To read or not to read: Do students really have the option?

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Abstract

Reading continues to be a critical skill for success in university studies. However, students have competing interests and activities which make academic reading less of a priority. The aim of the study is to explore the reasons why students do or do not engage with set reading tasks using an extant survey instrument. The literature highlights several factors, including a lack of interest in the academic subject, family duties and work obligations, which contribute to this behaviour and indicates how it might possibly be addressed. The theoretical foundations of this work stem from areas such as strategic learning, reading non-compliance, curriculum structure, and student engagement. The aim of the study is to explore the reasons why students do or do not engage with set reading tasks using an extant survey instrument. Building on the literature which discusses why students do not read, the pilot study presented in this paper examines the reading behaviours amongst a group of first year business students studying in block mode at Victoria University (Australia). The paper explores the implications for teaching practice and the potential for further research.

Keywords: Reading, reading behaviours, responsibilities, time-availability, assignments

Introduction

University students do not always come to class prepared to engage with the learning activities planned for the day. A critical pre-class activity of reading a prescribed book chapter or journal article is not always done (Johnson & Kiviniemi, 2009; Hoeft 2012). Thus, the teacher feels obliged to "back-fill" with information so that the planned learning activities can proceed (Prince, 2018). This potentially shifts the class away from socially constructed learning and student-centred inquiry into a "stand and deliver" model of communicating subject content. Nowadays, the academic task of reading, and for the greater part reading comprehension, seems to be a bothersome chore that has been replaced by activities such as experiential assignments, instructional videos, and competency-based simulations. However, despite the use of advanced pedagogical approaches and learning technologies, reading is still at the heart of university learning and plays an important role in a student's development and university success (Brick, Herke & Wong 2020).

The literature points to many academic reasons why students might not engage in reading tasks, which include, for example, the complexity of reading structure, complexity of vocabulary and complexity of content. However, the ability to read critically is a fundamental academic skill and the basis of being able to think widely and deeply and then to construct an argument. Reading is

an essential university task, and a fundamental skill often assumed by academic staff to have been taught in primary and secondary school; moreover, at the same time it is regarded by students as a learning task "achieved". On the contrary, it is argued that developing critical reading skills should be viewed as an ongoing lifelong learning activity (Brost & Bradley 2006). Scaffolding learning to systematically develop reading and thinking skills and engage students with their learning is one successful design strategy.

There are also many less "academic" reasons for student non-engagement in reading, leading to, or resulting from, procrastination and poor time management. The reasons presented in the literature include lack of ownership of the reading process (Brost & Bradley 2006), absence of self-confidence, non-interest in the course, underestimation of importance of the reading task, and motivation levels (Lei et al., 2010).

The aim of the study is to explore the reasons why students do or do not engage with set reading tasks using an extant survey instrument. The context of the Victoria University Block Model is presented but is not the focus. The next section of this paper gives an overview of the literature related to student reading behaviours.

Student reading behaviours
Kuh (2001) argued that explicit educational practices such as writing, reading and collaborating with peers and academic staff encouraged students to put forth more effort and become engaged academically. A virtuous cycle develops whereby critical thinking, problem solving, and other professional and life skills develop as "success breeds success" leading to deeper and more active engagement. Rachal et al. (2007), building on Kuh (2001) and Pascarella (2001), defined student engagement as active participation in the learning process, which requires, firstly, using the university's systems, structures and resources and, secondly, "the quality of the cognitive investment in learning tasks, the students' persistence" (p. 191). Even with innovations to learning and assessment, such as the now ubiquitous use of podcasts, interactive online content and videos, reading remains a core skill.

Learning strategies seldom develop without instruction and application, and sometimes much repetition and reinforcement. There are many models, which in Australia, are often subsumed under the label Academic Language and Learning. The models range from standalone, decontextualised, pre-semester instruction to fully embedded, contextualised, within-curriculum programs that require participation from discipline academics (Chanock et al., 2012). The Victoria University block design intentionally "front loads" many of these strategies into the first year (McCluskey, Weldon, & Smallridge, 2019).

