Getting Students to Do Their Assigned Readings

The failure of students to complete their assigned readings before class is an unfortunately common occurrence at every level of higher education and in every discipline. In fact, it has been demonstrated by multiple studies that for any given day or assignment, “compliance with course reading” is about 20-30% per class (Hobson, 2004).

In order to motivate students to do their assigned readings, it is important to understand the reasons why the compliance rate is so low. This document will review some of these reasons, and then present some methods that can be used to motivate students to do their assigned readings.

Reasons students don’t do their reading

A review of the literature on this subject reveals a set of common reasons why students fail to complete their assigned readings. These reasons can be grouped into four main categories:

1. Lack of pay-off
2. Misunderstanding student motivation or behavior
3. Poor reading or study skills
4. Problems with assigned readings

Lack of pay-off

Busy university students are very adept at running cost-benefit analyses when it comes to their schoolwork. With many students juggling full course loads alongside jobs, long commutes, and other commitments, any work that is seen to have no impact on their grades will quickly be put aside. Surveys have repeatedly shown that more often than not, students see a “weak relationship between course readings and academic success” and conclude that their grade will not be “enhanced by faithful compliance with reading assignments” (Hobson, 2004). This is especially true of average students whose only concern is getting by, rather than doing exceptionally well (Sandvig, 2007).

Misunderstanding student motivation or behavior

As Hobson points out, faculty members often make the mistake of seeing their students as being younger versions of themselves – exceptionally motivated and committed to both the material and to succeeding at a high level. These erroneous assumptions lead faculty members to be surprised that students don’t complete their assignments. Instructors therefore need to start seeing any given cohort as containing students with a wide range of ability, commitment, and interest in learning (2004).

Sandvig also points out that first year students are often not inclined to study on a daily basis or throughout the semester. They “don’t consider it important to keep up with course material but tend to think of ‘studying’ as reserved only for impending examinations” (Sandvig, 2007).

Poor reading or study skills

Many students, especially those in their first year of study, lack the necessary skills to make sense of their assigned readings. They don't see reading as an interactive or constructive process in which they are "developing understanding through a dialogue with the text" (Sandvig, 2007). They lack the skills and vocabulary to work with the discipline-specific texts that they have been assigned, and this frustration often leads students to give up on their readings.

Bean describes one particularly vicious cycle that is caused by a simple misunderstanding of the reading process:

1. Students labor under the belief that "experts" would be able to read any given text quickly and with no difficulty. They assume that their own difficulty with the text must be caused by their lack of expertise, making the text "too hard for them."
2. The students don't allot the necessary time to read the text deeply, become frustrated, and give up on the reading altogether, relying on the instructor to explain it to them.
3. The instructor, seeing this wide swath of reading comprehension problems, devotes class time to lecturing around the assigned text.
4. The students, realizing that the instructor can be relied upon to review the material in class, are never forced to practice the skills necessary to become better readers, and thus never improve (Bean, 2011).

Bean goes on to list several problems that can have an impact on student reading ability:

1. *Inexperienced readers are unable to distinguish between reading purposes for different types of texts*. They may read all texts as if they were textbooks – "linearly from first to last page, looking for facts and information that can be highlighted with a yellow marker." They are unable to adjust their strategies – knowing when they can skim material just for the gist or when they must read closely – or "chunk complex material into discrete parts with describable functions… Their often indiscriminate, almost random use of the yellow highlighter suggests that they are not representing the text in their minds as a hierarchical structure."
2. *Inexperience readers don't interact with the texts they read*. These students "often do not see what conversation a text belongs to—what exigency sparked the piece of writing, what question the writer was pondering, what points of view the writer was pushing against, what audience the writer was imagining." Students who can't see a piece of writing as part of an existing conversation are unable to see how they, as readers, are similar or different from the intended audience.
3. *Inexperienced readers are lacking in necessary vocabulary and cultural knowledge*. These students may be confused by technical terms, obscure or antiquated words, or words that are being used in unusual ways. Their level of reading comprehension may prevent them from parsing complex sentence structures, or understanding when irony or humor is being employed. They may also lack "access to the cultural codes of the text—background information, allusions, common knowledge that the author assumed that the reading audience would know."

