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From Passive Consumers to Passionate Creators: Undergraduate students and the research process

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This presentation is based on data collected through four rounds of Assessment Seminar Interviews at Mount Royal University. For more information on the Assessment Seminar project, please visit http://www.mtroyal.ca/ProgramsCourses/FacultiesSchoolsCentres/TeachingLearning/assessmentseminar/index.htm

Each round of interviews targeted a specific group of students:

- 2010 - Round One - 96 students - 49 first and 47 second-year students
- 2011 - Round Two - 30 third-year students
- 2012 - Round Three - 96 final-year students (many have research/honours experience)
- 2013 - Round Four – 111 first-year students

Statements about research and reading were extracted using NVIVO software and examined for emergent themes.

Results

Different students gained different rewards from their research assignments, and while there were more 'extract' statements from students earlier in their programs and more 'transform' statements from senior students, the pattern was not universal and may be related to particular student characteristics, experiences or assignments.

Reading/Researching for Extraction: Statements reflecting this perspective were more common in first and second-year students. These statements depicted reading/research as cherry picking bits of information to meet externally required (and often ill-understood) criteria without much integration of information into academic or life knowledge. Those bits of knowledge were the reward for research/reading, seen as ends in themselves and more as tribute to be offered up to the teacher than as rewards for the students.

Reading/Researching for Learning: Statements reflecting this perspective focussed more on process than product, and often indicated an appreciation of learning through the reading or research. For some this learning was an exciting in itself, for others more of a valuable by-product. Often, as with the next two categories of reward, the research was on a topic of the students' own choosing or where they could clearly understand the relevance of gaining knowledge to their academic or personal pursuits.

Reading/Researching for Transformation: Statements reflecting this perspective indicated a transfer of both process and content knowledge and often a transformation in their thinking derived from this transfer. The reward is seen as a change in thinking, in worldview, in approach, in ability and confidence, or even more fundamentally in the self. Transfer of knowledge to others was also seen as a rewarding aspect of research.

Reading/Researching for Affective Rewards: Statements reflecting this perspective often described a passion, or at least a fondness for research. Students also took pride in becoming knowledgeable people in their communities, in knowing more than their peers and being able to develop more informed opinions because of their ability to read/research.

Conclusion/Implications

The Assessment Seminar data clearly shows that students can engage with reading and research, that they can enjoy it, that they appreciate the learning gains they derive from those activities, and that those activities can have lasting, transformation effects. But this is not happening for all students all the time. By understanding more about what rewards students may derive from reading/research, we might be able to better articulate those rewards to new students, and develop assignments where students gain lasting benefit from their reading/research activities.

If we wish to move students beyond reading for extraction, we need to develop assignments where students perceive the goal as more than the gathering of nuggets for someone in authority. While such papers *may* be a stepping stone to deeper learning, often they may trap students in a mechanistic simulation of the form of research, rather than engaging them in the integration of knowledge which can be transformative.

What would this kind of research assignment look like?

For more information on students and research, see the excellent series of reports by Project information Literacy at http://projectinfolit.org/