Understanding Why Students Do Not complete Required Readings and How to Increase the Completion Rate of Assigned Readings.

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Abstract:

Reading as an undergraduate is an essential aspect of education. Expectations in both academia and in the professional world require that college graduates read at a certain level of comprehension and ability. Assigned readings are also critical in order for students to fully obtain knowledge in any given course. However, the general trend is that undergraduates across academia are reading less of their assigned readings and less in general. This trend has occurred for several decades, but is increasing as we continue into the digital age. As a result, students lack some of the essential skills or intellectual abilities that are required or expected. This literature review sets out to explore why students do not complete required readings and what are ways to increase the completion rate of assigned readings. Lastly, results from the literature review will be evaluated considering the unique aspect of cadets at the United States Military Academy.

Introduction

Reading is a key component of higher education. Both the liberal arts and the scientific communities require large amounts of reading in their courses. Here at the United States Military Academy (USMA), required readings that should be completed prior to an academic lesson are also a key ingredient to academic success and overall knowledge for our cadets. Additionally, “effective reading is [an] important avenue of effective learning and reading is interrelated with the total education process and hence, education success requires successful reading habit” (Owusu-Acheaw, 3, 2014). As an eventual college graduate, the ability to read is expected and developing the ability is one of our additional tasks as educators. One definition of reading presented by Micheal Owusu-Acheaw of the Koforidua Polytechnic states:

Reading is the ability to understand words contained in a document and make use of the knowledge for personal growth and development. This implies making meaning out of recorded information either printed or non-printed in the life of an individual. People read for different reasons and purposes, some of which include for pleasure, leisure, relaxation, information and for knowledge (Owusu-Acheaw, 5, 2014).
Reading is key to a vast array of occupations including USMA’s focus of the profession of arms. Moreover, “reading is related to learning and learning leads to mental, professional, and human development in general” (Davidovitch et al., 129, 2016). I even remember my plebe English teacher say to us on the last day of class that to be educated is to read.

Regrettably, reading at the undergraduate level is in decline. A great deal of reading is expected of undergraduates who take a normal load and even more for the cadets of USMA who carry a much higher than average academic load. Multiple studies have shown that the average time spent conducting academic reading is less than half of what is expected given students’ course loads (Davidovitch et al., 2016). Dr. Akanda of Rajshahi University in Bangladesh states:

The issue of reading, especially book reading, has received much attention from different quarters in recent times because of the downward trend it is experiencing, especially among the younger generation. The reason of the decline in the reading habits of the general public especially students and young people, are being widely debated and discussed by academicians, intellectuals, writers, librarians, and reading enthusiasts. (Akanda et al., 61, 2013)

Studies also show that this is not a trend of reading ability and that both students with a high level of reading efficiency do not read more than students with lower levels (Davidovitch et al., 2016). Both my personal experiences as an instructor and studies comment on the fact that most students rarely read their textbooks or assignments before the lecture and that textbooks are usually used only to assist in solving assigned problems (Davidovitch et al., 131, 2016). This is especially troublesome here at USMA where cadets should be following the Thayer Method in order to capitalize on their learning.

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a literature review looking at the importance of reading, reasons for a decline in reading at the undergraduate level, and suggestions for increasing reading amongst students. This literature review will also evaluate how this topic directly relates to cadets at the United States Military Academy.

**Literature Review**

Several journals and books exist that focus on motivations of students and how to increase the efficiency of education. Most of these sources and most educators agree that reading is an essential component of education. In fact, reading has many clear benefits which include increasing academic success and developing cognitive abilities. Reading is also expected of graduates and is a lifelong skill.

Studies show that reading increases academic success. For instance, one study showed that, “56.7% indicated they strongly agreed that reading had an influence on their academic performance” (Owusu-Acheaw, 17, 2014). Additionally, “poor or bad reading habits could partly be held responsible for general poor performance that the
school systems usually record in both internal and external examinations.” (Owusu-Acheaw, 5, 2014) Dr. Davidovitch of Ariel University in Israel mentions the importance of academic success and reading and wrote:
The academic mission to train the future generation of researchers imposes a challenge on instructors to teach students research skills, which include research methods, statistics, computer applications, and academic reading and writing skills. The acquisition of students’ reading habits has several aims: To create a foundation for new research...Develop habits of learning, reasoning, and methodical work...to cover all the course material in the lessons (Davidovitch et al., 129, 2016)

Furthermore, “Reading habits are well-planned and deliberate pattern of study which has attained a form of consistency on the part of students toward understanding academic subjects and passing at examinations....reading and academic achievements are interrelated and dependent on each other” (Owusu-Acheaw, 1, 2014).

