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Students Teaching Students: A Method for Collaborative Learning

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Abstract

The Student Small Group Presentation (SSGP) model, a student-centered approach, is introduced and applied to learning communities. Similar to the jigsaw classroom, small groups of students in learning communities are responsible for teaching material to their peers. Unlike other jigsaw techniques, presentation groups in the SSGP teach an entire lesson based on collaborative work conducted outside of class. Presenters are responsible for thorough analysis of course material as they lead a discussion among a small group of peers. Students meet with the same small group throughout the semester, creating a feeling of intimate community within the larger learning community. By challenging students to become well versed on a section of course material, SSGPs promote student confidence, enhance critical thinking skills, and provide the opportunity to work as a member of a team.

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Keywords

student-centered, jigsaw classroom, student presentations, small group interaction

Undergraduate learning communities innovate, and cooperative learning—which engages students in the learning experience beyond predictable, traditional patterns of lectures and note taking (Aronson, Blaney, Stephan, Sikes, & Snapp, 1978)—offers a particularly innovative approach for learning. Here, we introduce a specific approach to learning—student small group presentations (SSGPs).

A collaborative learning technique, the SSGPs challenge students to become actively involved in the learning process through shared responsibility with classmates. A major benefit of learning communities is that they create a feeling of connectedness among students. The SSGP technique extends this and enhances interpersonal relationships by providing students with the opportunity to engage regularly in small group discussion and work, both formally and informally, with the same individuals over the course of the semester. The SSGPs help students to develop a small and strong community within the larger learning community class.

The four authors of this article have all worked together as teachers, students and teaching assistants, using the SSGPs in the classroom, both inside and outside learning community classes. While most of our use of the SSGPs did not involve teaching assistants, we share our perspectives together in this essay because we believe our diverse experiences help to clarify the benefits of the SSGP exercise.

Cooperative techniques have been demonstrated to enhance active learning in higher education, creating a supportive environment that efficiently uses class time (Huang, Huang, & Yu, 2011; Perkins & Saris, 2001). The jigsaw classroom, developed by Aronson et al. (1978), increases cooperation among students and the engagement of each student. Students work collaboratively in a small group to master a piece of a critical lesson; then each student presents his or her section of the material to peers within another small group. The jigsaw group works collectively to piece the lesson together and understand the full picture, cooperating and developing a clearer understanding of course material.

Variations on the jigsaw technique have been applied effectively across disciplines, including sociology (Hedeen, 2003), psychology (Perkins & Saris, 2001), physics (Hänze & Berger, 2007), and chemistry (Doymus, Karacop, & Simsek, 2010; Seetharaman & Musier-Forsyth, 2003). Hedeen (2003) developed a valuable “reverse jigsaw method” to encourage students to share their perspectives in a discussion-based setting and develop presentation skills. In a statistics course, Perkins and Saris (2001) found 88 percent of students preferred collaborative work when compared to a lecture, 66 percent expressed having a better understanding, and 67 percent enjoyed helping peers. Similarly, Choe and Drennan (2001) reported positive feedback on course evaluations; students found the cooperative learning approach helpful and believed they gained a better understanding of the course material.

SSGPs share similarities with the jigsaw technique by offering students an opportunity to cooperate on the mastery of material and to develop presentation skills. By meeting throughout the semester with the same small peer group, students develop connections that encourage honest discussion of material at a level that requires established rapport.

Student Small Group Presentations

The SSGP technique, developed independently by Halley through trial and error, could be classified as a modified jigsaw classroom. Learning goals of the SSGP include developing students' skills in public speaking, requiring students to work in a group on a graded, high-stakes project, and encouraging students to take ownership both of course material and their own learning. SSGPs entail assigning students to discussion groups that meet regularly throughout the term, with each group given responsibility to present specific material assigned to the class. Groups meet outside of class prior to their presentation; group members work together to prepare a shared outline of the material and discussion questions. On the day of the presentation, each member of the presenting group is assigned a discussion group. All students in the discussion groups have read the material, but the presenter is responsible for reviewing the material with the group, based on his or her more thorough analysis, and for leading the discussion.

