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College students' textbook reading, or not!

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Introduction

College professors often look around a classroom full of blank stares after asking a question that should have been found in the assigned readings. Professors integrate assigned reading into their curriculum in hopes to help students create a deeper understanding of the content and expand their thinking past the surface. However, with fewer students completing their readings, a great deal of knowledge can be lost within the textbooks. Professors carefully collect materials to work succinctly with the content that is being taught in the class. When students do not read or only partially read their assignments their opportunity for growth is severely hindered. It is no secret that college students may not be reading all of their assigned materials, therefore research continues to examine the growing phenomenon, the behaviors of college students, as well as attempt to find solutions to this ever-growing issue.

Research on textbook reading has demonstrated the importance of integrating supplemental texts into the classroom to enhance learning. Instructors locate materials to allow students to create a deeper meaning of the course content; however, there has been a growing trend of students who are not compliant with completing class readings (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000). Although students may believe the course textbook plays an integral role not only in understanding course content, but also with the course learning experience (Beeser, Stone, & Nan, 1999), low numbers of students are completing their assigned readings before class (Burchfield & Sappington; Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004; Clump & Doll, 2007; Phillips & Phillips, 2007). Researchers also suggest that larger numbers of students wait until they are preparing for an exam to read the assignments (Clump, Bauer, & Bradley; Clump & Doll; Phillips & Phillips).

Method and Materials

The study was conducted using two Midwestern universities. A total of 395 participants were surveyed for the study; 219 of the participants were pursuing their degree in teacher education and 176 of the participants were non-teacher education majors. For the purpose of this study, when addressing teacher-education majors, the study is referring to students who are obtaining a degree in education (such as early childhood, middle childhood, adolescent young adult education, world language education, special education, and business education). This is not referring to teachers who are in training to instruct pre-service or current educators. Of the teacher-education participants, 29 were in graduate school, and 190 were obtaining their undergraduate degree. The 176 non-teacher education majors are all enrolled in undergraduate courses. All of the courses surveyed for the study required students to buy a textbook. Each course also assigned weekly readings from the textbooks.

The instrument used to conduct the study was an 11-question survey adapted from *Textbook Reading in this Course Survey* (The Teaching Professor, 2001) (See Figure 1). Seven of the survey questions address students' current reading habits for assigned class readings. Questions were also asked about the amount of time spent on reading the class assignments and the students anticipated grade in the class. In addition, the study strategies students used when reading were addressed. It was also important to observe the role instructors play in the participants' reading habits. The participants' views on the relationship between the instructors' lectures and their classroom activities with the assigned readings were addressed. It also asked how the professors or instructors could enable students to learn their required reading material more effectively.

Figure 1. Survey adapted from Textbook Reading in this Course Survey

How do you complete the assigned readings for this course?

1. What is your major?

- Teacher Education
- Non-Teacher Education

2. When do you typically do the assigned reading for this class?

- Before I come to class
- After the material has been covered in class
- When I am studying for the exam
- I do not complete assigned readings.

3. How much time, on average, do you spend on one reading assignment?

- One hour or less
- Between one and two hours
- Between two and three hours
- More than three hours

4. Based on your experience in this class, what grade do you believe you could earn in this class without reading the assigned readings?

- A
- B
- C
- D
- Could not pass without reading the materials

5. What do you perceive as the relationship between the instructors' presentations/lectures and the assigned readings?

- The instructor's material is very different.
- The instructor seems to highlight key points.
- About half of the instructor's presentation is from the text
- The instructor's material comes straight from the text.

6. When given the choice of reading a hard copy or an electronic copy, which do you choose?

- I prefer to read a hard copy.
- I prefer to read an electronic copy.
- It does not matter if it is a hard copy or an electronic copy
- I do not read either way.

7. If all college reading assignments were from electronic texts, how would you feel?

- I would view this favorably.
- I think for some classes this might be fine, but not for others.
- I would hate this.
- If I knew more about reading and studying from electronic texts, it may be fine.

