

Education Majors' Text Book Reading Habits: How Much are they Reading?

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As a teacher educator I am concerned with the disinterest my students have toward reading. Teachers need to read, not only to keep current in both professional and children's literature, but also to serve as role models for their students to encourage their reading (Cohen, 1999; Herda & Ramos, 2001; Von Sprecken & Krashen, 1998). I became interested in investigating my students' reading habits not only because of the aforementioned need for teachers to be readers, but because my students often admit to me that they do not read their assignments. Even without this admission, it was evident during class discussions on assigned materials, or activities that revolved around ideas presented in the text, that the majority of my students were not reading or did not read very deeply, as they rarely are able to discuss assigned reading content with clarity.

I wanted to find out from students themselves why they do not read, and to investigate what might motivate them to read more. The sample for this study included 288 students in 17 classes in the teacher education department of a medium sized private university in the Midwest. Discussions with instructors of courses in which a higher percentage of students read their assignments, students' motivational statements from the survey, and a review of past investigations into this issue by practitioners in other disciplines led me develop strategies to motivate reading in my own classes. While the survey included questions on recreational reading habits, this paper focuses on the academic reading portion of the survey, because of the important information my students are missing by not reading their assignments thoroughly.

Review of Related Literature

The problem of disregard for reading assignments among undergraduates is not a new phenomenon. Burchfield and Sappington (2000) found student reading compliance of assigned material declined over a sixteen-year period, from 1981 through 1997. Ten years later, Clump and Doll (2007) found reading rates of both undergraduates and graduate students to be low, (54.21% across all classes of Forensic Psychology, n 193), which was similar to the compliance rate reported by Culmp, Bauer, and Bradley in 2004. Even with evidence of an increasing disinclination to read, others have found students view textbooks as being "an important element of their courses" (Besser, Stone & Nan, 1999, p. 16). Why this decline if students feel their texts are important? It could be students are now expecting their teachers to provide exactly the information they need to know when reading their texts. In their study of 423 psychology majors, Clump et al., (2004) found 61.66 percent of respondents "felt that the instructor should tell them exactly what was important in the reading" (p. 231). I have also found this to be the case with my own students, when they ask questions such as "what should I read in the chapter?" not only before quizzes, but when a chapter is assigned to be read to prepare students for class discussion.

Reading level or ability does not seem to be the reason for non-reading, as university students' reading levels are generally appropriate for college material (Goodwin, 1996; Kibby, 1993). Others have found similar rates of non-reading (Bradley, 2007), even in advanced elective courses, where presumably students are at reading level high enough to have moved through less demanding courses successfully. A possible explanation could be the shift in the 'culture of reading' or how and what people are reading. With increasing amounts of electronic information being consumed via websites and text messaging,

students certainly *are* reading. But the non-linear nature of the Internet, with embedded links that move the reader from one site to another or to other pages within a website, is quite different from the format of a printed text (McPherson, 2005). Web pages often have shorter chunks of information displayed on each page, with bright layouts and animations to attract attention. Perhaps by extension, the reading of these small, abbreviated texts has changed the types of daily reading of many students. Tierney et al., (1997) found students say they are more interested in the content when reading, viewing and listening, occur at the same time, as is found in the content of many internet pages. In my survey, students reported high levels of reading online. Of those who answered question 11, frequency of use of the Internet for information, (216 out of the 288, or 75 % of respondents), 97% of those 216 students said they used this resource at least once a week. Furthermore, 81% of them consult the internet daily or several times a day for information.

In addition, there is a growing trend in school districts and classrooms to use paperless sources of printed information and even non-print technologies to teach content. Some, like the Milwaukee Public Schools, are investing millions in digital resources to replace traditional textbooks (Richards, 2006). Others are taking advantage of the technology of podcasts, where students prepare their own audio programs on many topics and post them on the web. As one teacher said, "They think it's cool walking around with an iPod, listening to the stuff that they're supposed to be reading" (Meola, 2007).

Perhaps another reason for university students' dislike of reading textbooks is the result of the increasingly common use of these different text and information forms. Students may not understand how to read the textbook format, and simply give up when confronted by the more cognitively demanding task of reading the dense, linear format found in textbooks.

How much should students read at the university level?

Colleges and universities generally have learning centers where students can get help learning how to study, read, and write at the college level. Such information is also readily accessible on campus study websites, which have specific recommendations for how to read effectively, and how much time students should spend studying and reading. The students who participated in this survey know about the help they can receive on campus at the well-publicized learning assistance center. In addition, when I ask at the beginning of each semester, students say yes, they have heard of the general recommendations for how much to study outside of class. For example, a minimum of 2 hours study time outside of class for every credit taken (College of St. Benedict, 2008) or, 2 hours per easy class, 3 hours for an average class and 4 hours per credit for a difficult class (George Mason University, 2008).

