

The Importance of Teaching Academic Reading Skills in First-Year University Courses

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Abstract

In the past decades researchers discovered a mutual relationship between a student's academic reading skills and academic success. Students as well as teachers, however, take the learning of this skill for granted. As a result, most students use a surface approach to reading in reading academic reading materials. This paper will discuss the need of teachers to teach the proper reading strategies to help students use a deep approach in reading academic texts. Participants of this research study were taken from first-year college in the Legal Studies course. The objective of the study is to evaluate students approach to reading by assessing the quality of their learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Reading skills, deep approach, surface approach*

Success at the university level mainly depends on existing pre-entry college attributes, including the mastery of some fundamental academic skills (Tinto, 1993). These include – reading, writing, critical thinking, oral presentation, and media literacy. Despite the importance of these skills for academic success, professors seldom teach them (Bean, 1996). They generally take them for granted, as they tend to presuppose that all students already acquired these skills either as part of their secondary education or elsewhere in college (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006). The reality is that most first-year students lack academic reading skills, especially because University-level reading greatly differs from High School reading. Thus, most students employ non-university strategies to read academic texts, which results in students taking a surface approach to reading.

The objective of this paper is to discuss some strategies, examples, and resources aimed at promoting students to take a deep approach to reading. The major tenet of this article is that if teachers explicitly teach students how to read academic texts in aligned courses where students have ample opportunities to engage in reading activities throughout the term, students are more likely to adopt a deep approach to reading.

This paper begins with a discussion of the difference between a surface and a deep approach to reading. I then recount an action research study that I conducted to analyze whether explicitly teaching academic reading skills, coupled with the introduction of teaching and learning activities designed to encourage students to actively engage in deep reading in aligned courses, makes a difference in the approach students take to reading. Then, I explore the categories of analysis needed to read academic texts and the importance of aligning courses. Finally, I share some of the teaching and learning activities aimed at fostering students' adoption of a deep approach to reading.

Surface and Deep Approaches to Reading

Learning a discipline involves developing familiarity with the ways of being, thinking, writing, and seeing the world of those experts in the discipline. Reading academic texts published by those disciplinary experts permits students to immerse in the culture of the discipline and facilitates learning its conventions, discourse, skills, and knowledge (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006, p.122). But, this is only possible if students take a deep approach to reading.

A surface approach to reading is the tacit acceptance of information contained in the text. Students taking a surface approach to reading usually consider this information as isolated and unlinked facts. This leads to superficial retention of material for examinations and does not promote understanding or long-term retention of knowledge and information. In contrast, a deep approach to reading is an approach where the reader uses higher-order cognitive skills such as the ability to analyze, synthesize, solve problems, and thinks meta-cognitively in order to negotiate meanings with the author and to construct new meaning from the text. The deep reader focuses on the author's message, on the ideas she is trying to convey, the line of argument, and the structure of the argument. The reader makes connections to already known concepts and principles and uses this understanding for problem solving in new contexts. Simply put, surface readers focus on the sign, i.e., the text itself, while deep readers focus on what is signified, i.e., the meaning of the text (Bowden & Marton, 2000, p. 49).

Research studies show that most university students today take a surface approach to reading and learning (Biggs, 1998, p. 58). This phenomenon occurs because teachers usually lecture the texts and evaluates students on their retention of facts and principles conveyed in the lectures (Wendling, 2008; Hobson, 2004, p.1)

The Study

I conducted an action research project to assess the approach towards reading among a group of first-year University students in a Legal Studies course. The objective of this project was to evaluate whether my students took a deep or a surface approach to reading. My ultimate goal was to assess the quality of their learning outcome, as the approach to reading is considered to be directly proportional to the quality of their learning outcome (Bowden & Marton, 2000, p. 51).

I adapted a study conducted by Marton and Saljo to the characteristics of my students and the subject I teach. In Marton and Saljo's study which took place at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden in the 1970's, the researchers asked students to read an article written by a professor of

education on some proposed university reforms in Sweden. They told students that they would ask them some questions about the text once they finished reading it. Marton and Saljo met with the students and asked them open-ended questions to assess their approach to reading and their understanding of the text. Additionally, they specifically asked the students how they had gone about studying the text (Bowden & Marton, 2000, p. 47).

Marton and Saljo (1976) reported that while reading the text, some students simply identified some isolated facts mentioned in the text, which they believed the researchers would ask them about during the interview, and then memorized those facts. These students could not make any connections between these facts and failed to see any connection to their realities. Another group of students tried to understand what the author was saying, focused on the underlying meaning of the text, and sought to integrate the different facts mentioned in the text. The first group of students focused on the surface level of the text while the second one adopted a deeper approach.

