



Save the Time of the Reader: Narratives of Undergraduate Course Reading

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Many factors underlie student success in college, and foremost among them is students' ability to complete required course readings. Most undergraduate coursework includes required reading assignments, though faculty often report (both formally and informally) that they are not successful in convincing students to complete the course reading.

This paper discusses a qualitative research study that explored undergraduate attitudes and practices toward their course reading, and offers insight into why they may not complete it. The study was undertaken at a large, urban, public, commuter university that primarily enrolls students who historically have been underserved by higher education in the US. They are likely to have work and family responsibilities outside of college, may be older than traditional-aged students (with sometimes substantial time elapsed between high school and college), and may be members of low-income households. Most published studies on undergraduate course reading habits involve research with students at public and private colleges and universities that are predominantly residential, and do not adequately consider the experiences of non-traditional students or commuter students, who make up the majority of undergraduates.

Interviews with students revealed much about the landscape of undergraduate course reading preferences and realities. Students described a wide range of strategies used to acquire and access their course materials, and discussed their struggles and challenges around the process of completing course reading. Concerns about time are especially pressing for historically underserved and commuter students, who typically have multiple commitments outside of their college requirements. The results from this study enable us to consider the role of librarians and libraries in supporting undergraduates in completing their course readings, and to encourage students' success in their use of time in college.

Student Reading Completion

Educational researchers have studied student reading completion, typically referred to as reading compliance. Prior research has primarily focused on student reading practices in specific courses or disciplines, and most has been survey-based, which can limit the detail students might share about their reading practice. In a widely cited study published in 2000, researchers compiled data "defined as a passing score on the first surprise quiz of a given quarter" for nearly a thousand students in undergraduate and graduate psychology courses at one university from 1981-1997, the analysis of which revealed "a decline in compliance over the period."¹ A more recent survey of students at two universities, the majority of whom were teacher education majors, found that 62% spent less than an hour per week on course reading.² Similar findings have been reported by others, and most published studies conclude that the majority of undergraduates do not complete all of their required course reading.³

It is worth noting that research on student reading completion has not taken into account changes in format and availability of course texts that have accompanied the wide availability of internet access, nor the ways that the internet and subsequent changes in the publishing industry might affect students' approach to their course

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readings. Digital course texts can include interactive media and applications that are not possible in print; however, a two-year survey at the University of Central Florida found that while digital textbook use increased over time, “lower cost and convenience remain the top reasons students purchase an e-textbook, not the interactive features designed to enhance learning.”⁴ A focus on textbook affordability as a growing problem in the US has sharpened in recent years as the increase in textbook prices has outpaced inflation.⁵ The National Survey of Student Engagement has reported that many students do not purchase their required course materials because they are too expensive,⁶ which may also impact students’ completion of reading assignments.

Factors suggested by prior studies for why students might skip their required course readings include issues of motivation, ineffective study habits, lack of time, a mismatch between faculty and student aims for the course, and “professor behavior.”⁷ However, these reasons are not examined in detail in much of the existing literature, which overall has tended to prioritize strategies for overcoming students’ lack of “compliance” with reading. Reasons that students do not complete their course reading have not been adequately explored, and further research into students’ course reading practices is needed, especially for commuter and non-traditional students who have been underrepresented in prior studies.

Research Methods and Institutional Context

This research builds on my previous work with my colleague Mariana Regalado examining students’ academic culture at the City University of New York (CUNY).⁸ In two cycles of mixed methods research we have sought to learn about how, when, where, and with which technologies CUNY students do their academic work. Our research has revealed much about the lived experiences of our students that informs improvements in our libraries, colleges, and institutions in and beyond CUNY.

In my study of students’ attitudes toward and practices around their required academic reading assignments I considered two research questions:

1. What reading materials are students assigned in their courses, and how do they acquire or access them?
2. When, where, and how do students do their assigned course readings?

