

College Student Use of Textbooks

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It would seem that one of the lamentations of post-secondary education faculty is the issue of textbooks for their courses. Faculty members of the academy stereotypically hold certain expectations with regard to the study patterns and activities of college students, which include at least two hours of study time for each credit hour (Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004), among other tenets. Students, however, have developed a different perspective with regard to the purpose, necessity, and use of textbooks that is decidedly oppositional to the expectations of their instructors.

Seemingly in spite of the assertions of Wandersee (1988) that reading text materials leads to better grades, it has been shown that there has been a decline in the rate of reading of texts by students (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000). Additionally, a significant proportion of college students do not read course texts either in preparation for class sessions or examinations (Aagaard & Skidmore, 2004; Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004; Sikorski et al. 2002). Sikorski et al. (2002) have reported that students spend less than three hours per week reading their text books.

Why do students not read their texts? Derryberry and Wininger (2008) linked motivation (extrinsic vs. intrinsic) to students' use of textbooks. Motivation was not necessarily related to who was more likely to read the text, but intrinsically motivated students tended to read it more in-depth, even taking notes during reading. Along those same lines, Linderholm (2006) suggests that most students read textbooks for memorization to achieve a grade on course examinations, and do not develop sufficient reasoning and metacognitive skills necessary for transference and application of knowledge to new situations.

Huon, Spehar, Adam, and Rifkin (2007) raised the issue of online materials being used as much as textbooks. Their survey of over 500 psychology students revealed 35% reported using the teacher-provided online lecture notes each week, while only 30% read the textbook weekly. (There was no indication whether those percentages overlapped, with some students using both resources.) The available resources that were used the least were the text CD-ROM and the actual text webpage, both of which contained supplementary materials and interactive exercises to help students understand the content more deeply (Huon et al.). Despite the attractiveness of the technology, students persisted with the material that they believed would be more directly linked to content on the test.

The technological issue of e-textbooks has been touted by some as the solution for the net-generation, in the belief that if they are provided something electronic they will spend more time with the content. Shepperd, Grace, and Koch (2008) examined the use of electronic versus paper textbooks. Course grades between students who chose the two formats did not differ, however, students using the electronic text spent less time reading for class preparation.

The rising cost of textbooks has been cited as a possible influence on students' study habits. Textbook prices have outpaced inflation by a factor of four since 1994 (New Report, 2005), with constant new editions and bundling of supplementary materials that many professors do not use (Fairchild, 2005). Perhaps students simply cannot afford textbooks any longer.

Method

Subjects and Sampling

A volunteer sample of 19 undergraduate students at a regional university in the midsouth participated in semi-structured focus group interviews regarding their use of college textbooks. Student participants were mostly of traditional college age and Caucasian. There were six males

and 13 females, mostly lower classmen although there were some juniors and seniors, as well. Students were solicited from one section of a general biology course and three sections of a sophomore level human development course to participate in the interviews for half an hour immediately following their current class period.

Procedure

Questions were asked concerning their textbook buying and reading habits, textbook cost, course requirements related to the text, student use of textbook features, the pros and cons of e-textbooks, and whether they had ever received instruction regarding how to read a textbook. The interview guide is available in Appendix A. Researchers took notes on a laptop each session and also audio-taped one of the interviews. Student responses were analyzed descriptively.

Results

Buying Textbooks

Surprisingly, a majority of the students buy all the textbooks for their courses, even though they know many will not be used at all. The others wait for a week and see which texts will be used, then they just purchase those. Students using that criterion said they buy perhaps half the texts. A few students, mostly those whose roommates are in the same classes, share textbooks. Monetary considerations motivate students to share or hold off buying textbooks. Reasons given for purchasing textbooks were that the bookstore listed them as required, the teacher had asked students to purchase them, or “just in case I need them, but I don’t really HAVE to have them.”

Cost of Textbooks

All participants agreed that textbooks are too high-priced. Some students noted that they have to buy new textbooks for some classes because of the supplementary material that comes

bundled with the texts that the teacher requires. They said that they try to get used texts, but even a thin used paperback textbook for one class was \$60. Very few use online sources like Amazon because of concerns about their purchases arriving several weeks into the semester. There were complaints about not getting much money back for their textbooks on resale. One student had kept track the previous semester and said he only received 19% of the total purchase price back at the end of the semester.

Comments regarding the cost of textbooks included:

“You can’t sell them back for anything close to the price.”

“If you’re investing for the rest of your life, then the price is worthwhile. But if the professor won’t use it, then it’s not worth it.”

S1: “I really hate this about college. I’m investing in things that I don’t know whether or not I’m going to need them. By the time you know, it’s too late to turn it back for a full refund.”