Similar to the jigsaw classroom, SSGPs give students responsibility for teaching material to their peers through a student-centered approach to the learning process. In contrast to other jigsaw techniques, the SSGPs assign an entire lesson to a specific group. By challenging students to become well versed on a section of course material, SSGPs promote student confidence, enhance critical thinking skills, and provide an opportunity to work as a part of a team. Student-centered discussions of the course themes allow students to develop deeper understanding by articulating arguments in their own words.

Halley has used SSGPs effectively in learning communities and other classes in both public and private college settings. The SSGPs have been adopted and adapted by colleagues for learning communities in a variety of disciplines, including psychology, history, gender studies, media studies, queer theory, and interdisciplinary courses.

Building SSGPs into the Syllabus

When creating the syllabus, learning community instructors select reading assignments for SSGPs, usually distributed throughout the timeline of the term. In the attached example syllabus for a multidisciplinary reflective writing and

discussion course (see Appendix A), five class sessions were dedicated primarily to SSGPs.

The instructors assign students to groups. Because students do not choose their group, they may or may not be working with acquaintances. For a class of twenty-five to forty students, there are usually five to seven students per group. In the example course, with thirty students, each of the five student small groups had six students. Each student small group presents once during the semester and meets together as the audience for all other presentations (indicated on the example syllabus with an asterisk). These guidelines can be adjusted for smaller or larger learning communities.

Early in the course, class time is reserved for students to gather in their groups, meet one another, and share contact information. In the example course, at the end of a class session in the second week of classes, the instructors ask students to change their seating to meet with their small groups. The instructors distribute the SSGP assignment, clearly identifying the presentation date and class material that each SSGP will present.

While all students in the class are responsible for reading prior to an SSGP presentation and coming to class prepared for discussion, members of the presentation group are additionally expected to read the assignment multiple times and analyze it in depth. The presentation group collaborates to prepare a cohesive outline for the presentation and a set of discussion questions. For example, the first SSGP described in the attached syllabus was responsible for presenting a reading by Rebecca Skloot and chapter three from a book by Jean Halley, Amy Eshleman, and Ramya Mahadevan. After presenting, members of the SSGP were also responsible for leading the discussion about the reading.

Written instructions urge presenters to meet as a group multiple times in preparation, guiding presenters to be critical readers of the material. Students are encouraged to consider the goals and key arguments in the reading, to critically analyze the support for the arguments, and to compare and contrast the perspective of the author(s) with other authors assigned in the course. Prior to the presentation, the student small group that will be presenting meets with the instructors to ensure that they understand the material and its purpose in the course.

The student small group presenters are encouraged to develop particularly strong discussion questions. The best questions are incorporated in essay examinations, allowing students to take part in the creation of examinations (see Appendix B for examples of ideal and problematic questions).

Collaborative work is emphasized as essential; dividing the reading and then compiling pieces from different group members creates a less cohesive outline than when groups meet and work on their presentation together. Cooperative work is also apparent in the preparedness of the presenters.

One week prior to the presentation, the presenting student small group submits the completed outline and at least five discussion questions. On the day of the presentation, each presenter uses the group-created outline and discussion questions to present and lead a discussion with another student small group. (Student small groups are together for all but their own presentation.) Depending on the level of the learning community as well as the quantity and density of the material, the presentations typically take forty to seventy minutes of class time. The instructor circulates throughout the classroom, supervising the presentations, and noting particular issues for feedback to the presenters and for debriefing with the entire class.

Following the presentations and small group discussions, all students confidentially complete an evaluation form and submit it to the instructor. In addition to feedback from audience members, each presenter evaluates his or her own performance. The evaluations engage students in another layer of learning, that of thinking critically both about the substantive material of the presentation and public speaking skills. The evaluation form asks whether the material was fully explained, if the presenter was knowledgeable about the presentation material, and how well the discussion was moderated (see Appendix C). These evaluations aid the instructor in determining grades while simultaneously making the classroom more democratic and student centered.