During the Spring 2017 semester, after obtaining approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board, I recruited 30 students into this study, 10 each at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), Brooklyn College, and New York City College of Technology (City Tech), all CUNY colleges. Recruitment flyers were posted around each college campus. Semi-structured interviews of about 30 minutes in length were held with participating students on their home campus, and each student interviewed received a \$10 gift card; the research protocol is available for adaptation and reuse.⁹ Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed to text, loaded into the Dedoose qualitative data analysis application, and coded using an inductive approach based in grounded theory to identify emergent themes for further analysis.¹⁰

The majority of undergraduates who attend CUNY colleges are New York City residents and graduates of the city’s public schools, and the demographics of the university reflect the diversity of the city. CUNY undergraduates’ self-reported race/ethnicity is 0.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, 21.1% Asian, 25.6% Black, 32.3% Hispanic, and 20.7% White, and 35% were born outside of the US. Just over a quarter of CUNY undergraduates are older than 25, just under a third attend college part time, and just over a quarter work at least 20 hours per week. About 44% of CUNY undergraduates are in the first generation of their families in college, and about 42% have a household income of less than \$20,000 per year.¹¹

Of the 30 students interviewed, all but two were enrolled at their college full-time, and 18 were working at least part-time in addition to attending classes. Participants, who ranged from first semester freshmen to seniors,

were studying in a range of majors across the liberal arts and sciences and professional fields. Most of the students I interviewed were of traditional college age, with only five students over 25 years old. A participant group of this size does not allow for generalizable results by gender, race, or ethnicity, and I did not collect these data during my research. Analytical themes that emerged during data analysis were broadly congruent across the three colleges, thus the research results will be discussed here in aggregate.

Findings: Access and Process

Student responses to my questions about their course reading attitudes and practices centered on two themes: access and process. Some students were unable or unwilling to obtain access to their course materials. While the CUNY students I spoke with did express concern about the high price of textbooks, cost was not their only consideration. Students evaluated the perceived usefulness of the course materials, and considered their experience in and after their course when deciding whether ownership of their course texts was important to them. In sharing details about their reading process, students discussed their practice when completing required course reading, including format preferences and the ways that they engaged with the text (or did not). Students also discussed the support—or lack thereof—available to them as they worked to complete the required reading for their courses.

Usefulness

One of the main factors that students considered about their required course materials was whether the assigned textbooks would be of use to them during and after the course. Students made choices about the utility of readings based on a range of criteria, including whether the course was a general education or major course, as well as the teaching strategies of their instructors. A third-year Brooklyn College student highlighted the differences in their approach to reading between courses in different subjects, and saying “most of the time I think that reading is not required, but depending on what class.” They noted that in humanities and social science courses in philosophy, history, and english, class discussion was required, and doing the reading enabled participation in discussion. However, in science courses they felt that “you don’t really need to read,” especially with a “good” instructor; this student claimed that a good professor “will give you good notes and will teach it well.”

Similarly, some students evaluated how much they would need to read in their courses to finish the class with the grades they sought, a strategy that students used in both general education and major courses. A BMCC freshman said: “I’m not buying the textbook, because it’s, like, March and we haven’t done anything” that required use of the textbook. A third-year City Tech student explained that they completed just enough of the readings in one course to enable them to do the homework; further, since homework in that class made up only 10% of the course grade, they sometimes felt it did not make sense to put in the extra effort required to do it.

Not surprisingly, students were very unhappy when they had purchased an assigned textbook and gone to the effort to complete reading that was not used or addressed in the class. Several students described courses in which their instructor gave them a reading assignment yet neither discussed it nor asked the students questions about it in class. The third-year City Tech student mentioned above who discussed their strategy for reading to complete the homework also described their frustration with the assigned reading in another course: “[My professor] gives us stuff to read, then we read it, we come in, we watch a video, we have a big discussion, it has nothing to do with the reading.” For many students it was not worth their effort to obtain access to their assigned course readings if their instructors did not structure the course in such a way that required students to complete their reading to be successful.

Ownership

Students also considered the implications of ownership when making decisions about how and whether to access their course readings. For those who chose to purchase or otherwise acquire a copy of their textbooks, they carefully weighed the benefits of that acquisition, including consideration of what they might do with their course materials after the semester ended.

