on how to read effectively and how to focus their reading on the important ideas (Berry, Cook, Hill, & Stevens, 2011).

Faculty members have employed quite a wide variety of approaches to motivating reading (Lewis & Hanc, 2012), many with good effect. Reading compliance increases, for example, when instructors teach in ways that value students' reading by asking questions about the reading in class, engaging students in using the information they read, and ensuring that texts are discussed (Brost & Bradley, 2006). Instructors should also monitor reading compliance as a way of signaling that they value the reading (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000).

Attaching a grade to the reading and its associated assignments has also been found to increase compliance (McMullen, 2013). Quizzes, for instance, can serve as an effective incentive for reading which, in turn, can have a positive impact on class participation and learning. Students have reported that they read more carefully when they know they will be quizzed (Marchant, 2002). Ruscio (2001) reported the anecdotal observation that with randomly administered reading quizzes, students asked better questions, and the quality of discussion increased as reading compliance increased.

Quizzes may not always be the most effective instructional strategy, however. Various forms of writing about reading in advance of class discussion can be more effective than quizzes in motivating students to complete their assigned reading (Hoeft, 2012), preparing students for class discussion (Weinstein & Wu, 2009), and encouraging deeper, more thoughtful reading (Roberts & Roberts, 2008). Instructor feedback to students' writing about text provides additional benefit. Ryan (2006) found that worksheets designed to support comprehension of course texts, coupled with feedback from the professor, were more successful than quizzes or the worksheets without feedback in engaging students' interests in the material and yielding better performance on exams.

### **Critical Reading as It Relates to Discussion**

Instructors want students to engage in deeper, more meaningful reading—reading to transform (Roberts & Roberts, 2008). We want our students to read not only for minutiae, but for the big ideas authors are trying to communicate in disciplinary writing (Roberts & Roberts, 2008; Tomasek, 2009). The term “critical reading” is often used to describe this kind of deep reading in which readers question, interpret, connect new information to previous knowledge, examine their own perspectives and assumptions, and propose solutions (Tomasek, 2009). This is the kind of reading that multiple choice quizzes may undercut (Roberts & Roberts, 2008).

Assignments that provide incentive to read and also support critical reading are generally open-ended, requiring students to express their understanding in original ways. In the Larson et al. (2011a) study, for example, students reported that completing worksheets designed to elicit different ways of thinking about text increased both reading compliance and content learning in small discussion groups. The worksheets, like those originally suggested by Daniels (1994) to support younger readers' comprehension of texts appear to provide a similar scaffold for adults. In another study, instructors offered students choice from an array of open-ended response options designed to help develop strategies for comprehending complex texts. These open-ended, student-designed responses to assigned readings increased reading compliance, enhanced students' comprehension, and improved the quality of class discussion (Roberts & Roberts, 2008). Writing prompts designed to elicit specific kinds of critical thinking, when answered prior to discussion, led to a “more active and dynamic learning experience” (p. 128) and richer, more engaged discussion (Tomasek, 2009). In another study, a structured written weekly assignment

targeted reading skills such as identifying an author's thesis and supporting evidence. Students' writing on this assignment reflected improved reading skills over the course of the semester, with the most notable improvement occurring for students who scored lowest on a reading pretest (Van Camp & Van Camp, 2013).

This kind of focused writing about reading can accomplish more than simply preparing students for subsequent discussion, however. Writing itself is “a powerful means of learning” (Gere, 1985, p. 2) that promotes higher levels of thought. Focused writing scaffolds reading which, in turn, improves participation and the quality of discussion and ultimately student learning. The remainder of this article describes a procedure my students and I refer to as “reading groups,” in which students read, use organizing templates to write about their reading, and then draw on that writing for small-group and finally whole-class discussion.

