

LEARNfest 2017  
University of Waikato

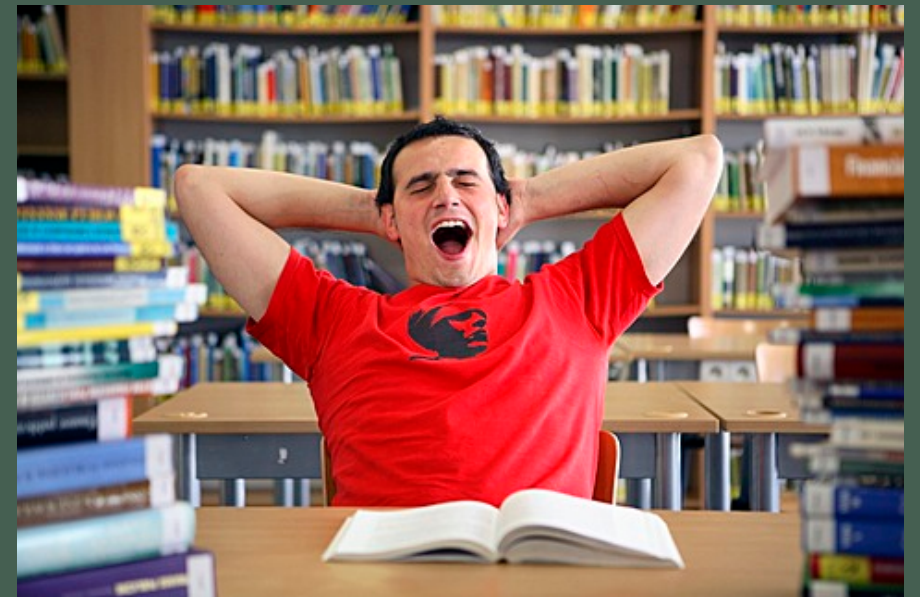
# Getting students to engage with readings

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# The problem:

## Students are bored and readings are boring

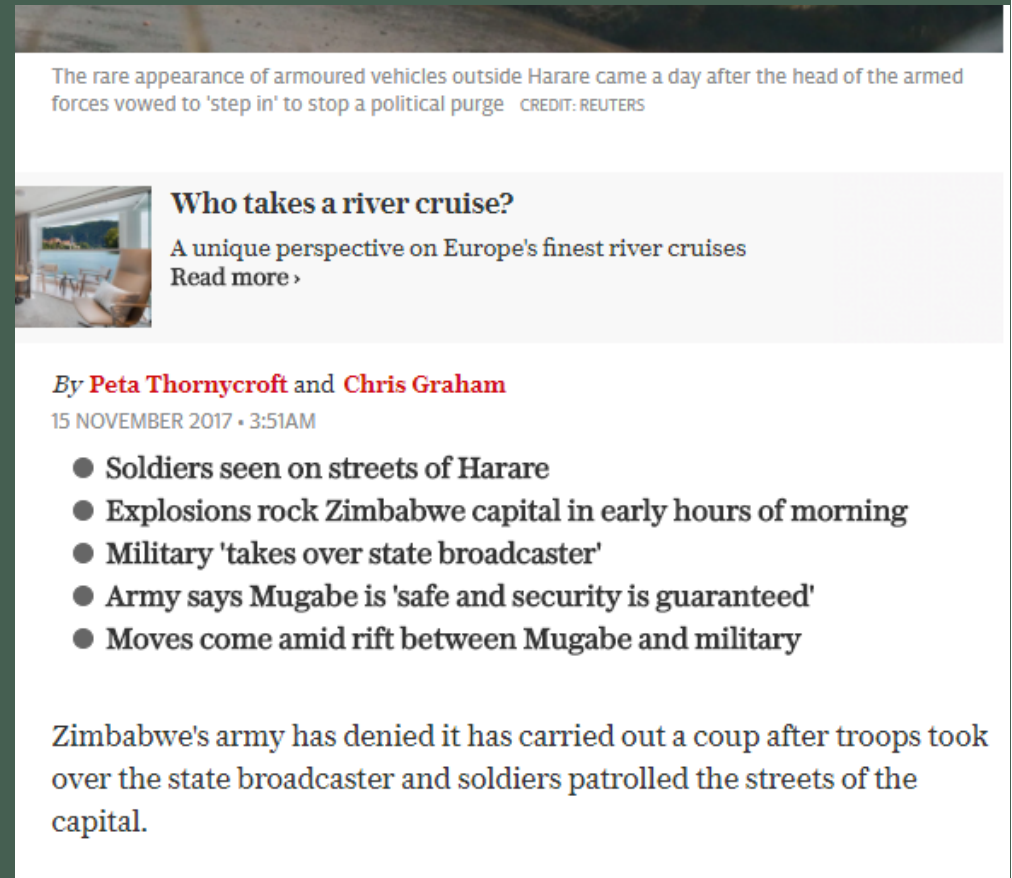
- We want students to learn how to comprehend and critique complex arguments that tend to be in **readings**
- Students are disengaged generally, so **how can we get them engaged with possibly the least engaging aspect of university study?!**