On the third week of the second-term of their first year, I asked all of my 30 students in my Legal Studies course to read a short article. Students had taken courses with instructors who did not teach them to read academic texts during their first term. The article dealt with a legal problem on rights over the Moon (Reynolds, n/d). It was a biased text where the author implied that the Moon Agreement acted as a barrier to exploitation activities on the Moon. The author deliberately introduced comparisons with another international treaty (the Convention of the Law of the Sea) to persuade readers that the international regime to deal with the exploitation of the Moon would be the same as the one that governs High Seas.

The language, complexity, and level of the selected text were the same as those of the textbook and other articles students read in first year Legal Studies courses. The reading took place in the University library and I explained to my students that they could consult any book, journal, and database available in the library to complement the reading of the assigned text.

Most of the students took a surface approach to reading. They did not question the author's arguments, they took the author's ideas at face value, and none realized that the comparison between the Convention of the Law of the Sea was a strategy adopted by the author to lead readers to believe that the regimes were the same while in fact they were not. These students stopped at the facts mentioned in the text and failed to connect the problem in question to broader legal issues. Except for one student, none made relations to other topics analyzed in class before. Only two students consulted other texts to understand the assigned articles and only one student read other articles by the same author to get an idea of his ideology.

After this first part of the study, I introduced a series of strategies to teach my students how to read academic texts and I designed a series of

student-centered reading activities –discussed below- which we worked on throughout the term. At the end of the term, I asked my students to read another short paper on Legal Studies of equal complexity. The result was very stimulating. Now the majority of students took a deep approach to reading. They were able to contextualize the author’s argument, they managed to identify and assess the evidence used to support the arguments, and they weighed the policy implications and the social consequences of the proposed arguments. Furthermore, they related the author’s arguments to problems we analyzed in the course –some even connected to issues discussed in other courses, and most of them proposed alternative solutions to the ones put forward by the author. A majority of students also reported having consulted several other sources to understand the context, the author’s arguments, and debates mentioned or alluded to in the text.

Reading Academic Texts

Reading is a process shaped partly by the text, partly by the reader's background, and partly by the situation the reading occurs in (Hunt, 2004, p. 137). Reading an academic text does not simply involve finding information on the text itself. Rather, it is a process of working with the text. When reading an academic text, the reader recreates the meaning of the text, together with the author. In other words, readers negotiate the meaning with the author by applying their prior knowledge to it (Maleki & Heerman, 1992). But this process is only possible if the reader uses a series of categories of analysis, some of which are specific to each academic discipline. Thus, working with a text and recreating its meaning entail both non discipline-specific and specific strategies. The expert reader has incorporated these categories and applies them almost intuitively. But, first-year students ignore these categories of analysis. So, professors in each discipline need to teach both the general analytical tools and the discipline-specific values and strategies that facilitate disciplinary reading and learning (Bean, 1996, p. 133).

Categories of Analysis

General categories of analysis to interact with academic texts include the following: (i) reading purpose; (ii) context; (iii) author’s thesis; (iv) deconstruction of assumptions; (v) evaluation of author’s arguments; and (vi) consequences of author’s arguments. The expert reader approaches an academic text with a specific purpose, e.g., to get ideas about activities that promote deep learning, to compare Kelsen’s and Austin’s notion of law, to analyze the use of swimming pool images in Lucrecia Martel’s films, or to examine the characteristics of dysfunctional families in Alejandro Casavalle’s dramaturgy. As novice readers in academic disciplines, first-year students do

not know why they have to read the assigned texts. In my courses, I produce reading guides in the form of questions for every single reading assignment. The reading guides help students navigate through the texts and to help them focus on the fundamental issues of each text. I also preview the readings in class, and explain their relevance and purpose. Since some teachers do not clearly explain the purpose of each reading assignment to students, I encourage my students to ask these teachers why they need to read a given text, what they need the text for, and what they are expected to do with the text.

Understanding the context helps students understand the background, environment, and circumstances in which the author wrote the text. In order to analyze the context of any given text, I encourage my students to do some research about the author. I want them to understand whether the author's opinion usually reflects the mainstream school of thought in the discipline or whether the author writes from the margins of the discipline. I also ask my students to analyze the audience of the text as well as when and where the text was written. In order to truly appreciate the context, I ask my students to read two or three articles written by the same author. For example, when I ask my students to read some Space Law articles written by Glen Reynolds, students read a few articles the author wrote on gun control and violence (Reynolds, 2001 & 1995), which are closer to the experiences and backgrounds of my students, and which permit them to have a unique insight to the author's ideas. When reading the author's Space Law publications, which are more sophisticated, this familiarity with the author's ideas becomes very helpful in understanding the author's Space Law texts.

