
**Categories:** student-centered learning, reading skills, syllabus/curriculum development

**Summary**

Hobson’s article, which is largely focused on offering basic advice to help increase student compliance with reading assignments, begins by discussing some of the underlying assumptions that drive the problem that plagues so many classes. There are, according to Hobson, two main assumptions made by professors: students are not prepared to read at a level sufficient to foster success at the collegiate level; and, students simply won’t read regardless of their respective skill levels. Despite the near unanimity with which the professoriate holds these assumptions and the limitations that they potentially create for student learning, most professors, notes the author, do little to ameliorate the situation. Rather than bemoan the situation and then ignore it, professors must, argues Hobson, accept responsibility for helping students to read more effectively and to take active measures to increase student compliance when it comes to reading assignments.

According to Hobson, professors must begin their efforts to address the problems pertaining to student reading by assessing the assumptions noted above and assessing the realities of the classes they operate within. Along these lines, the author stresses the need to evaluate the assigned readings in terms of their relation to the course’s stated learning outcomes. In many instances, texts are assigned simply because that is the traditional paradigm and despite the fact that the reading material contained therein does little to help students achieve success in the course learning outcomes. Thus, professors should, before they assign any readings, assess their value in terms of supporting student success. Hobson also suggests that professor need to assess their audiences (students), whom they too often consciously or not, view as being as capable in terms of reading skills as the professors themselves are. This assumption obviously ignores the realities of background experience and levels of study within the academic fields that professors teach. Further, in assessing their students, professors need to recognize that in most cases, their students represent a broad range of reading skills levels.

Having attended to the assumptions made by professors that exacerbate the problem of student non-compliance in reading assignments, the author turns his attention to offering tips to mitigate this problem, and does so within the framework of a series of themes. The first of these is entitled, “improvement and implementation skills,” and contains three specific suggests. Hobson suggests that professors need to carefully consider whether their course require textbooks, as such sources are often duplicated in in-class lecture, and are often less effective in promoting student success than custom reading packages. Next, the author argues that required reading lists should be shorter, in order to make student workloads are more manageable and to allow for assignments that are neatly tailored to course objectives and class lessons and readily engaged in class session activities. Third, he counsels that professors require readings that are aimed at “marginally skilled readers.”
The second set of suggestions offered by the author focuses on course structure as a means of encouraging reading. Here, Hobson begins by pointing the opportunity to use course syllabi as teaching tools that do more than simply list required readings. Rather, syllabi should also offer background information on the selected readings and offer a rationale for their usage. Additionally, he suggests that professors discuss the reading selections in terms of their relation to the course learning outcomes and explicitly state how they will promote student success in these areas several times over the duration of the course. Finally, Hobson advocates assigning readings close to their “use date,” and are therefore relevant and/or necessary to those subsequent class sessions.

The third set of tips offered by Hobson revolves around the idea of linking in-class activities to the assigned readings in order to promote student compliance. The activities he recommends range from teacher led to student centered techniques. For example, teachers can and should preview reading assignments in lectures. They can also, however, be tied to class discussions, presentations, and other active learning exercise. Hobson also suggests that it may be a value to simply put aside brief periods of class time to allow students to review/read certain crucial reading selections. Finally, professors can promote prior reading of assigned materials through a variety of assessment techniques, including calling on students randomly in class to discuss specific elements of the readings and testing compliance through more formal methods (tests, quizzes, etc.).

The final tips offered by Hobson directly address student reading abilities. Rather than assume that students are or are not capable of reading the assigned materials, the author suggests utilizing class time to help students develop their reading skills through text marking and annotation exercises. He also recognizes that most professors are not reading instruction specialists, and therefore advises them to get help from those people at their respective institutions who are experts in this area.

Applications

This article, in many ways, is a disappointment. While Hobson purports to offer a range of tips or techniques to help promote student compliance with assigned reading, many of his suggestions are either thoroughly commonsensical or overly vague. These weaknesses limit the immediate utility of the article. Indeed, one might have hoped that he would offer some compellingly new and detailed advice on how to help students develop their reading skills or some active learning techniques directly focused on reading improvement. Instead, he vaguely refers to broadly utilized techniques and generally accepted approaches. That said, the article does nonetheless speak to a problem that continues to plague what one might assume is a vast majority of college course: students’ failure to complete reading assignments. For some, the suggestions made by Hobson regarding the importance of carefully selecting readings that are directly related to and tied to class sessions and course learning outcomes may be old hat. Yet, the advice remains valid given the number of classes in which texts are required, but then never or rarely utilized. Moreover, while Hobson’s article is lacking in specifics or detail, there are two suggestions that seem to not only ring true, but also form a crucial element of needed improvements within our system of teaching and learning: helping students further develop their college level reading skills and creating active learning exercises that depend on and build upon the knowledge contained in those readings. While Hobson’s article may not provide the solution to those problems, it rightfully
stresses the centrality of reading to our students’ success and challenges us to come up with effective solutions of our own.

**Citations of Interest**