The usual course load for full-time students in my department is 15 to 18 credits per semester, which would necessitate 30 to 36 hours of reading and studying if students were following the minimum recommended amount of out of class work. While not all study time outside of class involves reading, much of it does, and many of the students who participated in this research indicated they are reading 2 hours or less per class each week. Interestingly, according to Goodwin (1996), despite these common study recommendations, there is evidence that students who are able to read at college level, and who also admit to rarely reading their book, still expect to get an A in their coursework.

Data Collection Techniques

I developed a survey based in part on Gallik's survey (see Appendix) of recreational reading habits (1999); then added a number of open-ended questions to find out the amount of academic reading students were doing and to ascertain why students are not reading, or reading less than recommended.

Eleven of the 17 full-time instructors in my department were able to accommodate my request to administer the survey in the later weeks of the spring semester. The survey was given in 11 courses (some with multiple sections), for a total of 17 classes participating. All of these courses were required for one of the educational degrees offered at the school, and all but 2 classes were restricted to students had met departmental requirements to take advanced course work. These requirements include completion of several introductory classes, and a GPA of 2.5 in all courses. Therefore, it could be expected that most participants could read well enough to maintain at least a C average.

Before the survey was given, students were informed they were under no obligation to complete the survey, that participation was anonymous, and that no information on the survey would be shared with

instructors until after semester grades were submitted. I also requested that students who took the survey in another class not take it again, so the number of participants would not be inflated. Using these criteria, I obtained 288 usable surveys for analysis.

Participant Demographics and Data Analysis

Of the 288 surveys completed, 257 respondents were female (89.2%) and 31 were male (10.8%). This sample had a higher percentage of females than the national average for public school teachers. Nationally, all public school teachers (elementary and secondary) include 79% female to 21% male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). It should be noted the majority of students taking this survey were those in elementary education classes, and there tend to be fewer male teachers in the elementary teaching field.

There were 811 undergraduate students, and 43 graduate students in the department the semester the survey was given. 275 of the participants were undergraduates. Therefore 34% of undergrads, and 30% of graduates in the Education Department participated in the survey. As the survey was given in undergraduate courses, most of the students were undergraduates, with 71% aged 20-22. (See Table 1 for class level distribution of participants).

Thus, nearly 86% of respondents were in their 3rd or 4th year in the Teacher Education program. The GPA of all undergraduates in the department that year was 3.26, out of a 4.00 scale, with students who had advanced to higher-level courses averaging 3.38. (Survey respondents self-reported cumulative GPA was 3.46). Of course, it is difficult to draw any conclusions from these numbers, as there was a mix of levels taking the classes, and students tend to self-report higher levels than they have. But, it appears that the majority of these participants were doing well in their teacher education courses. This is not surprising, as nearly all of the participants were in post advancement classes, which require, as mentioned above, a minimum GPA.

Amount of Time Spent Reading Course Texts

A perpetual gripe of university students is the cost of their texts. Despite this complaint, most students who responded to the survey *did* buy their books. In fact, only 3.82 respondents reported they did not buy their texts. This is unlike previous findings by Sikorski et al., (2001) who found between 9% and 69% (depending on the course) of students in a survey of 439, at two different universities did not have their own required texts. So while students in this teacher education survey did buy their course texts, they still tended not to read, or to read very thoroughly.

Recall, the minimum recommended time studying per credit is 2 hours outside of class. All the classes surveyed were 3-hour courses, which would mean students should be studying for 6 hours outside of class time to meet this recommendation. Question 7 concerned the amount of time students spent reading for the particular education class in which they answered the survey questions. (See Graph 1) Notice that only 4.51% reported reading 5 or more hours per week. Of course, outside of class study time is not limited to reading alone, but since 72.57% of the students read 2 hours or less a week, (or not at all) it is important to find out what might motivate such students to encourage higher rates of reading.

Grades Biggest Motivator

When participants were asked: “What motivates you to read the textbook for this class?” (Question 15), 5.6% said they were motivated by interest or to learn. This is disturbing, as these are students who will be teachers in a very short period of time. But even more troubling for those going into the teaching profession, only 3% of all respondents said they read because they wanted to be a good teacher.