The skill of reading has many, often overlooked, subcomponents such as the following: organisation, vocabulary, fluency, accuracy, grammar, logic, structure, assumed background knowledge, as well as the reader's and writer's own world perspectives. Meaningful comprehension, interpretation, and articulation are not automatic outcomes of reading a text. To aid comprehension and organisation the value of note-taking should not be minimised. Walker et al. (2017) purposefully introduced Socratic Note Taking (students develop their own questions which they attempt to answer whilst reading) which were followed up with quizzes as a test of the effectiveness of their note taking. On average when students used the Socratic Note Taking

technique their quiz performance improved. Online quizzes were used successfully with nursing students to encourage careful completion of readings (Azzarello et al., 2018); unfortunately, the positive reinforcement did not mean that the reading behaviour was applied to other assignments.

Schnee (2018) investigated reading across the curriculum which is a strategic attempt to develop and reinforce reading activities in meaningful ways, with consistent expectations, at several, if not all, points of a student's study program (Horning, 2013). It is an approach that requires academics and curriculum developers to collaborate so that reading tasks and assessments are sequenced to maximise learning and engagement. Schnee surveyed attitudes and practices towards assigned reading at an open-enrolment community college in the USA. Whilst most student respondents self-assessed as average readers, Schnee (2018) found that reading was gendered; more females than males attended class having completed the readings. Another finding was that the enjoyment element of reading textbooks was notably less than novels, social media and magazines.

Sharma et al. (2017) found a self-reported relationship between the amount of reading undertaken and time constraints. Specifically, the students who started the readings earlier were more likely to complete them. Other factors that researchers have investigated are different undergraduate levels and different specialisations. Brown et al. (2016) concede that upper level accounting majors can be slightly more motivated than first years, but the reading challenge does not disappear. Their solution was the introduction of guided reading questions. Prince (2018) addressed the pre-class reading compliance by using low stakes writing assignments. Eddy and Hogan (2014) examined one intervention – increased course structure – and its impact on various student populations in the US college system. They found that performance improved for all student populations but particularly first-generation students, if there was a "moderate-structure" intervention. Their findings included greater frequency of reading set texts and "an increased sense of community" (Eddy & Hogan, 2014, p.453).

Barriers to participation
Hoeft (2012) asks if students are not completing pre-class readings, which students are doing the talking when the teachers engage in classroom or small group discussions? One previous study concluded that only approximately 25% of undergraduate psychology students completed assigned readings (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000). Another study concluded that students only read about 25% of the assigned reading prior to class (Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004, as cited in Hoeft, 2012). Arguably this latter 25% might increase post-class if the class discussions whet their appetite for further reading, made the readings more comprehensible, or there was an assessment based on the completion of the required reading task. However, a little reading prior to class might be an effective and pragmatic strategy to become acquainted with a difficult text. To investigate reading compliance, Hoeft (2012) conducted two studies. The first study was to determine the rate of reading compliance, the level of comprehension of the students who had read, students' reasons for reading or not reading, and student views on how they could be motivated. The second study had the objective of determining the impact of several interventions (e.g., quizzes, supplementary assignments, reminders) on student reading compliance. It is this research that formed the basis for the pilot survey used at Victoria University and is reported in this paper. The next section of this paper will outline the educational context of teaching in the block model at Victoria University.

The educational context at Victoria University (Australia)

Victoria University (VU) is a metropolitan university located in the western region of Melbourne, Australia. It draws students from across Melbourne and internationally as well as having a sizeable population of students who are the first-in-family to attend university, speak English as an Additional Language, have had an interrupted education, undertake more than 20 hours per week of paid work, and live in low Socio-Economic Suburbs (Low SES as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics).