Students also need to be taught how to identify the author's thesis, main claims, and arguments dealing with the issues they are interested in. For this purpose, I encourage my students to try to understand what the author intends to do. They need to consider whether, for example, the author intends to challenge an existing position, whether she wants to examine a variable that previous researchers have missed, or to apply a theory or a concept in a new way. Students need to be taught to identify the different positions used by the author, the arguments used to hold these positions as well as the counter-arguments. Bean recommends an activity where students are asked to write what a paragraph says and what it does. This exercise helps students to identify the purpose and function of academic texts (Bean, 1996).

Unlike authors of textbooks specifically designed for the college classroom, authors of academic books and articles take for granted many concepts, principles, and debates of the discipline as they presuppose that their audience is familiar with them. So, it is important to help students become aware of these assumptions and to learn to deconstruct them. Thus, students need to examine the concepts not analyzed in the text. Students need to look up these concepts in college textbooks, encyclopedias, or other reference books. Similarly, if the author refers to a debate in the discipline or

is responding to another article or book, they need to briefly read about these debates or articles in other publications.

Perhaps the single most important step of reading academic texts is for students to judge the strength or validity of the author's arguments. I constantly stress the importance of not taking the author's argument at face value. Teachers need to show our students the importance of evaluating the argument's effectiveness in making its claims, and considering the evidence the author offers in support of her claim. Students also need to ponder counter-arguments used, and the logical reasoning used by the author. Furthermore, they need to evaluate any inconsistencies of thought, and the relevance of examples and evidence. For this purpose, I always give my Legal Studies students an article where the authors try to convince the readers of the logical rationality of legal arguments (Aldisert et. al., 2007). While written in very persuasive language, the article shows some contradictions as the authors themselves end up recognizing that legal arguments do not always follow logics. Besides, more serious works in Philosophy of Law prove the contrary point (Murphy, 1967). I ask my students to identify the main claims of the text and to judge the validity of these arguments. For this purpose, I remind my students of the need to consult other texts.

Finally, it is important to help students consider the non immediate consequences of the arguments used by the author. I help them reflect about the implications and applications of the author's thesis. I ask my students to make connections to other texts, to relate the arguments to other topics learned in class, and to relate the author's arguments to their own experience. For example, we read an article on terrorism in the aviation industry where the author proposes a series of measures to prevent terrorist acts. While these measures may undoubtedly deter new terrorist attacks, a careful look at the author's proposal leads to the conclusion that very few people will qualify to fly. So, my students usually argue that measures that will exclude the majority of passengers from flying are not a very sensible way of controlling terrorism.

Each discipline has also its own specific categories of analysis, which need to be taught alongside these general categories. For example, if teaching Legal Studies, we need to help students master the following categories of analysis: (i) approach to law; (ii) legal theory; (iii) rationality of the legal argument; (iv) legal tradition; (v) comparative law solutions; and (vi) policy implications and social consequences of legal problems. In Criminology and Criminal Justice, students need to be taught the specific categories of analysis in these disciplines i.e.: (i) Criminology theories; (ii) Criminal Justice model; (iii) rationality of argument; (iv) solutions to the crime problem adopted in other countries; (v) flaws in the collection of criminal data if the author relies on criminal statistics; and (vi) policy, legal, and social implications of the author's argument, among others.

Constructive Alignment

John Biggs proposes aligned teaching to foster a deep approach to reading and learning. In aligned teaching, there is maximum consistency throughout the system and each component supports the other. John Biggs (1999) conceptualizes constructive alignment as a “fully criterion-referenced system, where the objectives define what we should be teaching, how we should be teaching it; and how we could know how well students have learned it”. There are two basic premises to constructive alignment. First, the teacher aligns the planned learning activities with the learning outcomes and the assessment, and second, students construct meaning from what they do to learn. So, in order to promote a deep approach to reading, teachers need to design a course whose main objective and learning outcomes should be to encourage students to take a deep approach to reading and learning and to use higher order cognitive and metacognitive skills to understand, process academic texts, and to negotiate meanings with the author of academic texts. It is important that we as teachers make those objectives and learning outcomes explicit to our students, as most students tend to see only facts and principles as the sole content of courses (Herteis, 2007). Eileen Herteis explains that “when our students think about content, they usually think it comprises only facts and principles; the rest are activities (group work, cases, presentations) or assessments.” So, “teachers have a dual responsibility: we must do a better job of explaining to our students that these “hidden” things are actually content, and we have to give them the opportunities to learn them.” We need to teach reading processes, attitudes, and skills explicitly and move them to the forefront of our actual curricula instead of taking them for granted (Knapper, 1995).

