An Investigation of Course Requirements and Student Motivation
to Complete Required Readings

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Abstract

Many instructors note student failure to read required texts prior to attending class. This study investigated how instructor utilization of assigned readings interacts with student beliefs about the relationship between assigned readings and success in a course. Beginning-of-the-program teacher candidates were from a lower level undergraduate education class where quizzes were directly related to the reading material. End-of-the-program teacher candidates were from an upper level undergraduate education class where activities and discussions in this class were directly related to the reading material. Graduate-level practitioners were from a graduate class in special education where required online class discussions in this class were directly related to the reading material. Beginning-of-the-program teacher candidates and the graduate-level practitioners reported high rates of completing the required reading. Results from the end-of-the-program teacher candidate group were used to revise the course delivery.
Introduction

Most college instructors consider assigned outside-of-class reading to be an integral part of the academic experience. Research has shown that students who complete assigned readings show a greater understanding of instructors’ lectures, participate more often in discussion and perform better on exams (Sappington, Kinsey, & Munsayac, 2002). On the other hand, inadequate preparation for class activities and discussion can impede student learning to a considerable degree (Nilson, 1998). Although assigned readings may be highly valued by faculty, students do not necessarily value them. Burchfield and Sappington (2000) have reported that on any given day, only one-third of all students will have completed the assigned readings for any particular class. Similarly, Clump, Bauer and Bradley (2004) found that students in psychology classes on average read 27% of the assigned readings before class and 70% before an exam. Even though instructors and academically-strong students know that willingness to read the related material before it is covered in class produces better learning outcomes (Phillips & Phillips, 2007), the reality is that the majority of students do not read what is assigned as confirmed by a number of studies (Clump, 2004; Clump & Doll, 2007; Marchant, 2002) as well as the regular plaints of instructors that students have not even bothered to purchase the text.

There are many reasons for student noncompliance with completion of required reading including reading comprehension deficits (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Leamson, 1999), variations in the amount of assigned reading (Bradley, 2007), and lack of time management skills (Barnett, 1998; Maher & Mitchell, 2010). Lack of motivation due to student belief that the readings are not tied directly to the content taught and assessed in class (Brost & Bradley, 2006) or that it is possible to receive a passing grade in the course without reading (Broz, 2011) are also possible explanations for student noncompliance. Nolen (1996) suggests that lack of congruence between instructor goals and student goals leads to failure to complete assigned readings. Most instructors espouse mastery goals related to increasing skills and competence. When a student’s goal is the same, he/she will have a strong motivation to complete activities such as assigned readings that engage and challenge him/her. Such a student demonstrates what Dweck (1999) calls a “growth mindset” that perceives challenges as opportunities to grow. However, if a student has a performance goal of merely passing a class and he/she believes this can be achieved without engaging with the readings because the instructor uses
class time to summarize and interpret the text, he/she has no motivation to read the assigned texts (Derryberry & Wininger, 2008).

A number of studies have indicated that quizzes covering the material in the text increase student motivation to complete assigned readings. Conner-Greene (2000) found that students reported enhanced learning with the use of daily essay quizzes. Sappington, et al. (2002) demonstrated a positive relationship between scores on pop quizzes (indicating out-of-class preparation) and final exam scores. Additionally, Carney, Fry, Gabriele, and Ballard (2008) found that the use of Monte Carlo quizzes and non-random quizzes as well as learning logs all increased the amount of assigned reading completed. Lastly, Johnson and Kiviniemi (2009) reported that the use of online quizzes taken before class raises student comprehension as measured by achievement of subsequent exams. Recent work by Berry, Cook, Hill, & Stevens (2011) indicates that students want instructors to direct their attention to what is key in the readings. This can be done by providing reading questions (Henderson & Rosenthal, 2006), requiring student generation of questions (Van Blerkom, Van Blerkom, & Bertsch, 2006), having students use the SQ3R method as they read (Artis, 2008), requiring student summaries of assigned materials (Peterson, 2006) or having students use a self-monitoring system (Chang, 2010). Any of these strategies along with being assessed on the material may produce even higher rates of compliance with reading assignments and better student learning outcomes.

**Statement of the problem**

Students need to be motivated, whether intrinsically by the desire to learn the material or extrinsically by grades to read the assigned material. Regardless of student perception, the instructor of these courses believed these readings were essential for student success and would lead to a greater ability to apply the factual information, concepts and strategies covered in each of these classes and in their careers as educators. This study investigated how instructor utilization of assigned readings interacted with student beliefs about the relationship between assigned readings and success in a course to influence student behavior. The effectiveness of three strategies (directed at three different student populations) for increasing student motivation to comply with course reading requirements was examined over the course of a semester.
Methods

Participants. All participants were enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a mid-sized Midwestern liberal arts university. Students from three different classes participated in the research.