In contrast to the traditional university model where students are required to balance the competing demands of four subjects at a time over a 12 to 16-week semester (assessments, concepts, teaching teams, peers, deadlines, etc.), Victoria University offers students the ability to study their course in sequential blocks of time, completing each unit, including assessment, within a four-week block before moving to the next. This is known as the 'Block Model'. Students, studying in the block model, are immersed in a single subject, and learn via evidence-based, active learning pedagogies (McCluskey, Weldon, & Smallridge, 2019).

This approach is supported by a classroom environment (regardless of online or in-person) that features small group discussions and interactions. Strong and lasting connections are formed through close contact with one group of 30 peers and one educator for the duration of the block. Student confidence is built through timely and targeted support, feedback and assessment; and, crucially, the achievement of early success. Student confidence enhances motivation and the acquisition of skills required to excel beyond the first year in their chosen discipline area.

The block model was implemented across all undergraduate programs for the entire institution in one of the largest interventions of its kind at a tertiary institution anywhere in the world (McCluskey, Weldon, & Smallridge, 2019). The initial implementation of the block model was in the First Year College (FYC) which delivers 160 first year units to over 4500 students studying in more than 50 Bachelor level programs including professionally accredited courses such as nursing, engineering, accounting, law, and education. The challenge of underprepared students is amplified within an intensive block teaching model where each class is scheduled in such a way that the loss of ability to properly engage with set subject content can result in compounding delays in the learning schedule throughout the block.

The unit of study in which the Victoria University pilot survey was conducted has addressed the issue of students' lack of completing pre-class reading assignments by incorporating the reading task into the suite of in-class activities. This incorporation of the reading task is achieved using a jigsaw read technique (Aronson & Patnoe, 2011). Students are organised into reading groups of four. These groups are also kept together for the duration of the subject and become a "learning group" for in-class activities, such as case study analysis, group discussions, and assessment tasks. The use of a structured note taking technique, such as Cornell Notes is integrated into the jigsaw read, and the notes are used as a shared resource by the learning group for assignment work.

Method

This exploratory study employed three research phases to investigate the phenomenon of reading non-compliance in the context of higher education. The mixed methods chosen for this exploratory research consisted of document review and evaluation, survey administration, and an independent discussion group, therefore utilising triangulation to establish a research base (Gray et al., 2007); in this context, the independent discussion group was composed of high school teachers and university academics and notes were taken during the discussion. The first phase was a document and literature review of the different kinds and reasons why students do not read. After an initial examination of the applicable literature, a list of non-compliance reasons was compiled in a table and cross-referenced with the tools that were suggested in the literature to mitigate this non-conforming student behaviour. The three investigators of the study completed the table independently from each other. The table was completed by the individual experts to maintain interrater reliability and minimise rating bias (Newman, 2014).

The second phase of this exploratory study included using a questionnaire which was administered to students to establish a baseline for the underlying reasons students do not read and, as such, contribute to the phenomenon of reading non-compliance. In addition, the questionnaire set out to measure the importance of the different reasons for non-compliance as well as allow for possible follow-up questions for a more in-depth investigation of this phenomenon. Students were asked to complete a reading compliance survey during a regular class session. The survey used was derived from Hoeft (2012), employing reading compliance variables that were discovered in the literature (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Connor-Greene, 2000).

The leading reasons that were identified for contributing to the decision to read in the survey conducted by Hoeft (2012) were having the motivation to read, being concerned about one's grade, and being concerned about what the teacher thinks about a student. On the opposite side, the primary causes in the survey that were pointed out by students to contribute to the decision not to read were a demanding work schedule, busy social life, and dislike for any kind of reading. Only approximately 50% of the students who read the assignments really understood the reading. Also, there were a few students who did not do the reading at all. Students who did not read suggested that activities, such as less reading, more time, quizzes, supplementary assignments, and frequent reminders would increase their willingness to read.

