

# Executive Summary: Reading Circles Collaborative Learning Activity Evaluation

## Purpose

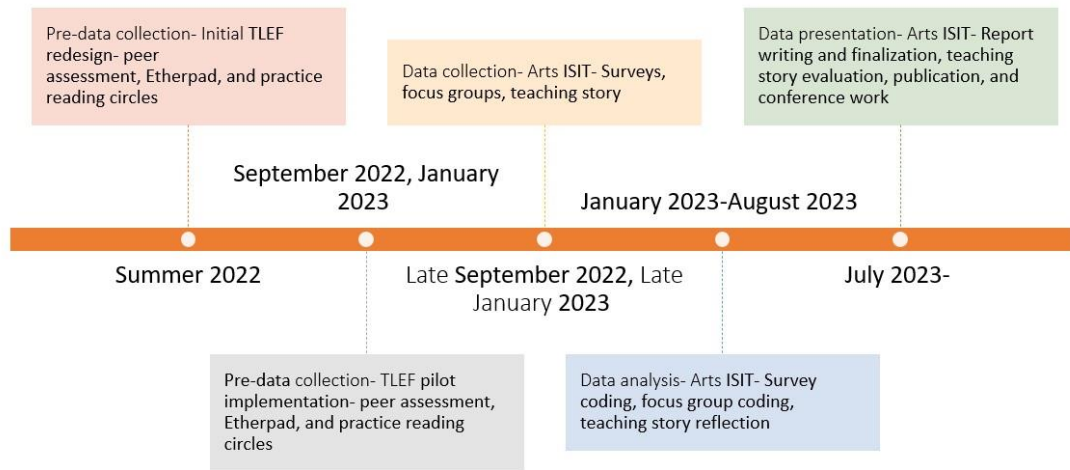
The purpose of this evaluation was to collect student feedback to better understand their experience with a collaborative activity, the Reading Circles, implemented in WRDS 150B during the 2022W1 and 2022W2 terms by Dr. Laura Baumvol. The Reading Circles activity includes collaborative reading and writing components and provides students with opportunities to critically read and analyze scholarly texts, to share and discuss their ideas orally with their peers, to practice collaborative notetaking and writing on an online platform, and to engage in self and peer-assessment regarding their peers and their individual contributions to the activity. The evaluation results will be used to help assess the effectiveness of the activity in order to provide insights that may be used to enhance the design of collaborative activities for future iterations of the course as well as other related courses.

## Methods

Student feedback was collected from WRDS150B students in both the 2022W1 and 2022W2 semesters from six separate sections through an experience survey and focus groups. There were 173 responses to the survey submitted. There were four focus groups conducted, two per term, with a total of 22 students participating. This data was statistically analyzed and qualitatively coded using the Qualtrics Stats-IQ and Text-IQ features and with manual researcher correction. Student grades were not altered by participating in the survey and focus groups. A monetary incentive (gift card) was offered to focus group participants. Interviewers conducted the focus groups via the Zoom online communication platform, and transcript recordings were corrected, analyzed, and summarized via qualitative coding and clustered to address recurring and novel themes in student responses. The design of the survey and focus group questions, as well as the data analysis was done by Dr. Baumvol in collaboration with Arts ISIT staff Meena Kahlon and Jason Myers and Neve Eilam, Undergraduate Academic Assistant.