Helping SSGPs Succeed

Successful SSGPs require commitment from the student presenters and the instructor. Success requires students to meet outside of class, which may be difficult to coordinate. Conflicts between group members can arise. Occasionally, students prepare insufficiently. Presenters may not understand the material well enough or may not have considered responses to their own discussion questions. Based on direct observation and audience feedback, the instructor can determine whether each presenter fully understood the material and appropriately practiced presenting. Students in the same presentation group normally earn identical or similar grades, but grades can be adjusted when a member did not meet the same standards as the rest of the group.

Instructors can reduce the problem of underprepared presentations by checking in with groups and encouraging them to meet with the instructor prior to the presentation. Occasionally one or two group members may not contribute sufficiently while most of the students work well together during the planning stage. The more invested students in the group will likely bring this problem to the instructor prior to the presentation. In a spirit of giving students a second opportunity, a non-participating member can be assigned a later presentation, with the understanding that his or her grade will be penalized and that he or she must

contribute significantly to the next group in order to earn the right to stay in the new group.

Students are often motivated to do their best work on these presentations. Those who perform poorly on written work often demonstrate marked improvement with the support of a group to help them prepare. SSGPs remove some of the pressure that might accompany presenting to a large group, yet the motivation to appear competent to one's peers is effective.

Benefits of the SSGP system make it ideal for learning communities. The small group allows for students to participate in discussion more readily than they might in the larger classroom setting. Students who tend to be quiet are given a greater opportunity to express their thoughts in the small group with whom they work closely throughout the semester. As students become more comfortable having discussions in smaller groups, they also become more comfortable expressing their thoughts during larger class discussions. Based on her experience as a student and later as a teaching assistant, Heiserman notes:

The SSGPs foster a sense of community, which is especially helpful to new undergraduate students. Presenters work together within a small group, and each presenter only speaks to a small group of students. Discussion and application are encouraged throughout the process. Students are able to connect with one another, confer about the material assigned, and think about it in ways that affect their own lives. SSGPs commonly create a sense of intimacy between students, as they are able to communicate in a very personal way.

Students gain experience and confidence from the SSGPs. They lead the discussion, developing a sense of expertise for class material they explore in depth. Heiserman reflects on her own experience as a new college student:

Even though we were the first group to present and this method was new to me, I was surprisingly calm and prepared. My group members met several times to thoroughly discuss the dense reading and create a detailed outline. We worked on our discussion questions with one another. Because I was responsible for presenting the material to my classmates, I made sure I read the assignment multiple times and truly knew what I would be discussing.

Felix adds:

The small group presentations provide an opportunity for students to participate in class presentations in a more collaborative and engaging

way compared to many other types of presentations. Through the creation of discussion questions, students develop critical thinking skills. By leading discussions based on these questions, students form stronger bonds with classmates. Students are challenged to formulate their own ideas, and then integrate those ideas with the views of other students.

As a student member of small group presentations, and later as a teaching assistant who helped to evaluate these presentations, I see the benefits of these groups for students and for professors. Students are working together, class time is utilized in a creative way, many voices are heard. The content of the class material is brought to life through in-depth analyses.

The experience improves students' communication and time management skills, while also providing the opportunity to contribute their unique perspective to the learning community. Knowing that discussion questions may be included on examinations, audience members tend to be motivated to actively participate.

Benefits of Using SSGPs

SSGPs engage students in their own learning processes and students pose sophisticated questions about the material. For example, after a presentation of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and dimed: On (not) getting by in America*, one student asked how the government determines and justifies the minimum wage. Another considered why many low-wage workers keep jobs with poor pay and avoid unionizing movements that might significantly improve job conditions. A third student mused about the social mechanisms that keep women who are among the working poor facing two demanding shifts, one for low pay in the wage workforce and a second shift for no pay at home.

A challenge occurs if students receiving the presentation are unprepared for discussion, relying on the presenter to teach them material they did not read. While this harms the quality of the SSGP, it is realistic to consider that students may not be fully prepared for every class. If students in the audience rely on an underprepared presenter, false understanding of the reading may spread through the group. Instructors should be aware of this potential situation, listening carefully to the group discussions as they circulate the classroom. An instructor may gently interject during a presentation to clarify a point from the reading.

In comparison to questions asked following a lecture or instructor-led large-group discussion, SSGPs enhance the quality of questions regarding the material. Audience members engage more actively with the material during the

presentation, leading to more thoughtful, truly curious and sophisticated questions.

