Strategies for Motivating Students to Read

This handout is designed to offer practical suggestions for how you might better motivate your students to read, particularly, though not exclusively, in preparation for seminars. The ideas are taken directly from Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN) members’ responses to a discussion posting and intend to stimulate further discussion. Opinions and information in this handout belong to the individuals acknowledged and do not relate to the official business of their Universities.

1. **Understanding why some students don’t read**

   *Suggested, inter-related reasons:*

   - Increased participation from students who may lack cultural capital (see Bourdieu) - “who think there is some mystery to deciphering academic work, and who seem to lack the basic tools for the job” (Tracy Johnson).
   - Lack of academic skills necessary to operate in HE – how to think, read and write critically.
   - Implicit HE curriculum (Margaret Herrington) - Universities’ failure to make explicit what we mean by often taken for granted academic practices and to embed opportunities for student to develop academic practices in the curriculum. This may be due to unrealistic expectations of students’ capabilities on arrival.
   - Shift to modularity has resulted in students being over-assessed summatively, crowding out formative assessment that might better support their development of academic practices (Sandra Sinfield & John Bradbeer).
   - “The discourse created by the abolition of the student grant alongside the imposition of direct costs on the student. Thus students are often working for 20 plus hours per week and fitting in full time family life also. The non-inducted student inaccurately reads this discourse as 'saying' to them that they can fit a full time degree around practically full time work and all the other family and social commitments that they had before. They barely make it to lectures and seminars let alone take on the reading!” (Sandra Sinfield).
   - “Massive pressure of information is in reality the pressure of our social structure and how it operates” (John Hilsdon). Students may need additional help in making sense of the sheer amount of information and in being selective about the information that they do draw on.
   - Students read less than they did, in general - newspapers etc. (John Bradbeer).
   - “Certain subjects being perceived as predominantly vocational and thus not academic and thus not requiring reading - here it is often Maths, Computing, Business that are seen by students - but not by staff” (Sandra Sinfield).

2. **Offering learning development sessions (ideally embedded in the curriculum) on how to read**

   *Suggestion for how to do this (Sandra Sinfield):*

   Learning Development Unit, Learning Development in Higher Education Network, & Learn Higher CETL  [www.learnhigher.ac.uk](http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk)
“In Learning Development we try to counter that with sessions on Reading - initiating discussion on the following:
* Why do we read?
* How do we know what to read?
* How can we read effectively?

We also give an active, interactive and critical reading strategy:
E.g. One active reading strategy - in summary:
For each paragraph that you need to read in depth ask:
* What is this paragraph about? Annotate
* Where is the writer coming from? Annotate
* Who would agree or disagree with this position? Annotate
* What is the argument? Annotate
* Who would agree or disagree with this argument? Annotate
* What is the evidence? Is it valid? How do you know? Annotate...

With the advice that on the first read through students annotate that which they are reading - and only on the second read through do they construct their SHORT notes.

LATER on the reading strategy can be supplemented with a writing strategy - the paragraph questions:
1. What is this paragraph about?
2. What exactly is that?
3. Tell me more (what is your argument on this topic in relation to the essay question?)
4. What is your evidence - for and against?
5. What does the evidence indicate?
6. How does this relate back to the question as a whole?

Then we give class time to the reading of a difficult passage - such that there is no hiding place and no avoiding the issue. Whilst often stressful, this often helps students to 'crack the reading code'. I have colleagues who take this a step further and build in seminar time for writing about the reading - encouraging students to build references and quotes appropriately into their reading.

I think that many of us in Learning Development think that the reason that so many students 'cannot write' is that they do not read - hence they are not excavating information - but neither are they assimilating writing models.”


3. Modelling Reading Practice

“Having (critical) reading modelled, especially in a way that demonstrates that it need not be dull and arduous, but that it can be done in small chunks, and actively, and using skimming and scanning techniques. Especially for new students: having seminar activity (when there has clearly been pre-reading) modelled (e.g. in a short video), so that expectations are clear (and, hopefully, the value of prepared participation is also clear)” (Martin Hampton).

“That some students don't prepare because academic texts are dense and off-putting is a common issue, I think. I've, therefore, gone down the route of suggesting that colleagues do the reading with the students in class so they can face difficulties with reading head on and demonstrate what they, as academics, do with texts” (Lisa Clughen).
Modelling reading practice might include dialogue about how we read “with academics being more up front with students about their own reading. It is such a mistake for academics to suggest that reading is always speedy, accurate and efficient...and essentially a technical matter for those in academic positions. There are discipline differences in these respects but reading is always a more subtle experience than this scenario suggests” (Margaret Herrington).