### **Reading Groups as an Instructional Strategy for Improving Discussion**

The concept of literature circles has been around since at least 1994 when Daniels first published his model for use with K-12 learners. Similar to the book clubs with which many adults are familiar, literature circles are small groups of students who read and then gather to discuss their reading. The literature circle model was first described and later refined by Daniels (1994; 2002; Harvey & Daniels, 2015) to scaffold students' critical reading and promote more meaningful, engaged discussion. One of Daniels's unique contributions was identifying a variety of roles discussants might play for the purposes of helping students understand the range of ways readers think about texts - thereby improving reading comprehension—and enriching the resulting discussion. Those roles included a question generator, a summarizer, an investigator who contributes supplementary background information, and so forth. For each role, Daniels offered a template for making notes and preparing talking points. This is the model that Larson et al. (2011b) adapted for use in college classrooms and that I have further shaped for use in a course I teach two or three times a year in a teacher preparation program.

Larson et al. (2011a; 2011b) adapted the literature circle model for use with college students, and I have found that it serves effectively for my students. Over the nine or so semesters since I began using this approach, I have adapted it further so that it works well for my students and me. My purpose here is to provide a detailed view of my implementation of reading groups so that others might also adapt it for their own use. The basic process is nearly identical to the one Larson and her colleagues shared at that

conference in 2011. In my master's level teacher preparation course in language arts, we employ the following process for the assignment I simply call "reading groups": For most of our weekly class meetings, students read assigned texts and make notes using their choice from among several templates I provide. They submit their reading notes electronically at least 24 hours in advance of class; I read them, often responding with brief comments, and use a very simple rubric to evaluate the quality of students' thinking. For discussion in class, students gather in randomly assigned reading groups, using the notes to guide their discussion. Additionally, I pose problems or questions derived from students' notes. Following small-group talk about the readings, I pull the whole class together for debriefing and summarizing. This process occupies about an hour of a three-hour class meeting; the remainder of our time is occupied with writing workshops, peer modeling of literacy strategy lessons, and other shared literacy experiences.

Students' reading notes are the centerpiece of our literature circle process, allowing for choice of format (Roberts & Roberts, 2008), offering incentive to prepare (Hoeft, 2012), and providing structure and direction to scaffold students' thinking (Berry et al., 2011). The description below includes logistical details of how I employ literature circles, with emphasis on the writing that students do before they come to class discussions. I will also describe some adjustments I have made over time and some practical suggestions for other instructors.

### The Reading Notes Assignment

The assignment is simple. Students read, make notes on their reading, and submit their notes electronically at least 24 hours in advance of class. They choose from among eight templates for the notes; four are derived from Daniels's (2002) work on literature circles, initially adapted by Larson et al. (2011b) (available at [http://www.uwec.edu/CETL/fellows/Reading\\_to\\_Learn.htm](http://www.uwec.edu/CETL/fellows/Reading_to_Learn.htm)) and then adapted further to suit my purposes. Since his original conception of the various roles readers might take, Daniels has shifted emphasis away from adherence to specific roles because the worksheets that accompany the roles can become an end in themselves and result in flat, mechanistic discussions (Daniels, 2002; Harvey & Daniels, 2015). In order to avoid this phenomenon, I have adapted his model in several ways. I do provide templates for students' reading notes. However, to ensure that the templates best suit the needs of my students and my course, I have selected four of Daniels's eight roles that are most appropriate for the context, I have further adapted templates shared by Larson et al. (2011b), and I have created additional templates not based on Daniels's (1994; 2002) roles. Rather than have students rotate through the various roles in order to gain understanding of all of them as Daniels

originally suggested, I allow students to choose any template they prefer. Although I do encourage them to try a variety of templates for their reading notes, students have the freedom to stick with a single format all semester if they wish. Additionally, students know that I read and make use of their notes, referring to specific ideas from the notes in class. I believe that my publicly and explicitly employing what they have written in their notes leads students to view the notes as purposeful (Brost & Bradley, 2006). In an online or hybrid course, this same process could be used. If the course were asynchronous, students could actually comment on each other's notes or make specific reference to peers' notes in written discussions.

