TEACHING REPORT

Encouraging Critical Engagement with Course Readings Through Focused Reading Responses

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Abstract

In this article I demonstrate how Focused Reading Responses motivate students to 1) critically engage with reading assignments, and 2) write more substantive reading responses. A focused reading response asks students to reflect upon several aspects of a reading assignment by responding, in writing, to a number of prompts that serve to engage students in critical thinking while also limiting the overall length of the response. Each prompt can be adjusted to accommodate the instructor's subject matter and teaching modality. Additionally, focused reading response assignments are adaptable to a variety of teaching modalities, including face-to-face and remote learning environments. Focused reading responses communicate specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and length-bound goals to students, providing students with the resources they need to produce meaningful and valuable work.

Keywords

Reading Assignments; Argumentative Writing; Reflective Writing; Bloom's Taxonomy

Reading response assignments are often used to mitigate a persistent problem in higher education – *students just won't do the reading!* (Warner, 2016). Beyond motivating students to take more than a mere cursory glance over a reading assignment, educators primarily use reading response assignments to try to get students to *engage* with the reading assignment, often with limited success (Flierl & Hamer, 2019, p. 88; Sackris, 2020, p. 71). While some of these limitations may be attributed to students who lack a genuine understanding about how to engage meaningfully with a topic, many reading response assignments limit student creativity or limit a student's imagined audience, and professors themselves find them overly burdensome to grade (Flaherty, 2014; Weir, 2009).

Over many semesters of using reading response assignments myself, I have found them to be ineffective, rife with references to SparkNotes, and uninspiring to grade. So, for the past few semesters, I have refined my reading response assignments to reflect more of what I *really* want them to accomplish: honing creative and reflective thinking, as well as argumentative writing skills, in my students. By re-thinking my pedagogical objective for using reading responses, I have revised the assignment into a *focused* reading response assignment that aims to capture what Flierl and Hamer (2019) refer to as a "Transformative" learning experience: a shifting of the way in which an individual thinks, feels, and acts. A transformative shift requires students to actively think about and re-evaluate their own views, rather than just memorize or summarize content that is being presented to them (Flierl & Hamer, 2019, p. 88). To this end, my revised assignment also limits the overall length of the response by requiring students to respond to a set number of specific prompts that discourage excessive summarizing and motivate more reflective writing.

In this article, I demonstrate how *focused reading responses* motivate students to 1) critically engage with reading assignments toward more transformative thinking, and 2) write more substantive and reflective reading responses. In the first section, I outline the purpose and scope of a focused reading response assignment. In section two, I discuss the principles that ground the pedagogical objectives of a focused reading

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response assignment, highlighting the importance of utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy and the 4R model of reflection to structure learning objectives for students. In the third section, I detail the core components of a focused reading response assignment. In section four, I provide examples of student work to illustrate how effective focused reading responses can be for student comprehension and discuss how the assignment has worked in practice, drawing on student evaluations of the value of the assignment for achieving learning outcomes.

1. What Is A Focused Reading Response?

A focused reading response asks students to reflect upon several aspects of a reading assignment by responding, in writing, to a number of prompts. I use a set number of specific prompts for several reasons. First, providing multiple required prompts, each with different expectations, serves to limit the amount of mere summarizing/reporting in the response.[1]

Second, specific prompts provide guidelines for how students should approach the reading. For my Introduction to Philosophy courses, I use the same set of five prompts, each focusing on a different thought exercise (I will discuss these prompts in more detail in section three):

> **Prompt 1**: Identification of what the student believes to be the most important or controversial part of the reading assignment.
>
> **Prompt 2**: Explanation of the student's reasoning for prompt number one.
>
> **Prompt 3**: Comparison of the current reading to another reading we have done in the course.
>
> **Prompt 4**: Evaluation of the reading, and justification of one's evaluation.
>
> **Prompt 5**: Formulation of a question to think about the reading further.