Students who purchased their required readings, either in print or digitally, told me that they did not buy from the campus bookstore since they can generally find books for a lower price from other vendors. However, some financial aid packages require students to buy books at the bookstore. Amazon was the vendor named most often by students, though students did use others, such as the third-year Brooklyn College student who noted that: “a couple years back I found a website that compares multiple websites that sell textbooks so I felt that was a better way to work with my funds.” Textbooks can also be rented either in print or digital format from the campus bookstore as well as online retailers. Renting books in either format is less costly than purchase, and price was the main reason students chose to rent.

While librarians of a certain age may fondly remember buying used books from fellow students, this strategy was not widespread among the students I interviewed. I do see flyers on CUNY campuses that students have posted to try to sell their books, and a fourth year student at Brooklyn College told me about a Facebook group where students post notices about books for sale. While that student did not have their own Facebook account, they sometimes asked friends to check that group for books they needed.

Students who did not purchase or rent their textbooks used a range of strategies to access their readings. At CUNY our college libraries do place some required course materials on reserve for students to use in the library. Students generally appreciate the cost-free access to required textbooks that library reserves provide, even as they note the limited loan period, as this third-semester student from BMCC mentioned: “The [reserve] books in the library, actually what happens is that they don’t let you take the book home.” Some students found their course texts at the public libraries, which they may be familiar with from their K-12 years. It has also become common for students to use their smartphones to take photographs of the assigned pages in a textbook or course reading, books that belong to a classmate, friend, or are on library reserve. A City Tech freshman explained: “I didn’t buy all of my books so I took pictures of what I needed” from library reserve books. Finally, several students found “free” copies of their textbooks online, that is, a pirated version of the text, though none of the students I spoke with used that term.

Only a few students described their purchase of course materials with the intent to keep them for future reference after the current semester had ended, even for courses in their majors. A City Tech student shared their experience with a required textbook for a major course: “Last semester I only needed one textbook, surprisingly, [...] and now that textbook is collecting dust. I should have rented it because I don’t think I’m going to need that book again.”

Practice

Students also spoke to me about how, where, and when they completed and engaged with required reading assignments. Congruent with the results of other research on format preferences for academic reading,¹² the students expressed a clear preference for reading print rather than digital texts. Some bought or rented a print textbook instead of an ebook, and most printed out at least some of their online readings. The reasons for preferring to read academic texts in print centered around focus and understanding. A City Tech junior referred to the temptations of the internet as a challenge when completing online reading and noted that: “I always print it, cause it’s kind of hard for me to sit at the computer and read stuff, I will get bored and I will find something else

to do while I'm on the internet." As well, a number of students indicated that they found it easier to grasp the entire arc of the assigned reading and to locate specific passages or ideas when they read a printed text. Several acknowledged that browsing an ebook was difficult, and a second-year BMCC student suggested that "on paper you can lay it down and get the relationship."

Despite a preference for print, a majority of students also completed at least some of their assigned readings online. Sometimes this was an economic decision—if the digital version of a text was less expensive than a print version, they typically chose digital. CUNY students have an allocation of free printing that resets each semester, and students evaluated their other printing needs (papers, lab reports, etc.) when deciding whether to print out an online reading. CUNY students overwhelmingly commute to campus and, while some preferred digital texts (citing the reduced weight of not having to carry a heavy textbook), other students shared their preference for printing out their readings in nearly the same terms, that it was easier to carry printouts which, additionally, were not constrained by lack of internet service in the subway tunnels.¹³

Students also revealed a variety of methods for interacting with texts while completing required course readings. Nearly every student told me that they took notes at least occasionally while completing their assigned readings. Most students who preferred notetaking said that they highlighted or underlined their texts, while others annotated texts in the margins, both practices primarily discussed in reference to print materials. Others took notes in a notebook, especially students who needed to return a clean copy of a rented textbook at the end of the semester. Only a handful of students preferred to take notes using a computer or other digital device, and only a few mentioned annotating electronic texts, which correlates with the strong preference students expressed for reading course materials in print.

