

## Teaching Story: Collaborative Reading Circles Activity in WRDS 150B

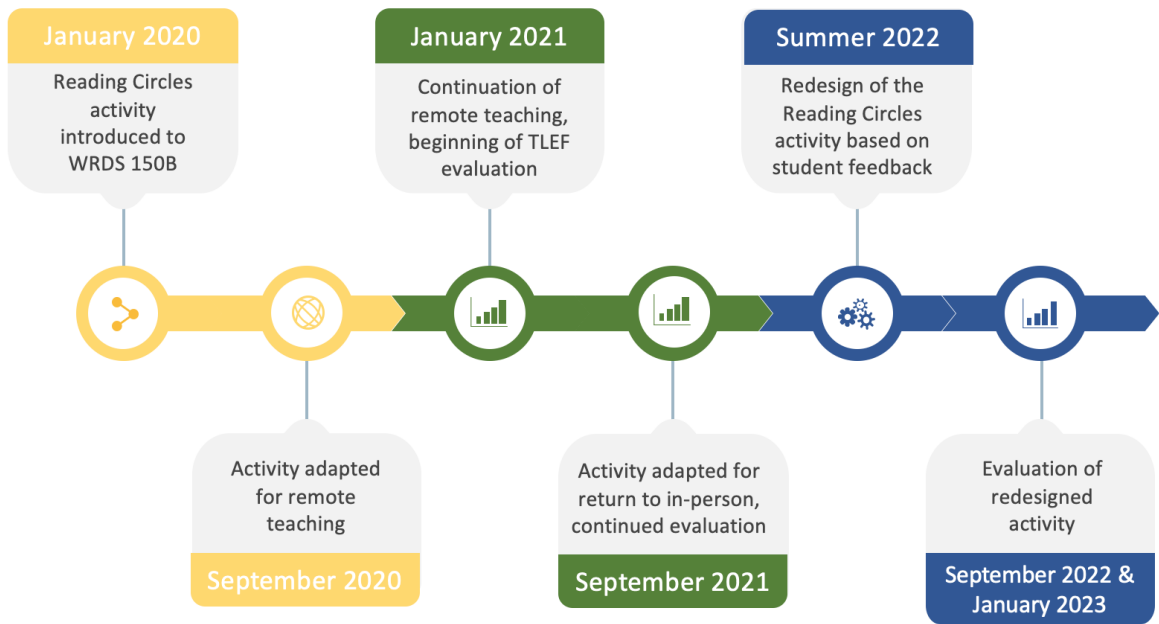
### Background and Overview

Dr. Laura Baumvol teaches WRDS 150B: Writing and Research in the Disciplines, a foundational, first-year academic writing and research course that introduces non-Arts undergraduate students to the ethical knowledge-making practices of scholarly communities, treating writing as a situated practice. Students are invited to analyze different styles and key features of academic genres arising from varied disciplines leading to their increased participation as novice scholars through their own research paper. Importantly, Dr. Baumvol runs her classroom as a learning community, a space in which students are encouraged to collaborate and support one another through group work, the sharing of ideas, and the diversity of their own unique perspectives.

This approach to teaching and collaborative learning is well represented by the *Reading Circles* activity that WRDS 150B students take part in. Previous group activities designed by Dr. Jackie Rea and Dr. Laila Ferreira were used as a starting point for the development of the Reading Circles. In this activity, students engage in oral discussions with their peers in small groups to read and critically analyze scholarly materials. Prior to this discussion, students take on different pre-assigned roles and post their contributions on an online shared document. Next, they meet in person during class time to exchange ideas based on each role's contribution and apply critical thinking skills as they collaborate with their group to take notes that will help them collaboratively write a paragraph with the key points and outcomes of their discussion. After submitting their key takeaways of their oral discussion from each of the three Reading Circle activities and receiving feedback from the instructor, students complete peer and self-assessments using the peerScholar tool regarding each member's participations and contributions on the Reading Circles.

The development of Dr. Baumvol's pedagogical practices in her WRDS150B sections and, more specifically, the Reading Circles activities, were part of a [UBC Arts ISIT TLEF project](#), which aimed to support a range of instructors across the Faculty of Arts to pilot and evaluate learning

activities involving the use of collaborative writing technologies. As part of this project, Dr. Baumvol collected data from four student surveys and four focus groups with students across a period of four terms.