If these students are not motivated in reading to learn or to learn how to be a good teacher, what does motivate them to read when they do? For these students, the biggest motivational factor for reading was doing well on assignments or making good grades. One hundred twenty nine participants (45%) said doing well on tests and assignments was the biggest motivational factor for completing reading assignments. Another 17% specifically said getting good grades was what motivated them to read. Altogether more than half of the respondents (62%) indicated one of these factors as their primary reason for reading. (See graph 2).

What does this tell us? First, it is not unusual for students to be motivated by grades, tests and assignments, as these have been the focus of their lives since they entered school. Educators can hope

their students are learning something from their reading, even if their motivation is grade based. On the other hand, it might be extrapolated from the responses regarding motivation based on grades and testing, that these students often only read when studying right before tests and quizzes. Unfortunately, the effect of cramming before a test leads to little retention of knowledge (Willingham, 2002). So, it would appear the expensive teacher education texts this group of students purchase are not supporting learning for approximately 94% of the students who responded to this survey, because they read very little and for limited purposes (i.e., studying before a test).

Interest in Subject and Caring Instructors are Motivators

In the last question on the survey “Think of a class in which you really read the textbook. What is/was that class, and what motivated you to read the text?” of the 288 respondents, 104 (36%) mentioned classes outside of their teacher education requirements in which they felt the most motivation to read the text. Half of these 104 (52, or 18% of all participants) gave tests and grades as the motivating factors to read in those classes. The other 52 (18%) expressed interest in the outside subject as the motivating factor. Compare this to the 20 students (7%) who expressed interest in the subjects of the Teacher Education courses they were taking as being the main motivation for why they read, as in this example: *“My early childhood class was a really interesting class. That made me read the book.”*

A caring teacher made the difference for other respondents: they wanted to read if they perceived the instructor was interested in them and their learning. For example, one student wrote in answer to the last question: *“...a class that seems pertinent to my education, with a teacher who cares.”* A few mentioned some aspect of a text that stimulated a desire to read: *“...class on management, literacy. (books had) better format and (were) more interesting and colorful, feels (sic) more pertinent.”* Some others said when a course was ‘good,’ it made reading the text more interesting: *“I enjoyed the class ETE 225, which made it (the book) more desirable.”*

Survey participants had a number of additional reasons for not reading, or reading very little: Some said they wanted to be told what to read (as in a study guide), a number said their texts were ‘boring’ or ‘hard’ and didn’t hold their attention. Others stated they didn’t have time to read: they hold outside jobs, or felt like their workload was too great in other classes.

Participant Perceptions of the Effect of Reading on Grades

Since the students indicated the biggest motivational factor to complete their assigned reading was grades and tests, it is interesting to note the responses to question 14: “If you don’t read assignments, do you feel this affects your grade adversely?” 44.8% said yes, if they don’t read their grades are affected (yet many say grades are one of the biggest motivational factors for reading). For example: *“(It) feels like I’m not learning as much, (when I don’t read) but I just pay attention in class.”*

But, 39.24% said it didn’t matter if they read or not, their grades were not adversely affected, as for example: *“I don’t feel it affects my grade, but I feel bad for not reading.”* It is therefore important for instructors to pay attention to how they construct reading assignments and class work so the two support each other. If so large a percentage of students feel reading assignments do not affect their grades, or that the information is covered in class, it is no wonder they don’t spend very much time reading what is assigned to them. If instructors want students to read, they need to make sure reading assignments *do* have an impact on student grades, which appears to be something students care about very much.

Like the student quoted above who feels not reading can affect grades, but it doesn’t really matter because you just need to pay attention in class, another student said *“... it is always covered in class-not just this class, but most classes.”* This sentiment is similar to what Bradley (2007) observed in a study of non-compliance of assigned reading, that a number of professors tended to go over the reading in class, rather than engage their students in meaningful work around the assigned reading. Students in Bradley’s case study said virtually the same thing as those who responded to my survey: *“I think some students think, since it will all be gone over in class that they don’t have to read it”* (2007 p. 7). This made me think of the classes I have taught where I tried to cover as much of the reading as I could. I have done this in the past because it seemed that if the students weren’t reading enough to participate, it was my responsibility to cover the material. The results of this survey have shown me that this type of thinking can promote to *less* reading on the part of my students.

Keeping Books

Since there is little desire to read, it is no wonder more than half (53%) of respondents said they would be selling their books. Note that 13% of respondents had journal subscriptions instead of a traditional text and did not have a text to sell. A small percentage of respondents were undecided at the time of the survey (in April) and only 28% specifically indicating they were keeping their books. This is important information for instructors, because in speaking with several from the courses in which the survey was given, they said criteria for their text selection includes how useful a book will be for students when they teach in the future. Some participants did mention they wanted to keep their books for future reference, but only 16 (5.6%) who indicated they wouldn't be selling their text, specifically mentioned they would keep an educational class text for use in the future.