Student Reading Survey at VU

The survey questions used in the VU study were derived from Hoeft (2012) and organised into a Qualtrics online survey; the instructions and list of questions are presented in earlier in this paper. The use of Qualtrics, unlike the paper-based approach used by Hoeft (2012), allowed for the development of a survey instrument that participants could access using a personal computer, tablet, or mobile phone. In a digitally supported remote-delivery teaching environment using Zoom it was not practical to employ a paper-based survey. The ability of participants to access the Qualtrics survey using a range of devices ensured the greatest opportunity for participation. The use of the Qualtrics tool also made the collection of survey responses more efficient.

Survey respondents were presented with a specifically worded set of questions based on a "yes" or "no" response to an initial question asking if they had completed a set reading assignment before class. A "yes" response took respondents to questions 1 to 15 and a "no" response took respondents to questions 23 to 38. The question sets are worded positively for the "yes" set and negatively for the "no" set. Each question in both question-sets used a graphic slider tool for participant responses with a range from 1 to 10. The response categories were "not at all" (1 to 2), "a little" (3 to 4,) "somewhat" (5 to 6), "a lot" (7 to 8), and "definitely" (9 to 10).

The survey was unannounced. At the beginning of class, the online survey link was distributed as an optional, anonymous activity with time allocated for students to complete it. It was made clear that participation had no impact on any student assessment. The written instructions given at the start of the online survey were as follows:

We'd like to ask you about your chapter reading for class today. There are a few questions based on whether you did the reading before class, and a few questions if you didn't do the reading before class. Choose the questions that relate to what you did by clicking 'yes' or 'no' to the question below. All responses are anonymous, and participants cannot be tracked or identified.

To answer each question in the survey, just move the slider beside the thermometer graphic up or down. Scroll the page down to move to the next question. It should take no more than five minutes to complete all questions.

Questions:

Did you read the set chapter before class today (Yes/No)?

Question set if YES:

1. Interest in topic
2. Interest in course
3. Love reading of any kind
4. Your interest in ideas that may be different from your own
5. The emphasis your family places on reading
6. Your respect for the lecturer who teaches this unit
7. Your desire not to let your classmates down
8. A work schedule that allows you time for reading
9. Your concern over your grade in this unit
10. Your concern that you will be called on during this class to discuss the chapter
11. Your concern over what your lecturer thinks of you
12. Your concern that you will be tested on this reading during this class
13. Your concern that you will be embarrassed by students if you don't read
14. You are ambitious
15. Reading comes before your social life

Question set if NO:

23. Lack of interest in topic
24. Lack of interest in course
25. Dislike of reading of any kind
26. Dislike of ideas that may be different from your own
27. Lack of emphasis your family places on reading
28. Your lack of respect for the lecturer who teaches this unit
29. Lack of concern over letting your classmates down
30. A work schedule that does not allow you time for reading
31. Lack of concern over your grade in this unit
32. Lack of concern about being called on during this class to discuss the chapter
33. Lack of concern over what the lecturer thinks of you
34. Lack of concern about being tested on this reading during this class
35. Lack of concern about being embarrassed by the lecturer for not reading
36. Lack of concern that you will be embarrassed by student if you don't read
37. You are not ambitious
38. Your social life comes before reading

Student participants were all first year, Bachelor of Business students, taking Management and Organization Behaviour, a compulsory first-year unit of study. As it was the fourth unit taught, in the second half of 2020, all students had completed at least one other unit of study prior to this unit. The Management and Organization Behaviour unit is recognised within the VU first year business units as "writing intensive".

Of the students who were able to participate and complete the survey there were 107 surveys successfully completed, 49 students stated that they had read the assigned reading task before class, 58 students stated that they had not read the assigned reading task before class.

