

Student Compliance with Assigned Reading: A Case Study

Brian D. Brost¹ and Karen A. Bradley²

Abstract: Educators value reading as an academic practice and express frustration with student noncompliance with assigned reading. Some research has addressed this issue and recommends multiple strategies for overcoming the problem of student noncompliance. Much of this research, however, treats the problem as exclusively student-centered. This paper presents a small case study designed to engage explanations for student noncompliance and to reflect on strategies used by faculty to incorporate reading assignments into their course design. This study suggests that more attention be placed on the reciprocal nature of the problem and how faculty behavior can contribute to reading apathy. How faculty members conceive, integrate and utilize assigned reading in the classroom does affect how students respond and take responsibility for the practice.

I. Introduction.

Though the classroom is the focal point of the educational experience, learning and teaching does not end there. When students leave the classroom, they continue the learning process by studying their lecture notes, conducting research, writing papers, solving problems and, of course, reading assigned texts. For many classes, the learning process is thought to hinge on students reading assigned material in preparation for and in tangent with the learning activities in the course (Altman and Cashin 1992, Nilson 1998, Grunert 1977). The time required to read course materials might easily exceed the amount of time that an instructor meets with students in class (Lang and Gore 1988). Even when teachers do not use readings as an integral part of their classroom pedagogy, they often recognize that they have a responsibility to produce active, critical readers as lifetime learners, and they may also expose students to important, challenging texts in order to promote cultural fluency.

Given the importance that teachers attach to assigned reading, it is not surprising when educators report frustration over their perception that students are not preparing assigned reading with the care they would like. Nor does it appear that teachers' perception of non-compliance is mistaken. Burchfield and Sappington (2000) report that, on average, only about a third of all students complete their text reading assignment on any given day. This recent finding confirms a body of research conducted over the last 30 years (McDougall and Cordiero 1993, Self 1987, Marshall 1974). Hobson (2004) clearly captures the dilemma stating, "faculty face the stark and depressing challenge of facilitating learning when over 70% of the students will not have read assigned course reading" (p.1).

While many reasons for noncompliance are offered, researchers repeatedly cite the *unpreparedness* of students to read the kinds of materials typically assigned in college coursework. The idea is that students don't read because they can't read; at least, they do not read well enough for the kind of texts most faculty assign. Leamson (1999), for example, argues that today's students are entering school with major deficiencies, and he believes that "the major

¹ Associate Professor of Philosophy, brost@cmsu.edu

² Associate Professor of Sociology, both at the University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg, MO 64093.

deficit is in language use and language understanding” (p. 43). Bean (1996) makes a similar point with the following analogy: “Armed with a yellow highlighter but with no apparent strategy for using it and hampered by lack of knowledge of how skilled readers actually go about reading, our students are trying to catch marlin with the tools of a worm fisherman” (p. 133). And this problem has not gone unnoticed by others (Lowman 1995, Healy 1990, Nist and Kirby 1989).

Since many believe that the problem of noncompliance stems from the problem of unpreparedness, remedies for noncompliance tend to be student-focused approaches. For example, Hobson (2004) asserted that teachers can get students to read by taking a “less is more” approach to course reading and by aiming material at “marginally-skilled” students. Other researchers echo these sentiments (Leamson 1999, Bean 1996).

Much of the research done on the problem of noncompliance has focused on students relatively new to the university—first-year students and students in general education classes (Burchfield and Sappington 2000, McDougall and Cordiero 1993, Erickson and Strommer 1991). Less has been done to understand the problem in advanced courses. This paper, however, examines student reading compliance in advanced level, elective coursework. Looking at rates of compliance in this context is important for several reasons. First, since advanced students are presumably skilled readers, unpreparedness (what many see as the chief problem to compliance) should not form a substantial barrier to the completion of assigned reading. Additionally, when students get to *elect* their course (presumably choosing a course that interests them), *prima facie* we should expect the students to be more motivated to read the assigned materials. Thus we can move our focus away from the problem of unpreparedness and toward the problem of noncompliance.