Each of these prompts includes guidelines for composing a response (for instance, prompt two, *explanation,* includes the following guidance: "*Why have you chosen X as the main thesis offered by the author? Why is this particular assumption controversial?* Think about this section as providing reasons for *your* conclusion that *X* is the main thesis."). Providing guiding questions is one way to demonstrate what a successful reflection looks like, especially for students who may otherwise struggle to do more than merely summarize a reading (Flierl & Hamer, 2019, p. 98). And because the prompts remain consistent for each reading, students are able to approach the reading more confidently. As such, this kind of *scaffolding* helps change students' attitudes about course readings from intimidation to approachability.[2]

Third, certain prompts that I use, such as the *comparison* prompt and the *evaluation* prompt, are designed to activate students' *prior knowledge* about a particular topic (including attitudes and dispositions that are connected to said topic). Neiman and Neiman (2015, p. 159) argue that using prompts to activate students' prior knowledge facilitates learning new material. By encouraging students to compare the current reading with an earlier reading, students can draw upon their prior knowledge and connect it to the current topic, deepening engagement with the major theme(s) of the reading assignment (as well as the course). By asking students to evaluate the reading assignment, students can integrate prior assumptions and/or experiences with the topic at hand, again deepening engagement.

Fourth, the specific prompts that I use encourage students to practice argumentative and reflective writing in a low-stakes environment.[3] Recent research by McDaniel et al. (2007) suggests that greater learning gains may be achieved by using more frequent, low-stakes assignments, especially if students are able to experiment with their responses more creatively because they do not fear failing as much (Flierl & Hamer, 2019, 96).

With respect to flexibility, each prompt in a focused

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[1] *Flierl and Hamer (2019, p. 98) note that excessive summarizing limits the learning potential for reflective writing exercises.*

[2] *Graves and Graves (2003) define scaffolding as a temporary structure that enables someone to successfully complete a task that they would be unable to without said structure. They argue that, "scaffolding can aid students by helping them to better complete a task, to complete a task with less stress or in less time, or to learn more fully than they would have otherwise." (Graves & Graves, 2003, p. 30)*

[3] *I am then able to ask students to apply these rehearsed skills to more substantial assignments later in the semester.*

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reading response can be adjusted to accommodate an instructor's subject matter and teaching modality. For instance, instead of requiring students to identify an author's main claim, a prompt can require students to identify the main catalyst for a particular event or story line, or it may require them to identify a specific practice or a series of steps in a process. The second prompt may still require students to provide the reasoning for their selection. Likewise, a prompt can require students to draw a comparison between character arcs in separate reading assignments, or between a narrative account and their own personal experience(s), and so on.

Additionally, focused reading response assignments are adaptable to a variety of teaching modalities. I first began using the assignment when teaching face-to-face courses and found it effective both for motivating students to complete reading assignments ahead of class meetings, as well as for preparing them to comment on the substance of readings assignment with more nuance during class discussions.[4] When courses pivoted online due to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Spring and Fall 2020, I found the assignment equally effective for motivating reading completion, reading comprehension, and reflection in remote learning environments. For instance, when responses are posted to discussion boards, students are held accountable by one another to post earnestly and on time, especially when the assignment is paired with a peer-reply component. With such assignment pairings, students comment upon one another's posts, which is especially useful for facilitating online discussions.

Further, I am able to glean how well students are comprehending course readings because of the streamlined and structured nature of their responses: in the few sentences allotted for each prompt, students either correctly or incorrectly identify the main thesis, they either persuasively or unpersuasively provide reasons for their main thesis selection, their evaluations provide either relevant or irrelevant criteria, and so on. In short, the assignment's specific prompts and limited length requirements facilitate more efficient and effective grading, which is especially helpful for educators. That being said, "streamlined and structured" does not mean *inflexible* or *uncreative;* focused reading responses allow students to be creative with their writing – an important pedagogical goal – while eliminating the "fluff" that so often pervades reading response assignments.

2. Pedagogical Objectives

When designing prompts for a focused reading response assignment, I determine what I want to see my students get out of my course. Do I want them to memorize and recite philosophical ideas? Certainly not. Do I want them to evaluate philosophical arguments and apply them beyond the bindings of our course text? Yes! But how can I prepare them to evaluate an argument, or apply it to some part of their life, when they have difficulty discerning the main conclusion from any one of the premises?