# Exacerbating the problem:

## Students rarely have to read long and complex texts

- Students can Google simple answers to most questions
- Increasingly, information is delivered in stand-alone sentences
- Even brief news articles are summarized



The rare appearance of armoured vehicles outside Harare came a day after the head of the armed forces vowed to 'step in' to stop a political purge CREDIT: REUTERS

### Who takes a river cruise?

A unique perspective on Europe's finest river cruises  
[Read more >](#)

By **Peta Thornycroft** and **Chris Graham**  
15 NOVEMBER 2017 • 3:51AM

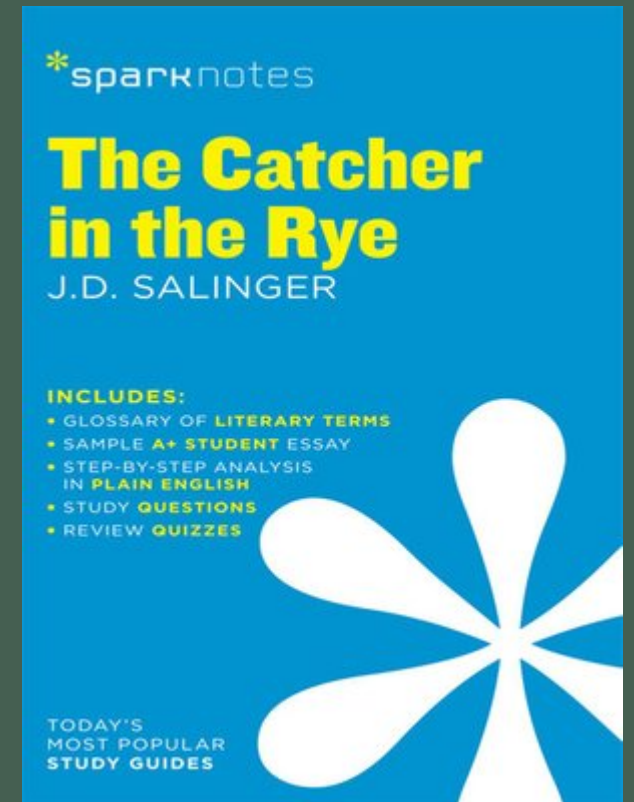
- Soldiers seen on streets of Harare
- Explosions rock Zimbabwe capital in early hours of morning
- Military 'takes over state broadcaster'
- Army says Mugabe is 'safe and security is guaranteed'
- Moves come amid rift between Mugabe and military

Zimbabwe's army has denied it has carried out a coup after troops took over the state broadcaster and soldiers patrolled the streets of the capital.

# Exacerbating the problem:

## Students rarely suffer consequences for not doing their readings

- Students can read summarised work instead
  - Online (blogs, Wikipedia, spark notes, etc.)
  - Lecture notes
- Many readings are not directly linked to assessment
- All of the important parts of readings are covered in lectures and lecture notes



# Exacerbating the problem:

## Distractions

### Internet/games to students:

- Look at me

### Part-/full-time job to students:

- You HAVE to come in today

### Family to students:

- We need you to...

### Result:

- ☹️ ◦ Studying while doing other things
- ☹️ ◦ Studying after other things
- ☹️ ◦ Not studying because of doing other things
- ☹️ ◦ Not being able to focus on one thing for more than 10 minutes



# Context

- Difficult content: Philosophy of science/science and human values
- 2<sup>nd</sup> year in-person course

# Learning outcomes

- Comprehend and critique complex arguments
- *Independently!*
- *Means they have to be able to extract complex arguments from the readings!*