Text Selection and Instructor Strategies

Teacher educators want their students to be as prepared as possible for the moment when they enter their first classroom. This is one reason why we select texts that contain information we know from our own experiences and research is necessary for our students' future careers. But if they pay little attention to their texts, we need to help motivate them to read these valuable resources, not just skim while cramming for a test. For one thing, we need to pay attention to such elements in texts as the format, readability, and cost. Besser, et al., (1999) found students have textual preferences, and texts that contain too many references and sidebars, for example, are difficult to read. More importantly, as Bradley (2007) discussed, it is the responsibility of instructors to use the readings they assign effectively in class. Certainly giving daily quizzes (Connor-Greene, 2002) has been shown to increase the amount of reading students do, but if they don't retain much of this information (Willingham, 2002), this may not be a very effective pedagogical strategy. On the other hand, if the objective of giving such quizzes is to make sure the students read the material, and instructors then use class time to engage the students in activities around the text, this could be a useful option.

When I discussed the results of this survey with the four instructors of courses in which a high percentage of respondents said they did their readings, I found one instructor gave quizzes each class session, but the other three had different ways to inspire reading. One had her students do chapter summaries or come to each class with questions to ask each other about material from the reading; another, who did not use a traditional text, asked her students to submit online summaries of the articles before class. The fourth had students write questions they had about the reading, and each class began with students asking these questions to begin each class discussion.

Changes to my Teaching

After conducting this survey, and talking with the instructors, I implemented a number of new strategies in my courses. On the first day of class, I ask students if they always read their assignments. There is usually some general laughter, which enables me to talk about the results of this research, and how a lack of reading in the university level is a prevalent trend nationwide. We discuss how assigned readings play an important role as the foundation of discussions, activities, demonstrations, and assignments in the course. I also discuss expectations of reading, studying, and the like. We talk about the implications of non-reading for their future efficacy as teachers. In addition, my students now must also do one of the following written assignments when we have a reading due: chapter or article questions, an outline of what was read, questions about the reading (for classmates to answer) or how they might apply what they have read in their future classrooms. Grading these assignments has not added appreciably to my own workload, an important consideration for those with large classes. Each assignment is worth a small percentage of the total number of class points, but if students do not do them, or do them poorly, there is an impact on their final course grade.

While many students don't always enjoy these readings-based assignments, they admit to finding them useful. Some example comments, from recent end of semester course evaluations: "*I don't like doing them, but the chapter assignments DID make me read*" or "*The outlines and stuff were a big pain but I learned more.*" Another positive outcome I have observed over the past three semesters is the quality of discussions in my classes has improved, with more participation from students, and less lecture from me.

In addition to these reading assignments, the activities we do in class require the students to have read the text. In whole group discussions, using questions the students have brought in, it quickly becomes obvious who hasn't read. Since grades motivate students, those who read their assignments do better in participation, and thus can make higher grades. I am able to keep track of participation because my classes are generally small, with no more than 25 students. Instructors with larger classes could encourage active participation, and easily keep track of student responses by having students use hand-held devices to 'lock in' their answers (Beeks, 2006).

Other strategies that work very well, which go beyond using questioning techniques to recall information from the reading assignment include those that require individual accountability. Small group tasks and discussions, where students must work together using information from the readings and then *each* turn in some type of written work, such as an outline of the discussion, or the conclusions they have reached, have worked well in my classes. The students in my courses are finding they need to do their reading assignments, and do them well, in order to be able to participate and work effectively in class.

Final Thoughts

This research supports what others have found, namely, many university students tend to read less than they should of assigned readings. Some researchers (Sappington, et al, 2002) feel if students do not do their readings, they only have themselves to blame. While I believe students should be responsible for their assigned reading, I agree with Bradley's (2007) assertion, that some of the problem in non-compliance is the fault of instructors. When students do not feel there is the need to read because professors do not engage them, or when the reading material is simply repeated in class, it is no wonder many do not comply with reading assignments. Instructors need to develop active reading assignments that serve an instructive purpose and motivation beyond a simple test grade.

Reading continues to be the dominant, and one of most efficient ways of acquiring knowledge both within the university environment and in the larger world. Therefore, despite some changes in reading format (e.g., the internet) future students will need to read their assignments, and those who do not will continue to miss important information. The major motivating force for assignment reading is grades and testing, according to the students of this survey. Yet testing may not be appropriate in many teacher education methods courses, where students are expected to be able to demonstrate what they know via participatory strategies. And since it has been shown that even when students study for tests, they don't retain the information latter, increasing testing in any class will not necessarily increase learning.

