# Why Read?

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# Why Read?

ABSTRACT

Why read? What is the point of reading in higher education if students can succeed in their classes without reading? Using Wigfield and Eccles' Expectancy-Value theory of motivation as a framework, I explore why different instructors think their students should be reading and whether students share these motivations. Instructors and students attribute value to reading differently. Instructors value reading for what it allows students to do and become. Students may value reading but still not read depending on competing factors including time available and assessment tasks required. The essay concludes by asking higher educational professionals to consider what, if anything, should be done to encourage the reading of difficult texts in classes.

Keywords: reading; motivation; engagement; aliteracy

Why Read?

## Introduction

As a literary scholar, I value reading immensely. I believe text has the power to shape what we believe and, therefore, the power to shape the world in which we live. But as a citizen watching the news with dismay, I don't see much evidence of reading as a positive force. As a teacher of tertiary students, I spend too much time worrying about why my students do not read, and my efforts to compel reading sometimes backfire. In this essay, I reframe this anxiety about why students don't read to ask an uncomfortable question: Why read? What is the point of reading—the sustained reading of difficult texts—in higher education if students can succeed without reading? As instructors, are we promoting reading? Should we?

The question "Why read?" often prefaces a passionate defense of reading literature (see, for example, Lesser, 2014; Edmundson, 2004; Birkerts, 1994). It also taps into anxiety about changing attitudes towards text. In an age of information overload delivered in easily digestible bits to our preferred devices, some wonder whether we really need to worry about long form reading. Here, however, I focus on reading in a very specific context, a tertiary education. University students are supposed to read a lot of difficult material often without much background in a particular discipline yet, so it's harder for them to make sense of this material. They may not know how to read this material effectively, but here I focus on why they read. I explore why different instructors think their students should be reading and whether students share these motivations. I end by asking us to consider what, if anything, we should do to encourage the reading of difficult texts in our classes.

## Reading in crisis?

Individuals who read news, academic blogs, or popular non-fiction books are familiar with the "reading crisis" trope, but the trope conflates several issues. Books like *The shallows: How the internet is changing the way we think, read, and remember* (Carr, 2010), *iBrain:*

*Surviving the technological alteration of the modern mind* (Small & Vorgan, 2008), and *The dumbest generation: How the digital age stupefies young Americans, or don't trust anyone under thirty* (Bauerlein, 2008) demonstrate anxiety that, by changing how we read, technology is changing how we think. Worrying about the fate of literature sells books, including *The edge of the precipice: Why read literature in the digital age?* (Socken, 2013), *Why read?* (Edmundson, 2004), and *The Gutenberg elegies: The fate of reading in an electronic age* (Birkerts, 1994), and worrying about children sells even more: *Readicide: How schools are killing reading, and what you can do about it* (Gallagher, 2009); *The reading crisis: Why poor children fall behind* (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1991), *Why Johnny can't read and what you can do about it* (Flesch, 1955), and its sequel *Why Johnny still can't read: A new look at the scandal of our schools* (Flesch, 1981). The publication dates demonstrate that the discourse of crisis isn't new, but this rhetoric elides a crucial difference between illiteracy and aliteracy. If illiteracy means being unable to read or write, and functional illiteracy means being unable to read or write at the level needed for everyday tasks, aliteracy means being able but unwilling to read (Mikulecky, 1978).

Both illiteracy and functional illiteracy are significant barriers to economic success, community health, and political power (UNESCO, 2005). Research suggests that literacy provides tremendous cognitive, emotional, and societal benefits. For example, reading leads to cognitive improvement as measured through practical knowledge, IQ tests, and cortical thickness (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2016); researchers have even linked limited literacy and some types of dementia (Kaup, et al., 2013; Lee, et al., 2008). Affective benefits of reading seem to include increased self-efficacy, self-esteem, and empathy (Galbraith & Alexander, 2005; Kidd & Castano, 2013) while participation in adult basic education increases political participation and impacts health behavior, particularly among women (See, for example, Kagitcibasi, Goksen, & Gülgöz, 2005). Illiteracy costs the individual and the

global economy (World Literacy Foundation, 2015). Collectively, we have to do more to support and champion increasing literacy rates among disadvantaged groups.