Reading is also expected of college graduates. In fact, “adults with more education and higher-status occupations had positive attitudes toward reading and reported spending more time reading than did adults with less education and lower-status occupations.” (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 157, 1994). Therefore, teaching and promoting reading in any discipline is an additional and sometime implied requirement for higher level educators.

Lastly, reading develops cognitive abilities and is a lifelong skill. Basic reading is just interpreting words on paper and the deeper aspects of reading is to engage with a text for hidden meanings and to make judgments on a particular body of knowledge (Annamalai, 2013). “Reading is regarded as one of the most important components in learning language and it is an essential tool for lifelong learning for all learners” (Annamalai, 32, 2013). Also, “Reading is generally accepted as a way of acquiring new information and new knowledge. It is not only to increase knowledge but also to build maturity and widen awareness of contemporary issues.” (Annamalai, 32, 2013) Some cognitive skills that reading develops include: clarifying, identifying critical and important information, interpreting meanings of content, and comprehending difficult subjects (Baker and Brown, 1984).

Many of these articles and studies mention the reasons why students do not complete required readings. First, “Reading habits are correlated with gender, age, education background, academic performance and professional growth” (Annamalai, 33, 2013), but there are many reasons why students do not complete readings with the main ones being an influx of technology, poor motivation, lack of time, and difficulty of the text. Lastly, Faculty sometimes fails to provide adequate focus for students to read effectively.

Perhaps the greatest change of the current generation of students and their lack of reading comes from the influx of technology in their lives. Multiple sources document
that this is a central cause to reading less. One reason is that students do not read for leisure and instead use their leisure time for TV and video games (Annamalai, 2013). Students also prefer to watch TV to learn instead of reading (Owusu-Acheaw, 2014). Besides television, many students also spend time listening to audio CDs instead of reading (Owusu-Acheaw, 2014). “This decline is most noticeable among young people because they are the people who are most affected by the emerging digital technologies, especially the Internet and TV-based entertainment.” (Akanda et al., 67, 2013) This trend is not new, but is most likely increasing in today’s connected world. In fact technology’s influence on decreasing reading was noticed in the 90’s. One study states, “Americans spent nearly triple the amount of time per week watching television or listening to the radio as compared to the time they spent reading for work or leisure.” (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 156, 1994). Another catalyst to technology’s influence on reading pertains to the relative ease of information via technology. In fact, web based resources are often used as the most common research and study resource, and today’s students lack the sense to question the validity of such sources (Davidovitch et al., 131, 2016).

Poor motivation is one of the leading cause for students not reading. One study showed that 56% of students found reading as boring and 57% said that the number one reason for not reading was laziness (Owusu-Acheaw, 2014). A different study highlighted that 61.5% of students found that the biggest obstacle to reading was uninteresting material (Akanda et al., 2013). Additionally, “many students report that the information texts they read in school are difficult, boring, and irrelevant to their everyday lives” (Rosenzweig and Wigfield, 133, 2017). This isn’t just a problem at the undergraduate level. The National Governor’s Association recognized that low motivation was the top factor that caused reading problems in grades 4-12 (Rosenzweig and Wigfield, 2017).

One reason for poor motivation was that students did not enjoy the topic of their readings. One study showed that students found reading for academic purposes as problematic, but this was not the case for leisure reading (Mann, 311, 2000). Dr. Nitza Davidovitch and others at Ariel University in Israel state that, “high reading efficiency is consistent with more positive feelings about reading abilities. Students who do not read willingly may be subject to negative effects on their academic performance.” (Davidovitch et al., 130, 2016) They also stated that, “students who did not enjoy reading the course materials claimed that the texts were too difficult and caused reading anxiety, and that reading was boring and does not motivate them to study.” (Davidovitch et al., 129, 2016) Therefore, interest and enjoyment of reading in a particular subject may be one of the major causes for students not conducting their assigned readings.

