

Meaningful Course Design to Increase Student Engagement with Course Readings

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Why Don't Students Do the Readings?

According to one study, 46 percent of students read their assigned readings, and of that 46 percent, only 55 percent could demonstrate a basic understanding of what they read (Hoeft, 2012). There are many possible reasons why students don't always read assigned texts:

- They don't have the skills, habits, or motivation (Nilson, 2016; Johnson, 2019).
- They prioritize other things (Nilson, 2016).
- They have done well in the past without reading (Nilson, 2016).
- Books are expensive, and/or at least students think they can learn without them (Johnson, 2019; McGuire and McGuire, 2015).
- Readings are often not integrated into course design in a way that encourages reading compliance (Hoeft, 2012; Nathan, 2005).
- It's also possible that the nature of digital reading is different from the types of reading you want to encourage in your classes (McLean, 2020)

Luckily, these problems can be eased through intentional course design. If course readings and the development of deep reading habits are integrated into course design from the beginning, students are more likely to be engaged.

I. How Do You Choose the Right Readings?

- Only assign what is most necessary to satisfy course learning outcomes (Nilson, 2016).
- Reflect on what type of reading you are assigning, and what they will be required to do with the reading. Are you asking them to read scholarly articles in your discipline? Dense theory? Popular press monographs? Keep in mind:

- Students can read about 100-400 words a minute.
 - If reading material is difficult, students can read about 200 words a minute.
 - If students need to read in order to recall information later, the rate is 138 words a minute.
 - Drawing upon various research studies, Rice University has created [a table of estimated reading rates](#) based on page density, type of text, and goal of reading.
- Choose Open Education Resources when you can to ensure that all students have access to the materials. If you require copyrighted materials, put them in eReserves.

2. How Do You Integrate Readings into Your Course Design?

- Grade it. (Nilson, 2016)
- Quizzes and graded journals increase reading. (Hoeft, 2012)
- Don't give students an option not to read. Students will be discouraged from reading if they can come to class and get the gist. That means using class time not to lecture, but to actively analyze the texts, develop a deeper understanding and personal connection to the material, and resolve misunderstandings (Nilson, 2016).
- Example: Monte Carlo Quiz (Fernald, 2004): a dice-based quiz that randomly tests students on reading comprehension. Fernald devised standard questions that could be applied to all readings. The general topics were:
 - Knowledge of content.
 - Comparison of two ideas in texts.
 - Application of concepts to students' lives.
 - Critique of an idea.
 - Portion of writing that generated an emotional response.

Each class, students roll a die. If they roll an odd number, they don't have a quiz. If they roll even, they roll again to see which reading they're being quizzed on. The third roll reveals which of the five questions they need to address in their quiz. If they roll a six, they get to choose. Responses are limited to a short paragraph and graded on a 4-point scale.

3. How Do You Frame the Readings?

- Inform students how the reading relates to the course structure and concepts (Hobson, 2004; Nilson, 2016). Consider the following questions **with** your students:
 - What value does the reading have?
 - How does it relate to the course learning outcomes?
 - How does it relate to other readings? Why is it being read at that particular point in the class?

- How does it relate to their assignments or exams?
- Provide a reading guide that previews the texts and provides an introduction to core or difficult concepts (Nilson, 2016). Some people even feel that previewing makes students more familiar with the discourse and therefore more likely to participate in class (Cook, et al, 2013).
- Support deeper learning by providing an overview of a topic, then encouraging students to add details to flesh out the overview (Klingner and Vaughn, 1999; McGuire and McGuire, 2015).
- Increase comprehension by assigning specific questions about the reading (Newell and Winograd, 1989; McGuire and McGuire, 2015).
- Assign journal responses to readings to increase understanding of complex concepts (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

4. How Do You Teach Effective Reading Strategies?

- Explain the organizational schema of the text to your students. Encourage them to explain the structure, scope, titles, headings, positions, and limitations (Nilson, 2016; Fink, 2013).
- Advise students to utilize the concept of “generation” when reading: “You can practice generation when reading new class material by trying to explain beforehand the key ideas you expect to find in the material and how you expect they will relate to your prior knowledge” (Brown, et al, 209).
- Encourage students to stop reading frequently and paraphrase the material to themselves (McGuire and McGuire, 2015).
- Better yet, ask them to explain the material to a friend or roommate (McGuire and McGuire, 2015).
- Model good reading strategies by demonstrating to students how you read, and use reading in your work (Brookfield, 2012). Share examples of your process.
- Require and show students how to highlight effectively, and make useful margin notes (Nilson, 2016):
 - Don’t highlight everything, it’s less effective (Kiewra, 2005).
 - Show them how you annotate your texts.
 - Explain that taking notes in longhand has been shown to be more effective than taking notes on a laptop (Mueller and Oppenheimer, 2014).
 - Encourage them to develop their own marking methods so they can distinguish between main points, connections to other concepts, and questions they may have. (Nilson, 2016).

- Encourage them to respond to the text in a personal manner. Talk back to and with the text.
- Warn against the illusion of mastery by telling students not to re-read too soon, and not to over-highlight a text. (Brown, et al, 2014)
- Introduce a method of reading that encourages self-testing, like the 3R (read-recite-review) strategy (McDaniel, et al, 2009):
 - Read a text.
 - Without looking at the text, recite what you remember.
 - Review the book to identify gaps in understanding between the text and the reciting.
- Expose your students to the five major note taking strategies:
 - Cornell
 - Mapping
 - Outlining
 - Charting
 - Sentence

For more information: <https://www.oxfordlearning.com/5-effective-note-taking-methods/>

- In general, ask your students to use multiple reading strategies. (Kellner, 3)
- Use concept maps to think critically about the relationship of ideas in a reading (Kellner, 147).
- Make them watch a video that teaches reading strategies!
 - UT Austin’s CRIT (Close Reading Interpretive Tool) video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdZH3EkjgdY>
 - Gannon University School of Education’s “Active and Close Reading Strategies” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZwDGCMbsts&t=39s>
 - Townsend Press’ video, “Active Reading and Study”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsSIjNw--So>

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