But with aliteracy, we have advantaged groups who could read but who choose not to exercise this ability. The number of American seventeen year olds who report never or hardly ever reading for pleasure has increased dramatically over a generation, from 9% in the 1984 to 27% in 2012 while those reporting reading for pleasure at least once or twice a week dropped from 64% in 1984 to 40% in 2012 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012). The amount of reading for pleasure reported by American college students drops again between the first and fourth year of an undergraduate degree (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). One explanation might be that students are not reading for pleasure because they are reading for their coursework, but studies demonstrate that a shocking number of university students don't read required texts (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Aagaard, Conner, & Skidmore, 2014; McMinn, Tabor, Trihub, Taylor, & Dominguez, 2009). Why? Do they lack reading skills or choose not to read or both? Certainly, students may struggle with academic prose, but Good (2017) connects aliteracy among highly educated people with entitlement; they choose not to read because they feel they don't need to in order to succeed. Chong (2016) also frames aliteracy among undergraduates in terms of choice, but a choice that is more complex as different demands on time and different types of reading compete. When professionals in higher education complain that students don't read, we may ignore, or at least oversimplify, students' motivations.

**Reading motivation**

Hoffman (2017) describes reading as "a complex act that rests on the motivation (desire) to learn and the application of strategic behaviors to achieve purposes" (p. 66). Leaving aside the strategic behaviors, the "how" of reading, I want to consider the motivation for reading, the "why." Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, and Wigfield (2012), reviewing recent literature on

reading motivation, emphasize the role of intrinsic reading motivation over extrinsic reading motivation, but university students may not be intrinsically motivated to read required texts. As adults, we usually choose when, what and how we read, but the situation in tertiary education is very different, and the issue of motivation more complex. On their own, students will read what they find pleasurable or useful (Joliffe and Harl, 2008). Required readings in university may not be pleasurable. As faculty, we assume that readings are useful, that they contain knowledge or perspectives that students need. However, students may not share that assumption about utility. Wigfield and Eccles' Expectancy-Value theory of motivation can provide a framework for examining why university students do or do not read. Wigfield and Eccles (2000) argue that children and adolescents are most likely to persist in an activity if they believe that they can succeed (expectancy) and if they value the activity, either for its own sake or because of what it could make possible (value). Their insights can be extended to university students and the reading they are required to do**.**

***Expectancy***

Schwanenflugel and Knapp (2016) identify the following components of expectancy in terms of reading: self-efficacy, view of ability, locus of control, support, and time. Self-efficacy involves feeling competent in the reading task while view of ability means whether we believe that we can improve over time. While many tertiary students struggle with academic prose, competency can be achieved with support and effort; initiatives range from reading workshops to course redesign. A more resistant component may be view of ability. We all know people who say "I'm just not good at math" or "I'm not good at sports." The individual who self-identifies as a non-reader is less likely to persevere in the face of difficult text. Some control over the reading task, support when needed, and enough time are also contributing factors to an individual's expectancy of success. Some of these characteristics are easier to manipulate than others--for example, an instructor may provide students with a

choice of texts or a reading guide--but even elements like self-efficacy and view of ability are not static (Nilson, 2013). Schunk and Bursuck (2016), reviewing research on developing readers' self-efficacy, agency, and view of ability, note the fine line between providing enough and too much support as "success gained with much help does not build strong self-efficacy, agency, or volition beliefs, because students are likely to attribute their success to the help they have received" (p. 63-64). The goal has to be the development of competent, independent readers.