The objective of this research is to examine rates of compliance with assigned reading in advanced students and, more importantly, we seek to understand students’ attitudes toward the use of assigned reading. In addition, we explore the way in which faculty utilize reading assignments in the learning process. Our overall goal is to become more aware of the role instructors play in reading noncompliance and to consider ways of improving student receptiveness to the practice of reading. This is one small step towards understanding how we help students reach the university goal of becoming critically engaged readers both in the classroom and beyond.

II. Methodology.

This research is a case study of a course designed as a lecture series; that is, weekly classes in which professors from different disciplines were asked to participate as a one-time guest lecturer. The course was conducted at a comprehensive regional university as part of the philosophy program. It was organized and implemented by the first author and was attended by both. The course was not conceived with any intent to do research. Rather, our interest in this research was sparked both by observing the wide variety of ways in which the faculty members conceived of reading and its relation to their classroom activities and by observing how students responded to these various methods. We recognize the limitations of its conclusions but still feel the study is useful in terms of highlighting some of the dilemmas faced by faculty and students.

As part of the course, we observed the variety of sources, length, and difficulty of the reading material and assessed the way faculty engaged the material in their lecture. Thirteen faculty members participated in the lecture series. Each was selected based on their expertise.

Before the term began, lecturers were to submit readings to be assembled into a course packet. Guest instructors were directed that the readings should reflect a typical reading load for a week's worth of class time, and that the course was listed as a junior-level course. It was assumed that students would complete the reading assigned each week *before* the class met so as to make the in-class meeting more productive. After each class, students were asked to write a critique of the lecture and accompanying reading. Together, these critiques determined half of a student's final grade. Two midterm essay exams accounted for the remainder of the final grade. Students were given the option of substituting one research paper for one of the exams (only one student opted for this alternative). Students were not graded on in-class participation.

Twelve students participated in the course, although the lectures were open to other observers. We assessed levels of compliance with and attitudes toward the reading assignments by administering an end of the semester survey. The second author who had no grading responsibility over the students administered the survey. Even so, the results of the survey were not examined until after course grades were assigned. In addition, we observed the behavior of the students at the lectures over the course of the semester, the quality of the work they produced, and we reflected upon our own receptivity to the assigned readings.

We did not collect any demographic information from the students in order to protect the anonymity of the survey process as much as possible. However, we can make a few generalizations about the students in the course. All but two of the students were white. All were American, and most were from the Midwest. Most students were philosophy majors or minors, and most were traditional students in terms of age. Only one had dependents and only two worked full time. Generally, we would gauge the students to be average or above average students in terms of academic ability for this institution.

Doing the research in this context was useful in that it allowed us to look at both the students and the professors in the context of a course. In addition, the course as a lecture series allowed us to look at a cross-section of faculty from various disciplines across campus. The limitations of a case study this small, of course, is that the results are specific to the case studied. Even so, we feel the case provides important clues as to how to proceed in more generalizable studies in the future.

III. Findings.

A. Faculty.

Our first observation was simply that the type and amount of reading varied dramatically. For example, in terms of length, one speaker asked students to prepare an assignment of only about 5,000 words, while another asked students to read closer to 77,000 words—a significant difference in terms of expectations. Additionally, the *types* of reading assigned widely varied. We noted five different types of reading that included: 1) simple handouts produced by the lecturer; 2) non-scholarly articles (a book review in the magazine, *Nature*, for instance); 3) textbooks chapters and secondary sources; 4) scholarly articles (for example, one speaker assigned three articles of her own published research); and 5) primary and/or classic sources (“Self Reliance” by Emerson and part of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for two examples). Some of these readings were quite elementary (textbooks and non-scholarly articles) while others we would deem as very challenging (primary and scholarly articles).