Another significant reason for students not completing reading is time or lack thereof. For example, 21.38% students at the Islamia University of Bahawalpur in Pakistan replied that other homework interfered with the time to finish readings (Dilshad et al., 2013). Many educators claim that students spend far less time then required for their course load. In fact, some studies show that students spend only about 1.5 hours a day reading academic materials and less than 30 minutes reading non-academic
materials (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 1994). Students even said that reading is, “a luxury” and that if an assignment, “was too long [they] didn’t read it” ((Davidovitch et al., 130, 2016).

Competing requirements are one of the major reasons why students lack the necessary time to complete assigned readings. For many students, juggling part-time jobs along with carrying full loads makes it difficult to make enough time to adequately read (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 1994). This is especially true here at the United States Military Academy since our cadets carry a full course load or an overload and have many other extracurricular requirements that are not normal to most institutions. Lastly, some students might be very poor time managers. This is especially true for freshman. Studies have shown that this group completes less readings than more mature student populations (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 1994).

The difficulty of the assigned readings also bears an impact on whether students will conduct the reading. Any unfamiliar subject increases the difficulty of comprehension and may make students read less (Francis and Hallam, 2000). Studies also show that students, “found particular difficulty with journal articles reporting empirical research and with books on statistical data analysis” (Francis and Hallam, 293, 2000). Moreover, “A text in an unfamiliar genre may well defeat a reader who has adopted a ‘deep’ approach, giving rise to difficulty in arriving at a coherent and stable understanding and a need to read and reread in order to tackle the meaning” (Francis and Hallam, 293-294, 2000). Due to difficult of assigned texts, many students fail to comprehend what they have read. A different study showed that, “Fifty percent of the high-scoring group and nearly 57% of the low-scoring group indicated inadequate comprehension as a serious problem” (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 163, 1994).

A lack of focus given to students from their instructors is another leading cause of lower reading completion and comprehension. In fact, many professors and instructors believe they understand their material best and don’t need to have their students pursue reading assignments (Shanahan et al., 395, 2011). Another similar faculty based problem is that some, “teachers of science, math, and history often do not know how to support their students’ reading in the disciplines and often avoid use of text, just telling students what they want them to know” (Shanahan et al., 395, 2011). This kind of avoidance of assigned readings reduces students’ ability to gain literary aptitude (Shanahan et al., 2011).

Most if not all of the literature on academic reading at the ungraduated level also provides recommendations on how to improve reading. One aspect of advice is to encourage students to read more in their free or leisure time on readings that they enjoy. One study found that, “There is a significant and positive relationship between students’ cumulative grade-point average and time spent reading for pleasure during vacations” (Annamalai, 32, 2013). However, most students only read to pass tests. Another study found that this was the case for 75% of the students (Owusu-Acheaw, 2014). Therefore, “Faculty staff should encourage students to visit the library and read not only lecture notes but novels and fiction as well, and further borrow some form the
library” (Owusu-Acheaw, 19, 2014). If students read more, they would increase their reading ability and skills and would make the required readings less daunting.

Since today’s students are fully immersed into the digital age, some research has shown that incorporating technology into the classroom may lead to a higher rate of reading completion and comprehension. One study showed that, “students do not enjoy reading as much as other activities that involve technologies.” (Annamalai, 32, 2014) In fact, Dr. Subashini Annamalai of the University of Malaysian found that:
Using technology for reading will encourage the students to explore the process in an alternative medium other than conventional books. This technology based reading will motivate them to read more as the students, who are digital-natives, are more keen to use computers for and technologies for learning. By increasing their motivation to read, the students will be reading more, which will lead to improvement in their language proficiency. (Annamalai, 39, 2013)

A different study showed that, “Students are far more likely to read academic articles from a screen.” (Vandenhoek, 42, 2013). A similar study showed that students learned an equivalent amount from both electronic versus a printed text, but students with prior knowledge on a subject were able to obtain more from electronic texts (Hartley, 212, 2002).

Tablets and digital copies of text have some unique benefits that print reading does not. One such benefit is the ability to integrate study or checks on learning questions within the text (Vandenhoek, 2013). In fact, one study showed that, “The results indicate that integrated questions led to higher comprehension and that the best results on the task were from students who read a text with integrated questions and had on-line dictionary support.” (Vandenhoek, 38, 2013).