Although the Reading Circles has become a core element of Dr. Baumvol's course, the activity has evolved significantly since its initial pilot in January 2020 through numerous iterations informed by student feedback. The following teaching story highlights Dr. Baumvol's approach to designing and facilitating this collaborative learning activity, and the lessons she has learned along the way from evaluation.

### Initial Design and Motivation

The Reading Circles were first introduced in January 2020 in a WRDS 150A course taught to Arts students at UBC Vantage College as a purely in-class activity aimed at getting students to engage in scholarly discussions around academic articles. The focus of the activity was on group discussion, but there was no preparation for a specific role in advance and no final written product associated with this. The Reading Circles took place entirely during class time, with Dr. Baumvol moving from group to group, listening to discussions, answering questions, taking notes, and providing feedback to her students as needed.

All of this would change in early 2020 with the emergence of a COVID-19 pandemic and a pause to in-person teaching and learning at UBC. Speaking about her teaching prior to the pandemic, Dr. Baumvol recounts: *"I didn't have a blended model, [everything] was fully in-person"*.

### [Emergency Remote Teaching and the Incorporation of Collaborative Writing \(September 2020\)](#)

When Dr. Baumvol was redesigning her course to be offered remotely, she felt it was important to maintain the type of interactivity that she had cultivated in her face-to-face classes. She planned a series of activities aimed at reproducing aspects of the classroom experience through a combination of synchronous class sessions conducted via online-conferencing software as well as asynchronous spaces. The Reading Circles was one of these activities designed to promote students' interaction:

*"I decided that many of the activities that I was doing in person, students would now do asynchronously, and sometimes synchronously with me during class time. I would have some lectures over Zoom, everyone together, and then other times students would be working in groups during class time [via breakout rooms]."*

During the summer of 2020, Dr. Baumvol did not teach WRDS 150B and had the opportunity to re-evaluate her approach to remote teaching:

*"I felt that teaching online without [students] having to do something more "hands-on" was too "theoretical", too abstract. The whole point of WRDS 150B and my pedagogical approach is to have students write, in addition to reading and analyzing scholarly discourse and its key features. By writing, you will learn how to write."*

In September 2020, the entire WRDS 150B class was offered for the first time in a remote teaching format and included a Reading Circles activity redesigned by Dr. Baumvol with this in mind. As part of the updated activity, students were initially divided into groups, which would stay the same for the length of the term. Instead of keeping the activity as a purely oral discussion, groups were now tasked with working together using Etherpad, an open-source online editor that allowed them to collaboratively author documents in real-time or asynchronously. Students were assigned a role before meeting, required to prepare their role's

contribution for their group, and collaboratively took notes while writing a paragraph with the key takeaways of their discussion.

One of the primary benefits Dr. Baumvol noticed during this shift to online collaborative writing tools was the increased visibility into group work processes and student learning.

*“I notice that, since the collaborative learning assignment is written, it's way easier to know how students articulate their thoughts and how they collaborate to develop an argument. And the collaborative writing tool allows me to assess students' work as a group and individually. Of course, I still find it valuable to have an oral component – the oral discussion. But in terms of assessment, the collaborative written part of the activity offers many possibilities in terms of students' learning”*

However, the collaborative writing tool [Etherpad](#) was still quite rudimentary at this point and many students were vocal that it did not meet their needs. Several asked about using other online document authoring tools; however, solutions like Google Docs failed to meet the requirements of provincial and federal privacy legislation, unlike Etherpad.

In addition, Dr. Baumvol was seeking ways to gain better insight into individual contributions to collaborative documents to monitor individual student learning, engagement, and collaboration during group work. In response, Dr. Baumvol connected with UBC Arts ISIT and joined the TLEF project [Strategies for the Effective Design and Implementation of Collaborative Peer Learning Activities](#) as a co-applicant, receiving support from Arts ISIT Learning Designer Meena Kahlon. The aim of the TLEF project was to support a range of instructors across the Faculty of Arts to pilot and evaluate learning activities involving the use of collaborative writing technologies.