Lecturers had diverse strategies for utilizing these readings in class. On the one hand,

several speakers geared their lecture to summarizing, reviewing and highlighting material covered in the assigned text. On the other hand, one lecturer read a scholarly paper in class, a paper that had little overt connection to the assigned reading. A majority of the professors presented lectures where elements in their presentation were drawn from topics covered in the reading they had assigned. Nevertheless, of the 13 lecturers, less than half directly used the texts in their lecture; that is, the faculty did not utilize specific passages during class nor ask students questions specifically about the reading. Generally, we judged the lectures to be accessible to students whether or not the reading had been done.

B. Students.

As a group, the students were quite active in discussion, asking for clarifications and raising objections. However, it seemed to us that student questions were rarely drawn from the reading, and at times, students asked questions that made it quite evident that they had not read the material before the lecture (at least, not carefully). Student in-class responses were most often stimulated by the oral presentation of the faculty member or drawn from the students' own experiences with the subject matter.

The survey given at the end of the class yielded interesting results. We began by simply listing all the reading assignments and asking students how much they read of each piece. Many of the lecturers assigned several distinct pieces and these were listed separately. Their response options included: none (0), some (1), most (2), and all (3). The average responses across the reading assignments ranged from .5 to 1.9 meaning that the students tended to read "some" or "most" of the assigned readings but rarely "all." The assignments with the most reported readers were those with one or two pieces, meaning that most students read at least some of each article. However, the lowest mean scores were given to the reading assignments with more numerous articles, indicating that students didn't begin many of the articles. One professor had six different readings assigned, and three of the article's means were rated below 1, suggesting that hardly anyone in the class even looked at the articles. When professors assigned only one or two pieces, the overall reported reading level ranged between 1.2 and 1.8. It appears students are more likely to read some of each piece when the overall number is lower. Of course, the number of pages actually read may be the same in both cases. In fact, our data is consistent with students generally starting the reading but losing momentum somewhere in the process. At the least, we can conclude students rarely completed all the reading assigned.

When we asked the students what the important factors were when deciding how much of the assigned material they read, they reported that of the listed options, "personal desire to learn" was the most important factor (average ranking was 7.3 on a scale of 1-10, 10 being most important). In addition, they noted that "time" (6.9), "the actual subject matter" (6.4), "the difficulty of the reading material" (5.6), and the "desire to participate in class discussion" (5.6) were variously important to their decision. A "sense of obligation" was only ranked 4.5.

We asked students to assess how important actually reading the assigned material was in terms of their overall learning in the course. Two students reported it was "very important." However, most (6) replied it was only "somewhat important" while two indicated it was "not important at all." While we can't rule it out, there is no particular reason to suspect that this is a peculiar finding that applies only to this course. At the least, it raises the question, at what point students develop the idea that reading is not essential to learning.

With time being listed as an important factor in students not reading, we checked to see if

these students had substantial time-consuming obligations besides school. Only a few reported that they worked full (2) or part (4) time, only one cared for dependents. In addition, we asked the students about their reading practices and were comforted to discover that almost all the students considered themselves to be “readers.” If they were unable to read easily or didn’t like to read, we might understand why, in practice, they didn’t read. However, five reported that they read “all the time—for enjoyment and to be well-read while the other half (5) reported that they read “occasionally” or “a lot.” While this data on their reading habits may be skewed (self-diagnosed), we merely interpret the results to show that, at least in principle, they have a positive attitude toward reading.

We asked students, what faculty should do to get good readers to actually read in the classroom. The students responded to a list of options, selecting ones they felt would make it more likely that they would read assignments. Those options that ranked highest were “give less reading (7),” and “use the reading better in the lecture/discussion (7).” Six indicated “providing a reading guide” would help, and five reported faculty should “pick better things to read.” Reading quizzes were not very popular (3).