4. *Inexperienced readers may be uncomfortable with the unfamiliar*. Here Bean identifies an interesting phenomenon: "No matter what the author really means, students translate those meanings into ideas that they are comfortable with… the more unfamiliar or more threatening a new idea is, the more students transform it into something from their own psychological neighborhoods" (Bean, 2011).

Problems with assigned readings

This category includes both problems with the way readings have been inserted into a given course, as well as problems with the readings themselves.

Course structure can actually have a big impact on student compliance with reading assignments. Boyd found, through student surveys, "that the linkage of reading to what happens in class is the greatest motivator for student reading" (Boyd, 2003, as cited in OSET, 2009). The main ways in which course design can impede student motivation to read are as follows:

- No justification for the readings in the syllabus (Hobson, 2004).
- Vague assignments without guidance as to what students should "get" from the readings.
- Lectures cover the reading content during class time.
- Slides or lecture notes cover the reading content (OSET, 2009).

The selection of the reading material also has a major impact on student compliance. The main ways in which reading selection can impede student motivation to read are as follows:

- No differentiation made between readings required for success and merely suggested readings.
- Mismatch between the difficulty level of an assigned text and students' reading abilities.
- Readings being used for purposes that they were never intended, or "not appropriate to the context in which they are used." For example, dense or specialized reference books being assigned as a primary course teaching and learning tool (Hobson, 2004).

How to motivate students to do their reading

Now that we've reviewed the reasons that students aren't completing their assigned readings, we can start using that information to develop pedagogical strategies to overcome these problems of motivation. It's not as simple as telling students to read a certain number of pages before class. Bean believes that instructors "need to assume responsibility for getting students to 'read for the course.' This includes making certain that the assigned reading is course-related, as well as teaching students the discipline-specific values and strategies that facilitate disciplinary learning" (Bean, 1996, as cited in Hobson, 2004).

To get students to 'read for the course,' Hobson suggests that the best solutions are multi-dimensional, examining and modifying "attitudes and activities on both sides of the teaching-learning coin" (2004). These solutions attack the problem from three angles:

1. "Help students understand course design choices, and related performance expectations;
2. shape the in-class experience to encourage reading as a learning tool;
3. develop needed course-relevant reading skills and attitudes" (Hobson, 2004).

These strategies fall into three contexts: prior to assigning the reading, during the time the student is reading, and the use of the reading in the classroom (OSET, 2009). We have divided these strategies into the following categories based on OSET's breakdown:

1. Prior to assigning the reading:
   a. Course design
   b. Selecting the best readings
   c. Assignment design
2. While the student is reading
   a. Dealing with reading comprehension problems
3. Using the readings in the classroom
   a. In-class activities

Course design

The process of selecting and assigning readings is inextricably tied to the course design process through the process of alignment, in which learning objectives are linked with teaching and learning activities and assessment methods. Therefore, when approaching the creation of your reading assignments, keep in mind your course's intended learning outcomes – these outcomes "provide one criterion for determining course-related texts, reading load, and pragmatic reading compliance expectations" (Hobson, 2004).

The following areas of effective course design can be leveraged to increase reading compliance:

- *The syllabus*: An effectively prepared syllabus will not simply list the readings for the course, it will provide students with background on the material, show students how each reading relates to the course content and activities, and indicate how the assignments will contribute to their learning (Hobson, 2004).
- *Continue to explain the relevance of reading assignments through the term*: Review the relevance of each assignment in the syllabus, and then continuously throughout the term. These explanations are important to unskilled readers "because they are not adept at making inferential connections between items that are seemingly dissimilar or only loosely related." By reinforcing the intended learning outcomes for the assignments as they occur, instructors can increase student buy-in (Hobson, 2004).
- *Scheduling assignments:* A mixture of reading assignments should be distributed throughout the term, with each assigned text appearing in conjunction with a corresponding section of the course. Hobson even recommends only distributing specific reading assignments close to their use date, rather than ahead of time. He believes that "when these assignments are made close to the 'use date'—the class session during which the information contained in that reading appears—students are more likely to read the assignments" (Hobson, 2004).

