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“It’s a lot to take in” - Undergraduate Experiences with Assigned Reading

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Interviewer: Tell me about some things that frustrate you about your course reading.

Student: I feel like, especially core classes, professors take the reading way too seriously, like they want you to know everything and memorize everything, and I'm just like, this isn't even my major, like I have other things that I need to focus on.

Assigned texts play an important role in college coursework, and students are required to read for their classes during their college careers – in textbooks and other volumes, on websites, in journal articles, and elsewhere. Yet faculty across all disciplines report that many students do not complete all of the reading for a course, and some do not do the reading at all.

Concern with reading compliance is not new, and researchers have examined student completion of reading in college courses over the past several decades. Burchfield and Sappington studied the results of student performance on surprise reading quizzes in Psychology courses of 910 undergraduate and graduate students at a small Southeastern university, administered between 1981 and 1997. Their results indicated that the amount of course reading students completed decreased over the time period of the study, what they referred to as “a disturbing trend of noncompliance with reading assignments” (2000, p. 59). Other studies have also shown that students often do not complete their assigned course reading (Baier, Hendricks, Warren Gorden, Hendricks, & Cochran, 2011). In her research on reading in a first year seminar at a small regional university, Hoefft found that a greater percentage of students completed their assigned reading than did students in the foundational Burchfield and Sappington study; even so, less than half of the surveyed students reported that they completed their required reading (2010, p. 12).

In a review of prior research, Starcher and Proffitt suggested several reasons that undergraduates do not complete their reading, including struggles with reading comprehension, lack of motivation, misperception about the importance of reading for the course, and challenges in finding time to read (2011, pp. 397-399). Hoefft concurs, and characterizes the reasons that students she surveyed gave for not reading: “schedules that didn’t allow time for reading, social life that comes before reading, dislike of reading of any kind, lack of interest in topic, and laziness” (2012, p. 11). Though most studies have focused on students – measuring reading completion and suggesting strategies to increase compliance – Brost and Bradley (2006) examined the role that course instructors play in students’ academic reading practice. While time and motivation are cited in most studies as reasons that students may not complete their reading, few have explored the reasons why students may not have adequate time for their assigned course reading or why they may not feel motivated to complete it. Further, many studies of undergraduate reading involve research at primarily residential colleges and universities, and do not adequately consider the experiences of commuter students, who make up a large and growing percentage of undergraduates, or institutions with highly diverse, non-traditional student populations.

What stands in the way of students completing their course reading, and how can faculty and staff support students’ academic reading practices? Students who do not complete their assigned reading may have difficulty completing their coursework; exploring the reasons that students do not do their reading can inform strategies to support their academic success. To learn more about students’ experiences with their required course reading, I undertook a study of undergraduate academic reading habits.

Research Methods

Building on previous research on the student academic experience at the City University of New York (CUNY) (Smale & Regalado, 2018b), this project employed qualitative methods to explore undergraduates’ attitudes toward and practices around their required course reading. The research questions for this study were:

- What reading materials are students assigned in their courses, and how do they acquire or access them?
- When, where, and how do students do their assigned course readings?

This research was conducted at three CUNY colleges: Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), Brooklyn College, and New York City College of Technology (City Tech), selected to represent a range of schools at the university: a community college, a baccalaureate college, and a comprehensive college that offers two- and four-year degrees. In Fall 2016, undergraduate enrollment at Brooklyn College was 14,406, at City Tech 17,282, and at BMCC 26,748; BMCC has the largest enrollment of any CUNY college (CUNY OIRA, 2018). While there are differences between the student populations of each of the three colleges in this study, they are not substantial, especially as many students transfer between CUNY colleges during their academic careers. CUNY is a highly diverse institution: across the university student self-identified race/ethnicity was 0.3% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 20.8% Asian, 26% Black, 31.9% Hispanic, 21% White. Most CUNY undergraduates are of traditional age and take a full-time courseload, though 26.5% are over 25 years old, and 33.8% are part-time students. Nearly 53% percent of CUNY community college students and 37% of comprehensive/baccalaureate college students lived in households with incomes of less than \$20,000/year (CUNY OIRA, 2017).