Student questionnaire
For more insight there was an "extra" student questionnaire; the first-year students were selected through convenience sampling (Newman, 2014). Convenience sampling was determined to be the most viable sampling option at this exploratory research stage.
*Academic focus group*

The third phase of this exploratory research entailed a broader group discussion of this phenomenon during a conference workshop with participating senior high school teachers and university academics. The general questions/discussion topics were mainly derived from the themes that emerged from the Hoeft (2012) survey. The discussion was designed to ascertain what teachers and educators think are the main reasons for students not to read and, thus, engage in non-compliant behaviour. Of particular interest was to identify a short list of main reasons that contribute to this non-compliant behaviour as seen from the teachers' perspective. Therefore, phase two and three of the research design allowed this exploratory study to examine input from the two primary stakeholders in this non-compliance situation.

Data Analysis

General themes emerged from the document review, discussion groups and survey, which were divided into several categories. During the document and literature review, categories, such as lack of preparation, time constraints, motivational deficiencies, diverging interests, social media distractions, and inadequate reward systems, surfaced; these themes, then, might suggest tools for how teachers mitigate the reading non-compliance (e.g., quizzes, supplementary assignments, frequent reminders, worksheets, more selective readings, rewards and recognition), one of which was a jigsaw read. The group discussants had valuable insights into the pedagogic reasons why non-compliance takes place as well as which instructor shortcomings contribute to this phenomenon.

The responses to the survey questions were grouped together for content analysis. The categorical questions were analysed according to the frequency of the responses. The survey responses are presented graphically in Tables 1 and 2. The answers to free-response questions for the YES and NO survey were reviewed independently and examined whether the answer identified a specific concept or idea. Each answer was analysed to gauge the number of response categories. The differences were discussed and agreements were reached regarding these differences.
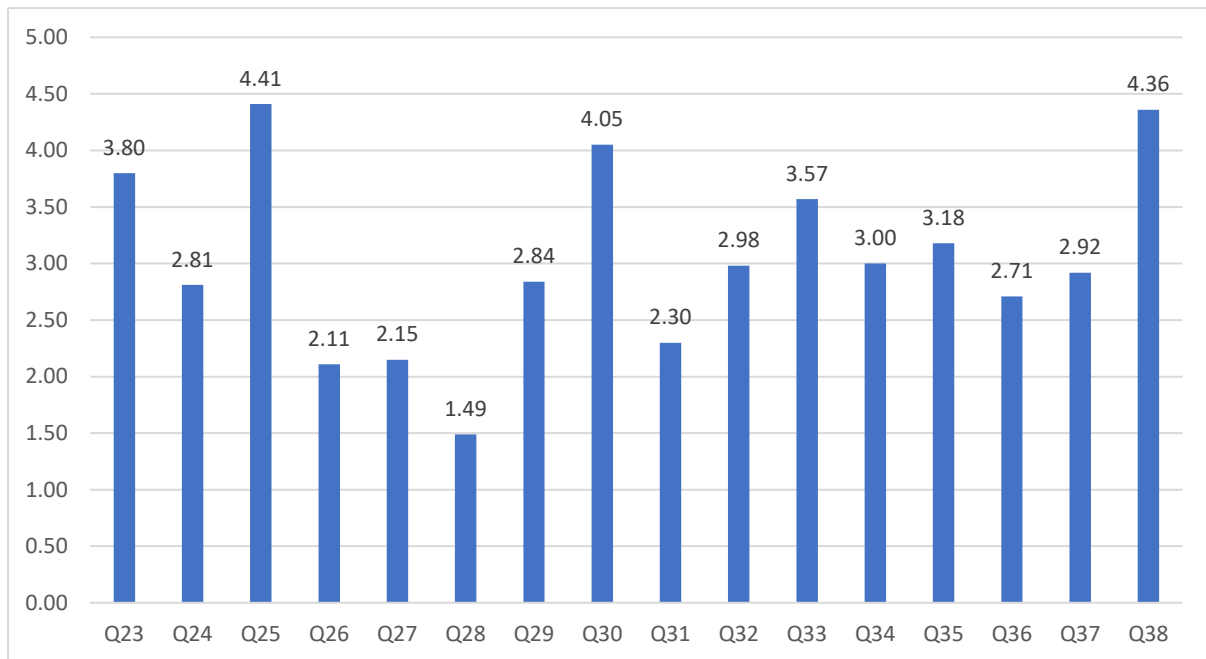
Table 1. Yes to Reading: Means for all Questions
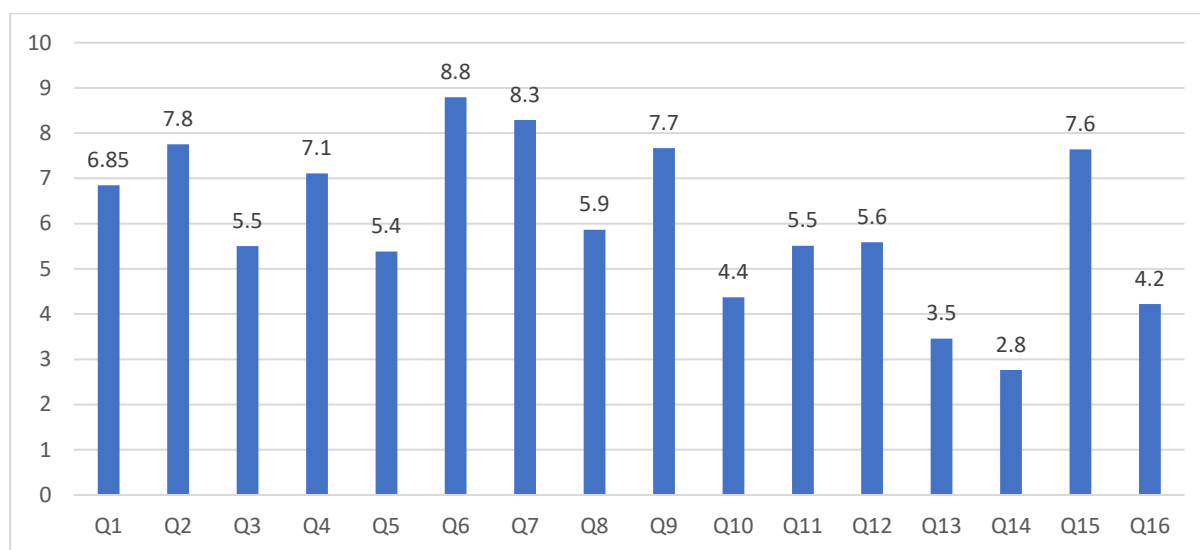
For the students who reported that they had completed the set reading the two highest scores were for questions six (8.8) and seven (8.3) (see Table 1). This suggests that the respondents who completed the set reading before class were most strongly influenced by a sense of responsibility to their immediate learning group partners and their respect for the lecturer. This is also supported by the score of 7.6 for question 15 which directly related to the respondents' self-assessment of their ambition to be successful. The mean scores for questions one (6.85) and two (7.8) were also strong and relate to the self-reported interest in the specific topic of the set reading and interest in the unit.