We ended the survey with an open-ended question asking students to reflect on their reading behavior and why faculty may have difficulty getting students to read material carefully before class. The responses suggested a few things. While some students attributed the problem to “laziness on part of the student” or to the fact that the reading is “too boring,” others described the problem as more dynamic. One student reported, “It’s hard to get students to read, because we know that the material will be summed up in class anyway.” Another student echoed this sentiment saying, “I think some students think, since it will all be gone over in class that they don’t have to read it.” This suggests that students may very well strategize their reading decisions. As one student concluded, “students are smart and know what they are doing by reading or not reading.”

In summary, the faculty in our study had very different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate required reading for college students in an advanced course. While there is much to be said for a diversity of teaching styles, inconsistent load expectations may pose difficulties for both faculty and students. Students do form expectations about what “reasonable” reading loads may be (accurate or not), and in turn, they impose these expectations on faculty via their willingness to cooperate. While the assigned reading usually supplemented lectures, many instructors did not directly utilize the assigned reading in their classroom meeting in ways that we think would have enhanced support for student reading. In fact, some faculty strategies reinforced the benefit of not reading by repeating the material for them or by simply not actively using or drawing on the information in class.

The grading criteria for this class also appear to have failed to motivate students to adequately complete assigned reading. Since response papers were due after each weekly presentation, students could avoid completing the assigned reading by drawing mainly from the lecture and/or in-class discussion. When confronted with exams, students could then go back and revisit the texts (though it appears from our survey that many did not). This instrumental approach to reading (reading the bare minimum at the last possible moment) missed a primary point of the assignments--that point being to make class meetings (whether it be lecture, discussion, etc.) more productive.

For their part, the students in this course were faced with the challenge of adjusting reading strategies to a variety of academic subjects and kinds of texts. Even so, these were advanced students in an elective course. The end result, however, were compliance rates that

roughly approximated the rates for less skilled readers in general education courses (Burchfield and Sappington 2000, McDougall and Cordiero 1993, Self 1987, Marshall 1974). We found little evidence that this group had significant outside commitments that would restrict their time available to read. As a group, they did not complete the class reading even as they expressed very positive attitudes toward reading. Open-ended student responses suggested that many made a conscious decision *not to read* the assigned texts and there was some evidence that students did not view the reading as important to the pedagogical process.

IV. Discussion.

Admittedly, the course studied, comprised as it was of distinct lectures by different instructors, is not typical. We are not suggesting that this case study is generalizable. Nevertheless, we suspect that the peculiarities of this course allowed a unique glimpse into a pervasive problem with student reading, and it was helpful to see how instructors in a wide range of disciplines used assigned reading in their instruction. We found the lectures informative, but we were not always sure how the assigned reading enhanced them. We even felt frustrated when instructors spent a significant amount of time merely reviewing and summarizing material we, like the students, had been asked to prepare for the class. We sympathized with students when the lecture had no obvious connection to the reading, and understood how they might question why they spent the time preparing irrelevant material. However, when the reading material *was* drawn on in a constructive way, and students who appeared not to have read the material appropriated discussions in counterproductive ways, we also felt disconcerted. Consequently, we were left with the understanding that the role of reading assignments in learning constitutes a problem that has multiple sources. Our impressions were supported by student responses on the survey.

As we mentioned earlier, many writing on the issue suggest that the barrier to student compliance with reading assignments lies in the area of student preparedness. While they suggest there are things that educators can do address this barrier, they place the *source* of the problem squarely with the student. However, if their hypothesis were true, then we should expect skilled readers, like the students in our study, to comply in higher proportions than less skilled readers. However, we found our subjects to comply at roughly the same rate as less skilled readers. It is possible that the students in our study were not actually skilled readers and, more generally, advanced students are not acquiring reading skills as they advance in their studies. Perhaps this would not be too surprising: if students are not reading in their lower-division courses, then where are they learning to be skilled readers? Alternatively, it is possible that universities select for students who can succeed without doing assigned reading. In other words, the students who advance in college are just those students who were able to succeed in lower division classes without having read the assigned reading.