Support

Finally, the CUNY students I interviewed revealed much about the successes and struggles they encountered as they completed—or attempted to complete—their assigned course readings. Some of students' successful experiences seem obvious but are worth mentioning: if a student found the course material interesting, or had prior knowledge of the subject matter—for example, a course in their major or a sequence of courses—they were more inclined to complete the assigned reading and feel successful in doing so. A senior at Brooklyn College explained that they felt "definitely more of a comfort level" with the reading in their major courses, and continued: "I'm basically building on previous learning that I already have, so it's a little bit easier in that regard."

Students often struggled with longer and more scholarly texts. A BMCC student in their sixth semester revealed their frustration with "the length of the readings, they're very long. I'm not always sure what's most important." Also unsurprisingly, students for whom English is not their first language often found their reading to be a challenge. A Brooklyn College third-year student objected that the texts they were assigned "use very difficult language," and continued that "English is not my first language it's like, my third language I would say." Their strategies for understanding included searching for summaries online or using study guide websites like SparkNotes because "they break it down in a simple way." Other students reported searching on YouTube, Google, and Google Scholar, as well as online (and offline) dictionaries, for help with challenging reading.

The students I spoke with did sometimes seek in-person support when they encountered difficulties in their reading assignments, with mixed results. Some asked their instructors for help after class, though a senior at Brooklyn College shared their reluctance to delay an instructor, because "everyone is standing in line waiting to talk." And while faculty do maintain office hours, students may not always be available to visit faculty offices during those times. Some students asked classmates, friends, or family members for help with readings. Most of the students I interviewed were unsure where to find assistance on campus specifically with their course read-

ing. Some mentioned going to tutoring or the writing center at their college, though as a freshman at City Tech astutely noted: “I feel like there should be like a reading center on campus for students who are having trouble reading.”

Discussion: Time is Crucial

As I listened to CUNY students describe the ways they accessed and accomplished their required course readings, it was clear that students performed their own cost/benefit analysis when making these decisions, weighing both price and time.

Every student used multiple strategies to access to their course readings, committing varying—and sometimes substantial—time to each. Shopping for textbooks online allows students to avoid beginning of the semester lines in the campus bookstore, though comparing prices adds time, and books ordered online may not arrive until the semester is already well underway. Library reserve books are cost-free for students to use, though students felt constrained by the short loan periods and lines that formed at the reserve desk, photocopiers, and scanners. Students also encountered lines in library and computer labs on campus to print texts from the learning management system or other online sources; many do not have access to printers off-campus.¹⁴

Many students’ reading process involved time investments that sometimes went beyond the time spent reading. CUNY is an overwhelmingly commuter university in a city with an extensive public transportation system. For our students the commute can be valuable study time, and the majority of students I interviewed tried to complete at least some of their required course reading during their commute, taking advantage of that time; however, ensuring their access to course readings on the commute can also add time preparing for the commute. A freshman at City Tech student detailed the ways in which they prepared for reading on the subway: “I would usually like, print them out, or save a PDF for myself, and read it on the train, cause a lot of times I’m either at work or I’m traveling. So I would just save it in case I lose service.”

Variable commitments outside of their academic role, including work, family, extracurricular, and community activities, impacted students’ availability to complete their course reading and to take advantage of support for reading on campus. A Brooklyn College first year student explained that they sometimes asks instructors for help after class because “their office hours don’t match with my schedule all the time.” Several students lamented that while they did visit the tutoring or writing center on their campus, long lines in those offices were often a barrier for them.¹⁵

It is important to note that the factors students consider and strategies they attempt in accessing and accomplishing their assigned reading can vary for each course they take, and from one semester to the next. The students I spoke with took their prior experiences into account when making decisions about how—and whether—to complete their reading. Consistent with the findings of other studies, some students waited to acquire the textbook until they were sure that their professor would use it, while other students were less likely to take the time to complete their course reading if they perceived that they could earn the grade they desired in the course without doing so.¹⁶ A BMCC second-year student shared that they usually do not feel like they have enough time in the day for their job, all of their classes, and sleep, concluding that “I can’t spend all my time on this one homework.”

How Can Librarians Support Students’ Reading Practices?