S2: “I have bought some used textbooks online, but they don’t always come at the beginning of the course. After you go through all the frustration and then find you don’t really need it...”

S1: “I had that problem when no stores in town had the text. It took three weeks to get it online. It’s kind of a gamble getting used stuff online. It’s definitely a cheaper way to buy them, though. Selling them back doesn’t get you near the money you put into them. And they might have changed editions already and not buy them back at all. It’s a lose/lose situation.”

Reading the Textbook

A few students claimed they never read their textbooks, even though they bought them every semester. The rest used them to some extent in some classes. It depended a lot on the class and what use the teacher made of the text. Students who opened the text at all mostly didn't read the actual text, but looked at key words, the summary at the end, and the charts and graphs. The text was used mostly as a supplement to the lecture.

Comments regarding reading the text included:

"I use the questions at end of the sections to focus on what I need to study. He tends to hit the information in the review questions."

"Reading the text is not that important, but having the textbook to refer to is essential for [some] course[s]. " He noted that he used it as a back-up to the lectures and Blackboard materials. "I look through the book to see if there are other detailed explanations or a picture or something to help me."

"I don't crack my book open that often. I get more from the teacher than reading about it. I need to see the teacher put notes up – I don't retain information well when I read it. I've tried to read the textbook for this class – I took notes and highlighted in the first chapter, but after the first two weeks I get busy and don't read it any longer."

"Some people learn from textbooks, but with me, I would rather hear it in class."

"Getting a book could help get a higher grade. But generally they say if we didn't discuss it then it won't be on the test. The lengthy portions of reading make you zone out and you don't comprehend it. ...Reading is the last priority – you might do it if you have time left over. "

“I have two courses that I bought the book, but there are no actual reading assignments. We were told the information is in there if we want to look at it. I never opened them.”

“I’ve noticed a lot of people read a lot more than I do. I’m not too much of a bookworm; it’s hard for me to stay focused.” [Researcher: “Other people really take time with their textbook?”] “Some take notes from it, but others just read it. My roommate would highlight or take notes.”

Reason for Not Reading the Textbook

Students don’t feel that they HAVE to read the books anymore. There are so many resources made available to them online by professors that the textbook fades in comparison. Time was a factor for some students, as well. One girl noted: “I’m working 40 hours per week, plus fulltime school. School suffers.”

Many of the students mentioned the ubiquitous nature of PowerPoint in current higher education, mostly in a positive sense because it largely eliminated the need for a textbook.

“When I first came [to college], there weren’t a lot of classes that used Blackboard. Now, every class I take has had a Blackboard site and instructors used PowerPoint. You really don’t have to go back to the text. Everything they want you to know is on the PowerPoint on Blackboard.”

“PowerPoint has taken the place of textbooks. Just go to class and you don’t have to have the textbook.”

“Even for nursing class, the PowerPoint is more precious—it’s on Blackboard and you always can access it.”

“If teacher does an in-depth PowerPoint presentation or lecture, then I don’t read [the text]. There are usually more test questions over what goes on in class than over the book.”

“Powerpoint has taken over and become education.”

“In government class there were no PowerPoints at all. I find it interesting, though, and I read every chapter [in the textbook].”

“I really like PowerPoints—I can print them out with a place on the side to add additional notes. I put arrows in and add more information and my own comments or questions.” (In other words, she’s treating it just like a textbook.) Another student added: “An outline of the lecture or the instructor’s notes would do the same thing.”

“I think PowerPoint is boring. I would rather have a lecture where the professor just talks and requires class feedback.”

How Professors Could Encourage Reading the Textbook

Test over the textbook readings. Students noted that having a test over information in the book that was not discussed in class or having a reading quiz would get them to crack their texts. Only about half of the students interviewed said they ever had professors who quizzed over the textbook readings. They do not, however, want to go to the publisher’s website (My Education Lab, etc.) to take quizzes. They objected to having to pay extra for that privilege and some found the online registration process to be frustrating. Typical comments included:

“I read the text only if tests are from the book. “

“Most professors don’t have reading quizzes – they just discuss it the next day and I pick up on in it and can get involved.”

“The only time I always read [the text] (although I enjoyed the book, too, that was part of it) – we had a 5-point reading quiz in class at the first of the period, then educated conversation over what we had read. If you know you’re going to have a quiz, then you’ll read it.”

“I had a class [where] we took quizzes every week. We had unlimited chances to take the quizzes. It did force you to get into the textbook, but you got to the place where you just skimmed. But we did at least use the book. “

Shorten the reading assignments. Many students find the assigned readings too long. They feel they can't absorb that much in one sitting or they don't have time to read all of it.