8. What do you do when you complete assigned readings from a hard copy? Check all that apply.

- Underline/Highlight key points passages
- Take notes on a separate sheet of paper
- Compare the reading with class notes
- Write notes and questions in the text
- Outline the reading
- None of the above

9. What do you do when you complete assigned readings from an electronic copy? Check all that apply.

- Use the highlighting feature within the program to note key phrases or passages
- Print the electronic copy then read
- Use comment boxes to write notes and questions in the text
- Compare reading with class notes
- Outline the reading in a separate word document
- Outline the reading on a separate hand written copy
- None of the above

10. How do you review the assigned readings before an exam? Check all that apply.

- Reread all the assigned readings
- Read the text material for the first time
- Reread what I underlined in the readings
- Write sample questions on text material I think will be on the exam
- Discuss the assigned readings with peers
- Review my assigned reading notes and class notes together
- Make an outline of the material and review the outline
- I do not review the assigned readings before the exam

11. What can the professor do to support your efforts to learn the assigned readings? Check all that apply.

- Tell me exactly what is important in the reading
- Encourage me to ask questions about material I did not understand from the assigned readings
- Ask the class questions about the assigned readings
- Speak regularly about how the assigned readings relate to what we are learning in class
- Take time in class before the exam to review the assigned readings with the class
- Give the class time to discuss the assigned readings

Results

All tables provide the frequency, and percent for each question. The data were analyzed using univariate descriptive analysis, which allows for each variable to be analyzed independently.

Table 1 identifies the number of hours participants spent on their assigned readings. The results indicate that majority of the students (40%) complete their assigned readings when preparing for exams. Only 24.8% of students indicated they read the assigned materials before coming to class. It should also be noted that 18.7% of the students reported they did not complete the assigned readings for class.

Table 1. When Assigned Readings are Typically Completed

When Readings Are Completed	Frequency Percent	
Before coming to class	98	24.8
After the material has been covered in class	59	14.9
When studying for the exam	161	40.8
Don't complete readings	74	18.7
Total	392	99.2
No Response	3	0.8
Total	395	100.0

Table 2 presents the amount of time, on average, students spent reading one of the assigned readings. According to students surveyed, 62.4% spent one hour or less on their assigned readings while 31.9 % of the students indicated they read between one and two hours. Thus, 93.9% of the students spent less than two hours on assigned class readings.

Table 2. How Much Time (Average) is Spent Reading Assignments

Number of Hours	Frequency Percent	
On hour or less	245	62.0
Between one and two hours	126	31.9
Between two and three hours	18	4.6
More than three hours	6	1.5
Total	395	100.0

Another question asked students to indicate what grade they believed they could earn without doing any of the reading. Table 3 shows that 89.1% of the participants believed they could receive a C or better. Interestingly, 31.6% of the students believed they could obtain an A in the class without doing any assigned readings, while 32.2% believed they could receive a B.

Students were asked to identify any strategies they used when completing an assigned reading from a hard copy. The participants were able to select all options that applied. Table 4 shows the results. A total of 36.2 % of students identified underlining/ highlighting key points in the passage to be one of their reading strategies. Another 24.2 % of students selected taking notes on a separate sheet of paper, and 13.8 % of students selected comparing the reading with class notes.

Table 3. Perceptions of Grade Without Reading

Grade	Frequency	Percent
A	125	31.6
B	127	32.2
C	100	25.3
D	32	8.1
Could not pass without reading	11	2.0
Total	395	100.0

Table 4. Reading Strategies From Hard Copy of Text

Strategies	Frequency	Percent
Underline/Highlight key points	233	36.2
Take notes on a separate sheet of paper	156	24.2
Compare the reading with class notes	89	13.8
Write notes and questions in the text	63	9.8
Outline the reading	55	8.5
None of the Above	48	7.5
Total	644	100.0

Table 5 indicates the participants' perception of the relationship between the instructors' presentation/lectures and the assigned readings. The large majority of students (75.2%) identified the instructor as highlighting the key points while 11.1 % of participants stated their perception to be that half of the instructor's presentation was from the text.

