

NEW CHALK TALK

To Read, or Not to Read ... But That's Not the Question!

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I often hear faculty members complaining that students don't "do" the assigned readings and students complaining of the length, quantity and difficulty of readings assigned to them. Even more often, I hear people talking about how Egypt is an oral culture and how rare it is to find young people who read for pleasure.

But here is the question: is our objective in assigning the readings only to teach our students the skill of reading 200 pages of academic articles in one week? Or is our real objective to have them engage with the text, understand those readings deeply, reflect on them, apply them to various authentic contexts, evaluate the arguments in the readings, and synthesize the various readings with their own life experiences to transform them? It is said that this generation of learners are so digital they are incapable of deep reading (Wolf and Barzillai 2009), but is this not using a deficit model of education, placing the blame on the students' capabilities?

I have heard students complain about readings assigned to them in courses so often that I have started to consider the legitimacy of their complaints – especially when these complaints come from bright and energetic students whose complaints cannot be attributed to laziness.

I've spent more time studying education and other teachers than I have spent actually teaching, so every teaching experience for me is a study in trying to apply what I've learned from others before me and then to create new knowledge that works for my own context.

I would like to propose a different perspective on the matter of "how do I get students to read?" – I propose we ask ourselves, as teachers, how we might think differently about assigned readings in the first place. When I assign a reading, I ask myself the following questions:

FIRST: Are the readings within the linguistic ability of my students? When the SCI 120 course was first redesigned, feedback from students at the end of every semester included complaints about the difficulty and length of the assigned readings. While I can understand teachers aspiring to having students read seminal works of science, such aspirations are not likely to benefit anyone if the students' language abilities do not allow them to understand the readings in the first place. As a large proportion of SCI 120 students are freshmen, their language abilities are often not high enough for the assigned readings. The SCI 120 instructors have since modified the readings to a more accessible level for the students and the complaints have dwindled. I suggest we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by trying to find readings within the language abilities of our students, instead of risking frustrating them and ourselves. After all, we do want them to *read*, and hopefully *understand* the assigned articles, don't we?

SECOND: Are the readings within the comprehension level of your students? Here I am speaking of something beyond language ability. For example, I once taught a group of students (half of whom taught English Language or Literature in their school) who could not understand the sarcasm and rhetoric used in short British newspaper articles. Since I was not trying to teach British journalistic writing style, but rather, the ethics of educational technology, I stopped using such readings and stuck to more straightforward readings. I have also seen graduate students complain of readings that include a large amount of new terminology and concepts they had not encountered previously, either in the same course or in a prerequisite course. They complain that they spend so much time researching the concepts that they have little time to complete the

assigned reading itself! I suggest that we should not assume students have certain background knowledge of concepts/jargon unless we have good reason to assume so (e.g. because of prerequisites), and we should find ways to support students in understanding the new jargon before we assign them the reading. That way, they can focus on the point of the article, rather than getting distracted trying to understand the jargon.

THIRD: Are we giving students enough time to reflect on the readings? I always felt that the way the Core Seminar 200 was taught (back when I was a student in the late 1990s) was problematic in this aspect. We read a new book each week, attended a general lecture on it, had one class discussion on it, and then moved on to the next book that was only loosely connected by a similar theme. We had little time to reflect on any one book and its depth and meanings, and we had little time to make connections between books, except during exams! I have always wondered how overloading students with pages and pages of reading that they can barely finish between one class and another can give them time to reflect on each reading. Yes, as academics we are capable of reading much more in much less time than our students, and yes, it is a good skill to develop, but are we asking for too much too soon? Are we taking our students through the reading gradually, or are we teaching them fast reading strategies but not reflective, analytical reading strategies? Are we taking the time during our classes and in our written assignments to help them reflect on the reading we have given them, or have we assigned so much reading that there is not enough time in class to discuss it all in depth? If so, then why have we assigned all that reading?

FOURTH: Are the readings relevant to the course and to the students? Students sometimes complain that they cannot see a connection between some of the readings they are assigned and the course. It may be that the instructor sees that connection but has not made it explicit to the students or has not helped them find that connection. It may be that the connection to the course is there, but students do not feel it relates to their own lives. For example, students often question the connection between the content of core curriculum courses and their own major/life. They often question the connection between theory developed in the West and their reality here in Egypt. We often dismiss these objections and attitudes, whereas I believe they are worth serious consideration and can often be addressed when we do take them seriously.

FIFTH: What are we going to *do* with the reading? I always felt that the best way to know my students have benefited from the reading is when I see them using it, applying it critically in their end-of-semester projects/papers, and better still, if they go back to their own context outside the course and use the ideas they have gleaned from the reading. It means to me that there was something useful in that paper that they understood and found relevant and may continue to retain.

Basically, I am proposing that we do not ask ourselves how to motivate our students to read what we have decided in advance is valuable for them to read, but rather, that we think about the readings, choosing them after considering who our students are and what they need, in such a way that will result in motivated students who want to do these readings to learn.

I propose we do not start by thinking: "what should my students read?" but rather "why should my students read this or that?". Instead of deciding "how much should my students read per class?" we would decide "how much of this reading will students be able to apply and retain?".

I welcome your thoughts on the matter.

References

Wolf M and Barzillai M (2009) "The Importance of Deep Reading: What will it take for the next generation to read thoughtfully—both in print and online?" *Educational Leadership*. March 2009. 66:6 Literacy 2.0. pp. 32-37.