The teaching and learning activities have to be designed in order to promote a deep approach to reading and learning in consonance with the proposed objectives and learning outcomes. If, for example, the teacher lectures the textbooks, students will probably not read the texts as they will rely solely on teacher’s oral explanations and the notes they take from these lectures.

While all three components of the system –objectives, teaching and learning activities, and assessment– are important, assessment is the one that plays the most influential role in students’ decision on whether to take a deep or surface approach to reading and learning (Gibbs, 1999 & Forsaith, 2001). Students are heavily influenced by the hidden curriculum. They look for clues and use these to drive their study effort. Very little of out-of-class student learning is unrelated to assessment. So, the assessment has to measure whether students use higher-order cognitive skills to read assigned materials, whether they can effectively negotiate meanings with the author, whether they can evaluate the strength of the author’s arguments, whether they can deconstruct hidden assumptions in the texts, and whether they can

see the non immediate implications and applications of the author's arguments (Carlino, 1999). Barbara Millis also suggests the use of classroom assessment techniques (CATs) to promote deep reading and learning throughout the course (Millis, 2008).

Examples of Teaching and Learning Activities that Foster a Deep Approach to Reading

In my Legal Studies course, apart from explicitly teaching students how to read academic texts in an aligned course, I resorted to a series of student-centered activities designed to encourage my students to actively engage in deep reading. For example, we play several games which they are familiar with. We play the Amazing Race where students in teams have to run from the classroom to the library, then to my office, then to the computer lab, and then back to the classroom. In each of these stops, they have to analyze academic texts and answer some questions. For instance, a group has to find the book "Looking at Canada's Legal System" by Patrick Fitzgerald and Barry Wright and summarize and explain the legal method used in civil law as described in the book. Another group has to summarize and explain the quote from B. Nicholas found on the book Canadian Legal System, 5th edition by Gerald Gall and they have to give examples not mentioned in the book. In the computer lab, they have to find a report entitled "Aboriginal Peoples and the Criminal Justice system" prepared by the Canadian Criminal Justice Association and explain in their own words the conflict between aboriginal and non-aboriginal values in a court setting. The first team that gets back to the classroom gives a complete oral account of all the reading tasks while the rest of the teams contribute actively to the discussions.

Another activity I use in my first-year Legal Studies course is the Apprentice. I tell my students that I approached my friend Mark Burnett - The Apprentice executive producer- and convinced him to do an Apprentice show where teams have to read some articles and books in order to give a presentation on a certain Legal Studies topic. Teams are given some reading guides which foster them to evaluate, judge, compare, and synthesize information from these texts. Students then have to make a presentation to the rest of the class. The worst teams are fired and the best one is hired.

More conventional activities include the use of double-entry journals, concept maps, and reading journals.

The double-entry journal is an assignment where students take down notes of their readings and enter them in a column. In a parallel column, students enter their reactions to their readings. These entries may include comments, questions, connections to their personal experiences, and relations to other issues discussed in class. Millis suggests using double-entry journals to begin discussion, for classroom assessment of readings, or for other

classroom and group activities (Millis, 2008).

Concept mapping is a technique where students represent their understanding of a text by producing graphs which display the relationships between concepts and ideas. Students use concept maps to link concepts, develop interrelationships, create meaning schemes, connect their previous experiences, and construct knowledge. Barbara Daley (2002) quotes a student who used concept mapping and explains her experience with this technique: “[it] is a way to take the idea, apply it, and get a deeper meaning out of it at the very end. It is not just a matter of learning a concept, learning about theory, defining a word and spitting back a definition. It is actually applying it to what you know so that it makes more sense in the actual world.” For Novak (1984) concept mapping helps students understand their own learning and foster a learning-how-to-learn approach.

Reading journals are logs where students record their comments on the assigned readings. They may react, question, argue, provide additional examples, or write about what the readings mean to them personally. Some teachers prefer to use more structured reading journals where they ask specific questions to their students to answer in the journals (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006, p. 125).

All these activities have in common the fact that they encourage students to use higher-order cognitive skills to process academic texts while at the same time they motivate students to read the texts.

Conclusions

Research studies on postsecondary education reading and learning show that most University students today adopt a surface approach to reading and learning. In general, these studies try to explain this phenomenon by focusing on students’ attitudes, activities, and skills. The research study presented in this paper shows that when teachers design an aligned course that places academic reading at the forefront of the course, where the selected class activities encourage students to use higher-order cognitive skills to construct meaning from academic texts, and teachers implement assessment tools aimed at evaluating whether students use such skills to read academic texts, the result is that students tend to take a deep approach to reading and learning.

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