Table 5. Perceived Relationship between Instructor’s Presentations/Lectures and Readings

Relationship	Frequency	Percent
Instructor’s material is very different.	28	7.1
Instructor seems to highlight key points	297	75.2
About half of the instructor’s presentation is from the text.	44	11.1
Instructor’s material comes straight from the text.	23	5.8
Total	392	99.2
Not Reported	3	0.8
Total	395	100.0

When asked what the professor could do, participants were able to select multiple responses. Table 6 indicates 27.9 % of students stated the professor could tell exactly what is important in the reading. Another 19.6 % of students indicated the professor could speak regularly about how the assigned readings relate to what is currently being taught in class, and 18.5 % selected taking time in class before the exam to review the assigned readings.

Table 6. What Can the Professor Do?

What Can Professor Do?	Frequency	Percent
Tell me what is important in the reading.	265	27.9
Encourage me to ask questions.	74	7.8
Ask the class questions about the readings.	126	13.3
Speak regularly about how the two are related.	186	19.6
Take time in class to review readings before exam.	176	18.5
Give class time to discuss assigned readings	122	12.9
Total	949	100.0

Discussion and Implications

This study explored students’ perceptions of assigned class readings. The results of this study may be somewhat discouraging to college faculty. According to the participants, a staggering 62% of students spend an hour or less reading their assigned materials and only 6.1% spend more than two hours reading. Although only 24.8% of participants completed assigned readings before class, 40.8% of the participants indicated they did their reading only when preparing for exams. Approximately 89% of students believed they could receive a C or better without completing any of the assigned readings. It was also discovered that students would prefer (a)

instructors review the assigned class readings, (b) speak regularly about the readings, and (c) discuss the important points from the readings.

Many professors assign readings and expect the students to enter class with a base knowledge of the content being covered in the classroom. However, this may not be the case with many students. Teachers may need to reduce the amount of reading that is required to keep the readings short and functional.

It is also vital for instructors to evaluate their reasons for assigning class readings. If readings are assigned as busy work, the teacher must ask if the readings are necessary. If the purpose of the reading is to be the core focus of the class or is necessary for student understanding, the instructor must convey the importance of the readings to the students (Ryan, 2006). The instructor may do this by having a discussion with the class about the overall role the readings will play in class. This will set clear expectations of how, when, and why students should be reading the assignments. If the instructor does not discuss or acknowledge the assigned readings, students will not see the value of the assignment.

Instructors may also want to develop innovative techniques to ensure that students are reading their assignments on a regular basis. This may eliminate students' habits of only reading the materials before exams. Pop quizzes are often suggested as a motivational tool to encourage students to read (Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, & Herschbach, 2010; Ruscio, 2001). Another commonly suggested technique to increase student reading is awarding extra credit (Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004; Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, & Herschbach, 2010). Several researchers (Ryan, 2006; Yonker & Cummins-Sebree, 2009) also suggest that faculty link assigned readings to future assessments and exams. Ryan found that explicit homework on the assigned readings with extensive teacher feedback drastically improved student participation in the assigned readings.

Given the popularity of e-books, Kindles, and Nooks, faculty may wish to pursue electronic versions of textbooks, or engage readers in reading documents online. Online assignments may encourage students to read the information in closer proximity to the class discussion, rather than waiting for test time. Online reading may also be perceived as more relevant and timely. Current, up-to-date information may add an element to class readings that currently does not exist for students.

There is not one solution to the problem of students neglecting to read their assigned class materials; however, it is a growing problem that warrants further investigation. Our results indicated only one-fourth of students read their materials before class, and less than two-thirds of the students spent more than one hour reading the assignments. This, much like

previous research (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004; Clump & Doll, 2007; Phillips & Phillips, 2007), suggests students are increasingly reading less and less. The information gleaned from these research initiatives must be used continue on this further develop strategies to help improve the amount of students engaging in classroom readings. While much can be learned from the results of this study, there is much room for further research.

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