During the Spring 2017 semester semi-structured interviews of about 30 minutes in length were held with 10 students each of the three colleges, for a total of 30 students interviewed during this project. After obtaining approval for this study from the college Institutional Review Boards, students were recruited via flyers posted on each campus to produce a convenience sample. Students were interviewed on their own campus and all interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder; interview questions are available in the Appendix, below. All students interviewed received a \$10 transit card or gift card for their participation. After completing the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed, and the Dedoose qualitative data analysis platform was used to code the interview data and develop themes to facilitate analysis.

The students interviewed during this study were in a range of majors and programs at the three colleges, from first year students through seniors. Most were attending college full time during the semester I interviewed them, with only two part-time students. All but five of the students interviewed were between 18-24 years old, and about one-third of them were working at least part-time or participating in internships. With a sample of only 30 students it is not possible to correlate reading practices with academic performance or demographic data, thus I did not collect information on GPA, gender, or race/ethnicity from the students interviewed. The results of a study of this size are not generalizable, however, as has been found in previous research on the student experience at CUNY, students reported strong similarities between their experiences across the three schools despite the academic differences between community and baccalaureate colleges (Asher et al., 2017). The results of this research are thus discussed here in aggregate for all three colleges.

Undergraduate Course Reading Narratives

The students interviewed shared information about their reading process that is likely familiar to many academic faculty and staff, though they also revealed detail that is less visible about their practice, priorities, and challenges when engaging in their required course reading. Three narratives of CUNY students' course reading, students pseudonymously referred to as Tamara, Sana, and Isabella, illustrate the experiences surfaced in this research. While each narrative comprises the responses of one individual student to my interview questions, these three students are not outliers; each reported experiences that were broadly representative of the responses of many students who participated in this research, and revealed themes that were common across multiple student interviews.

Tamara

Tamara was a traditional-aged student in her second year of college during the semester she was interviewed. She was working part-time in addition to attending school, and taking a full-time course load that included both required General Education courses and classes in her major, Psychology.

That semester Tamara was assigned course readings from both print (textbooks, handouts) and online sources. Tamara described a tension between reading online and in print: she noted the constraints of the free printing allocation at her college and a desire to be “ecofriendly,” though she also had limited options for reading online. While Tamara had a laptop computer she did not bring it to campus, and doing the reading on her phone was “a little bit of a distraction because I have text messages coming in, and it’s a very small screen.” Tamara also preferred to annotate her readings on paper, revealing that “it’s a lot easier to jot down notes on the side.”

Tamara was a commuter student, like the vast majority of CUNY students, and often used her commute on the bus or subway to complete her course reading. She said that she sometimes did her course reading “right before bed, [because] a lot of people are asleep already” in her household which included a parent and several siblings. However, Tamara also shared that “it’s a lot easier to do it on the bus or train.” She found that annotating or taking notes on her reading could be a challenge while on public transit – “it’s difficult to maneuver” – and she would often wait until getting to her destination to take notes, or occasionally take notes on her phone.

I mentioned to Tamara that she was brightening and smiling when she discussed the reading for the two Psychology classes she was taking that semester. She replied that the reading in those classes was “interesting, *really* interesting.” Tamara characterized the readings for her major courses as “the real stuff,” and their place in her academic priorities was clear when she declared “those are the readings I tend to do first.”

Tamara was also taking several required core courses during the semester that we spoke, and her prioritizing strategies for the reading varied. Sometimes she set a timer to read for 10 minutes each day to try and get through her assigned reading, though she would go beyond that time if she found the reading interesting. Overall she prioritized based on “the weekly agenda,” whatever homework or assignments were coming due that week, though she sometimes had to make choices between what she could do in the time she had, and noted that “I feel like I’m juggling in a circus.” She felt that her Psychology courses were most important, and said: “I like being able to engage in the conversation and to have input.” For some of her other classes in which she wasn’t always able to complete the reading she told me “I usually just stay quiet.”

Tamara’s main frustration with her required course reading was the amount, and she shared that “there’s so much to read and it seems like so little time, and it’s annoying because don’t these professors know we have other classes and other assignments and other things to do?” Sometimes she wished that her course readings were easier to understand, and when she found herself struggling her most frequent strategies were rereading and taking notes in her own words. She did sometimes review particularly challenging readings with a classmate or ask her professor for clarification after class, but with multiple classes, a job, and family responsibilities she did not always have the time to seek help with her reading.

Sana

Sana was a traditional-aged student in the second semester of her first year of college when I interviewed her. She was majoring in Nursing and taking a full-time course load.