On the other hand, digital texts do have some drawbacks. On of the major negatives of screen reading is the ease of annotating texts or lack thereof (Vandenhoek, 38, 2013). In fact, a study highlighted that, “under 50% of students know how to use highlighting or comment functions when reading PDF files from a screen” (Vandenhoek, 40, 2013). This same study showed that studies were reluctant to print articles which is evidence that they prefer media over hardcopies, but there was a general lack of knowledge on how to annotate the text using digital tools (Vandenhoek, 41, 2013). As a result, students could clearly benefit from additional instruction on screen reading and note taking using digital media (Vandenhoek, 42, 2013). Perhaps a class in this subject would greatly benefit studies and lead to a higher reading completion and comprehension. Lastly, additional considerations on ethics and validity of sources should be considered for electronic readings. Specifically, “Instructors must raise students’ awareness of ethical principles concerning intellectual property rights and rules of citation, Instructors should encourage students to maintain a balance between traditional modes of reading and new technologies, yet make academic materials available on institutions’ information systems.” (Davidovitch et al., 141, 2016)
Poor motivation is a major hurdle for reading success, and it is our job as educators to try to alter negative motivation. One of the motivating factors to make students read is linked to grades. Therefore, “The performance appraisal system in educational institutions should be refurbished in such a way that encourages extensive reading. In this way, the students who read extensively will receive good grades rather than those who simple memorize.” (Akanda et al., 69, 2013). Additionally, reading “often breaks down in the educational context where readers mostly read what is required of them rather than what they are curious to learn from.” (Mann, 299, 2000). Students should also desire to read for additional benefits other than just grades. One troubling statistic shows that, “To increase knowledge was [a] major objective for more than one fourth,” of all students. (Dilshad et al., 315, 2013). This displays a greater motivation other than just grades and would lead to a higher reading completion rate. This challenge is summed up by doctors Richard Ryan and Edward Deci of the University of Rochester in which they stated, “Given that many of the educational activities prescribed in schools are not designed to be intrinsically interesting, a central question concerns how to motivate students to value and self-regulate such activities, and without external pressure, to carry them out on their own” (Ryan and Deci, 60, 2000).

Setting the example as teachers is one way to increasing the completion rate and comprehension of assigned readings. No instructor should start a class if they haven’t read or reviewed the assignment beforehand. Three scholars out of Bangladesh stated: The role of teachers and parents for improving the reading habit of students cannot be overemphasized. They can do this in many ways, but most importantly, by creating examples of themselves. The more they will read in front of young people, the more they will be able to instill the love for reading in the hearts of young people. (Akanda et al., 69, 2013) Therefore, we must not only serve as examples by reading the assigned text, but students should see us reading for leisure and other development.

Reading should still be challenging in order to spark motivation to learn. For instance, “Learners of any age are more likely to take active control of their own cognitive endeavors when they are faced with tasks of intermediate difficulty (since if the task is too easy, they need not bother; if the task is too hard, they give up)” (Baker and Brown, 4, 1984). Therefore the difficulty should not be so light that the reading becomes trivial, because, “Sophisticated, difficult texts often require the reader to build an equally sophisticated, complex representation of meaning.” (Hass and Flower, 170, 1988). Readers who struggle greatly with reading difficulty might be lacking foundational skills they should have learned in high school and may require remedial reading instruction.
Clearly, motivation is an important aspect for reading. It is a personal endeavor and leads to personal development both intellectually and ultimately professionally. Sarah Mann of the University of Glasgow stated:

Students’ approaches to and experience of reading need to be understood by viewing reading as a meaningful activity which has significance for students in different ways. It is not enough to view reading in the academic context as a purely neutral cognitive process, it has to be understood within both its personal, and its socio-cultural and political context. (Mann, 314, 2000).

Additionally, Nitza Davidovitch, Roman Yavich, and eran Druckman of Ariel University in Israel summed up motivation by saying:

Positive attitude toward reading evokes positive reading experiences. These positive attitudes are acquired through the support and encouragement of motivational factors that affect individuals throughout their lives, and potential encourage higher academic performance levels. (Davidovitch et al., 132, 2016)

Therefore, increasing the motivation of students to read not only the assigned readings, but to read more in general will greatly increase their education and their development.

Interestingly, one study showed that reading assignments in small pairs resulted in a higher reading completion, comprehension, and retention rate. Readings could be completed in their entirety or divided up and the students would compare and share their understanding of the readings (Hartley, 211, 2002). The reasons for resulting success from this area is due to accountability placed on both students.