- *Integrated activities*: Concepción describes "integrated activities" as connecting "controlled failure, homework, [and] in-class activities where students publicly share their work," allowing students to see "the connection between their work and the course's learning objectives" (2009). Controlled failure "occurs when students realize that they are not doing well. Teachers need to provide students opportunities to become self-conscious of what they do not know so that students will seek further information and advice." Building both controlled failure and the opportunity for students to publically display their subsequent learning results in sustained engagement with the course content and increased motivation to do well (Concepción, 2009). This kind of integration can be achieved, for example, by designing "creative classroom exercises and ungraded feedback" in a way that prepares students for subsequent graded work (Sandvig, 2007).
- *Designing assessments:* When designing assessments for your course, make sure that the readings play a part. Exams should include questions that can only be answered by having completed the readings. Research or reflection papers should require the use of the readings. Weir suggests including the following instruction on writing assignments: "Your paper must draw upon assigned readings (specify which ones) in a substantial manner that demonstrates your mastery of them and your ability to synthesize these with outside sources. Papers that fail to reference these works will be marked down accordingly" (2009).

Selecting the best readings

When beginning to select readings for a course, Hobson urges instructors to examine a major assumption that can lead directly to trouble – "the assumed inevitability of course texts." This idea that university level courses *must* have "required reading" can often lead instructors to apply the label "required" to "all course-linked reading assignments…regardless of how central the reading assignment is to course success" (Hobson, 2004). This can often lead to a bloat in the amount of "required" readings, overwhelming students and forcing them to make choices about the amount of time they are willing to invest in actually completing the readings. The perception of an overwhelming workload, combined with the perception that they can get by without completing the readings, leads to low compliance with the assigned readings. The following suggestions can help prevent this from happening:

1. *Amount:* Hobson suggests performing a "triage" on your reading list. Review all the materials you have considered assigning and rate each one "according to its relevance to success in the course (e.g. 'absolutely essential,' 'good supporting material,' 'exotic,' 'appealing to experts,' 'idiosyncratic choice')" (2004). Only the readings that fall into the category "absolutely essential" should be assigned as "required reading." Each of these texts should be mentioned in class, be included in projects and assignments, or appear on examinations. "From the student perspective, a more manageable reading load, combined with accountability for completing reading assignments, makes reading compliance a course-related investment with high returns" (Hobson, 2004).
2. *Level*: Required readings should be aimed at "marginally-skilled" students. Selecting readings that are beyond the reading level of the majority of students is unfair, and leads to an "unequal learning environment tilted in favor of highly-skilled readers." After

slogging through a few "unreadable" readings, students will give up, rather than suffer through another one (Lowman, 1995, as cited in Hobson, 2004).

3. *Purpose*: Remember – if students think they can get by just by attending lectures, they won't bother with the readings. Therefore the course readings must be "an explicit learning device that is separate from, but complementary to, what you do in class" (OSET, 2009).

Assignment design

When assigning readings, there are specific ways to structure the assignments that can increase student motivation. These methods can also help ensure that reading assignments "align with in-class learning opportunities that then combine to motivate mastery of learning outcomes" (OSET, 2009).

When designing an assignment:

- Provide a purpose for reading, giving students a sense of what they should focus on and what they should learn from the reading. Make reading assignments explicit, with specific instructions and additional resources that can guide students through challenging areas (OSET, 2009).
- Use scaffolding to organize the development of new skills. Tasks should move from "relatively inauthentic, simple, and highly structured tasks" to "complex, authentic, [and] open-ended." These assignments should be discipline-specific, requiring students to complete tasks that are realistic to their area of study, and should require content mastery to complete (Concepción, 2009).
- Include language that deemphasizes the role of the instructor as a formal authority, and instead focuses on students' intrinsic motives and "suggests they will find the assignments intellectually satisfying" (Sandvig, 2007).
- Create assignments that students feel are rewarding, providing them with material that they not only need to know, but is also engaging and "has some application to their own lives and thoughts" (Immerwahr, 2013). When possible, "feed them small doses of the stuff they're used to seeing, such as Web sites, blogs, and graphic novels" (Weir, 2009).