To identify appropriate learning objectives for focused reading responses, I utilize *Bloom's Taxonomy*, a framework for classifying the different skills and objectives that educators set as goals for their students,[5] as well as the *4R Model of Reflection*, which holds that students may achieve four levels of reflection: reporting/responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing (Flierl & Hamer, 2019).[6]

Bloom's taxonomy was initially proposed in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom, an educational psychologist, as a means of structuring learning objectives for different types of assignments (see Figure 1).[7]

The base category, *remembering,* involves recalling and/or identifying methods and processes, specific and general

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[4] *Sackris (2020) notes that this is probably the biggest benefit to using frequent, targeted reading response assignments: they allow for meaningful class discussion of the reading in class sessions because they enable the instructor to move beyond the task of simply explaining the content of the reading to students who are underprepared (p. 76-77).*

[5] *See Hall (2015).*

[6] *The 4R model of reflection is based upon the 5R Framework and Assessment Scale for reflective writing and thinking, which was developed to assess the levels of reflection found in the journal entries of student teachers (Bain et al. 2002, p. 13). The 5R Framework keeps reporting and responding as distinct levels, whereas the 4R model collapses both categories into one level (Level 1).*

[7] *The taxonomy has since been updated to reflect our increasingly digital pedagogical landscape. A "Bloom's Digital Taxonomy" infographic, created by Ron Carranza, is featured on the Arizona State University Teach Online website.*

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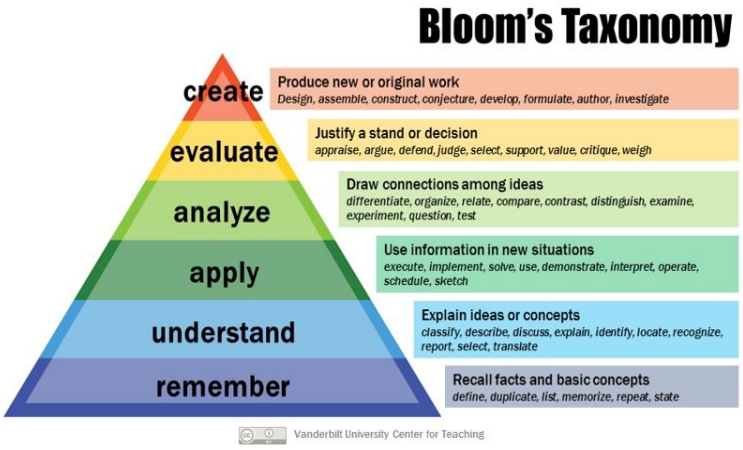
concepts, and patterns and structures, and is a necessary precondition for putting the skills and abilities identified in the other categories, such as *applying, analyzing,* and *creating,* to effective use (Armstrong, n.d.). For instance, in asking students to *evaluate* something (a reading, an artifact, a work of art), we are asking them to *justify* or *defend* their stance by providing supportive evidence (*facts and basic concepts*) or well-reasoned critique (*analysis*). Since one of the primary goals for my students is to hone their argumentative writing skills, I structure my focused reading responses on developing these abilities through regular practice. As such, I focus primarily on *analyzing* (prompt 3) and *evaluating* (prompt 4) arguments, and scaffold focused reading response prompts on achieving these learning objectives.[8] To do so, I incorporate the base category *understanding* (prompt 1) for students to use as a resource.

Figure 1:

Bloom's Taxonomy infographic, created by Patricia Armstrong, as found on the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching website.