There was also a perception that the way the reading assignment was phrased in the syllabus indicated how important the professor believed it to be. Several students noted that when actual page numbers were included in the assignment (“read Chapter 1, pp. 32-64”) that it indicated the reading was more important than when just a chapter designation was given (“read Chapter 1”).

Student comments on assignment length included:

“Just sitting down and reading a 50-page chapter – there's no way I could do that.”

“Chapters are 40 pages – that's too long!”

“[I would like to] read just one chapter at a time. Most professors shove in four chapters a week or so. I don't have time to read all that for every class. If it were smaller sections, I might read more.”

“If the professor assigned just a specific portion, with page number designations, I would be more likely to read it. If it was less than 20 pages, even more likely.”

Provide advance organizers for the reading. There seemed to be support from students for advance organizers in the form of study guides for reading assignments. This topic came up spontaneously in several of the interviews. These students indicated that not only did they want reading questions to answer, but they also wanted credit for doing them, and for the teacher to

discuss the same material in class after their reading. One student noted that such a study guide for his reading would allow him to “begin with an end in mind.”

“If they listed what we were looking for in the reading – maybe ask questions or note topics to discuss. If they would tell us what to look for and then we’ll discuss these questions when we get to class.”

“Give page numbers and a study guide of what really to focus in on.”

Use the text in class. Finally, interview participants said that if professors used the textbooks in class, then students would be more likely to crack the text on their own, too.

“If the teacher takes an interest in the book, then you will read it.”

“We go over problems in the physics book in class. We use it in class.”

Use of e-Textbooks

Most students had no experience with e-textbooks. Although the human development text was available in that format, few of those students were aware of it or said they would consider it. One student had purchased e-texts in the past but didn’t read them either. Some students expressed concerns about the reliability of technology plus the feeling that they would prefer something in their hands on which they could write notes and highlight information.

A nursing student was alive to the possibilities, however, having had experience with computerized texts. Although they weren’t exactly e-textbooks, neither were they hard copies, but she was very enthusiastic about them: “All the nursing texts are downloaded to computer and I can access them without the internet. There is an integrated search engine for all the texts, so I can type in a topic and it will search all the books. I love it – I can access things so easily. It comes with the entire package of books we have to buy.”

More typical student comments about e-textbooks included:

“I need a hard copy. I don’t like reading from the screen.”

“I’m old school – I like having a physical book. I zonk out reading on the computer.”

“I haven’t had one, but would prefer it if it was cheaper. But I like to underline and highlight, etc. And what if the technology shut down and I couldn’t use it?”

“I don’t like computers and they don’t like me. Mine’s dead and I can’t do anything on it now. I like paper because it doesn’t go down. Even if the e-text was cheaper, I would still use the paper one. I like to take notes on the side, so if you could take notes on the Kindle or whatever, I would probably do that. [The professor] doesn’t want us to have laptops and stuff out in the class, though.”

“I like a physical book, too, but I’m used to the Internet and if I had to have an e-book, I don’t think it would cause me that much discomfort. I would consider it. It’s probably a lot easier to use and probably cheaper. It would be quicker to go through. Everyone pretty much has a laptop and just by taking that to class you would have all the textbooks.”

Learning to Read a Textbook

Interview participants were asked whether they had ever received any instruction regarding how to read a textbook in comparison to reading literature. Very few students remembered being explicitly taught how to read a textbook, either in high school or college. When they did receive suggestions from teachers, however, they did their best to follow them.

Comments about instruction in textbook reading included:

“I learned by trial and error. I never had any study skills classes. In high school you do just what they tell you at first, but then you figure out they didn’t test you over all of it. Eventually you know to only look at the bold words and the reviews.”

“My high school never really taught us how to study. If we did well on [the state assessment] we got out of semester exams. I didn’t learn anything in school because we just watched movies the rest of the year after testing. It took me awhile to get used to the exams [in college] – I had never been under that much pressure before.”

“[Middle and high school] really don’t teach any of that. I don’t think they taught us any particular techniques. My children in high school don’t bring anything home to read. Some of the textbooks have to stay in the classroom and they’re not allowed to bring them home. They rely on their notes to go over. Maybe it’s related to cost of textbooks rather than paying a deposit on them and returning them all before finals, etc.”

“I took a little study skills last year although I ended up dropping it. What they want us to do is write down the section headings, make up some questions for each one and then go answer them. So I’m trying to get into that habit, but I’m not good at making up questions, so it tends to be something I can answer just from the heading. I definitely hit things bolded or highlighted or in different print. I take breaks so I can stay focused and not be bored. Try to read summaries.”

“A lot of the better professors in the general education classes take time to go through the way to read the book. Go through highlights, read summary, then go back to the actual text. They always had a method for a way to attempt to read the chapter – they would break down how to read it.”