Sana was mostly taking required core courses during the semester we spoke, and only one of her courses was part of her major. She characterized herself as “a slow reader,” and tended to do her homework after classes ended for the day or on the weekends, preferring to do her reading at home where she had quiet space to concentrate rather than her college library which she described as “kind of a hangout place for most people.” Sana tended to do her readings in print, printing out online readings whenever possible; she told me that “I like to highlight so I know the important parts” when studying for tests.

That semester Sana was taking classes full-time but did not have a job, and she was conscious of the resulting impact on her time. She told me that she felt that her reading load was heavy but that she always found time to do it, though she acknowledged that she probably wouldn’t have time to do all of her required course reading if she had a job. Even without a job, Sana did sometimes find her reading load to

be heavy, and let me know that sometimes “if I don't have time I'll try to skim through, but if I do have time I'll read the whole thing.”

Sana prioritized reading for the one course she was taking in her major “because it's the most important.” She also mentioned prioritizing reading for her English course because her instructor gave the class a quiz on the reading each week, and was pleased to share that she had passed each quiz so far. For her Sociology course Sana revealed that she no longer did the reading “because it doesn't benefit me,” explaining that her professor “goes over what's in the readings in class.”

When asked about strategies she used to deal with readings she found to be challenging, Sana replied that she did not have a specific strategy. She mentioned that she often found both the amount and topics of her course reading to be difficult, telling me that she was frustrated that “sometimes it's hard to understand, and it's a lot [*slight laugh*] of reading.” Sana sometimes asked her classmates for help clarifying the reading, though she did not think it would be helpful to ask her professors about the reading, saying “I don't think they would have time for that.” She also did not know of any offices on campus that could help specifically with reading; she had visited the writing center in a prior semester but found it to be very crowded with a long wait and had not returned this semester. Sana astutely identified a challenge for students in reading subject matter that may be new to them, and told me that “if you don't understand the whole topic then it's hard to ask a question, like you don't know where to start.” She also expressed a wish for more reading support at the college, “a reading center on campus for students who are having trouble reading.”

Isabella

Isabella was a student in the final semester of her Associates degree program when we met for our interview; she planned to transfer to a four-year program to complete her Bachelors degree. She was majoring in Business and taking a full-time course load as well as working outside of college, and she was a few years older than the traditional-aged college student.

When asked to describe her reading practice, Isabella shared that she preferred to do her course reading at school, characterizing both her home and commute as too busy and distracting. Isabella studied in the library, empty classrooms, or other quiet areas on campus because “I kind of focus more that way.” She told me that she took handwritten notes when doing her course reading, which she described as “kind of, like, old-fashioned [though] it works better that way for me.” Isabella did not mention a preference for reading in print or online, though she did note that her practice of taking detailed notes on the reading meant that she could bring her notes to class instead of her heavy textbooks.

While at this stage of her degree program Isabella was predominantly enrolled in courses in her major, she was also taking required General Education courses during the semester that I interviewed her. Isabella told me that she felt it important to do the required reading for her major courses because the topics could be complex, and she wanted to maximize her opportunities to learn them thoroughly in class. She prioritized her reading assignments based on their due dates and homework, and did try to complete all of her reading if she had time.

Isabella felt that her course reading was most difficult when it covered subject matter that was not of interest to her. She mentioned that the English composition course she took in the previous semester was more interesting than her current English course, and wished she could have known the topical focus of the current course before enrolling. As a student whose first language was not English, Isabella told me that “because it's my second language, sometimes the language, and especially, like, when I'm not interested in the topic, I just kind of give up, but, that's when I feel frustrated.” When struggling with reading, Isabella tried to “read little by little” and reread texts until she understood them. Some of Isabella's professors recommended online videos – she specifically noted YouTube and Khan Academy – in order to help explain difficult topics and subjects. Isabella appreciated those resources, and said “it's really helpful because it explains like, the process of if we actually do a problem wrong.”

Isabella shared that she typically did not have time in her schedule that aligned with opportunities to meet with her professors or classmates to seek additional help with reading, though she did sometimes

ask for help with reading at the college's writing center. She often came into campus even if she didn't have class on that day, and would visit discipline-specific tutoring for assistance with course material that she found challenging. Isabella told me that she valued the tutors because "even if I think I know how it works, I just like to double-check that I'm doing the right thing."