The other goal that I have for my students is to hone their creative and reflective thinking toward a transformative learning experience. Transformative learning requires students to actively reflect upon their experiences or observation. The process of reflection involves taking what one has learned – in this case, philosophical concepts and views – and reconstructing it to apply it to one's experiences or observations (Flierl & Hamer, 2019, p. 88).[9] The 4R model of reflection helpfully distinguishes cognitive levels of learning, including the level of learning on which pedagogically beneficial reflection occurs (p. 89):

The 4R Model of Reflection

First Level - Reporting/Responding: Providing a descriptive or summarizing account of what was encountered / Providing an emotional or personal response to what was encountered

Second Level – Relating: Making connections between one's experiences and/or prior knowledge with what was encountered

Third Level – Reasoning: Explaining the issue at hand, highlighting relevant factors, variables, or experiences for what was encountered; thinking through logical outcomes

Fourth Level – Reconstructing: Drawing conclusions about what was encountered; reframing the issue at hand and developing a future action plan drawn from one's reframing

A transformative learning experience is unlikely to occur for students reflecting on a reporting/responding level, or a relating level. It is only when students begin to *reason* about what they have encountered – in this case, a reading assignment – that a fundamental shift in thinking can occur. Prompt 2, which asks students to explain their reasoning, is meant to achieve this transformation in thought. Simply put, it is not enough to report about some portion of the reading; one must also provide their reasoning for choosing this portion of the reading to report on. Requiring students to provide this reasoning is meant to motivate a reflective thought exercise where students must ask themselves, "Why *did* I find this so important?"

[8] *I have found that students who practice these philosophical skills in a low-stakes environment throughout the semester tend to apply philosophical perspectives more creatively to current events (in papers or in group projects), and tend to express philosophical ideas more clearly in class discussions.*

[9] *Flierl and Hamer, 2019; Bain et al., 2002.*

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Likewise, when a student can reconstruct or reframe an issue – especially in the context of evaluating the issue, as prompt 4 asks them to do – they must think about whether they would act on the reasons provided by the author (or not act). Prompt five, which asks students to formulate a question, is intended as a continuation of this thinking exercise: *should we think about this issue as the author does? What implications might this way of thinking produce?* Requiring students to engage in these specific reflective exercises through focused reading responses can yield such transformative learning experiences.

3. Assignment: Focused Reading Response

A focused reading response assignment in my Introduction to Philosophy courses is presented as five parts, each part specifying an objective and a target length:

- **IDENTIFY** what you believe to be the most important part of the reading assignment, *in your own words*, in 2–3 sentences. This can be a summary of what you believe to be the **main thesis** provided by the author (this can also be thought of as the *main conclusion* the author reaches), or a **controversial assumption** grounding the author's position (for instance, some belief the author mentions that guides much of their thinking).

- **EXPLAIN** the reasoning behind your selection in 3–4 sentences: *Why have you chosen X as the main thesis offered by the author? Why is this particular assumption controversial?* Think about this section as providing **reasons** for *your* conclusion that *X* is the main thesis. You should use examples from the article to help make your case.

- **COMPARE** this reading to another reading we have covered in the course. In 2–3 sentences, **examine** the **similarity** between this reading and another (perhaps both authors reach the same conclusion, or share similar reasoning), or **examine** the **difference** between this reading and another (you can point to differences in the main theses, or differences in reasoning, and so on).

- **EVALUATE** the reading in 2–3 sentences. *Do you find the author's argument plausible/implausible? Persuasive/unpersuasive? Why?* Be sure to **justify** your evaluation by providing reasons that support your evaluation.

- **FORMULATE** a **question** for your classmates. This can be a question to kick off discussion (for instance, you can ask about how the author's argument might apply to something in your peers' lives), or a question about something you found unclear in the reading (for instance, you can ask a classmate to explain a concept, a term, or to clarify an example that you may have struggled with). *Be specific! Vague questions (such as, "did you like this reading?") can be difficult to answer meaningfully.*

By creating clear guidelines that aim to demonstrate what a successful reflection looks like, students are given clear and attainable goals for their assignment. These goals are clarified further through the use of an accompanying rubric (Figure 2 on next page) that I share in advance of the assignment's due date. The rubric is also helpful for streamlining the grading process, as each box corresponds to a number grade. Once each part is assessed, the average of the five graded parts forms the final grade for the assignment. For educators like myself who can have up to 120 students per semester with no grading assistance, the clear guidelines in the prompts and the accompanying rubric offer actionable feedback to students while making grading a much less burdensome task.