As audience members, students offer constructive criticism for their presenter. Presenters gain skill in public speaking while audience members are challenged to critically reflect on best practices in public speaking. For example, students are likely to identify the importance of deeply understanding the material, speaking spontaneously from an outline, maintaining a slow pace, and expressing enthusiasm.

Halley has invited classroom observations by colleagues during SSGPs; observers visiting the classroom have been impressed with the technique. For example, one faculty observer noted:

On entering the room, I observed five groups in deep discussion. Students are more relaxed speaking openly about the readings in a small group session than in a large class setting. In this SSGP the students were discussing George Gilder's *Men and Marriage*. "I think he is saying this." "He says this, but I do not agree with that." "But consider this..." These are comments indicative of a powerful discussion of the readings. *I did not see a single student in the classroom who was not deeply engaged in the material.* Student discussions were focused on the important question of whether there are differences between the sexes in sexuality, and whether these differences are biologically determined or socially determined. While some students talked, others were furiously writing notes on the discussion, and others were rifling through the book for quotes to defend a position they were planning to inject into the conversation. It was a powerful learning experience for them.

In another faculty report, the observer wrote:

Halley...created a fairly elaborate, multi-pronged assignment for the small group presentations that required the students to thoroughly acquaint themselves with the topic at hand, to develop a critical opinion on it, and to present their work and also engage each other's. I was impressed by the level of trust that she and students clearly shared and, as well, the good faith students seemed to share with each other. The level of conversation they were able to have was quite sophisticated, and I enjoyed listening to them discuss such issues as possible approaches to immigration reform.

The benefits of SSGP are apparent in student engagement, creating a sense of community, and mastery of complex material.

Conclusion

SSGPs can be challenging to organize and to keep on track. Students do not always meet every requirement of the assignment. Yet as teachers, it is wonderful to observe students in charge of the material, discussing it seriously, raising questions and challenging both the reading and their own thinking in respectful and thoughtful ways. We watch students step into the exciting and scholarly role of becoming knowers, members of an intellectual community engaged in the development of ideas. Despite challenges that the SSGPs present, they are worth the effort and the risk.

Overall students respond enthusiastically to the SSGPs. Students appreciate being challenged both to learn the material and to take ownership of it. Quiet students are given the opportunity to voice their opinions in more intimate groups, vocal students are kept from overpowering the entire class, and every student is held accountable for firmly understanding and applying course material in meaningful discussions. SSGPs emphasize a student-centered approach that allows students to truly immerse themselves in both the teaching and the learning processes.

References

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Appendix A

Seeing Power and Privilege: The Other Side of Oppression in Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this learning community, we will explore what it means for individuals to be privileged based on social power, whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and belonging to the middle or upper class. Learning about and simultaneously critiquing the disciplines of psychology and sociology, we will examine both individual and social experience in our modern historical context. We will look at how human beings shape social experiences and understanding of race, class, sexuality and gender, and how race, class, sexuality and gender shape us in our lives. One of the main goals of this learning community will be to develop students' skills in writing, scholarly reading and critical thinking. This learning community will challenge students to reflect on their personal experiences, evaluate others' arguments, explain social scientific research, and propose their own questions about and answers to modern human experience. For the experiential component, students will analyze issues of race, class, sexuality and gender in a community agency and/or in museum exhibits.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

...

4. Group presentation of reading material once during the semester. We will divide the class into groups of five to six people. Each group will prepare a summary to present of the reading assignment for the day, **an outline of the presentation (minimum of one page to be turned in on the presentation day, typed and double spaced), a series of five questions for discussion (to be turned in on the presentation day, typed and double-spaced)**, and will lead discussion for that day. The classes/topics from which students will do their presentations are marked with an asterisk (*). **Please see the last page of the syllabus for further instructions on the small group presentations.** (10% of final grade)

...

READINGS

Students are required to bring the books to class those sessions that we use them. Readings will be drawn from the following texts, along with various assignments posted on Moodle.

Halley, Jean, Amy Eshleman, and Ramya Mahadevan Vijaya. 2011. *Seeing white: An introduction to white privilege and race*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Raimes, Ann with Maria Jerskey. 2011. *Keys for writers*, sixth edition. New York: Wadsworth.