The four roles we borrow from Daniels (2002) include a Discussion Director, whose job is to generate questions for the group to tackle; a Content Connector, whose job is to integrate concepts from the reading with information from previous courses, life experiences, and other knowledge sources; a Literary Luminary, whose job is to identify passages of significance (defined by the student in that role); and a Word Wizard, whose job is to identify words or phrases that are essential for understanding the texts. Additional templates I developed include the following: Quote-Question-Talking Point (QQT) (adapted from Connor-Greene, 2005), in which students identify an important quotation from the text, a question about the text, and a talking point derived from the text; Four Squares, consisting of four boxes, each with a prompt (e.g., "One thing I didn't really understand. . .," "An essential principle in this reading was . . .") (adapted from Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002); Magnet Words (adapted from Buehl, 2014), in which students identify at least two "magnet words" that serve to organize the essential content of the texts, along with conceptually related words and rationales for their choices; and Big Three, an original format in which students identify three central concepts from the reading and provide a list of supporting text passages for each (see Appendices A, B, C, and D). Whichever format students select, they are encouraged to think about central concepts, to synthesize those concepts with previous learning and experience, and to integrate their thinking with the literacy theory I use as a framework for organizing course content.

To keep this assignment from overwhelming the students or me, I provide time guidelines of thirty minutes to an hour, both for students to make their notes (in addition to what would be the usual reading time) and for me to read the submitted assignments. My purpose is not to respond to every idea a student puts forth, but instead to let students know whether the quality of their thinking is on the right track and what might be most useful to bring up for group discussion. The content of their thinking as reflected in the notes is less important than their attempt to

make sense of the texts. We will address the content in class, together. I set a timer as a reminder not to get caught up in giving lengthy feedback. The rubric is quite simple. The notes get one or two points depending on the quality of thinking they demonstrate, and no points if the notes are incomplete or if they reflect only superficial thinking (see Appendix E).

### Using the Notes in Reading Group Discussions

Students check the feedback before coming to class and bring printed copies of their notes. (Relying on electronic copies in class tended to interfere with group engagement due to the scrolling and searching and dealing with devices, resulting in less eye contact among group members and less attentive listening to each other.) When it is time for the discussion, students move to their reading groups. In the early part of the semester, cards with their names are displayed on the table in front of them so that they can easily speak to each other by name. In Daniels's (2002) model, the life of a literature circle lasts as long as the discussion of a particular novel or set of texts, and then new circles form as the students move on to new texts. My students tend to pick a table on the first night of class and sit in the same place all semester. In order to ensure that they hear a variety of voices for these discussions, therefore, I do assign the reading groups even though, in general, I place a high value on student choice. I use the university's learning management system (Blackboard Learn) to form random groups and to reassign group membership about every four weeks. Most students report that they like this method and that the regrouping every few weeks is beneficial.

The members of each reading group determine how they want to proceed. In some cases, each member takes a turn to speak briefly before the discussion opens. In others, a student who is particularly eager to raise a point will start right in, and discussion flows freely from there. Although I require that they have their notes printed and their texts in front of them, students make use of these resources in different ways. Some begin by referring to their notes, while others seldom refer to them; the writing and thinking have done their work, and most students approach the discussion well prepared. If discussion flags, students consult their notes and shift to a new topic. After 10 or 15 minutes of small-group talk, I often interject a provocative question or passage from a student's reading notes, the groups talk further, and then we have a summative whole-class discussion, during which groups share their insights or puzzlements and the class engages in further talk about the texts.