***Value***

Schwanenflugel and Knapp (2016) identify intrinsic interest, utility value, self-concept, relational value, and cost/risk as motivational factors connected to value. We are more likely to read a text perceived as interesting or as useful. While hopefully university students are interested in the subjects they are studying, instructors cannot rely on all students finding all readings interesting. Springer, Dole, and Hacker (2017), reviewing the role of interest in reading comprehension, distinguish between individual and situational interest. Individual interest is connected to internal curiosity or preference and lasts over time (Renninger, 2000). Situational interest, on the other hand, tends to be temporary and linked to external factors (Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001). So a particularly interesting text or example might spark situational interest in a topic, but such interest is unlikely to last beyond that specific situation; individual interest, on the other hand, is likely to withstand even dull texts about the subject.

While researchers sometimes associate intrinsic motivation with individual interest--we are intrinsically motivated to pursue that which we are interested in--extrinsic motivation does not require any interest at all; it requires an external incentive (or disincentive). Reading compliance activities, by definition, involve extrinsic motivation as instructors try to reward or punish students. Bénabou and Tirole (2003) argue that the effectiveness of external

incentives depends on the attributions made by the individual; external incentives can be demotivating, but are not necessarily so. Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasize the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, but note that, while intrinsic motivation is not always possible, "Students can perform extrinsically motivated actions with resentment, resistance, and disinterest or, alternatively, with an attitude of willingness that reflects an inner acceptance of the value or utility of a task" (p. 55). The utility value of reading, however, may not be immediately apparent, and Sharma, Van Hoof and Pursel (2013) note that students often emphasize short-term benefits over long-term benefits.

Valuing reading involves more than utility or interest. We are motivated to read when the reading reinforces our concept of self; conversely, we are less likely to persevere if the reading challenges our sense of self, either in terms of ability or in terms of identity (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2016). We are more motivated to read if it enhances our relationships, and less likely to read if the cost in terms of time, effort, or potential failure seems higher than the potential benefit (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Klauda & Wigfield, 2012; Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2016). Again, some of the characteristics are easier to manipulate than others, but the issue of perceived value is central to reading motivation.

**Why read**

Instructors and students attribute value to reading in a tertiary education differently. To support this claim, I draw on material from two populations: instructors from different disciplines and institutions, and students from different disciplines at my institution. I refer to multiple studies which received ethics approval through the XXX institutional review board, but my analysis of data here is not comprehensive. I focus on the question "Why read?"

***Instructors' perspectives***

As part of a larger study about reading compliance and reading models, I surveyed higher educational professionals from a variety of institutions about their attitudes towards reading.

Thirty-two instructors participated in an online survey; fourteen agreed to be interviewed. The semi-structured interviews focused primarily on the types of reading they expected their students to complete, but I also asked interview participants why they valued reading and why they wanted their students to read.

Some participants had difficulty articulating why they valued reading because they saw reading as an intrinsic good, a position I have considerable sympathy with. As one participant, an archaeologist, said,

> Well, that is kind of like asking somebody, "Why do you value breathing, or eating, or drinking anything?" It is … you have to do this! If you can't read you can't really function in society at all. You cannot. (Participant 27)

Another said

> Well, I am a reader! [laughs] I have been a reader since I was wee little. I don't … I value text, you know, I value written and spoken and other forms of text and I don't … part of it is my profession, part of it is being a librarian, but part of it is I don't really see …" (Participant 7)

She went on to argue that "there is so much beautiful, beautiful writing out there that can take us somewhere else. You know, being able to read is a skill but it is also a gift" (Participant 7). Notice the hesitations and pauses before each of these participants comes up with a rationale for reading. Self-identifying as readers, they valued reading intrinsically.

However, for most of the instructors interviewed, reading in the classroom is not valued for itself, but for what it can lead to. Instructors from a wide variety of disciplines value reading for the information it conveyed and for what it helped the student to do and to become. Many instructors valued reading because it transmits information: as one physicist explained, knowledge "has been encoded in texts for the benefit of future people who want to access it" (Participant 12). Reading outside class saves time in class and provides the

opportunity to move beyond content delivery lecture to application. Participant 5, a family scientist, articulates a common theme:

> I couldn't get through enough of it if all I did all day was just talk and they took notes; there is no way they would get the tiniest fraction of what they need to get out of the class.