Scholinski, Daphne with Jane Meredith Adams. 1997. *The last time I wore a dress*. New York: Riverhead.

Skloot, Rebecca. 2011. *The immortal life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown.

GENERAL EDUCATION GOALS

This course promotes the following general education program goals set by Wagner College:

- critical thinking skills that enable you to analyze information and develop approaches that are new to you and lead to a better understanding of your world;
- competence in the skills of listening, speaking, and writing, to promote effective communication and self-expression;
- an ability to understand the relationship between the individual and the world, based on knowledge of history and sociocultural dynamics;
- competency in “learning by doing,” where ideas and field-based experiences are related, reflected in writing and discussion, and applied in ways that improve your world;
- recognition of the values that shape moral, ethical and spiritual judgments, including an understanding of the importance of these principles in your personal and social life; and
- familiarity with your own culture and other cultures in a global context.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. Students should become familiar with some of the kinds of questions social scientists typically ask, the kinds of research methods social scientists use to answer those questions, and the kinds of theories they use to interpret their research findings.

2. Students should understand social scientific perspectives on how gender, sexuality, class and race serve both to facilitate and to constrain people's actions and interactions.
3. Students should begin to use social scientific perspectives in examining the major institutions of contemporary societies, such as families, schools, religions, the mass media and the government.
4. Students should begin to see their own lives and work experiences, and in particular their experiential learning, through a social scientific lens.
5. Students should improve their skills in writing, critical thinking, oral presentation and class discussion.
6. Students should critically examine issues of social justice.

CLASS SESSIONS

One.

Introduction to course

Two.

GUEST VISIT FROM THE LGBT CENTER

Informal writing versus formal writing

Experiential learning

Reading: 1. Moodle: Endesha Ida Mae Holland selection

2. Ann Raimis with Maria Jerskey, Section 9, How to avoid plagiarism (pages 133-145)

3. Moodle: Carol Tarlen selection

Three.

GUEST VISIT BY THE ACADEMIC HONESTY COMMITTEE

Plagiarism and academic honesty

VIDEO: *Tim Wise: On white privilege* (2008).

Reading: Jean Halley, Amy Eshleman, and Ramya Mahadevan Vijaya Chapter 1

Four.

GUEST LECTURE BY PROFESSOR X

Public speaking

Five.

GUEST LECTURE BY PROFESSOR Y

Science and race

Reading: Halley et al. Chapter 2

* Six.

Student small group presentations

Reading: 1. Rebecca Skloot

2. Halley et al. Chapter 3

Seven.

GUEST VISIT BY THE WRITING CENTER

Writing and the writing center; and thesis statements

Reading: Raimes with Jerskey, Sections 1, 2, & 4, Ways into writing, Developing paragraphs and essays, Writing and analyzing arguments (pages 3-40, 51-80)

Eight.

FIRST PAPER DUE IN CLASS (please bring three copies)

Required peer review

Reading: Raimes with Jerskey, Section 3, Revising, editing, and proofreading (pages 40-50)

* Nine.

Student small group presentations

Reading: 1. Halley et al. Chapter 4

2. Moodle: Ron Nerio

Ten.

REVISED FIRST PAPER DUE IN CLASS

Socioeconomic class and privilege

Reading: Halley et al. Chapter 5

* Eleven.

Student small group presentations

Reading: 1. Scholinski Prologue through Chapter 9

2. Moodle: Halley

3. Moodle: Kane

Twelve.

Rebecca Skloot, author of *The immortal life of Henrietta Lacks*, will deliver the 6th annual Kaufman-Repape Lecture

Thirteen.