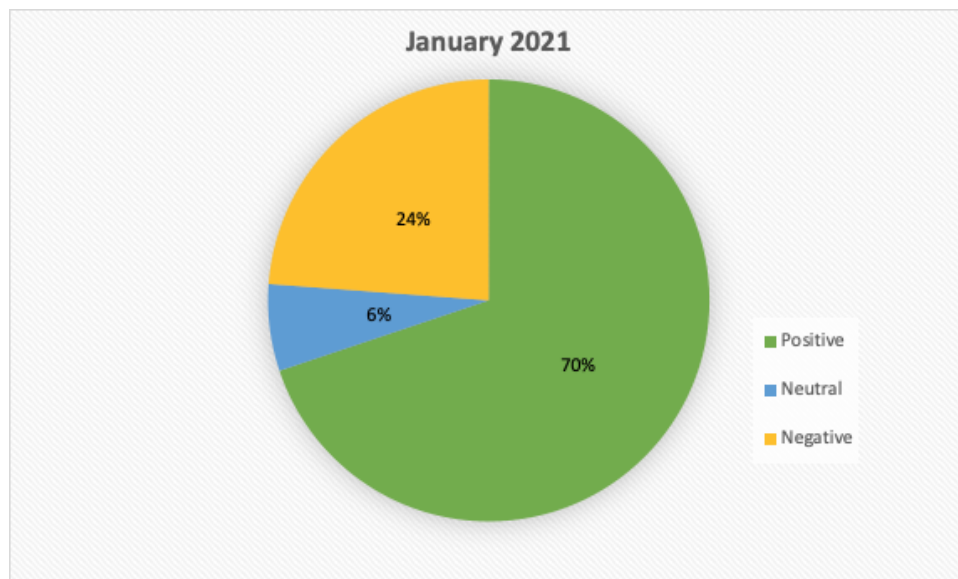
#### [Initial Evaluation and Introduction of Microsoft Teams](#)

As Dr. Baumvol continued working towards improving the Reading Circles activity, she received support from Arts ISIT to evaluate its design and transition to using Microsoft Teams beginning January 2020. TA resources were also provided to her WRDS 150B sections to help set up private teams, which students would use to share documents, collaborate on their written work, and work as a group to write the key takeaways that resulted from their oral discussions.

The TA also supported Dr. Baumvol by checking each team to ensure groups were completing the tasks, while providing feedback on the written work that they were producing and on the individual contributions of students.

Students were given a survey (n=63) at the end of the January 2021 term to collect feedback. Overall, student responses were mostly positive about their experience with the Reading Circles activity in WRDS 150B. When asked if collaborating with other students as part of the activity was beneficial to their learning, 69.8% of students either agreed or strongly agreed.

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



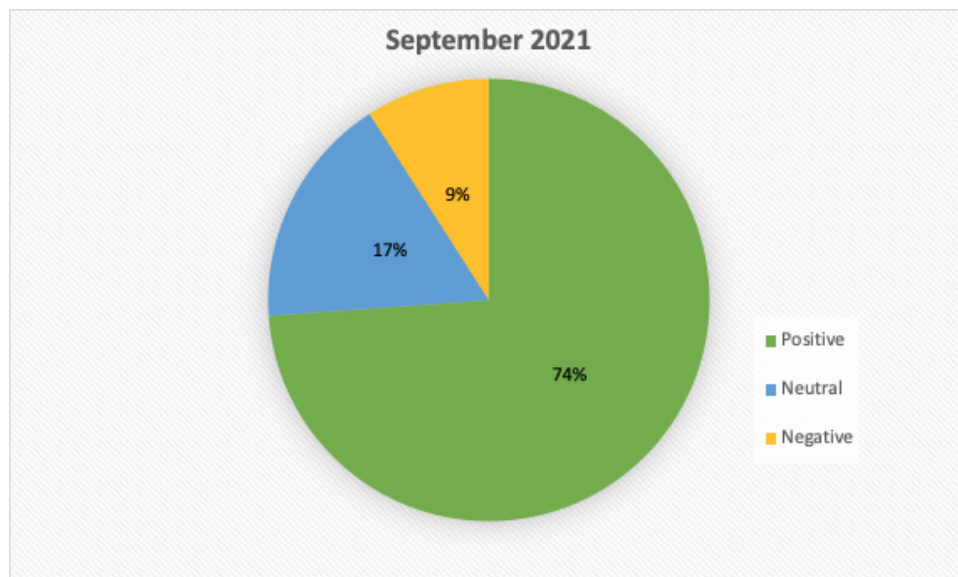
[A Blended Approach to Collaborative Learning and Returning to the Classroom](#)  
September 2021 marked a return to campus for many students, and Dr. Baumvol's WRDS 150B class was no exception. The shift back to face-to-face instruction required her to reconsider the design of her course once more. Rather than returning to the approach used prior to the pandemic, Dr. Baumvol decided to keep some elements of the remote version that had worked well. Student feedback from the previous term indicated a desire to reduce the number of collaborative activities they engaged in. Dr. Baumvol reflected on this feedback and decided to eliminate some of the activities that were done in the remote class sessions, but decided to keep the Reading Circles activity:

*“When we transitioned back to in-person classes, I adopted a blended model. Why did I decide to do that? One of the reasons was the Reading Circles activity that had been so effective for students' learning .... This was the main activity that involved collaborative writing.”*

Dr. Baumvol decided to utilize a blended approach to the Reading Circles activity, with some parts occurring during class time and other parts completed online synchronously and asynchronously. The goal was to take advantage of the classroom setting's immediacy and personal interaction while also keeping the benefits that students had while working together online, such as the development of collaborative writing skills, increased visibility of student learning processes, and additional opportunities for feedback.

Students completed a survey (n=88) at the end of the September 2021 term to collect feedback about their experience with the activity. Overall, students were mostly positive about their experience with the Reading Circles activity in WRDS 150B, showing similar results as the survey from January 2021, although there were more negative responses. When asked if collaborating with other students as part of the activity was beneficial to their learning, 73.9% of students either agreed or strongly agreed.

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



## Evaluating Results from January 2021 and September 2021

Both January 2021 and September 2021 student surveys provided feedback that was valuable in determining the direction of the activity moving forward. In addition to confirming the overall positive experience students had with the activity, the feedback helped to understand students' perceptions of different parts of the activity, challenges they experienced, and their suggestions for improvement.

When students were asked about the best part of their learning experience with the collaborative activity, some common themes that emerged across both terms included:

- Collaborating and connecting with other students and building a learning community;
- Sharing ideas with peers through discussions and being exposed to different perspectives;
- Working together in real-time in a structured way and receiving feedback; and
- Having peer support for learning how to analyze articles and write summaries

When asked about challenges students experienced, the following themes emerged:

- Group collaboration challenges, such as workload distribution and lack of equal participation;
- Agreement related to times to meet and deadlines; and
- Technology challenges (Microsoft Teams).

When asked what suggestions for improvement students would give their instructor, the following themes emerged:

- Address issues related to unequal student workload and participation;
- Have fewer assignments that require collaborative work;
- Address technical issues and allow use of other technologies for collaboration;
- Provide more clarity around assignment expectations; and
- Increase opportunities for modeling and practice.

When interviewed and asked to reflect on this iteration of the Reading Circles activity, Dr. Baumvol mentioned the trade-offs related to instructor workload and explained how important

TA support was for the activity's continued success. A TA aided Dr. Baumvol by setting up online groups in Microsoft Teams, but much of their time was also spent helping to monitor student work and providing feedback.

*“[The TA’s] main role was going through the documents, checking every week if [students] had submitted their individual contribution on time and the content of their submissions. Unfortunately, some students did not write "substantial" work for their assigned role, according to the requirements I had initially explained. The TA could identify that by reading each member's contribution on their group's MS Teams document (SharePoint document). Then, after the Reading Circles in-class oral discussions, [the TA] would go through the key takeaways, make comments and grade them according to the rubric, adding these grades to a spreadsheet. I would check and adjust the comments written by the TA and we would then add them to Canvas.”*

Dr. Baumvol knew that timely assessment and feedback was important to students' success in this activity, and that this had to be done well in advance of the next Reading Circle. Students needed time to digest the feedback given and to be able to apply it to their next Reading Circle activity. According to Dr. Baumvol, providing meaningful feedback within the time constraints was challenging and having TA support was essential.

Unfortunately, it was for this very reason that Dr. Baumvol briefly considered ending the Reading Circles activity in January 2022. The TA support available for remote teaching by her department and by the TLEF grant played a vital role in supporting the activity, particularly for monitoring group activity, and providing feedback. Therefore, the activity seemed unsustainable once the TA resources were no longer available. This would limit the instructor's capacity for assessment and feedback and lead to fewer opportunities for individualized support to students.