Beginning-of-the-program teacher candidates.

Participants were from a lower-level undergraduate education class, “Introduction to Learners with Exceptionalities” (EDUC 2900). This is a required course for all education majors. Most of the students were sophomores and considered beginning-of-the-program teacher candidates. There were 19 students originally enrolled in the class; 18 students completed the class. This section included half of all students enrolled in the course this particular semester. Students selected which class section to participate based on their scheduling logistics. All students consented to participate in anonymous surveys throughout the class related to required readings and quiz performance. The quizzes in this class constituted 15% of each student’s final grade.

End-of-the-program teacher candidates.

Participants were from an upper-level undergraduate education class, “Behavior Management” (EDUC 3375). This is a required course for all education majors. All of the students were seniors and were considered end-of-the-program teacher candidates. There were 18 students enrolled in the class. This section included all students enrolled in the course this particular semester. All students consented to participate in anonymous surveys throughout the class related to required readings and group work. Assignments contributed to each student’s ability to complete the final project, but were not graded.

Graduate-level practitioners.

Participants were from a graduate class in special education, “Assessment of Functional Skills in Students with Severe Developmental Disabilities” (SPED 5313). All students were practicing teachers. There were 10 students originally enrolled in the class; nine students completed the class, one student took an incomplete and completed the course at a later date without responding to the online discussion threads. This section included all students enrolled in the course this particular semester. All students consented to participate in anonymous surveys throughout the class related to required readings and
posted discussion threads. Discussion postings in this class constituted 10% of each student’s final grade.

**Survey Administration.** Surveys varied by group but all surveys required circling a response and provided no identifying information. Surveys for the first two groups were folded in half and placed in a large manila envelope by the students. Students who chose not to participate simply folded the form in half and placed it in the envelope. The envelope was sealed by a participant at the end of class. The researcher was not able to determine if a student had chosen to participate or not. The graduate-level practitioners received a short survey form by mail at the beginning and end of the course. It was accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. None of the surveys were viewed by the researcher until the end of the semester after grades had been posted. A sample survey from each group is provided in Appendix A.

*Beginning-of-the-program teacher candidates.*

In EDUC 2900, quizzes were directly related to the reading material. Students were asked to fill out 15 short survey forms throughout the course. The first survey asked if the student had the textbook and if they typically complete required readings. The next 14 surveys took place after an online quiz had been completed outside of class time. These surveys asked if the students had taken the quiz, if they had read the required material prior to taking the quiz, if they had used the posted quiz bank questions to assist with their reading, and if they believed the answers they had just given influenced the grade they had received on the quiz. These multiple-choice quizzes with Bloom’s taxonomy application level questions were taken after one week of lecture on a topic. The last survey asked the students to estimate what percentage of the required readings they had completed and to indicate their average quiz grade (0-10).

*End-of-the-program teacher candidates.*

In EDUC 3375 class activities/discussions were directly related to the reading material. Students were asked to fill out six short survey forms throughout the course. The first survey asked if the students had the textbook and if they typically complete required readings. The next four surveys took place after a related class activity/discussion has been completed during class time. These surveys asked if the students had read the required material prior to the class period and if they believed the answer they had just given influenced their ability to participate in the small group activity/discussion. These activities and
discussions were related to the subsections of the students’ final projects. The last survey asked the students to estimate what percentage of the required readings they had completed and to what degree they believed that it had influenced their final class grade. (Students in this class knew their final grade by the last day of class.)

In SPED 5311, required online class discussions were directly related to the reading material. Students were mailed a short survey form at the beginning and end of the course. The first survey asked if the students had the textbook/access to the articles and if they typically complete required readings. The syllabus in this class indicated that online postings were graded according to a rubric that addresses quantity of responses (i.e., initial post and a response to a classmates post were the minimum requirement) and quality of responses (i.e., relevance to the topic, reference to the reading, reflection of one’s own classroom experience). The last survey asked the students to estimate what percentage of the required readings they had completed and to what degree they believed that it had influenced their discussion grade.