Discussion

Though not identical, the experiences of Tamara, Sana, and Isabella were shared by many of the CUNY students who were interviewed about their assigned course reading. Student responses – from these three students as well as many others interviewed during the study – centered around three themes for further analysis: their reading practices, their criteria for prioritizing reading assignments, and their perceived successes and challenges in reading for their courses.

Practice

In this context practice is defined as the way that students complete their course reading, including preferences for – or resigned acceptance of – the format of their assigned texts (that is, print or digital), and methods of engagement with the text.

Most of the students interviewed preferred to do their required course reading in print rather than online, consistent with the results of other studies (Foasberg, 2014; Mizrachi, 2015). A recently published multiyear survey of more than 10,000 undergraduates around the world revealed that the "majority of participants report better focus and retention of information presented in print formats, and more frequently prefer print for longer texts" (Mizrachi, Salaz, Kurbanoglu, & Boustany, 2018, p. 1). The most common reasons for preferring print cited by CUNY students interviewed were the ability to annotate easily and the lack of distraction. One student noted that they felt frustrated by ebooks specifically: "it's harder to read online...I like the physical book more because you can go easier back to another page."

However, several students did acknowledge that readings available online could potentially be completed more easily during the commute. One student shared that they preferred to do their readings in PDF on their tablet if possible, and that they highlighted the PDF as well. Students balance multiple factors when acquiring course readings, including cost and format preference. Student strategies for accessing their required course reading in multiple locations can be complex: on and offline, and at times that are most convenient for them. This tension has also surfaced in research with CUNY and other commuter undergraduates (Smale & Regalado, 2017; Regalado & Smale, 2018a).

Priorities

Like Tamara, Sana, and Isabella, the CUNY students interviewed shared a variety of criteria they used to prioritize their required reading assignments. Most students tried to use their syllabus and the assignment due dates to plan their reading, and intended to complete their reading before class whenever possible. Students acknowledged the many constraints on their time, and most felt that the reading for their major courses was more important to complete than that for their core or General Education classes. A few students mentioned that as they moved into upper level courses they realized the necessity to allocate additional time to complete their now more detailed and complex readings, which could affect their academic priorities overall.

As other studies have shown (Baier et al., 2011; Brost & Bradley, 2006), students often do not complete their course reading if they feel it is not an integral component of their success in the course, and many of the CUNY students I spoke with concurred. Some students said that their instructors reviewed all of the reading thoroughly in class, which obviated their need to read the textbook. Others shared their frustration when instructors assigned but did not refer to or use the reading during the course, which made students feel like their time and funds had been wasted. Given students' time constraints with their multiple academic, family, and job responsibilities, it is not surprising that many students decide it is not worth their effort to complete the assigned readings for every class if it will not affect their performance in the class.

Challenges

All students interviewed shared challenges they encountered when completing, or attempting to complete, their assigned course reading. Both interest in and prior knowledge of the course topic impacted students' motivation to read; students who found the subject uninteresting or who were encountering an unfamiliar discipline often found their reading to be difficult. A few students mentioned that they struggled with reading because of learning disabilities, though some also made use of student support services on campus. Like Isabella, several students for whom English was not their first language shared their frustration when reading scholarly material, which could be compounded if the material was uninteresting or unfamiliar to them.

Some students identified support strategies for the reading challenges they encountered, including asking for assistance from their instructors, either after class or during office hours, or from their fellow classmates. Other students understood that their professors were available for help, but did not have the time or availability in their schedule to obtain help in these ways. Several students referred to the writing center on campus but did not know whether there was an office at their college specifically to support reading, and were not sure whether the writing center was an appropriate place to seek out reading support.

Conclusions & Interventions

What can faculty, staff, and administrators do to support students' success in their academic reading? While this research with CUNY students was limited in size and scope, interviews with students about their assigned reading demonstrate the value of considering students' lived experiences in their past and current academic contexts. It is easy to assume that undergraduates come to college having mastered strategies for academic reading during their time in high school. Many students have not, and even those who were explicitly taught how to read scholarly texts in high school are likely to encounter far more difficult texts in college. Some of the students I interviewed seemed embarrassed when asked whether they sought support with challenging reading assignments. Students too have internalized that reading is something they should know how to do already – as one student told me, in college “reading is your problem.”