I assign focused reading responses for every reading assignment over the course of the semester. However, I only require students to complete a portion of them (typically, 70% or so), essentially offering "freebie" days that students can choose to take whenever they are feeling swamped. While Sackris (2020) argues that assigning reading assignments for every class is essential for producing more engaging class discussions, I aim to balance this important goal with the ebb and flow of other demands that my students may be balancing at any given time. This consideration was certainly shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic, but I believe that it also lends some agency and ownership to my students (they may decide to prioritize the readings they believe will be the most interesting, and therefore may devote more time to the assignment because of it). There is never a class that goes by where I don't have at least a quarter of the class

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Figure 2:
The grading rubric that accompanies my focused reading response assignments.

Requirement	Incomplete / Does not Meet Expectations 0 – 1 (1=50)	Minimally Meets Expectations 2 (2=72)	Meets Expectations 3 (3=88)	Exceeds Expectations 4 (4=100)
Summary (of important part of reading)	Summary is missing or incomplete (0) / Summary does not reference anything specific from the reading assignment (1)	Summary vaguely references the reading assignment, but does not indicate that the student engaged with the reading assignment in a substantive way	Summary clearly references the reading and attentively summarizes the student's selection from the reading assignment	Summary clearly references the reading; summary completely and clearly outlines the student's selection while connecting the selection to the reading overall
Explanation of Summary (reason for summary selection)	Explanation of summary is incomplete or missing (0) / Explanation of summary does not logically connect to summary (1)	Explanation is not sufficiently motivated; examples used do not make the summary any clearer (may be irrelevant)	Explanation of summary is mostly clear and accurate; explanation indicates student's reasoning	Explanation of summary is relevant, accurate, and clearly indicates student's reasoning; explanation expands upon summary in insightful way
Analysis (comparison to other reading)	Analysis is incomplete or missing (0) / Analysis is too vague to discern any connection to other reading (1)	Connection to other reading is perfunctory or irrelevant	Connection to other reading is clear and well-motivated, but may not be comprehensive	Connection to other reading is clearly articulated, well-motivated, and comprehensive
Assessment (evaluation of reading)	Assessment is incomplete or missing (0) / Assessment does not include any relevant or clear reasons for student's evaluation (1)	Assessment is generic in character, does not indicate that student has engaged with implications of the author's argument(s)	Assessment is well-motivated and provides relevant reasons for student's evaluation	Assessment is well-motivated and insightful; student provides clear, comprehensive, and relevant reasons for their evaluation
Question (question for teammates)	Question is missing (0) or incomplete (1)	Question is too vague or general to motivate responses	Question is clear and specific to motivate discussion	Question is insightful and asks students to engage with reading in novel way

having turned in a Focused Reading Response ahead of time, providing plenty of material to build off of in class discussions, and a sizable portion of students in class to provide more insight for others each meeting.

Relatedly, while I do grade every focused reading response assignment, I am not grading heavily on the *accuracy* of the student's response. Rather, I am grading responses by how well students demonstrate reflective thinking in their response. As such, focused reading response assignments offer students many opportunities to practice identifying the main thesis of a philosophy article, as well as being given many opportunities to practice argumentative writing in various forms (through explanation, comparison, and evaluation). Specifically, by asking students to *identify* what they believe to be an important part of the reading and *explain* their reasoning, I am asking them to *write like a philosopher* – that is, to *defend their claim with reasons*. By asking students to *compare* readings, I am asking them to *think*

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critically about the nature of philosophical argumentation, especially how different arguments can be used to support the same claim or belief. By asking students to *evaluate* the reading, I am asking them to *think critically about their own beliefs* and how they relate to our reading assignments. By asking students to *formulate* a question for the class, I am asking them to think *creatively* about how to apply the main thesis beyond the text itself, as well as how to motivate their peers' engagement with the reading. These skills can be applied to other assignments during the semester, such as course papers.