## Project Timeline

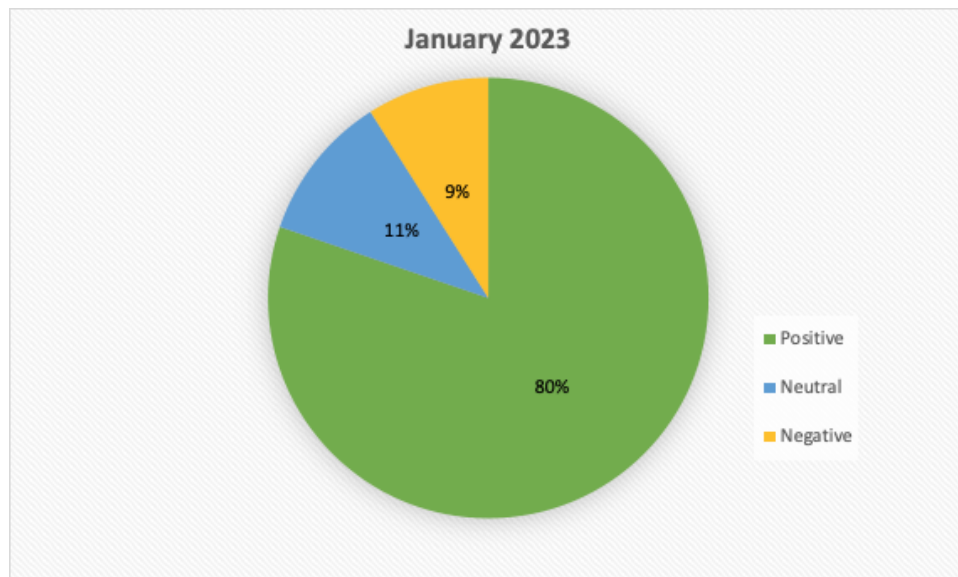
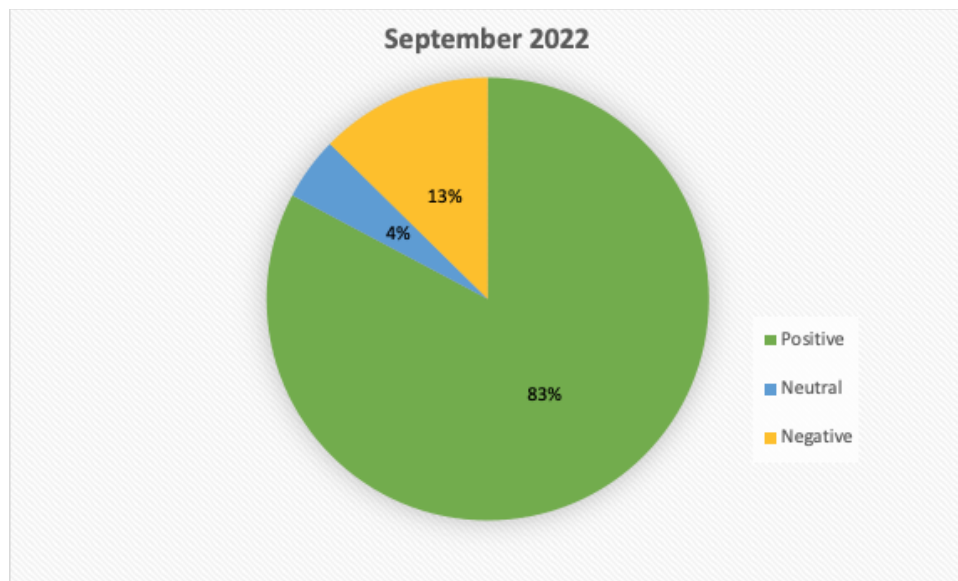
The following timeline describes the development of the inquiry into the WRDS150B Reading Circles activity across multiple terms, including the planning, investigation, and analysis conducted. While the timeline has a focus on data collected in 2022W1/W2, work on the project began prior to this period.



## Findings and Conclusions

Overall, student feedback from the course surveys and focus group sessions indicated that students felt that the Reading Circles activity was beneficial to their learning and helped them to develop not only their individual reading and writing skills, but transferable skills in collaborative writing and group decision making, as well as their academic development. Survey responses regarding student perceptions of learning outcomes were generally positive, as seen in the following results:

Q12\_6: Collaborating with other students in this group activity was beneficial to my learning in the course.



### Reading Circle Benefits

- **Learning benefits:** Generally, students expressed positive views toward the learning benefits of collaborative writing. When asked if collaborating with other students in this activity benefited their learning, 82.8% (2022W1) and 77.5% (2022W2) responded positively.
- **Collaborative skills development:** Most participants claimed they could practice newfound or previously acquired writing, collaborative negotiation, and discussion skills, likely making them more proficient in collaborative writing.

- **Engaging with diverse perspectives:** Students identified that engaging with diverse perspectives through discussion of the scholarly readings and with writing the final submission led to personal development both in terms of course concepts, as well as in collaborative skills. Students claimed that although group work required more time than engaging in the activity individually, it allowed them to produce richer and more well-rounded work resulting from the discussion.
- **Development of classroom community:** Students reported that keeping the same Reading Circles activity group across multiple weeks of the course made them feel more connected to peers. This led to a positive impact on their sense of community in the class.
- **Peer Assessment:** Student feedback on the peer assessment component of the Reading Circles activity was largely positive. Most students indicated that peer assessment was effective in increasing grade fairness, as it provided an important mechanism to address variation in peer contributions. This supports the decision to integrate a peer and self-assessment component into the activity to address student concerns about grading fairness and equitable effort and distribution of work in the group activities. Although students did not indicate that peer assessment helped their learning, this could be attributed to the fact that peer assessment was only conducted at the very end of the Reading Circles. Therefore, introducing peer assessment at different stages of the activity might positively impact students' learning process by allowing them to incorporate the feedback they receive into the next stage of the activity.