Dealing with reading comprehension problems

As discussed in the first section, poor reading and study skills are major factors in non-compliance with assigned readings. Students, especially those in their first-year of study, may have never learned how to be "deep readers," focusing on meaning, as opposed to "surface readers," focusing on facts and information (Bean, 2011). Instructors must be willing to demonstrate strategies for effective reading and comprehension in their particular discipline, or risk facing a sea of unprepared faces at their next class meeting (OSET, 2009). Proactive methods for dealing with reading comprehension problems include:

1. *Make the reading central to the course*: On the first day of class, include the readings in your description of what's to come. Include graphics or photos from some of the readings in your slides or carry the books with you to class. Demonstrate the positive value of the readings, and although "you may not like all aspects of the text, do not dwell on the

negatives, because that devalues the book in the mind of the novice reader. Speak positively about the book; and introduce alternative information and points of view without being negative" (OSET, 2009).

2. *Previewing the material:* Prepare students for the upcoming reading by spending some time in class explaining what "is to be achieved from reading" and "how the text will set up students for the necessary learning outcomes and upcoming in-class activities" (OSET, 2009). For example, "when lecturing with PowerPoint, include textbook page numbers in your slides in order to relate key concepts to where the student can learn from reading in the text" (OSET, 2009). This can also be done through a short, un-graded pretest that "provides students an introduction of what is to come" and shows them "where their knowledge gaps exist" (OSET, 2009). Hobson cites a study that found that "integrating readings into class presentations and discussions is the best means of motivating students to read beforehand… Because students often wonder why faculty consider reading assignments important, they will listen carefully to brief comments about why a reading assignment is interesting and connected to prior and future issues" (Lowman, 1995, as cited in Hobson, 2004).
3. *Guide student reading:* Though it can be a time consuming process to develop additional material, providing students with study guides or notes to supplement their reading can help center their reading process around key questions, or give students guidance on how to make sense of a difficult text. Students may also benefit from being forced to take an active involvement in their reading, "such as writing something that must be e-mailed in before class, or preparing specific questions for a quiz" (Immerwahr, 2013).
4. *Teach reading strategies:* Students who are new to university or new to a discipline may need your assistance in learning effective strategies for reading. Rather than allowing them to color their pages indiscriminately with highlighter, you can provide them with models for effective text annotation and note taking. For instance, you can distribute a sample page from the course text that has been marked up. Hobson suggests providing an additional annotation of the marking that explains the strategy behind it and discussing it during class. This modeling serves two purposes: it shows the course readings to be crucial to student learning, and it provides students with a "model of how experts approach material presented in complex structures, including making sense of technical language, shuttling between text and supporting materials, cross-referencing topics via the text's index, and using study guides for formative assessment purposes" (Hobson, 2004).

In-class activities

Using the assigned readings as part of in-class activities is key to increasing compliance. The most important thing to keep in mind is that students need to be held accountable for having done the reading. This can be done in any number of ways, from low-stakes quizzes or discussion board participation, to reflective writing assignments before class, to cooperative activities during class (OSET, 2009). Remember that the reading assignments and their accompanying activities must "consistently prepare the student for in-class learning" and "be aligned with stated learning outcomes and what will be assessed on exams" (OSET, 2009). These activities should *build* on the readings, rather than just going over what has already been reviewed in the text.

Below are some ideas that can be used in class to engage students with the readings just before class meets:

- Post some questions on Blackboard and require students to answer at least one before class. Use these answers to monitor student writing ability, track their progress with learning the content, and to plan the discussion for the coming class meeting (Weir, 2009).
- Give short online reading quizzes that must be completed a few hours before class. The questions should be designed to help students focus on the important points that you want them to take from the reading. You can use the same questions in class as multiple-choice clicker questions, with some selected student responses provided as the answers (Bruff, 2010). This can help kick off class discussion, re-focus student learning, and make students feel as though their work matters.
- Allow students to anonymously report on whether or not they have completed the reading. This can give you a more accurate measure of compliance with your assignments and allow you to adjust your assignments accordingly (Hobson, 2004).