4. In Practice

In practice, I have found that focused reading responses help keep students accountable for completing reading assignments ahead of class meetings. Since they must make reference to the text itself (both in identifying the main thesis and in using examples to help defend their selection), it is difficult to complete the assignment by simply skimming the reading or using vague language to summarize and evaluate the reading. In short, it is easy to identify whether or not a student has actually done the reading.

Additionally, the nature of the assignment prompts makes it difficult for students to plagiarize their responses or to effectively use online guides such as Course Hero or SparkNotes to formulate responses. Such guides typically offer broad overviews of reading assignments and so fail to reach the level of specificity needed to successfully answer each prompt.

From a participatory perspective, focuses reading responses help students prepare for class participation in a variety of modalities. Sackris (2020) notes that "Assignments associated with each class session's reading results in a high percentage of students carefully completing said reading, which results in more successful class discussions, and a deeper dive into the course material" (p. 75). I have found this as well. For instance, in a classroom setting, students already come prepared with a question to ask the class, making it easier to begin and sustain class discussions. Moreover, students are better prepared to answer questions posed by instructors since they have engaged with the reading in a more nuanced fashion.

For online or blended courses, focused reading responses facilitate useful discussion board content. I have found that students respond earnestly to their peers' questions and are regularly motivated by the connections their peers make to other reading assignments – in some cases, the comparisons alone spark an entire discussion thread! Most importantly, successful comparisons indicate not only that students comprehend the material, but that they have the ability to creatively engage with it by making new connections to other philosophical ideas.

For instance, a focused reading response posted to a discussion board in one of my Fall 2020 Introduction to Philosophy courses focused on Annette Baier's "Trust and Antitrust", drawing a connection to the work of David Hume by referencing his argument that impressions precede ideas:

> *Annette Baier's "Trust and Antitrust" explores the way in which we as humans trust, identifying the different types of trust yet at the same time understanding that trust is a major foundation in relationships and atmospheres. Baier describes that we frequently trust total strangers and with that "of course we are often disappointed, rebuffed, let down, or betrayed when we exhibit such trust in others, and we are often exploited when we show the wanted trustworthiness" (p 234).*
>
> *For example, Baier specifically mentions that we trust the mailman to deliver and not tamper with the mail and we trust those whom we ask directions for in foreign cities to direct rather than indirect us. Continued in the piece, Baier creates reason as to why we typically leave that in which we hold closest to our hearts in the hands of other people, trusting that they will not cause them harm. Baier narrates that "we need their help in creating and then in not merely guarding but looking after the things we most value so we have no choice but to allow some others to be in a position to harm them" (p 236). Consistently through this work, Baier focuses on our choice to trust, even those we just merely encountered, and the way it shapes human condition.*
>
> *I believe that philosopher David Hume could most closely relate to Baier. Hume was all about how our experiences shifted our lives and created impressions for the remaining of our lives. If Baier might further*

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> *explain Hume's philosophy using the idea that our experience with one individual, particularly the way the trust we put into them was handled and whether it be with care or not, can leave a lasting impression on us.*
>
> *I find it interesting how Baier importantly mentions that "when we turn to the great moral philosophers, in our tradition, what we find can scarcely be said to be even a sketch of a moral theory of trust" (p 232). With this I'm left with the question of, would Baier argue that everybody's moral theory of trust is different, and if so, would the fact that each person's unique set of morals, different from the next, affect this?*

In this response, the student has successfully responded to each prompt and has incorporated evidence (in the form of selected quotes or explanations) to support their claims. The learning objectives have been met: the student has made an earnest attempt to identify the main thesis and provide relevant evidence to support their selection; the comparison to Hume is both relevant and substantiated with the student's reasoning; and the question as formulated has the potential to motivate specific, relevant responses from peers. It is clear that the student has critically engaged with the reading assignment and has thought creatively about connecting the reading to others we had covered in the course. Moreover, the response has demonstrated a transformative learning experience: the student's thought process has taken them away from merely discussing the article and into a musing about moral relativism and its implications for trusting others.