“The only explanation I ever got was to read the chapter before class, take notes, reread the chapter, and focus in on key words and things at the end.”

“Teachers in elementary and middle school explained the glossary, dictionary, and index. That was very helpful because I can use the book as a reference. You don’t have to spend hours reading when you can go right there.”

S1: "In my high school history classes, they would take up your notes and grade those because they wanted you to have good note-taking ability."

S2: "I wish I would have had a note-taking class, because when I got to college I didn't know how to do it. There wasn't a lot of participation in high school – they just told us what to do. I really struggled with note-taking and mom and dad were trying to tell me how to do it. Sometimes it's hard for me to read my own notes."

Researcher: "How do you do it?"

S2: "I've learned to listen more than write. Writing everything down was what I tried first. Now I try to focus on what he's saying and zone in on the ideas and take the main idea of the concept down. Then I'll go back through the notes and look at that and it will be a memory cue for other things he said about it. You can go back to the text and have it explained to you in more detail."

S1: "That's how I'm using PowerPoint now—I highlight those miniature slides and add some notes there. The professor kind of does his own note-taking that way."

Researcher: "So you go back and highlight or add to those notes?"

S2: "I try to do it as soon as class is over."

S1: "Yes, within a couple of hours."

Researcher: "Getting into the notes as soon as you leave class, where did you get the idea?"

S2: "I had professors who had suggested it. I tried it and you do remember things better then. I had to learn it the hard way – I used to get out of class and just go hang out. It was really hard to recall that information later. Go study right after class and it's remarkable how much you remember."

S1: “I have to do it while it’s fresh in my mind – reread and relate to other things.”

Discussion

Conclusions and Implications

Today’s college students have a strange and complicated relationship with their course textbooks. If they can afford them, they buy the texts but then they rarely read them. When students do crack the texts, they use some of the features of the modern textbook to enable them to skim through looking for vocabulary words or helpful diagrams. They have an aversion to reading long passages, yet it never seems to occur to them that they could break up the reading into multiple short amounts on their own, accomplishing a bit each day until they finish the assigned chapter. Although they are of the net generation, they seem tied to the physical textbook and hard copy PowerPoint notes – e-textbooks don’t seem to be a solution to their textbook issues.

A key point emerging from this descriptive study was the influence still exercised by the professor. Students buy textbooks because the professor requires them. If the professor provided an advance organizer for their reading and tested over the textbook, then students would be more likely to read it. When professors suggest reading or study strategies, students try them out. If the professor shows interest in the text, then students will also. This suggests a great deal of dependency on the students’ part. We might wish that all students came to the classroom as independent learners with an innate curiosity and thirst for knowledge, but they seem to lean on the professors a great deal more than that.

In light of that, perhaps professors need to lead the way in the matter of textbooks. Teachers in higher education need to be acquainted with the cost of their course textbooks and

supplemental materials, requiring only the ones that are absolutely essential and keeping in mind that not every student has loan money to pay the costs. If textbooks are required, then professors should take steps to encourage students to actually benefit from them. Suggestions based on this research would include making shorter daily reading assignments rather than longer weekly ones, providing advance organizers for the reading assignments, quizzing over the textbook information, and using the text in class. It can't be assumed that college students are already acquainted with the proper way to read a text or the learning features it contains. This research implies that if those things were pointed out to them by the professor, it would enhance the learning experience for at least some of the class members.

A consistent educational outreach to the local high schools might help produce future college students for whom these measures will not be necessary. The alternative, of course, is to put everything students need to know on PowerPoint and forget about textbooks altogether.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited by the small sample size and demographic homogeneity of the participants. It was intended to be the prelude to a survey study of a much larger sample, with the responses from these participants to be considered when crafting the survey questions.

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Appendix A

Interview questions for textbook focus groups

- Do you purchase textbooks for your classes?
 - Why or why not?

 - If not, do textbook prices play a part in not buying them?

 - Do you feel like the price of textbooks is too high? If the text was cheaper, would you buy it?

- If you buy them, do you read your textbooks?
 - Why or why not?

 - Can you get along in any of your classes without using the book?

 - What do your professors do to encourage your use of the textbook?

 - What else could the professor do that would get you to use the textbook?

- Have you ever used an e-textbook?
 - If so, how did you like it? What were the pros and cons?

 - If not, what do you think of the idea? Would the format make any difference to your use of the text?

- HOW do you use the textbook?
 - Do you use the features built in, like chapter summaries, vocabulary boxes, etc.? Do you read picture captions, headings, etc.? Skim or read in-depth?

 - Were you ever shown how to read a textbook by anyone? What techniques? Did you try them?