Much of the literature on improving reading focused on teaching students how to read better. The literature offered several pointers on how to reading efficiently and how to retain information. For instance, “One way to facilitate learning from text during reading is to engage in self-interrogation” (Baker and Brown, 41, 1984). The studies show that students across the various disciplines often will make ties to other texts, which is largely beneficial for comprehension (Shanahan et al., 412, 2011). Reading is also much more than just covering the texts, and “to read successfully in these disciplines, it is necessary for readers to not only construct mental representations of the prose elements of text but also likewise make sense of the graphic elements and ultimately to develop a coherent body of knowledge based on the text in its entirety” (Shanahan et al., 417, 2011).

As an instructor, “Students might be better served by being asked to read less in their classes and by being better trained to read carefully selected material more deeply.” (Hartley, 212, 2002). In fact some, “students may believe that if they understand all the words and can paraphrase the propositional context of a text, then they have successfully “read” it.” (Hass and Flower, 170, 1988). However, understanding and retention often requires much more. Hazel Francis and Susan Hallam of the University of London highlighted this and said:
adequate understanding of a text requires sufficient prior subject knowledge an approach characterized by the intention to understand (‘deep’ approach), ability to recognize and use the text genre concerned, and adequate time to reflect on apparent differences or contradictions. (Francis and Hallam, 294, 2000)

Clearly, students must read deeper and the question remains on how to best do this, and some of the literature also has advice on this manner.

First, students need to pre-read and write down notes. They should have a general understanding of the text before they read. A study of higher performing graduate students and PhDs showed one individual that conducted such pre-reading techniques. For instance, “She tried to criticize the ideas and make predictions about the context” (Fadlelmula and Ozgeldi, 26, 2010). This helped to organize the reader’s thoughts and narrow focus. James Hartley of Keele University in the United Kingdom presented a PQ4R method to help read. Specifically he states:

the PQ4R method suggests that students: P. Preview or survey the text in advance. Q. Question what they are reading about (e.g. by turning headings into questions). R1. Read the text carefully. R2 Reflect on what they have read (e.g. by relating what they have read to their own experience). R3. Recall the information (e.g. by summarizing it out loud); and R4. Review what they have achieved (and reread any sections that they found difficult). (Hartley, 208, 2002).

Additionally, Hartley emphasized that, “Students who spontaneously summarized their reading of a philosophical text did better on their essays than students who produced verbatim notes or notes following the order of the text.” (Hartley, 211, 2002). These recommendations could increase completion of reading assignments along with reading comprehension and retention.

Since reading takes a great deal of time reducing the time involved may be largely beneficial. In fact, “both the high and low-scoring groups identified their inability to read with speed as a major hurdle.” (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 162, 1994). Here at West Point, RS102 Reading Efficiency teaches techniques that cadets can use to increase their reading rates dramatically. I highly recommend this course to all cadets. I took the course as an instructor and was impressed with the techniques that I learned and wish I had the class earlier. I feel that making this course mandatory for all cadets would greatly increase the amount of reading assignments that are completed due to the less time involved. One study also highlighted additional classes and stated that “what we teach in developmental college reading courses is helpful, may be essential, not only for developmental students but for all beginning college students.” (Sheorey and Mokhtari, 165, 1994).

Lastly, one study commented on the quality of the library as a source of improving reading. Specifically, the “library collection should be strengthened so that people will not get frustrated or disheartened by not finding their required materials
there.” (Akanda et al., 69, 2013). This is both for leisure reading, a quiet reading and study space, and the availability of print text for academic study.

Conclusion

Cadets at the United States Military Academy clearly follow the trend that was evaluated in this literature review. However, the causes for reading less are heavily influenced by the heavy course load and the lack of time available in order to read the proper amount expected of an undergraduate. The other reasons discovered in this literature review were also applicable to West Point such as the influence of technology, poor self-motivation, and faculty failing to provide adequate focus. Some of the recommendations for improving reading discovered in the literature review could be offered by faculty at West Point such as: promoting leisure reading; incorporating digital resources for reading assignments; strengthening self-motivation; and encouraging study groups to conduct or review readings. Having a strong library is also essential and an area that West Point excels. Instructors should also take time to identify weak readers and give additional instruction on how to pre-read, read, and review readings in order to increase comprehension and retention of material. Lastly, given the time requirement of assigned readings, RS102 should be required by all plebes in order to increase the skill set and the ability to speed read material. The amount of time in a day, especially a cadet’s day, can’t be altered, but classes such as these would have a great impact on the completion rate of assigned readings.