Another example, from a student in my Spring 2021 Introduction to Philosophy Course, demonstrates a student grappling with how well an historical philosophical argument applies in a more contemporary context:

> *The main idea that Hume was trying to convey was his method of identifying empty words. "When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea… we need but enquire,* from what impression is that supposed idea derived?" *First, we identify the impression, or original perception of an experience, behind an idea. Then, by judging the validity of that impression, we are also able to judge the validity of the idea.*
>
> *Throughout the reading Hume provides ideas that build off each other and give context for his main claim. He starts by defining* Ideas and Impressions, *then goes on to show how the two are intrinsically linked. "But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that… all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions".*
>
> *One similarity between Descartes and Hume was their ideas on the origin of the imagination. Hume wrote, when defining ideas, that "all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience". In other words, anything a person can imagine is in some way derived from a real-world experience. Descartes seemingly would agree, as in Meditations he wrote that "even when painters try to depict sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they simply jumble up the limbs of different kinds of real animals, rather than inventing natures that are entirely new."*
>
> *Hume's method for finding "terms employed without any meaning" seems to be extremely situational, and there are a few holes in his theory that potentially undo the whole thing. One of them Hume acknowledges, with his example of a colorblind man imagining a shade of color that he can't physically see, but ultimately discounts as being too "singular" to be worth accounting for. Another possible hole in Hume's theory is PTSD, where people can experience flashbacks of traumatic events "as if the event were actually happening"* (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder), *which could put Hume's initial claim that ideas are always "the less lively perceptions" under dispute. Still, when used expressly for the purpose of identifying empty talk, and especially in more technical fields, Hume's method could be extremely viable.*
>
> *Assuming Hume wrote this piece before the modern understanding of PTSD, does the condition now being recognized blow apart his whole line of reasoning? Or is it like his example of the colorblind man, being*

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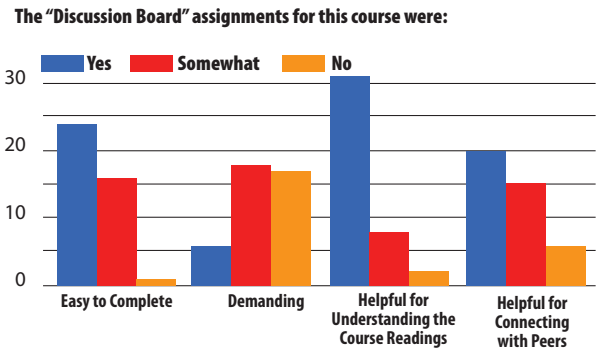
> *too "singular" of a case to need to be factored into his reasoning? Or even, would it fall under Hume's description of a "mind… disordered by disease or madness" and so not affect his theory whatsoever?*

Beyond merely reporting the details of the reading, this student has reflected on its applicability to phenomenon that might challenge the strength of Hume's argument. As such, this response demonstrates a transformative learning experience in that the student has moved beyond the details of the argument itself to the nature of philosophical argumentation more generally.

Most importantly, students themselves find this assignment helpful for comprehending course content. At the end of the Fall 2020 semester, I administered an anonymized survey through Google Forms to all students in my two Introduction to Philosophy courses (Figure 3). In both courses, students were required to post focused reading responses to a discussion board throughout the semester. Of the 41 students who completed the survey, 31 responded that the discussion board assignments were helpful for understanding course readings, while eight students responded that the discussion board assignments were somewhat helpful for understanding course readings. Students also indicated that the assignments were easy to complete and were helpful for connecting with peers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3:

Student responses to a question about the focused reading response discussion board assignments given throughout the semester.



By providing clear directives that connect to transformative learning experiences, students can glean how this assignment advances their understanding of philosophy and hones creative and argumentative writing skills.

5. Conclusion

Focused reading responses effectively motivate students to read and critically engage with course readings by providing clear directives for students to compose meaningful reading responses. They are versatile assignments, working well in both face-to-face and remote teaching environments, as well as in various disciplines. By utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy and the 4R Model of Reflection, the assignment clearly communicates the connection between the learning objectives for the assignment and the desired learning outcomes for the course, providing students with the resources they need to achieve a transformative learning experience.

Encouraging Critical Engagement *continued*

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