Undergraduates—especially those who commute to campus, are non-traditional students, or are members of historically underserved groups—have busy and complicated lives. Making it easier for students to make the most of their time is essential for equity in higher education and student success.¹⁷ It is worth considering how

academic librarians can support students in their required course reading practice to encourage student success in their academic work.

Library reserves, as we have at CUNY, enable students to access required textbooks and other course readings at no cost. Additionally, older editions of textbooks may be moved to the circulating collection where they can be borrowed for longer periods and taken out of the library. While students appreciate them, reserve collections are not a panacea for challenges of student reading access. Collections budgets are not large enough for libraries to acquire a copy of every assigned course text, and reserve texts, with their short loan period and heavy use, are costly both in personnel and material lifespan.¹⁸ Students' use of reserves can also be affected by issues that are unrelated to the collection itself; for example, a first year City Tech student struggled to use reserve books when the library was busy because the crowding and noise made it difficult to concentrate.

In addition to reserve collections, academic libraries can leverage electronic resources that are available for our campus community to access on or off campus. We can work to make faculty more aware of the range of electronic resources that the library provides on topics that align with their course content, resources that are more easily accessible to students than library reserve books. A sophomore City Tech student expressed appreciation for the reference librarian who helped them find an assigned reading for class in one of the library databases: "The librarian, she showed me that I could go on the computer and I could see the PDF, from here, so I printed it out. [...] Talking to people who work here helps me out a lot, because if I'd never talked to the librarian I would have never known about the link to the play."

Interest in open educational resources (OER), free-to-use course materials that can be adapted and reused across institutions, is growing. Academic librarians—especially at community colleges, which enroll more students from low-income households than do baccalaureate colleges and universities—have been at the forefront of OER development and implementation, in collaboration with faculty in many disciplines. Many OER programs are funded by individual colleges and universities, though state and federal funds may increasingly be available to support this work. At CUNY we are in our second year of a state-funded initiative that has enabled OER course conversions across the university, to positive feedback from both students and faculty.¹⁹ Starting with a small pilot project to work with faculty to convert a handful of courses to OER, as we did several years ago at City Tech, is an inexpensive way for academic librarians to become involved with OER efforts, and can provide evidence with which to advocate for additional funding.²⁰

Academic libraries are also well-located to support students in the process of reading. During instruction sessions, at the reference desk (and in chat reference), and on research guides, we guide students both in finding and using their reading materials. A first year City Tech student expressed the concerns of many who encounter an unfamiliar scholarly text: "If you don't understand the whole topic then it's hard to ask a question, like you don't know where to start." Understanding the challenges students face when they encounter difficult readings can inform our work with them in all instruction and reference contexts, as we consider the role of reading in strengthening students' information literacy competencies. We may consider encouraging students to use topical overviews and background information, including and beyond sources like Wikipedia with which they are already familiar. A Brooklyn College freshman described their appreciation when a reference librarian was able to help them navigate an unfamiliar topic to find reading materials for their research paper:

"I had a research paper last semester and I didn't know where to start or what to do, so I went to the library and the front desk and I asked. And they were like 'what are you specifically asking for?' and I was like 'I don't know,' so they took me to the computer and walked me through everything until I got a topic and had at least one source to back me up. There's a lot of help here."

Finally, we might consider outreach to faculty and student support offices across campus explicitly around students' reading practice. Students may not be aware of reading support on campus, and faculty may not realize that academic support services like the writing center or tutoring may not focus on reading support. The students I interviewed acknowledged their challenges with reading and many wished for additional support, like the senior at Brooklyn College who said "I think reading needs to be taught, like research skills." Collaboration for reading support could take many forms. At City Tech the library has partnered with faculty in English and Biology on a discipline-specific reading support initiative, in which student peer mentors work with their fellow students one on one to address reading challenges. Discipline faculty recruit, schedule, and train the mentors, while the library offers space for the mentors to meet with students and store materials, and provides assistance with promoting the initiative.

Understanding how students approach their required reading assignments can inform these and other improvements to student services in the library and across campus in collaboration with colleagues in other departments or offices. Strengthening our support for undergraduate course reading contributes to our mission as academic librarians to encourage student success at our colleges and universities and equity in higher education.

Endnotes

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