Table 2. No to Reading: Mean for all Questions

For the students who reported that they had not completed the set reading the two highest scores were for questions 25 (4.41) and 30 (4.05) (see Table 2). Question 25 asks respondents to assess their like of all forms of reading. The high average response scores suggest that a dislike of reading in general influences students to not undertake the assigned pre-reading for class. Question 30 asks respondents to comment on the relationship between their work schedule and available time to complete the set reading. The relatively high average score for this question suggests that the study/work/life balance that the respondents have relegates reading and other academic tasks to a position below work and social life. A mean score of 4.05 for question 30 tends to support the view that the respondents prioritise their social life over study tasks. Similarly, a mean score of 3.80 for question 23 and 2.81 for question 24 suggest that the respondents who reported that they did not undertake the assigned reading task did not have a lot of interest in the specific topic and in the unit.

Discussion

The survey yielded some interesting and important results which point to further opportunities for systematic study. However, the exploratory nature of the study reported in this paper, and the limited resources available at the time the study was conducted have set boundaries around the scope of analysis at this stage. The initial aim of exploring why students in their first year of study do not complete their assigned pre-class reading tasks has provided an opportunity to gauge the impact of using one in-class technique to encourage reading ("Jigsaw" reading), while a review of the extant literature has pointed to other alternatives. A large study is necessary to deepen the understanding of the student behaviour that prompted this exploratory study and allow for a more comprehensive analysis of findings. Next to using quizzes, supplementary assignments, and frequent reminders, one can also use group reading approaches such as the

jigsaw reading technique (Aronson & Patnoe 2011) to encourage reading, material comprehension, and task responsibility. These findings could be applicable to both, secondary and tertiary education, and provide educators with different approaches to make the reading experience more successful, efficient, and rewarding. In addition, the results and the suggested approach to mitigate reading non-compliance give educational institutions an opportunity to make the learning more experiential. Given these pedagogical implications, it might be prudent for higher education administrators to implement additional policies that require the selection of more subject-based, competency-based, and applied reading (reading-by-doing).

Limitations

This research was confined by certain limitations. The sample size was rather small; therefore, this study has an exploratory nature. This research also focused on a relatively narrow segment of literature. Furthermore, the study targeted only higher education courses. Given these limitations, opportunities for future renditions of the research arise. For instance, a bigger sample can be used by including and comparing block and non-block institutions. Also, future studies can expand on the existing research by examining how different youth-generations or age cohorts take to reading assignments. In addition, the project could also examine broader literatures, that might address, for instance, modern-day time and social demands students have and their impact on non-compliance. Also, future research could look at how social media and technology influence reading compliance.

Hoeft (2012) used self-reporting as the basis for her survey for her first study and she acknowledges some of the flaws such as sincerity and self-esteem, which might influence the accuracy of the data. Notwithstanding, this research adapted the self-reporting survey format developed by Hoeft (2012).

The degree of similarity between the survey instruments and student populations allows for the results between the two studies to be compared (in the 10 years since Hoeft's study little has changed); certainly, there is no indication of independent improvement or prioritisation of reading unless motivated by assessment. However, one significant difference was that Hoeft's survey for her first study was administered to the same cohort at three points in the semester and behavioural changes in reading compliance were noted. The survey for this research was administered at the midpoint of the teaching block only.

Future Research

The preliminary study reported in this paper has indicated that there is a similarity between the responses from participants in the Victoria University survey and the results reported by Hoeft (2012) as well as the findings reported in the wider literature. These preliminary findings are encouraging to the authors, and a larger project is being designed to extend the study to a more comprehensive sample across a broader range of first year student cohorts at Victoria University.

Whilst the initial aim of the study was to explore the reasons why students do or do not engage with set reading tasks using an extant survey instrument, there are direct implications for the context of the Victoria University Block Model which should be researched. Furthermore, how and where the skills of reading and writing intensive units of study are reinforced and enhanced should be researched as a fundamental component of a holistic curriculum design.

The study undertaken by Hoeft (2012) administered the student survey at multiple points during a semester, whereas the study reported in this paper is based on responses to a single survey. Any future studies conducted at Victoria University could also administer the survey at different points during a teaching period. However, this may not be practical, or desirable within in a single block (only four weeks); it may, however, be valuable for future studies that respondents are asked to participate during multiple teachings blocks over an academic year.

Conclusion

This exploratory research examined students' non-compliance with reading requirements, the factors that contribute to this behaviour, and how this challenge might be addressed. Building on studies described in the literature, a pilot online survey was developed to investigate the reasons for students engaging, or not engaging in reading tasks. The results of the exploratory research presented in this paper suggest that there is a similarity between the responses from participants in the Victoria University survey and the results reported by Hoeft (2012), and that there is a general agreement with the discussion of the topic in the wider literature. These preliminary findings were encouraging to the authors and provide an opportunity to develop a more comprehensive project which encompasses a more diverse spectrum of first year students and units of study.

Disclosures
No conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, are declared by the authors.

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