Privilege and passing as heterosexual
Reading: Scholinski Chapters 10-13

Fourteen.
Sexuality and psychiatric treatment
Reading: Complete Scholinski

Fifteen.
SECOND PAPER DUE IN CLASS (please bring three copies)
Required peer review

Sixteen and seventeen.
One-on-one meetings

Eighteen.
REVISED SECOND PAPER DUE IN CLASS
Topics for research paper
Reading: 1. Raimes with Jerskey, Sections 6 & 8, The research process & How to evaluate sources (pages 99-110, 126-133)
2. Moodle: Student Z's research paper
3. Moodle: Student A's research paper

Nineteen.
CLASS MEETS IN THE LIBRARY FOR A WORKSHOP Reading: Raimes with Jerskey, Section 7, Searching for sources (pages 110-125)

Twenty.
Privilege in classrooms
Reading: Halley et al. Chapter 6

Twenty-one.
November 14, Monday – **WORKING THESIS FOR RESEARCH PAPER, LIST OF 20 JOURNAL ARTICLE ABSTRACTS, AND NOTES ON ONE SOURCE DUE**
Documenting research
Reading: 1. Moodle: Unzueta & Lowery
2. Be prepared to begin using Raimes with Jerskey, Section 14, APA style (pages 225-261)

Twenty-two.
Privilege in the workplace

Reading: Halley et al. Chapter 7

* Twenty-three.

RESEARCH PAPER OUTLINE DUE

Student small group presentations

Reading: 1. Halley et al. Chapter 8

2. Moodle: Tatum

* Twenty-four.

Student small group presentations

Reading: Halley et al. Chapter 9

Review: 1. Moodle: Common ingroup identity model

2. Moodle: Guaranteed income

Twenty-five.

THIRD PAPER DUE IN CLASS (please bring three copies)

Required peer review

Twenty-six.

REVISED THIRD PAPER DUE IN CLASS

Individual presentations regarding experiential learning

Final exam period.

Individual presentations regarding experiential learning

STUDENT SMALL GROUP PRESENTATIONS

In your summary and discussion of the reading material, please do focus on the following:

1. For nonfiction, what are the key arguments being made by the author? How does she back up her theses? For fiction, what are the author's goals? How does she achieve these goals?
2. How is this author's thinking similar or different from that of other writers being read in class? For nonfiction, what is unusual or unique about the arguments being made by this author? For fiction, please make connections between the themes explored by the author and the arguments proposed by other writers being read. Select nonfiction works with which you think the fiction author might agree and works with which she might disagree. Please explain why.
3. For nonfiction, in what ways do you agree with the author? In what ways do you disagree? And why? For fiction, select a character, in what ways do you agree (and/or feel similarly) with the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the character? In what ways, do you disagree? And why?
4. How might this reading material reflect or/and challenge aspects of your fieldwork learning experience? Please describe and explain.

Each presentation group must turn in a list of five discussion questions, and an outline of the presentation (minimum of one page) based on the reading. Both the discussion questions and the outline should be typed and double-spaced. No grade for the presentation group will be assigned unless both the five discussion questions and the outline are turned in on the day of the presentation. The group will use these questions in leading the small group discussions for that day.

Appendix B

Examples of successful discussion questions:

1. Please compare and contrast naturalist/attachment versus behaviorist parenting ideology. If you had to pick one form of parenting which would you choose and why?
2. How does the topic of bed sharing reflect ways of thinking about socioeconomic status, race, and other factors?
3. In what ways can the criminal justice and legal system both help and hurt the families experiencing domestic violence that may attempt to utilize them?

Examples of problematic discussion questions:

1. Did you agree with the reading for today?
2. What year did La Leche League International start?
3. Do you think breastfeeding is child sexual abuse?

Appendix C

Student Small Group Presentation and Discussion Evaluation Form

Date:

Topic:

Reading:

Presenter's name:

Your name:

1. Please comment on today's student presentation. Be sure to offer at least one critical comment (something that might be improved upon) for your presenter. And be sure to describe one strength displayed by this presenter.
2. On a scale of very good to very problematic, please rate today's presentation and discussion:

Presentation style (making eye contact with audience, speaking clearly and slowly, et cetera)

Very good	Good	Fair	Problematic	Very problematic
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Understanding of reading assignment

Very good	Good	Fair	Problematic	Very problematic
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Effort in trying to generate a discussion

Very good	Good	Fair	Problematic	Very problematic
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Questions that generated discussion

Very good	Good	Fair	Problematic	Very problematic
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Overall job as presenter and discussion leader

Very good	Good	Fair	Problematic	Very problematic
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3. Please write out at least one question you have about today's readings or/and class.