# Course design

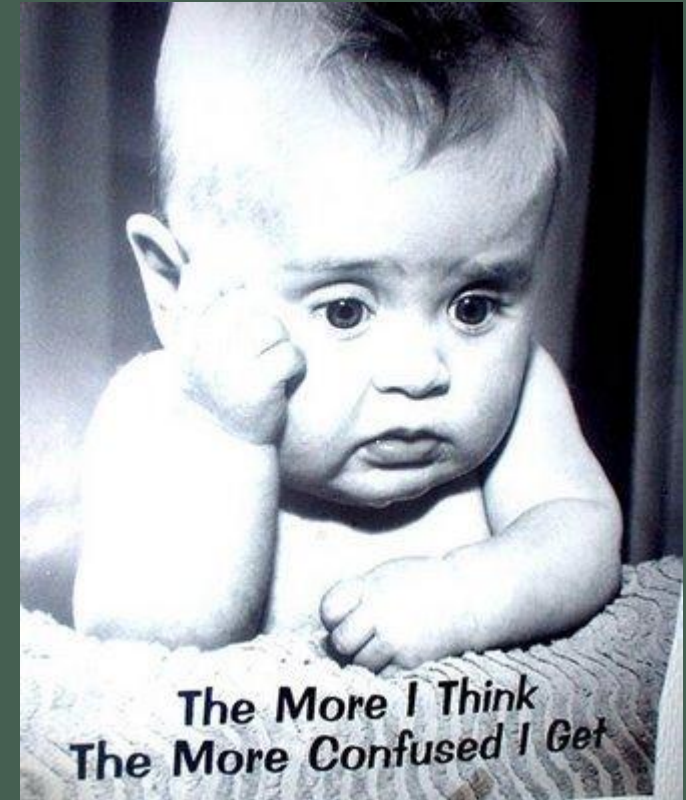
- Scaffolded learning
- Early and regular assessment
- Include low-stakes assessment
- Learn by doing
- Flipped approach
- Group and individual work
- Blended (in-person/online)
- Assessment fully linked to learning outcomes





# Teaching

- Expectations are made crystal clear
- Expectations are justified in terms of learning outcomes
- Create multiple active learning moments
- Failure and feeling like you don't know things are normal parts of learning
- Encourage self-reflection on learning



# Assessment

- Explaining how each relate to learning outcomes
- Pointing out the importance of doing the reading effectively

Component Description	Percentage of overall mark	Details
In-class participation	9	23 lectures Earn up to ½ a mark per lecture
In-class surprise quizzes	21	3 marks each Best 7 of 11 quizzes
Analysis Paper	30	Independently summarise and critique the argument in a complex paper
Exam	40	Write 2 essays from 6(/9) possible prompts

# Scaffolding

- How to stay awake while reading
- How to extract information from a complex text and make notes
- Being encouraging and supportive

## Success is close at hand

- \* Organize a regular time to do the reading and stick to it as best you can
- \* Tell me if you are struggling
- \* Understand that your brain is like a muscle



## How to read critically

- \* Make up your own mind before you read
- \* Momentarily take the opposite side to every point of view
- \* Make this face



## How to take notes

- \* Think pair share
- \* What is the author arguing for?
- \* What are the main reasons the author uses to argue for that?
- \* Are any terms defined and frequently used within the reading? What are they and what does the author say they mean?
- \* Does the author use any key examples? What are they and what does the author use them to argue for?

# Scaffolding etc.

- Work in teams during class to extract arguments from short complex passages
- Low stakes - First quiz is revealed to be a practice quiz (after the fact)
- Prompt feedback
  - Discuss answers directly afterwards
  - Put up grades within 48 hours

## (Practice) Quiz 1

2. Describe Newton's method for discovering gravity (according to the text book). (1 mark)
  - \* Observations deduced from phenomena (using geometry style: deduce theorems from axioms)
  - \* Observations are then generalized (universalized) by induction/deduction from an assumption/axiom about God
3. Why does Newton not like the 'come up with a hypotheses and then test it' method of science? (1 mark).

# Quiz benefits

- Timing (any time, including multiple in one class, but usually at very start)
  - Students come on time (9am lecture)
  - Student don't leave early
  - Student pay attention while in class
  - **Students read and take notes before class** (students can use their notes during quiz)
- Best 7 of 11
  - Don't have to worry about sick notes etc.
  - Allows students to learn from mistakes in a low-stakes way
  - Students and I get regular feedback on their learning



# Building skills and seeing their value

- Every reading and set of notes students do, helps develop their skills and enables them to get a better grade in **all of the assessment**
- I explain along the way how these skills can be used in the real world
- Sometimes swap exam for portfolio

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# Student experience

- 50% of the responses to “What aspects of the paper helped you to learn?” mentioned the quizzes, including:
  - “The way that the paper was set out with most of our marks based on regular readings and participation and in-class quizzes helped me to keep up with the workload and attend class often.”
  - “The structure of the paper allowed me to learn most effectively. E.g. readings before class, followed by (potential) quiz, learning about the reading in class -having to read and make notes in case there was a quiz and then having the content explained and examined in class helped me learn the content quite easily.”

PHIL208-17A(HAM)

Response rate: 75% (18/24)

94%

“Strongly agree” responses to “Overall, this paper provided me with a good learning experience”

# Next steps

- Fully integrate (free/cheap) student response systems to spread the assessment throughout each class and further develop engagement
- Add more funny pictures to my slides