An assessment of what is a “reasonable” reading load for students must also take into account students' life circumstances; often research on reading compliance takes as a given that faculty assign “reasonable” amounts of reading in their courses (Brost & Bradley, 2006, p. 105). CUNY students are not unique in their multiple time commitments in addition to their work as students, and many hold part- or full-time jobs or have substantial family or community responsibilities. At commuter colleges and universities, the time required to commute between home, work, and campus also impacts students' available time to devote to their coursework.

Some researchers have acknowledged several of the challenges in completing required course readings that CUNY students shared. Fujimoto, Hagel, Turner, Ka iyapornpong, and Zutshi (2011) also report on the difficulties students face in encountering academic subject material that is new to them and in switching between disciplines; they mention the additional challenge for students for whom English is not their first language. Brost and Bradley discuss the need for faculty to ensure that the link between assigned reading and coursework is clear to students. They recognize that many students will not read if they do not see the value in reading, and suggest that “faculty members deserve our share of the responsibility as well” (2006, p. 106).

However, most literature on reading compliance follows Burchfield and Sappington, who encouraged “a renewed emphasis on compliance with required reading assignments and an incorporation of appropriate consequences” (2000, p. 60). Other suggested actions for faculty include implementing reading journals or surprise reading quizzes, assigning students to read for a specific amount of time, or using other homework or assignments to test students' completion and comprehension of the required course readings (Carney, Fry, & Gabriele, 2008; Hilton, Wilcox, Morrison, & Wiley, 2010; Hoeft, 2012; Kerr & Frese, 2017). The overwhelming focus on assignments that measure students' reading

compliance seems to leave unanswered the question of why students do not complete their required course reading.

Alternatively, a focus on explicitly teaching undergraduates strategies for reading disciplinary texts and supporting them in practicing those strategies could increase students' motivation to complete their course reading. A student I interviewed who had found success in her course reading explained that she had taken an Advanced Placement English class in high school. She told me, "I learned from my AP class to look for important keywords," and had also learned effective notetaking strategies in that class. Faculty may consider building in time during the semester to support students' reading practice in their courses. Fujimoto et al. describe a structured reading assignment in which students are: given an academic reading along with a set of criteria to identify in the text, asked to identify important themes in the reading, and placed in groups to discuss (2011). Fisher shares details on workshops she has taught on the reading apprenticeship model for scaffolding undergraduate reading skills across the disciplines (2018).

Faculty and staff can also advocate for providing additional reading support on our campuses. While creating a Reading Center may not be feasible for all colleges and universities, it's likely that the campus Writing Center also provides assistance with students' reading. Making that aspect of Writing Center services more visible to students might help them more readily find their way to that source of support. Faculty can also make sure that all students are aware of student support services and of any support that is available for students for whom English is not their first language, regardless of whether they have identified themselves as a student in need of additional support.

Our undergraduate students arrive on campus with varied experiences prior to and during their academic careers, and their preparation for and facility with required course reading also varies. As this research demonstrates, it is worthwhile to consider both our students' constraints and challenges in reading as well as possible strategies to address these constraints and challenges in our classrooms and on our campuses. Faculty should seek out ways to learn more about their students' reading experiences, and to incorporate specific discussion of reading practices into their courses. Understanding our students' reading experiences can help us identify the most appropriate ways to motivate our students to read, and support their opportunities for success in their coursework and degree programs.

Appendix

Undergraduate Reading Attitudes & Practices

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Student #:

College:

Date:

1. Let's start with a few questions about you:

- What's your program of study/major?
- How many semesters have you been in college?
- Are you going to school full time or part time?
- Did you start off at this college or transfer from another college?
- Age

2. How many courses are you taking this semester? What are they? Are they required for your major? Let's talk about the reading you have in those courses specifically, though if you have other experiences with course reading you'd like to share that's fine too.

3. Tell me about the reading that's assigned in each course. Is it in textbooks, online, or in other formats?

4. How do you do the reading you need to do for your courses?

5. When and where do you do the reading for your courses?

6. How do you decide what reading to complete for your courses?

7. What are your plans for after you graduate, is there a career or future schooling that you have in mind?

8. What frustrates you most about the reading you're assigned in your courses?

9. If you could change one thing about your course reading, what would it be?

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about reading for your courses?

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