Text Mapping (http://www.textmapping.org/using.html) is a technique originally used with children but can be adapted for HE students. Really helps to demystify solid chunks of text by collectively working on, discussing and annotating large-size photocopies joined into a continuous scroll. Doing this in a group also helps model reading strategies individuals can use privately. (Pauline Ridley)

4. Make reading necessary and purposeful

“Having an explicit mini-task associated with the reading i.e. not just ‘read this’ but ‘read this and come to the seminar with three words describing how it made you feel / a bare-bones summary of not more than 25 words / a visual summary / something you’d ask the writer if you met them / an object that in some way represents something from the text (and if you don't bring one you have to choose from a mystery lucky dip and relate it to the article on the spot!) (Martin Hampton).

“Design the seminar activity so that students need to have completed the reading to be able to take part. You might randomly select individuals to present a 1 min summary of what they have read so that they need to do the preparation – this experience would be enough to encourage some students to do the work to avoid having to ‘wing it’ again. Students generally don’t like to be seen to be letting each other down so if they were working in groups and some hadn’t done the prep necessary to complete the group task this might serve to highlight that they are letting fellow students down. These interventions aren’t intended to humiliate individuals, just make the prep necessary and purposeful. If it isn’t, why do it? It may put some students off coming to the seminar if they haven’t prepared, but that is a different issue.

Also, are you sure that they know what is expected and are able to carry out the task? You might ask them to check. You might also re-state the expectations of the seminar/module or negotiate what they need to prepare in order for you to run a useful session and establish a contract letting them know that this prep is necessary and their responsibility. Have you asked the group in general why they haven’t prepared for this session by…. I’m interested to know why that is.” Then negotiate accordingly, if at all.

Finally, do those who have done the work feel their effort is valued? Are they thanked for their contribution? If the session is sabotaged by those (majority or minority?) that haven’t done the prep, those that have won’t bother in future, unless you make their effort worthwhile by rewarding them with a session that allows them to make use of their prep” (Kate Smith).

5. “Encourage students to develop a positive attitude towards putting the work in to be properly analytical” (Tracy Johnson).

Learning is hard work and it seems that some students think it is hard for them and easy and obvious for others. It might be worth sharing experiences with them that demonstrate that reading, thinking and writing analytically is difficult but that these activities become easier with practice. This relates to the point on modelling.

6. “Critically consider the amount and relevance of materials students are asked to read in preparation” (Kim Shahabudin).
To encourage initial participation choose topics that students may be familiar with the style of: e.g. “the seminar is based around a paper by Geoffrey Beattie, carefully chosen as he’s the "pop" psychologist on Big Brother (so recognisable to the students), that looks at how people draw on theories of attribution in their discussion of rape” (Chris Keenan).

7. “Facilitate an environment for concentration on an issue or set of issues/problems/questions by using texts” (John Hilsdon)

See Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) materials for modelling questioning and potential answering (John Hilsdon).

8. Avoiding allowing students to re-structure seminars so that staff do all the work

“Actually we now have a rational system. Students lack practice in reading and are lacking confidence and ability and are very slow. We are seasoned academic readers, reading quickly and accurately. So it is really rational behaviour for students not to read but expect us to provide potted summaries in lectures (or on WebCT) and to fill the embarrassed silences in seminars with summaries of the reading we expected the students to have done” (John Bradbeer).

One way to do this is not be afraid of silences; people need time to formulate their responses.

Another suggestion is to have emergency tactics up your sleeve:
“Emergency tactic when half the students in a group don’t appear to have read the set text: ask students (beforehand if possible but at start of seminar is fine) to select one sentence that is particularly meaningful - either because it represents the main point of the piece, or because they want to argue with it, or for some other reason - and then in turn write it on a post it note/ white board and say why they chose it. The ones who have done the reading will be able to make an informed selection but others will skim read, pick something out quickly and then try to find something interesting to say about it. At worst, it’s better than an embarrassed silence, but it’s surprising how quickly this can generate a genuinely interesting and constructive discussion among all the students. And if the tutor is skilful about helping the group to pull the threads together, they are more likely to do the reading properly next time” (Pauline Ridley).

9. “Encouraging consideration of the wider and longer-term personal and professional benefits of this kind of preparation

E.g. how will developing the skill of efficient prep impact on job chances? What explicit ‘CV’ skills does this kind of prep relate to? What kinds of personal development can doing this kind of prep facilitate? As with all curriculum requirements, clear links to PDP seem to motivate some students (though probably a small minority) more effectively than course-related incentives” (Martin Hampton).

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