Reading allows this participant to focus on application in the classroom. For many participants, reading has an instrumental value because it allows learning to occur. Participants also talked about reading helping students write. A computer scientist described how he valued writing intrinsically because it helped students think through problems and ideas*: "*then I value reading because I think it supports writing" (Participant 28). An English instructor also talked about the connections between reading, writing, and thinking: "I value reading as a prompt to thinking. It is a way to get ideas that you can then do things with, and then I value reading as providing examples of what writing looks like" (Participant 24). Reading involves students doing things and thinking things that they might otherwise have been unable to do. Another English instructor claimed that reading helps students co-create meaning and develop empathy (Participant 21). As Participant 11, a business instructor, explained, reading is one way to learn and "learning is not just … about acquisition of knowledge, but it is also not really about being able to manipulate knowledge and those other things, it is also a process fundamentally of human development." Reading, for many of the instructors, opened the possibility of transformation. These instructors sometimes worried about the students' ability to read (expectancy). Occasionally, they framed reading as one of several modes of instruction, but they had little doubt that reading was valuable, whether in terms of intrinsic interest, utility value, self-concept, or relational value. They believed that the benefit of reading was, or at least should be, higher than the cost.

***Students' perspectives***

But do students value reading? The flippant, and I think inaccurate answer, is that they don't. Bauerlein (2008), for example, talks about teens "drowning in their ignorance and a-literacy" (p. 65). But just because they're not reading what we want them to read or the way we want them to read it, doesn't mean that they don't value reading. Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, Malmström, and Mežek (2012) note a disjunction between the value attributed to reading and the behaviors reported by undergraduate students: students see reading textbooks as valuable, but do not necessarily read. Some were even unaware of whether their instructors had in fact assigned reading. Aagaard, Conner, and Skidmore (2014) found that the majority of first-year university students surveyed did not believe that they should be required to read before class while 46% fourth-year students reported that whether they should be required to read depended on other factors. Some of this reluctance may be the result of discomfort with reading ability, but a surprising number of students claim to have confidence in their reading ability and to value reading (Manarin, 2012).

What if students value reading as a concept, but don't believe it's necessary? Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, Malmström, and Mežek (2012) speculate that, rather than being perceived as complementary, reading and attendance are seen as alternative routes to success in class. One Chemistry instructor I interviewed reported that the majority of his students returned the textbook to the bookstore still shrink wrapped:

> the feedback I got from my students was that they would say, "Oh, but you are such a great instructor we don't need the textbook. We just come to class, we hear what you say and your lecture notes are more than enough." (Participant 26)

The issue is the assessment: the students have "more than enough" to succeed in the assessment, not more than enough knowledge about the chemical construction of our world. Success in common assessment practices may not require much reading. When examining research papers in four very different discussion-based first-year courses, my colleagues and I

saw little evidence of reading in papers that otherwise looked fine, and had received good grades (Manarin, Carey, Rathburn, and Ryland, 2015). We saw many students using sources without necessarily having read or understood them beyond the specific sentence or detail cited, a pattern that the Citation Project has documented time and time again (see, for example, Jamieson, 2013). Arum and Roksa (2011) note that students often avoid courses with heavy reading requirements; even when they have enrolled in those courses, they may not have to read to succeed depending upon the assessment tasks.

What if students read in a way that is counter-productive for success in our classes? For example, a student might not achieve enough distance between self and text to be able to analyze rhetorical strategies because he or she is so angry about the subject matter, or perhaps a student takes a detail out of context and reads it into the context of his or her own life (Manarin, 2012). What if reading all the assigned texts in a class actually leads to lower grades, or student perception of lower grades, which has the same effect in terms of motivation theory? The student who reads everything risks confusing what the instructor really cares about, and presumably went over in lecture and will test on the exam, with all that other supplementary information about the topic. If the student is just learning an area, how can he or she reliably distinguish between what is important and what isn't? Students who ask what is important for the test may receive an exasperated "it's all important," but it's not all equally important at this particular moment.

