

Make readings and discussions really work

By: Dr. Wong Wing Hung
From: Office of University General Education
Year Starting: 2010

Effective readings and discussions

In the tertiary level of education, giving students home readings and then conducting in-class discussions based on the readings is a common learning activity in many courses. However, the effectiveness of this type of reading and discussion activity rely heavily on student participation – students really prepared the readings at home and they are willing to participate in the class discussions. To maximize students' learning outcome, improvement on the design of reading and discussion activity should be made.

With regard to this, the activity design in one of the general education courses in CUHK, UGFN1000, *In Dialogue with Nature*, could certainly be treated as a good example. The following strategies were employed to systematically guide and prepare students so that they gained the most from the readings and the follow-up discussions. The strategies can be listed as follows:

- Appropriate introduction of the readings in the previous class
- All-in-one package of readings with questions and help on reading/ highlights of main points
- Online reading guides provided during the reading stage
- Incorporating the buzz group feature into the design of in-class discussion
- Followed up online discussion after the lesson

In this course, the assigned reading articles were an important components linking up different parts of the course. Before the start of the discussion of each reading article, there would be a preparation lecture in which teachers would introduce the background of the article, such as the relevant information as well as related science theories and concepts. It is believed that such act could not only help students to generate a simple picture of the article that they were going to read in that week, but also made it easier for them to comprehend the content as a result of having some basic understanding of the article before actually reading.

In students' reading stage, two teaching strategies, including course pack together with online reading guides have been used. The course pack was in fact a package of readings required in this course and the most special feature was that study questions would be added in different parts of the articles in order to consolidate students' understanding through critical thinking. Apart from this, reading guides containing the outline as well as the main points of the articles would also be online, so that students could know what aspects of the articles should be mainly focused and paid more attention. Consequently, these strategies could certainly help students to well prepare for the discussion.

As for the in-class discussion, buzz group was the most distinctive feature helping students to deeply investigate different parts of the articles. Buzz group is actually one of the peer learning types which requires students from different small groups with different topics to share the things they learnt to the whole class. Through incorporating this concept to the discussion design, students in this course were divided into several small groups limited to six or seven people and each group would be responsible to discuss one aspect of the article. Presentations were needed to be given after the discussion. By listening to the presentations from other groups with different topics, students could thus have more comprehensive understanding on the entire article.

To continue students' learning, follow up discussion would be proceeded in the online forum. After each in-class discussion section, new discussion topics would be posted to the forum for students to express their point of views there. Topics were usually the extended questions from the in-class discussion and they might be closely related to daily life. Besides, teachers would also give comments to each student's post. Such arrangement could not only allow students to further consolidate their knowledge through learning from each others, but also allow teachers to check for students' understanding towards the reading articles.

Advantages of the learning activities

Apart from those advantages mentioned above, this kind of well structured reading and discussion activity also contained various advantages benefiting students' learning. The positive impacts brought by this learning activity could be summarized as follows,

- Maximized students' learning outcome from the reading articles.
- Ensured that students at least had some preparation for in-class discussion by introducing the background information to them and guiding them to read.
- Consolidated students' understanding to the knowledge through deeply studying specific areas of the readings and presenting their findings to peers in the discussion.
- Understood the knowledge from different perspectives suggested by others who came from different major departments.
- Developed a good learning atmosphere with higher learning motivation and support from peers and teachers.

Feedback from students

In order to collect students' opinion to further improve the teaching quality of this course, a survey has been conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2011. With reference to the results, most students were satisfied with the course design which rather emphasized on reading and discussion. Here are some of the students' feedbacks in the open end questions:

“It is good to make up groups to share every member's opinions during the discussion.”

“I like the pace of conducting this course, especially the abundant time for thinking and discussion.”

“I go through more about the text materials before going to the discussion session.”“I learnt to deal with problems from different angles.”