### Scaffolding Students' Reading, Writing, and Talking

Since many students have participated in book clubs with friends, or are at least aware of the concept, the basic idea of reading groups is familiar. To introduce the assignment, I provide a one-page overview listing its purposes and procedures, as well as evaluation criteria. I try to make my expectations for students' thinking and participation very clear. The students in our program are generally very familiar with reflective writing and summarizing, which is different from the qualities I value in the notes and the discussion: a focus on big ideas and guiding principles, a willingness to consider multiple points of view, and an attempt to synthesize ideas across texts and experiences. These qualities are embedded in the rubric and in other information I provide in Blackboard, and I make them explicit in class.

I introduce the templates that are available for students' notes and provide completed examples from previous semesters, as well as some I have created, to help students envision what good reading notes look like. We examine these models together and talk about the kinds of thinking they reveal. Additionally, I scaffold their reading by providing guiding questions to help students focus their thinking on the big ideas, rather than the small, interesting details, in a set of texts. Students are not required to answer the guiding questions; the questions are designed simply to point their attention to the most essential concepts and issues of the course. Throughout the semester I display compelling, insightful excerpts from students' reading notes, and we use these both as discussion fodder and as additional explicit examples of the kind of thinking I want students to engage in.

Also, a couple of times early in the semester we take a few minutes prior to small-group discussion to talk about what a good discussion looks like; based on that conversation, I generate a handout with a list of good discussion practices, and for several weeks, I remind students to look over that handout as they get into their groups. This combination of scaffolds for students' reading, writing, and talking helps them build an understanding of how to prepare and participate effectively, as well as why the reading group process is valuable. Although my work occurs in a teacher education context, everything about this approach is easily adaptable to courses in any discipline in which discussion of readings occurs.

### Student Response

At the end of each semester, I administer my own anonymous electronic questionnaire with questions about each of the major components of the course.

Table 1  
*Preferred Means of Assessing Understanding of Readings*

Number of responses ( $n = 30$ )	Preferred Means of Assessment
16	Reading notes (as described in this article)
8	No preference expressed
5	In-class quizzes
2	Oral class participation only
1	Mid-term and final exams only

*Note.* Two students' comments stated more than one preference.

Each prompt reminds students of the purposes of the assignment or activity and asks about their experience and suggestions. Although I modify the wording slightly from one semester to another, this version of the reading notes prompt from the most recent semester's questionnaire is representative:

The purposes of the reading notes were to help you prepare for discussion, to encourage you to do the reading, to allow me to gauge your initial understanding, and to guide how I approached instruction. Did we achieve these purposes? How did the reading notes assignment work for you? What did you think of the balance between reading notes and the quizzes on the weeks when you had major assignments due? Did you find that the templates made any difference in the way you prepared for class? In the quality of group discussions? What modifications would you suggest?

In two recent semesters, 30 of 36 students (83.3%) responded to the questionnaire. Their responses about assessment preferences are represented in Table 1.

As the table demonstrates, not everyone loves the reading notes. This kind of preparation takes more time than simply reading and showing up to talk. Most students, however, do prefer the reading notes to the one-question quizzes I give on some weeks. For instance, one student wrote the following:

I am surprised I am saying to have a quiz instead, because I am one who has bad test anxiety. It was just TOO overwhelming, and I felt I was scrounging to make sure I said the right thing to get 2 points each week, and each week spent less on the actual good information in the reading.

These kinds of comments remind me that learners have different needs and preferences (Weinstein & Wu, 2009). They do have choice in the format for their reading notes, and they have many other opportunities to make choices about their own learning in the course. The course *can* be overwhelming due to the volume of content addressed to meet teacher certification

requirements. This kind of feedback is what prompted me to drop the reading notes requirement on the weeks when students have other assignments due in the course. Instead, I substitute a one-question in-class quiz designed to encourage reading and roughly assess their initial understanding of the texts. On those evenings, with other work to do and the absence of reading notes, the level of preparedness—and quality of discussion—always seem to drop. For everyone's sanity, though, I have settled on this compromise.