What if students learn that they don't have to read all of it? Inspired by the Harvard Assessment Seminars (Light, 2001), my institution interviewed over 300 undergraduate students from 2010 to 2014 about different aspects of their university experience. Margy MacMillan and I examined the transcripts for references to reading, writing and research. In 2011, fifty-four third-year students were asked whether they had any advice for first-year students entering university. Some advised planning carefully to keep up with assignments,

getting to know the professors, or getting involved with different activities on campus--all wonderful suggestions supported by student success literature (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). But another common suggestion was "Don't do all the reading." Students enter expecting that they would have to read a lot; after all, they're in university now. They try but become overwhelmed or realize that they can get the same grades with less effort:

> my first semester, honestly, I'd say I read all of my textbooks and I busted my ass and I did it well, but people around me are like "I didn't read the textbook, I didn't study". I did a little better than them, but not enough for it to be worth my time. (Student 51)

This issue of the time it takes to read comes up again and again in the responses:

> When I first came here, I thought that reading...assigned readings were really important and then I realized that half the time, if teachers don't use them in their class, they're not that important. … So, for me, depending on the class I'll usually figure out what's really important and what's not, and I don't read the readings that aren't important because honestly, I don't have time. (Student 48)

Time is an element of expectancy, but the issue is value--the readings aren't important enough in terms of assessment to justify the time. And so students begin to skim or scan:

> So now, I just read, I just read the first sentence and the last sentence. I just read the part where it says what you're going to be learning in this chapter, you know? ...: I just read that and then I just...and then after the lecture, if I need to go back, then I go back but I really never do. [Both interviewer and interviewee laugh]. ...Probably I don't have the time anymore because more assignments when you get into the higher classes, so I just don't have time to keep up with actually reading all of it. (Student 46)

Assignments are prioritized over the knowledge that assignments are supposed to demonstrate. Listening for tell tale changes in tone or emphasis when professors lecture, students become experts at reading us rather than the texts we assign:

> My first semester I would read everything and then I started to realize that we would read a chapter but only half the chapter would be on the test so I started to realize what kinds of things I could cut out. Depending on the teacher you would know whether or not the readings would be important. (Student 32)

I know some of these students were probably struggling with their academic reading; they may not have wanted to admit weakness in the interviews. However, these students didn't talk about not being able to complete or understand their readings; they talked about not needing to in order to succeed.

**Discussion**

Wigfield and Eccles' theory of motivation suggests that people will persist in an activity if they believe they can succeed and if they value the activity. While much attention has been focused on improving student reading skills (see, for example, Graham and Hebert, 2010; Horning, Gollnitz, & Haller, 2017), we need to focus more on value. In saying this, I am not discounting expectancy as a critical element for persistence and success, but without value, the task may not even be attempted. Faculty and students demonstrate very different attitudes towards reading. Some faculty valued reading intrinsically, just as some students value reading in the abstract. However, in the classroom context, faculty and student attitudes towards reading diverge. While faculty see reading as a way to access knowledge and provoke thought, students see it as useful only in so far as it helps them with the specific assessments in the course. Reading for knowledge beyond that assessment is not worth their time because their classroom experiences demonstrate that reading is often unnecessary for success, at least in the short term.

The students' answers reveal much about the ideals and realities of the twenty-first-century university, where reading can be a time-consuming and risky choice for a very busy, and often risk-averse, student body. As Lolich and Lynch (2016) note, higher education is often marketed as a way of avoiding risk; such risk is not only economic but also relational: "Risk is not only framed in terms of securing an economic future but also securing a relational future, the risk to care and love relationships that particular careers or jobs entail" (p. 27). We are asking a lot of students when we ask them to risk reading in our classes if we cannot demonstrate that reading is necessary. As Roberts and Roberts (2008) note, "reading the material may be an *unwise* use of valuable time if there are no adverse consequences" (p. 129, emphasis in the original), but simply implementing reading compliance activities is unlikely to produce independent, competent readers since compliance activities, by definition, involve someone checking that the rules have been followed, that the reading has been done. We can increase the cost of not reading through compliance, but a review of recent literature on reading motivation found that "reading competence is … negatively or nonsignificantly related to extrinsic reading motivation" (Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, and Wigfield, 2012, p. 458). If we take the question "Why read?" seriously, the answer has to be more than "Because I said so."