[Redesigning for Sustainability: Peer/Self-Assessment and the Reintroduction of Etherpad](#)  
While there were concerns about the sustainability of the Reading Circles, due to instructor workload concerns, Dr. Baumvol still saw significant learning benefits for students and the evaluation results from the previous two terms confirmed the value of the activity from a



student perspective. She worked with educational consultants in Arts ISIT and CTLT during Summer of 2022 to re-design the activity and adjust instructor and student workloads associated with it, keeping all the effective parts of the activity and addressing some of the feedback provided by students.

One of the major changes made by Dr. Baumvol was the introduction of a peer and self-assessment component. She noticed the importance of monitoring group participation to provide feedback and ensure equal collaboration by all group members. However, the act of monitoring used so far - checking each group's online document and individual contributions - was too time consuming without additional TA support. Because of this, she decided to incorporate a peer assessment component into the activity using the tool PeerScholar.

The Reading Circles activity was also adjusted so that the number of graded Reading Circles activities was reduced from three to two. Based on student feedback requesting more opportunities for modeling, the first Reading Circle assignment of every term would be ungraded to provide opportunities to practice and receive feedback without the pressure of being graded. Specifically, introducing a Reading Circles practice session allowed students to better understand how the activity worked and the different roles they would be taking on in a low-stakes environment that reduced stress while helping them to gain confidence. At the same time, since the Reading Circles activity takes place in the beginning of the term (Weeks 2, 3 and 4), the practice session helped mitigate the challenge of managing group formation due to uncertainty in registration and management of the logistics by Dr. Baumvol.

*"Having the practice session when students were still joining or leaving the course was helpful for students and for me [...] Students reported in my own mid-term reflection survey that they didn't feel as pressured and were more confident to proceed to the graded Reading Circles."*

Finally, Dr. Baumvol decided to move away from Microsoft Teams and reintroduce Etherpad as a tool for collaborative writing, which at that point had been updated and substantially improved. The main reason for this change was the time required to set up group spaces and the effort involved when onboarding students in Microsoft Teams. Etherpad was more time

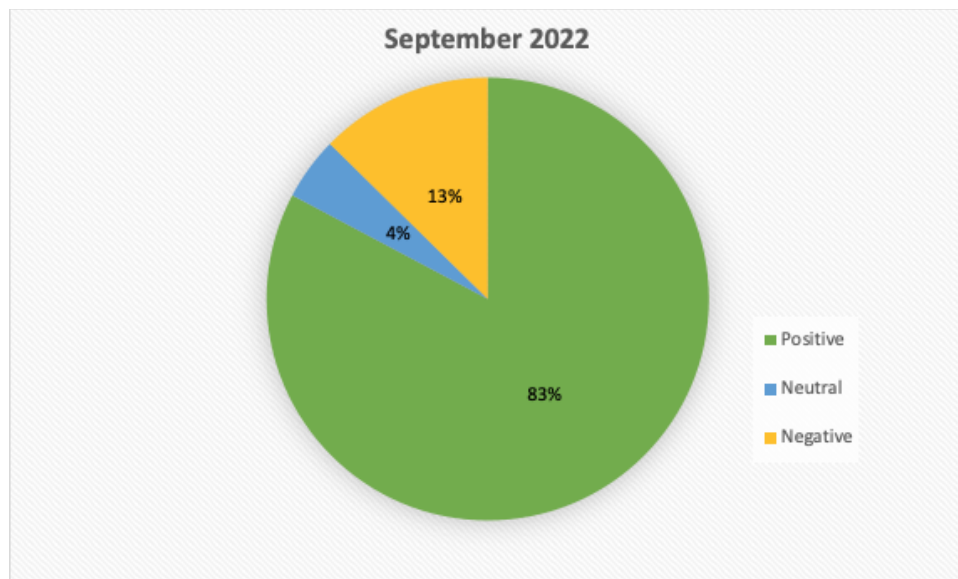
efficient when setting-up and met the specific learning objective of the Reading Circles activity, I.e. collaborative writing.