We are willing to grant that unpreparedness may have something to do with the problem of noncompliance (note the diversity of types of reading they are asked to do), but we gather from our case study that noncompliance is not simply a *student-centered* problem. Rather, we suspect that *faculty members* deserve our share of the responsibility as well. Our survey confirmed the point that many students do not understand the pedagogical role of assigned reading (Lowman 1995, Cannon and Newble 2000). In fact, our experience in this course was that much of the assigned reading did *not* have an overt pedagogical role; over half the faculty didn't even use the assigned reading in apparent way within their class time. Moreover, the way

the class was graded also failed to emphasize the importance of reading assigned material since students could still write successful essay responses to the lectures with substantial noncompliance. Also, many students in our survey choose not to read even when preparing for exams, choosing to base their answers on lecture material only. We might, then, forgive students for their perception that assigned reading is not essential to academic success.

In the course, we witnessed (among other things) what Bean (1996) has referred to as the “vicious circle” of the reading process (p. 134). We offer an example to illustrate this phenomenon. Suppose in order to teach Aquinas’ proofs for the existence of God, we assign the corresponding passages from *Summa Theologica*. How are we to use this reading? Do we expect the students to understand the arguments without further explanation? We recognize that this is probably too much to expect from the students, or worse, we suspect that too many students failed to read the assigned passages. Instead, we are likely to explicate the arguments in class and directly walk them through the text. Students, in turn, may simply not read, waiting for the instructor to cover the reading for them in class. We feel compelled to cover assigned reading material because we cannot assume that a majority of the students have read and understood the material. They see no reason to read if instructors will, as students sometimes put it, “tell them what they need to know” in class. Of course, there should be, and often is, direct discussion of the reading in class; the question is how to do it in such a way that we do not undermine students’ need to critically read on their own.

What is to be done about the problem of non-compliance once we understand that the problem is perhaps more dynamic than is often recognized? This study does not pretend to answer this difficult question. However, we do make the following observations.

(i) The relationship between non-compliance and preparedness needs to be better understood. Many assume that preparedness is the chief barrier to compliance. We feel that this may get the cart before the horse: the acquisition of reading skills depends, after all, upon compliance with assigned reading. Moreover, we feel that some of the suggestions for improving compliance--suggestions that view unpreparedness as the chief obstacle to compliance--may worsen the problem. For example, using class time for reading material with a high priority (Lowman 1995, Hobson 2004) simply exacerbates the vicious circle of the reading process. Students will surely be less likely to read outside of class if important materials will always be read in class. Solutions like aiming readings at remedial readers (Leamson 1999) or advocating that teachers assign less reading, perhaps skipping a textbook at all (Grunert 1997, Maleki and Heerman 1992) seems to us to devalue the role of reading in learning, reducing students expectations to read independently. A better understanding of the relationship between preparedness and compliance is needed before we can hope to discover real solutions to these issues.

(ii) We do not dispute that preparedness is at least a partial explanation for non-compliance. However, while there has been much research for improving student reading skills, dissemination of these innovative theories as well as *practical* teaching ideas are lagging. There has been much research on teaching reading skills within a classroom focused on reading acquisition (Dillard 2003, Nist and Simpson 1996, Nist and Diehl 1985). Still, researchers generally fail to explain how to integrate the strategies they recommend in courses where time allotted to reading skill development is very limited (Stahl, et. al. 1992). Improving reading skills is a tremendously resourceful field, but the format of the help (geared towards whole classes devoted to reading training) makes it much more difficult and less likely that a typical college professor will be able to draw easily from the material.

(iii) Our brief excursion into faculty teaching habits demonstrated in this lecture series was enough to convince us that faculty are clearly a piece of the compliance problem. It has been argued that many of the common ways instructors deal with the problem often creates more problems. For example, Bain (2004) argues that focusing on point accumulation fosters strategic learning rather than “deep learning” (p. 151). Assigning quizzes as a way to force students to read sets the wrong precedent for classroom learning. What faculty can do to resolve this issue is complex and full of wrong turns. As Bain notes, the best college teaching does not come from templates or ‘simple list of do’s and don’ts’ (p.15). Unfortunately, college professors are simply not taught enough about pedagogy and teaching as a theory driven enterprise. More training in this area for all college instructors is probably needed.