**Reframing Reading**

Taking the question seriously means articulating the value of reading in specific contexts, and realizing that there are different types of reading appropriate for different purposes. We need to describe the types of reading we expect; after all, the students may not even recognize that other reading strategies are possible, let alone desirable. Kyndt, Dochy, Struyven, and Cascallar (2011) found that the more students felt that they lacked information to complete the task, the more they resorted to surface approaches to learning whether they were engaged in simpler or more complex tasks and whether they were subject to heavier or lighter

workloads. We need to make explicit our assumptions about how students should read in this particular context. We probably need to coach them throughout their degrees to build what Douglas, Barnett, Poletti, Seaboyer, and Kennedy (2016) call reading resilience, the skills, strategies, and habits of mind required to succeed as readers of difficult texts within and beyond the academy.

In our higher education contexts, when we're often dealing with aliteracy rather than illiteracy, we also need to pay attention to the multiple factors of motivation. Wigfield and Eccles' Expectancy-Value theory can provide a framework. Consider, for example, a confident but busy reader faced with a lot of compulsory reading in a required class, perhaps reading that is difficult conceptually or that may challenge the reader's preconceptions about the world. What is there besides a compliance activity to encourage the reader to read?

I use components of Wigfield and Eccles' Expectancy-Value theory to increase the chances that my students will read. Components of expectancy include self-efficacy, view of ability, locus of control, support, and time (Schwanenflugel and Knapp, 2016). So I provide structured choices in what students have to read; I describe different reading strategies for different purposes; I reduce the number of pages assigned in the hopes that some of the pages will get read. I talk about the difference between self-efficacy and view of ability. I try to encourage persistence, but I won't get very far without value. Components of value include intrinsic interest, utility value, self-concept, relational value, and cost/risk (Schwanenflugel and Knapp, 2016). In the required courses that I teach, many students do not have an individual interest in the material, but I try to trigger a situational interest. I have students do something with the material, preferably with each other. I try to design assessment tasks where reading cannot be circumvented through google searching for specific phrases or sound bites. I redesign my courses to make it difficult to succeed without reading.

I make these changes because I value reading, not just in a specific course context but as a way of interacting with the world. I believe reading in a specific course can make a difference in how students read beyond that course. Researchers in reading have long posited a so-called Matthew effect where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer; in terms of reading, good readers read more and become even better readers while struggling readers are less likely to read and so struggle further with reading (Stanovich 1986). It's sometimes talked about as the virtuous circle of reading or the vicious circle of non-reading (Pfost, Hattie, Dörfler, & Artelt, 2014). However, although theorists predict a widening achievement gap in reading from primary grades on, compensatory strategies complicate the picture (Pfost, Hattie, Dörfler, & Artelt, 2014; Protopapas, Parrila, & Simos, 2016). We know that there are reciprocal relations between skills and learning experiences, but it is not too late to build new skills through learning experiences. Grant, Wilson and Gottardo (2007), examining the reading skills of university students with and without reading disabilities, note that "Although usually the 'rich get richer', increased practice in reading might lead to better reading and reading-related skills in initially poor readers, helping 'poor' readers become 'richer'" (p. 190). If this is possible, if people who read more are likely to become better readers, and therefore read more, we have to do what we can to encourage that future for our students and for ourselves. We need competent, independent, and literate citizens.

An earlier version of this paper was presented as the S. W. Brooks public lecture at the University of Queensland. I would also like to thank the MRU Institute for SoTL and the Marshall Family Foundation for supporting this research. Finally I would like to thank Margy MacMillan, Jude Seaboyer, Tully Barnett, and the anonymous reviewers.

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