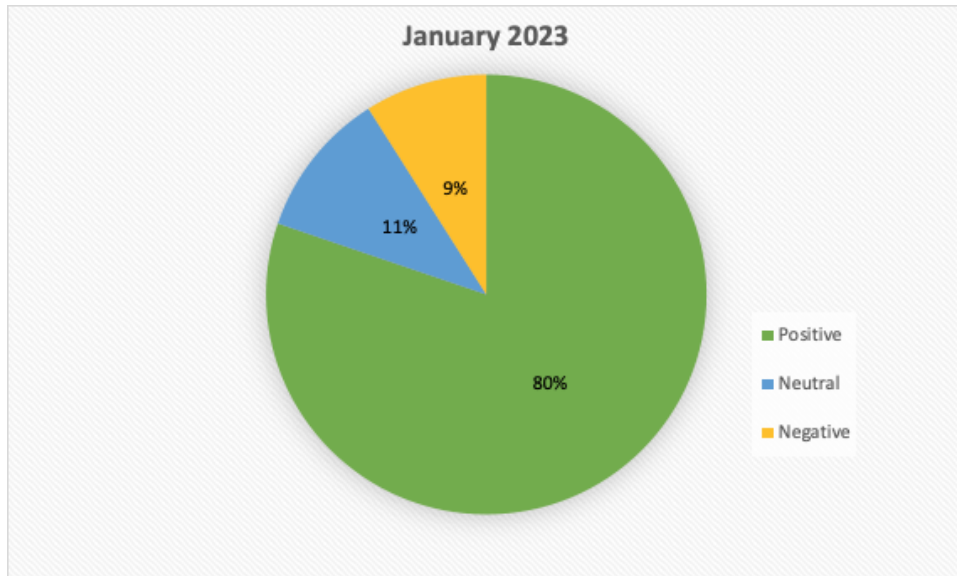
#### Evaluation Results from September 2022 and January 2023

Student feedback was collected from WRDS150B students in both the January 2023 and September 2022 semesters from six separate sections through an experience survey and focus groups. A total of 173 responses were gathered. Four focus groups were conducted (two per term), with the participation of 22 students.

Results from the student surveys continued to show that most students felt that collaborating with their peers through the Reading Circles activity was beneficial to their learning.

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





As seen in the figures above, the percentage of positive responses (80.2% in January 2023 and 82.8% in September 2022) showed a slight increase when compared to previous terms (69.8% in January 2021 and 73.9% in September 2021). While different factors could have influenced such results, such as the remote teaching during the pandemic and the return to in-class instruction, the enhancements to the activity made were well received by students. In addition, they continued to mention that the highlights of the Reading Circles were the chance to learn from the diverse perspectives of their group members and the positive impact that the discussions had on the overall sense of community in the classroom.

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 students' concerns about grading fairness and equitable effort and distribution of work. 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.

In addition to the largely positive perception of the Reading Circles activity, students provided suggestions for its continued improvement. Some of the most common recommendations included:

- Extending deadlines to allow more time to collaborate on the final paragraph;
- Allowing opportunities for instructor and peer feedback earlier in the process.
- Providing greater clarity and accountability for the workload expectations of group members for each role.

The suggestions above were incorporated by Dr. Baumvol in January 2023 students' perceptions on these improvements could be examined in future research projects.

### [Reflecting on Reading Circles and Future Directions](#)

The refinement of the Reading Circles through its many iterations since January 2020 has resulted in an activity that students enjoy actively engaging in and overwhelmingly support.

Reflecting on her process since the initial pilot, Dr. Baumvol explained that the incorporation of student feedback in the development of Reading Circles has been crucial. Small, iterative changes over time enhanced the effectiveness of the activity, fostered deeper engagement, and better catered to students' learning needs and preferences. Additionally, she described what this has meant to her as an educator:

*"I have been doing this activity for five years and when I look at its trajectory and the struggles students have had, I am now seeing a clear increase in positive feedback. I deeply appreciate being part of this project and receiving support from Arts ISIT and CTLT. This partnership led to the improved noticeable improvement of the design of the activity. The whole process of gathering and analyzing students' perceptions through surveys and focus groups has benefited me as an educator in so many ways. I feel much more confident about my teaching and how to implement overall adjustments in my course. This project has given me a unique opportunity to reflect on my own approach to teaching and assessment."*

Dr. Baumvol also highlighted her commitment to the continuous advancement of her pedagogical practices and collaborative writing and oral activities, such as the Reading Circles. based on the most recent round of student feedback. Based on the most recent student feedback, she identified three areas for future improvements and development.