### Challenges

- **Workload and logistics** Although students indicated that group work may result in a richer, more well-rounded final product, they also highlighted the tradeoffs related to efficiency of individual work, as group work was generally perceived to be more time-consuming. The time intensive process of engaging in collaborative decision-making and managing logistics around meeting times were seen as challenges.
- **Managing group contributions and decision-making processes:** Learners noted that disagreement from such decision-making often led to conflict, originating from student incompatibility, unequal workload sharing, lack of accountability, knowledge disparities, and logistics. Imbalances in effort and motivation were highlighted as a key concern. Despite these challenges, students largely recognized the learning benefits of collaborating with peers as part of the activity.
- **Clarity around requirements and expectations:** Students expressed some concerns over grading related to adjustments based on unequal contributions. Students also indicated a desire for greater clarity regarding rubric criteria and expectations for the final submission. Furthermore, some students expressed concern about using individual tracking data on Etherpad as part of grading.

### Student Suggestions

Although analysis of student feedback with the Reading Circles activity indicated a largely positive impact on their learning and development of collaboration skills, students suggested the following improvements to the activity:

- Option of switching groups based on compatibility, with the addition of more peer-reviewing sessions throughout as a means of student compatibility assessment.
- More clarity around assignment expectations, as well as more explicitly defined workload expectations for each role within the group.
- Extension of the deadline for the final key takeaways submissions to provide more time to allow for editing the text together before submitting. (Note: These suggestions were incorporated by Dr. Baumvol in 2022W2)
- More student autonomy in group management, with the instructor acting as a mediator to enforce individual accountability, while offering resources and realistic solutions for challenging issues.

### Differences between Term 1 and Term 2 responses

In the survey questions addressing perceived learning benefits, differences were noted between responses in Term 1 and Term 2. Students from 2022W1 responded more negatively to statements related to the learning benefits of the activity when compared to their 2022W2 counterparts. For Question 2.9, which asked students whether collaborating with other students in Reading Circles activity was beneficial to their learning, statistical results showed a significant difference ( $p=.0096$ ) between the terms, with 12.6% of students in 2022W1 responding disagree or strongly disagree compared to just 3.8% in 2022W2.

We suspect this may be due to first-term students being in their very first semester of university and having less familiarity with collaborative writing. This suggests that future studies may allow to better understand the differences in student experiences with collaborative learning across their first-year experience and whether the activity could be adjusted to better support students in their first term of post-secondary learning.

### Future Considerations

Overall, the student feedback received from this evaluation provides valuable insights that not only help inform the future design of the Reading Circles activity in WRDS 150B, but may be valuable for instructors of other undergraduate UBC writing courses looking to implement collaborative learning activities in their own classes. The results from this analysis may be used to enhance student learning experience for collaborative activities in similar courses while offering instructors a feasible model for continued evaluation of the student learning experience within the WRDS150B writing course. The following areas may be particularly relevant to explore:

- The overall positive responses regarding the learning benefits of the Reading Circles activity supports the continued use of the activity in the WRDS 150 writing course. In addition to generally positive sentiment, students highlighted specific benefits such as exposure to diverse perspectives, enhancement of feelings of community, development of both academic reading/writing and of collaboration skills that align with instructor motivations for implementing the activity.
- Prior to 2022W1, a number of changes to the activity were made, including the introduction of peer and self-assessment components, the first Reading Circle being an ungraded activity, and the switch to Etherpad as the tool for collaborative writing. There

were still some challenges identified with using Etherpad, although the student feedback included fewer negative comments than previous terms where Microsoft Teams/Office 365 was used. Continued collaboration with Arts ISIT will be important to utilize the most effective tool for the activity as platforms and integrations evolve.

- Students' suggestions regarding increased clarity of assignment expectations and roles can be implemented in future terms, which may have a beneficial impact on the overall activity without any significant changes in its structure.
- Based on student feedback, an individual component in the activity in the form of a reflection or brainstorming activity could be introduced to address some of the student concerns about grading fairness and individual student learning assessment. This feature could increase student trust in peer assessment while increasing students' sense of engagement with their group members.
- The feedback related to the peer assessment component was largely positive, supporting the introduction of this element into the activity. Increasing the number of peer assessments throughout the activity's duration could offer students more reflection opportunities and provide additional feedback earlier in the learning process at a relatively low effort to the instructor.
- Overall, this project can provide insights for future research on how student perceptions, instructor involvement, interpersonal relationships, and personal capabilities affect collaborative learning experiences. Differences found in students' term 1 and term 2 perceptions about their learning process could also be further explored to inform the design of collaborative activities according to these students' needs.