Much more commonly, students respond positively, as in these examples:

- I definitely think that the reading notes were effective tools for learning and comprehending the texts. In many classes, there is not enough incentive or structure and it is too easy to skip a week of reading. In this class, the routine of reading notes was helpful. I liked choosing from the role sheets and having the freedom to decide what role sheet to use each week. I also liked being allowed to stick to the same role sheet if we wanted. They served as excellent guides to support my reading and understanding of the text. They also helped a lot during reading group discussions.
- I felt like I was reading for a purpose, and some points I was looking forward to talking with my classmates the next week. . . . As a result, the role sheets helped me to prepare for class by having them printed out, and helped us to focus on the key details in our group discussions, rather than ideas we liked. . . . I like that it was only worth two points. It was enough to help me to want to do it, but I wasn't too overwhelmed each week. I more read for enjoyment and because I wanted to learn.
- My suggestion for this is, I would keep using the reading roles sheets and other scaffolding that you use, because it means more than just taking a test. Also, using strategies like these stay with me much longer than taking a test. I liked doing the reading notes; it was more like we were

able to do some constructed thinking to developed a deeper meaning of the information.

The students in the sample found a range of benefits for reading notes. The most frequent comments (17 students) connected the reading notes assignment to enhanced thinking about the texts, as seen in the students' comments above: Students said that using the templates and making structured notes caused them to think more about the reading, facilitated their construction of meaning and helped them remember more about what they read. Students reported that making their notes and knowing they would be discussing with peers gave them a purpose for reading that is lacking in some courses. They felt that work they put into the reading notes prepared them for and supported the discussion.

From a pragmatic standpoint, students appreciated the variety provided by the templates and the freedom to choose which format they used for their notes. Several found value in the structure provided by the templates and the submission in advance of class. Comments about the amount of time required were mixed; two said that the notes took too much time, and three said the load was reasonable, especially after they got the hang of it. Several preferred the notes to quizzes because of test anxiety.

In a separate question, I ask students' opinions about the course texts: whether they provide a variety of perspectives and sufficient content to help students' feel confident about their preparation for teaching literacy. Students overwhelmingly like the course texts, but what I have been most struck by is that they often provide very specific, content-based reasons for their responses. The students who have written these structured reading notes and participated in the reading group discussions can, at the close of the semester, write about their reading with obvious familiarity and confidence. For example, one student wrote the following:

I enjoyed the textbooks. I found [Book A] to be a much easier read than [Book B] because of the way it was laid out. I will definitely use both of those as resources in future teaching. . . . [Book C], I felt, could have had chapters or excerpts of chapters pulled and featured as handouts. I didn't feel we covered that book in depth the way we covered the others. For the most part, I enjoyed the [supplementary] articles. I found that there was not an overwhelming amount, and it was a nice accompaniment to the other reading assignments.

Although I do not have this same information from students prior to implementing this approach, I would be greatly surprised if their responses about course texts

would have been as specific as the ones students provide now.

Anecdotally, students sometimes report that part of their motivation for taking their work seriously is the desire *not* to be the group member who does not carry his or her weight; they become annoyed—sometimes visibly—when a classmate is repeatedly unprepared. They come to expect a higher level of discussion.

### Conclusion

Whereas in past semesters whole class or small-group discussion often began with an awkward silence, that opening silence is now rare. I often hear students discussing the readings as they enter the classroom. The big majority of students come to class having read and, more than that, having taken at least a few minutes to *think* about the reading, give it context and substance, and prepare to discuss it meaningfully.

Since I began using the reading group procedure, the benefits documented by Larson and her colleagues (2011a) have been evident for my students. I am learning to support my students' active meaning making through reading and discussion, and student reports and my own observations confirm that students understand texts better, feel accountable for reading and participating, believe the reading notes have a positive impact on their learning, experience more meaningful discussion, and are more likely to complete assigned reading (Larson et al., 2011a).