(iv) Student perception of the reading-learning process is important. The second author of this paper has experimented with letting introductory sociology students engage the course’s textbook outside of class while reserving class time for exercises addressing more conceptual issues. What would happen if we held students responsible for material in a very accessible textbook without spending class time lecturing over it (she did reserve class time for questions regarding the text)? While students’ performance on this material was judged to be similar to the performance of students in classes with explicit lecturing on the material, students resisted the change. One student evaluation stated, “You turned this course into an independent learning course and didn’t do your job of teaching.” Some students were able to accept the new expectations but many were hostile toward them. So while the students generally appeared capable of learning from the textbook on their own, many did not feel that this expectation was reasonable. Ways of dealing the compliance problem will need to be sensitive to students’ attitudes toward reading.

(v) We end on a positive note. It should not be overlooked that the students in the course studied have a positive attitude toward reading; they did not hesitate to identify themselves as “readers,” whether or not this actually reflects their actual reading habits. Moreover, “personal desire to learn” was the most common reason cited for reading assigned material. In these respects, we hope that our students are representative. If so, there certainly is hope that given appropriate learning conditions—including maybe giving students a sense of “ownership” of the reading process-- students can be motivated to prepare the reading we assign them.

Our ultimate purpose in writing this paper is to call attention to the direct role faculty may have in perpetuating reading noncompliance in our students. It is easy to finger students as the source of the problem, ignore the role instructors play. Faculty need to ensure that we create the appropriate learning conditions that actually foster and reward the behavior we seek, and we feel the dynamic nature of the compliance problem is something that merits continued attention.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

This survey is designed to assess your reading behavior in this lecture series and your perceptions of the reading assignments. Completing the survey is voluntary, anonymous, and will have no effect on your course grade. If you are willing to participate, please write the answer choice in the blank beside the question. We do appreciate your willingness to respond.

Below is a complete list of all the reading assignments given in this course. Please indicate, as best you can remember, how much of each assignment you read and how adequately you felt the material was utilized by the professor in the actual lecture.

0=none, 1=some, 2=most, 3=all

(NOTE: We are omitting reporting this section (questions 1-11). It simply lists particular faculty and the reading assignments they gave.)

12. In your own opinion, which of the faculty members who lectured in this course, if any, used the assigned readings most effectively?
13. In deciding how much of the assigned reading you were going to read each time, how important were each of the following factors in your decision? Rank each item from 1-10, with 1 meaning "not important" and 10 being "very important."
____ time, ____, difficulty of the material, ____ actual subject matter, ____ desire to participate in class discussion, ____ personal desire to learn, ____ sense of obligation, ____ wanted to please professor
14. In your own experience, how important is actually reading assigned material in terms of your overall learning in this class? Not important, somewhat important, very important, it was essential.
15. What could faculty do to make it more likely that you would read the assigned reading (put an X by all that apply)? ____ give less reading, ____ pick better things to read, ____ use the reading material better in the lecture/discussion, ____ provide a reading guide or questions to use as we read, ____ give points for reading or quizzes, ____ other, please specify: _____.
16. Outside of assigned course reading, which of the following best describes your reading lifestyle (put an X beside the comment that best fits you). ____ Never read unless I have to, ____ read some here and there, mostly comics, ____ read occasionally, things I want to read, ____ Read a lot, only for my own enjoyment, ____ Read all the time, to enjoy and to be "well read."
17. Check the statements that apply to you. ____ I work full time, ____ I work part time, ____ I care for any dependents (children, aged parents, etc.).
18. Finally, in your own words, explain why you think getting students to read material before class may or may not be a problem for faculty.