Results

Beginning-of-the-program Teacher Candidates

In survey one, 17 of 18 students indicated that they had the required text. In response to the question, “Do you typically complete assigned readings?” students responded as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>Half of the time</th>
<th>Not Often</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here we see a discrepancy between faculty and student perceptions of reading related to how students view their overall study habits.

In surveys 2 through 15, the average response to the question, “To what degree do you believe reading or not reading the material influenced your grade on this quiz?” students responded as shown below:
These results show that students' perceptions may be influenced by instructor connection of reading compliance and assessment.

In survey 16 in response to the question “What percentage of required readings would you say you completed during this course?” students responded as shown below:

**Figure 3: Percentage of Readings Completed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In survey 16 in response to the question “What was your average quiz grade?” students responded as shown below:

**Figure 4: Average Quiz Grades**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student class performance and average quiz grades are shown below:

**Figure 5: Class Performance and Average Quiz Grades**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Average quiz grade</th>
<th>Course grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There appears to be a slight relationship between reading and final grades, but quizzes were only 15% of the grade and due to the fact that individual grades could not be linked to specific survey responses, it is difficult to conclude that the quizzes predicted grades.

*End-of-the-program Teacher Candidates*

In survey 1, 14 of 18 students indicated that they had the required text. In response to the question, “Do you typically complete assigned readings?” students responded as shown below:

**Figure 6: Perception of Completing Assigned Readings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>Half of the time</th>
<th>Not Often</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These students demonstrate their prior learning that in most cases the professor will lecture reducing their need to read. As a result of this learning, they may have entered the course with perceptions that reading was necessary.
In surveys two through five the average response to the question, “To what degree do you believe reading or not reading the material affected your ability to effectively participate in today’s discussion/activity?” Students responded as shown below:

**Figure 7: Perception of Reading Influence on Discussion/Activity Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Great Deal</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A Little</th>
<th>Not At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast to the strong connections made between reading and quizzes by the beginning-of-the-program candidates, the looser, non-graded requirements did not create a strong connection between reading and performance for the end-of-the-program candidates.

In survey six in response to the question “What percentage of required readings would you say you completed during this course?” students responded as shown below:

**Figure 8: Percentage of Readings Completed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that a reduced emphasis on the connection between reading and graded performance may increase noncompliance.

In survey six in response to the question “To what degree do you believe reading or not reading the material influence your final grade in this class?” students responded as shown below:

**Figure 9: Perception of Reading Influence on Final Grade**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Great Deal</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A Little</th>
<th>Not At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One-third of the final grade was based on each student’s final project. Grades were distributed as shown below:
Without some portion of the grade being directly tied to an assessment of their reading, the students did not attribute success in the course to reading compliance.

Graduate-level Practitioners

For survey 1, there were 10 respondents. Seven out of eight students indicated that they had easy access to the readings. Eight students indicated that they had experience posting to an online discussion. In response to the question, “Do you typically complete assigned readings?” students responded as shown below:

Figure 11: Perception of Completing Assigned Readings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Most of the time</th>
<th>Half of the time</th>
<th>Not Often</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For survey two, there were seven respondents. In response to the question “What percentage of required readings would you say you completed during this course?” students responded as shown below:

Figure 12: Percentage of Readings Completed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
<th>100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The high percentage of reading compliance in this group reflects the students’ perceptions that the readings were important.

For survey two in response to the question, “To what degree do you believe reading or not reading the material influenced your final grade in this class?” students responded as shown below:
With the high perception of compliance, student attribution of success in the course to completing assigned reading is predictable.

Online postings were rated on a four-point scale with three being proficient and four being advanced.

Student performance was distributed as shown below:

**Figure 13: Perception of Reading Influence on Final Grade**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Great Deal</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A Little</th>
<th>Not At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grades for the 10 students in this class were distributed as follows: Eight students received an A, one student received a B and one student received an incomplete.

**Discussion**

Beginning-of-the-program teacher candidates took quizzes over required readings as one means to assess learning. Along with a direct relationship between quizzes and readings, two-thirds of the class believed that completing the readings influenced their grades a great deal; this was probably the same two-thirds of the class who indicated that they completed 70-100% of the required reading. One student remarked, “The weekly quizzes forced me to read material and know information.” Such comments indicate that the quizzes provided extrinsic motivation to complete the readings which further reinforces the position of Sappington et al. (2002) that students have a responsibility to prepare for class and instructors have a responsibility to make clear that success is tied to preparation. These results also suggest that the background knowledge students gained as a result of the readings improved overall performance across all assessment, not just the quizzes on readings.