During class time, try the following techniques:

- Ask students to list three key points from the reading and write those on the board – use these points as the outline for your lecture (OSET, 2009).
- Go around the room and have students each name one "important point, new discovery or question s/he has about the reading" (OSET, 2009).
- Have students complete a write-pair-share activity in class using sections of the text as prompts for "student reflection, interpretation, and discussion" (OSET, 2009).
- Allow students to submit a card with notes on the day's reading at the beginning of each class. Return these cards to the students on exam day and allow them to use them during the test. If they haven't handed a card in on the day of the reading, they won't have access to notes on that material during the exam (Davis, 1993, as cited in Immerwahr, 2013).

When you're really having trouble getting students to do their reading, it is crucial to still conduct the promised discussion or activity in class, even if students appear unprepared. If you feed them the information that they failed to read, they will learn that the readings are unnecessary, because you will do all the work of summarizing for them (Sandvig, 2007). The following methods can be tried to really force the issue:

- *Use class time to complete the readings* – give students a short amount of time, perhaps 15 minutes, to read the "high priority" material that is at the core of the rest of the activities you have planned for the day's class. This isn't ideal, but at least it will prevent your entire planned discussion from being completely derailed, as well as stressing the importance of the readings to future classes (Hobson, 2004).

- *Pop quizzes and short papers* – distribute a graded quiz or short writing assignment to students at the beginning of class that requires them to demonstrate what they learned from the day's reading assignment (Weir, 2009).
- *Random questioning* – although this technique is often unpopular amongst both faculty and students, McDougall and Cordeiro assert that it's important to sometimes call on students who haven't volunteered the answer because *only* calling on students who volunteer reinforces the non-preparation behavior of students who don't raise their hands (McDougall and Cordeiro, 1993, as cited in Hobson, 2004).

Specific methods

Below are some more in-depth descriptions of specific methods that can be used to increase compliance with assigned readings:

Cognitive Mapping

Alongside any given reading assignment, distribute a "map" for students to fill out while they complete the reading. This "map" consists of at most five questions that are not overly complex, but also not merely a restatement of the lesson objectives. The goal is to get the students to "explore the material in a focused way." Sample questions can be along the lines of "What is the focus of this chapter?" or "What ideas in this chapter are new to you and especially interesting?" Sandvig emphasizes that the final question should always be a version of "What ONE question would you like me to answer in class about this reading?"

At the beginning of the next class, set students up in groups of three or four, and have them discuss their answers to the questions for 10-15 minutes. After the groups have had sufficient time to work through their maps, start a discussion with the full class by asking each group for questions. This makes the class student-centered. Sandvig also believes that "by giving students the opportunity to really formulate questions in a controlled environment, the quality of the questions will improve" (2007).

Providing the map to students to use while they do their reading provides them with the necessary support and focus. Going over this map in class, with work being done amongst peers, signals to students the value of doing the reading prior to class (Sandvig, 2007).

The Median Option

This technique exploits a principle in psychology that states, "when presented with multiple options, we tend toward the median option (so long as it's perceived as minimally acceptable)" (Cholbi, 2012).

To exploit this principle, Cholbi created a syllabus that included two sets of reading expectations. The "assigned readings" column listed what, in an ideal world, he hoped students would read. The "If you can't read everything, just read…" column then included the very minimum that he hoped students to read.

The idea is that, given the choice between the greatest number of readings, the smaller number of readings, and not reading at all, that less-motivated students will be more likely to choose the median “If you can’t read everything” column, rather than nothing. The motivated students will also be given an opportunity to exceed the basic expectations.

Below is a sample reading schedule developed by Cholbi:

DATE	TOPIC(S)	ASSIGNED READINGS	IF YOU CAN’T READ EVERYTHING, JUST READ…
Tu 25 Sept	Facing up to death: Do we know we will die?	Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich* Kagan, *Death*, pp. 1-5, pp. 186-96	Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich* Kagan, *Death,* pp. 1-5
Th 27 Sept	The nature of death: Physicalism, dualism, and the soul thesis	Kagan, *Death,* pp. 6-36	Kagan, *Death*, pp. 6-13, 24-36
Tu 2 Oct	The soul thesis, part II	Kagan, *Death*, pp. 36-68	Kagan, *Death*, pp. 36-56

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