The quality of thinking as evidenced in students' notes strengthens over time as they develop and hone their skills of identifying the most important ideas and synthesizing ideas across sources. My informal observations suggest that this growth in students' thinking and level of preparation spills over into both the small-group and whole class discussions. In both contexts, students refer to their texts more often than I have seen in semesters past, flipping through pages in search of some passage to support an argument and explicitly referring to specific passages as they talk. I have observed that my students are able to sustain focused discussion for longer periods of time, and shifts to off-topic talk are fewer. Although it is still possible for a student to fake her way through the notes and discussion, faking is more difficult and less likely.

Each semester, the assignment evolves a little more, another kink gets worked out, and I learn how to articulate purposes and expectations more effectively. The reading notes process takes time, both in and out of class, and there are moments when I say to myself, "Why are you doing this? Does it make that much difference?" My answer is always yes. I do it because of the difference it has made in our engagement with each other, with ideas and, more importantly, in my students' learning.

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## Appendix A

## QQT Response Guide

Identify the quote, question, and talking point and—for each—explore it a bit to show your thinking. Remember to work toward synthesis in your learning. Each item should address a different text/chapter or a significantly different topic from the other two.

Quote: One really thought-provoking passage to quote. Not just any passage will do! When you find yourself thinking, “Wow, I never thought about it that way,” or “Really? I’m not sure I agree with that,” or “I’m not understanding what the author means here,” then you’ve found your quote.

Your quote and response:

Question: One really thought-provoking question for your group to consider together. Use what you know about open-ended questions that encourage divergent responses and about authentic questions (questions to which you really want an answer) as opposed to “test questions” (questions to which you know the answer).

Your question and response:

Talking Point: One additional talking point—something that you’re dying to talk about with your group, whether it would fit in one of the previous two categories or not. What’s the juiciest part of the readings, the issue or big idea that really gets you excited, confused, or frustrated?

Your talking point and response:

[Note that the response spaces in each of the templates expand as students type.]

(Adapted from Connor-Greene, 2005)

## Appendix B

## Four Squares

<p>[Some theoretical framework] helped me think about this reading by . . . .</p>	<p>One thing I didn't really understand as I read was . . . .  . (or, I understood it but am not sure how it would really work)</p>
<p>I think one of the essential principles underlying these texts is . . . .</p>	<p>When I read about _____, it really struck a chord with me because . . . .</p>

(Adapted from Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002)

## Appendix C

## Big Three

Big ideas cut across one or more books, chapters, or articles. They express principles that guide literacy teaching and learning and curriculum. They focus on fundamental ideas that direct our decision-making processes as teachers.

Identify three big ideas from this week's reading, and make a case to support them, as follows:

- Main Ideas: State each as a sentence.
  - Supporting Details: Show your thinking that led to the main idea. *Pull specific evidence from across texts*, and explain how they support the main idea you've identified.
- 

Main Idea #1:

Supporting Details:

Main Idea #2:

Supporting Details:

Main Idea #3:

Supporting Details:

## Appendix D

## Magnet Words

Text/p.#: Support:	Text/p.#: Support:
<b>Magnet Word 1:</b>	
Text/p.#: Support:	Text/p.#: Support:

Considering all the texts in this set, identify *two* magnet words—words around which many essential ideas cluster. Do *not* choose a word that is the main topic. E.g., If the texts are all about comprehension, do not choose “comprehension” as a magnet word. Too easy!

For each magnet word, provide at least four specific instances of support from the texts.

You may add more boxes if needed.

## Appendix E

## Rubric for Reading Notes

0 Points	1 Point	2 Points
Incomplete or late, or doesn't appear that you have read all the texts; notes are very cursory.	Dig a little deeper: Complete but may focus on minor details, makes some connections among ideas but may not develop a line of thinking, may focus primarily on insignificant details, or may not prove useful for the group. Your notes seem to be written in a vacuum, independent of other readings.	You've got it! Complete, focuses on central concepts, develops a line of thinking about each idea and makes connections among ideas, will be useful for group. You're clearly building a cohesive set of ideas from week to week.