With the end-of-the-program teacher candidates, participation in ungraded group discussions and activities related to required reading was evaluated to see if it was related to success in the course. Activities included group completion of graphic organizers, case studies and simulations. One-half of the
class believed that completing the readings affected their participation in group discussions and activities somewhat or a great deal. One-third of the class completed 70-100% of the required reading. There was no identifiable relationship between reading and final grades. As observed by Brost and Bradley (2006) and Broz (2011), the lack of an explicit connection being articulated between readings and success in the course may have led to the students’ noncompliance.

Grades of the graduate-level practitioners related to posted discussion threads on required reading were evaluated to see if they were related to success in the course. All students completed 80-100% of the required reading. Two-thirds of the class believed that completing the readings affected their participation in discussion threads and activities somewhat or a great deal, although the discussion threads only accounted for 10% of the final grade. The readings did address major course topics and provided examples of how the strategies presented could be implemented in the classroom. Specific prompts such as “The Criterion of Ultimate Functioning (Brown, Nietupski, & Nietupski, 1976) was written over 30 years ago. The authors set out a wonderful vision for individuals with severe developmental disabilities. How far have we come in meeting that vision? Are we providing instruction that is designed to help our students meet the criterion of ultimate functioning? If not, why not? What are the barriers?” encouraged students to think about how they might apply the concepts learned in their own classrooms. Comments by students in this class indicated that they were highly motivated to read the material in order to gain the knowledge whether or not it was related to their grades. One student indicated “The material was stuff I could use in my classroom NOW.”

**Implications for Practice**

This research suggests that explicit connections must be made between assigned readings and utility for the student. In the two groups that showed high compliance, one group had the extrinsic motivation of being able to successfully complete the quizzes and the other had the intrinsic motivation of being able to directly apply the material read to their teaching the next day. Beginning-of-the-program candidates received immediate feedback as to their knowledge related to the topic covered in a specific chapter. Unlike the online quizzes given by Johnson and Kiviniemi (2009), these quizzes were given after assigned readings were to be completed and lecture was completed and students were encouraged to apply the information learned rather than memorize facts. The survey fostered metacognitive activity
leading to students making a connection between their effort and strategies (e.g. reading the chapter, taking notes) and quiz grade. Likewise, the participants in the graduate course received feedback, first from their classmates when they posted responses indicating how they would apply the reading in their classroom setting and second, from their own students as they implemented new strategies.

The group that read the least indicated that they were able to complete required activities based on information presented in lecture or from general background knowledge. As suggested by Derryberry and Wininger, (2008), the instructor’s practice of summarizing and interpreting the text prior to the introduction of class activities related to applying the concepts, had a negative effect on the students engaging in required reading. Based on this feedback, this course was redesigned using student-led seminars and conceptual workshops as outlined by Finkel (1999) in order to provide explicit connections between readings, in-class activities, and out-of-class summative assessments.

Instructors who believe that reading the text allows students to access and use valuable discipline-specific content must create learning environments that connect the readings to either in-class experiences or out-of-class applications. Establishing the utility value of completing assigned readings is the first step in assuring student compliance in this area.

**Future Research**

In the future, these interventions to increase student compliance with required reading should be examined by applying them across multiple sections of a course with some sections not receiving intervention and being used as control groups. Additionally, different interventions can be compared cross-sectionally among similar groups of students. Lastly, measures that clearly tie required reading to assignments and course grades need to be utilized.

**Limitations**

Students participating in this study may not be representative of all learners as they were all education majors. Additionally, the study’s generalizability is limited because of the small number of participants in each condition. Lastly, results may be confounded by additional variables such as students’ personal time constraints, learning aptitude, and motivation that were not measured.
References


Appendix A

Group 1 Survey 2
Did you take the quiz? Y N
Did you complete the assigned reading before taking the quiz? Y N
Did you use the posted quiz questions to guide your reading? Y N
To what degree do you believe your reading/not reading the material influenced your grade on this quiz?
A great deal Somewhat A little Not at all
To what degree do you believe your use of the posted quiz questions influenced your grade on this quiz?
A great deal Somewhat A little Not at all

Group 2 Survey 2
Did you complete the assigned reading before the class activity/discussion? Y N
To what degree do you believe your reading/not reading the material affected your ability to effectively participate in today’s discussion/activity?
A great deal Somewhat A little Not at all

Group 3 Survey 2
What percentage of the required readings would you say you completed during this course?
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
To what degree do you believe your reading/not reading the material influenced your final grade in this class?
A great deal Somewhat A little Not at all