If instructors feel reading the textbook or other materials is important, it is incumbent upon them to ensure assignments necessitate this reading. Rather than simply repeating the text information in class via lecture, instructors need to develop participatory assignments to encourage reading before class. Educators should implement methods in their classes that stress the need for reading more deeply: not just reading to make an A, but reading to retain information, which will continue to serve their students beyond the university classroom.

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Appendix

Survey of textbook and recreational reading habits
(Questions 8-11 adapted from Gallik, J. D. 1999)

1. What is your gender? Female _____ Male _____ Age: _____
2. Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior _____ Senior _____ Other (specify) _____
3. Cumulative GPA: _____ Teacher Education GPA: _____
4. Name _____ of _____ this class: _____
5. Title _____ of _____ main _____ textbook _____ in _____ this class: _____
6. Did you buy the textbook for this class? Yes _____ No _____ (if no, why not?) _____

7. On average, how much time do you spend reading your textbook for this class on a weekly basis? Less than 1 hour ____ 1-2 hours ____ 3-5 hours ____ more than 5 hours ____ (how many?)
8. On average, how much time do you spend reading for pleasure on a weekly basis? Never ____ Less than 1 hour ____ 1-2 hours ____ 3-5 hours ____ more than 5 hours ____ (how many?)
9. Do you read more for pleasure during vacations than during the school year? Yes ____ No ____
10. If you had more free time, would you: read more of your textbook? Yes ____ No ____
 Read more for pleasure? Yes ____ No ____

11. How often do you read the following?

1-2 times a week 3-4 times a week daily several times a day

Newspaper:

Online ____ ____ ____ ____
 Paper copy ____ ____ ____ ____

Internet:

Entertainment ____ ____ ____ ____
 Information ____ ____ ____ ____

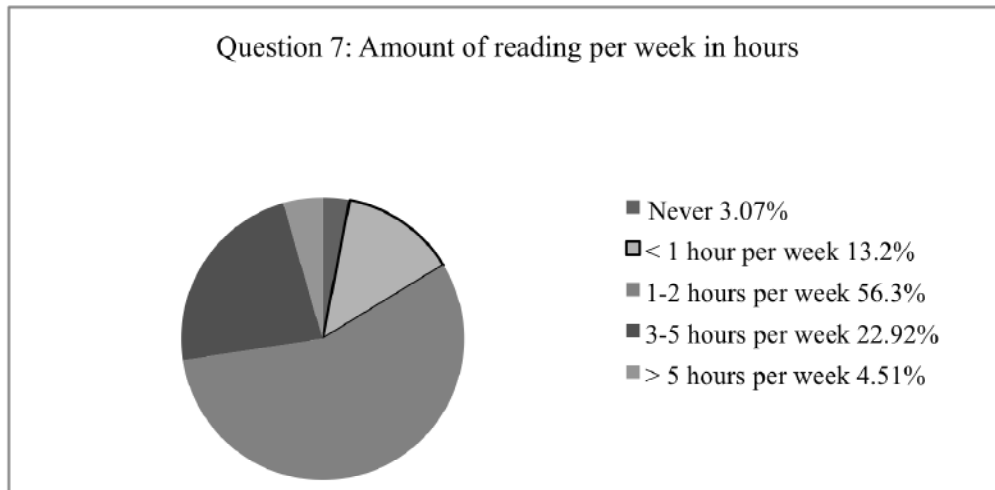
Magazines ____ ____ ____ ____
 Poetry ____ ____ ____ ____
 Email ____ ____ ____ ____
 Text messages ____ ____ ____ ____
 Chat rooms/blogs ____ ____ ____ ____
 Novels ____ ____ ____ ____
 Nonfiction books ____ ____ ____ ____

12. Do you like your textbook for this class? Why or why not?
13. Are there any times when you should read your textbook, but don't?
14. If you don't read assignments, do you feel this affects your grade adversely?
15. What motivates you to read the textbook for this class?
16. Are you planning to sell the textbook for this class at the end of the semester?
17. Think of a class in which you *really* read the textbook. What is/was that class, and what motivated you to read the text?

Table 1

Level	Number	Percentage
Freshman	3	1.04
Sophomore	22	7.64
Junior	135	46.88
Senior	112	38.89
Graduate	13	4.51
Teacher Certificate	1	.003
2 nd Bachelor's Degree	2	.007

Graph 1



Graph 2