First, students suggested an individual written component to the Reading Circles to be completed after their oral group discussion. When asked about this, Dr. Baumvol proposed including a "wrap-up" component with students' critical reflection as about their group work experience. Another option would be asking students to develop questions for further discussion during oral group discussion and then submitting their individual responses to these. This would allow students to engage in more in-depth group discussions while providing an opportunity to alleviate their concerns surrounding the assessment of group and individual work.

Second, Dr. Baumvol signaled that the peer and self-assessment component of the Reading Circle will be kept. However, she would like to include more opportunities for this type of feedback after each Reading Circle, rather than only one peer and self-assessment at the very end. This way students can benefit from their peers' insights when this is still relevant to the task they share. Although this may result in additional workload, Dr. Baumvol explained that such a change would be relatively easy to set up by using the PeerScholar tool while requiring little administrative investment over the course of the term.

Finally, one of the interesting revelations from the evaluation was that there was a difference between September and January terms in how students responded to the survey questions. Student responses in September 2022 were slightly more negative for statements related to their learning experience with the activity compared to their January 2023 counterparts.

*“By term 2, I noticed that students’ discussions are more in-depth and there is a higher quality in their understanding and synthesis of ideas. The critical thinking skills that they are applying are also greatly improved.”*

Dr. Baumvol suspects this may be due to first-term students being in their very first semester of university and having less familiarity with scholarly genres, critical discussions and how to

engage with their peers collaboratively in an academic setting. She suggests that future studies may allow her 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.

### Key Takeaways of the Reading Circles Activity

Just as Dr. Baumvol asks her students to provide a summary of their key takeaways, we asked about her recommendations to other instructors seeking to implement a group activity involving oral discussions and collaborative writing like the Reading Circles in their own classroom. She suggests:

- **Assign groups randomly:** Students may find it difficult to find a group, particularly in a new classroom environment where they may not have pre-existing relationships. Randomly assigning groups can help them to overcome this barrier and may provide them with a more diverse group environment than they would have been in otherwise.
- **Provide detailed instructions, examples, and a timeline:** Model and provide examples of different group member's roles and how the activity is supposed to be run. Ensure that students know the timeline for the activity and all due dates in advance so that they can more effectively communicate with their peers to share responsibilities. Additionally, provide training for peer assessment and a detailed rubric for students.
- **Provide timely feedback and plan accordingly:** Even with the inclusion peer and self-assessment, these sorts of activities require a great deal of instructor work and time. Plan your assessment accordingly to ensure that students receive timely feedback to allow them to apply it to their next group activity. Providing students with a practice activity is helpful, as students can be provided feedback in a low-stakes environments while learning their assigned roles.
- **Ensure the technologies support course learning objectives:** A common trap is adapting one's course to specific tools. A successfully blended classroom uses digital tools that enhance learning rather than restrict it. In WRDS 150B Dr. Baumvol incorporated new technologies like Microsoft Teams, Etherpad, and peerScholar as needs arose; although, EtherPad proved to require less time investment from the instructor to setup while still

allowing the necessary feedback and monitoring for collaborative writing and assessment.

- ***Provide support to groups:*** Learning to manage group work, sharing responsibilities, and handling conflict are important learning objectives of collaborative writing activities like the Reading Circles. Student feedback suggested that instructors need to be available to mediate and support students when needed but should not be so closely involved in monitoring groups as to inhibit students' need to manage tasks and work through conflicts on their own. Students should be able to contact their instructor easily and anonymously as issues arise.
- ***Collaboration is a learning outcome not a by-product:*** Collaboration is not just a soft-skill or a by-product of an activity like the Reading Circles, it is a key learning outcome. The ability to collaborate with peers and to write collaboratively has become essential aspects of academic writing and research in various contexts beyond the classroom. Consequently, it is essential to explicitly discuss the importance of collaboration with students and actively support them in the development of their collaboration skills.
- ***Addition of Individual Components and Reflection:*** Pairing collaborative learning activities with individual components can help overcome some of the hesitancy students have surrounding the assessment process in group projects. By pairing this with a debriefing exercise or reflection, students also have an opportunity to consider how they might overcome barriers in the future. This is integral to the development of skills surrounding critical thinking, communication, time management, etc.