

In the Classroom 106

How to Hold College Students Accountable for Reading

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. I certainly do appreciate it. I know you could be doing other things, but you're hanging out with me and it means a lot to me. One of the most important skills we can impart upon our students is a life-long reading habit. As Michael Hyatt noted, "Leaders are readers." This week, we're going to explore strategies to at least get your student to doing the reading for the class. Why should anybody read? Well, a few years ago, I was having conversations with faculty members, and they were lamenting the fact that their students weren't reading.

After doing a bit of research, one thing led to another. I wrote a book called, *Read to Succeed: The Power of Books to Transform Your Life and Put You on the Path to Success*. The initial premise of this book was that students wanted to be successful, but they weren't reading and that entrepreneurs I was listening to on podcasts were extremely successful, and they were reading books like they were going to be banned. The more I read, the more I discovered that some of the most successful leaders were also readers. This was in government, military, business, academia, you name it. If folks were successful, they probably had a reading habit behind them. For example, Mark Cuban, he reads three hours a day. Warren Buffet, he reads 500 pages a day.

Now, you and I will probably not going to read that much, but there's other leaders out there who are doing a lot of reading. Bill Gates would take vacations, pile up a bunch of books, go read them, taking notes that he would later pour back into his business. Our Founding Fathers were reading books like crazy, and that's when books were expensive. It behooves us to be out there reading. If you're in academics and you're doing research, you're doing all kinds of reading. You're reading journal articles, but I know a lot of you are also reading books. It seems that these folks and you are learning from others.

For the individuals that I've mentioned, their books were their coaches and mentors throughout life, that there's always somebody who knows something that you don't, and a book is a convenient way of sharing this information. I also learned, as I was putting my book together, that to become an expert in something, you had to know more than others. While the number varies, if you read 3 to 15 books on a topic, you can become an expert in that particular topic. Some say that if you read an hour a day for seven years, you will become an international expert. Basically, reading is a fuel source for lifelong learning. If you want to be competitive in today's world, you must continue to read and learn.

Our students haven't figured this out yet, so we have to guide them. Why don't students read? Students don't read because they haven't found it to be important. Many students, even like us, are looking for the shortest path to success, and they have not yet learned that reading may be that particular path. As educators, we can't just simply tell them to read and expect miracles. Frankly, as educators, you're not normal. In fact, you're probably two standard deviations from normal. By being experts in your field, you understand the importance of what you do and the importance that reading plays into it. Students are not in love with your discipline yet. They're not in love with the purpose of academia.

They haven't got it, so students have not achieved that level of expertise. Therefore, they are skeptical because those around them are not reading either. We have to teach them how it is to be an expert in our particular field, and what is important in our particular field, and reading happens to be one of those things. What can we do to get students to read? Well, once you become an expert, your intrinsic motivations drive you, that you go out and look for material that will help you write your paper. You don't need somebody to tell how to do that, and you don't need somebody to be cracking the whip to do that. You have figured this out, and that's what makes you an expert.

You know how to continue to fuel that desire to learn more about your discipline. For students, on the other hand, we may have to rely on extrinsic motivators in order to get students to read. In other words, reading has to be part of their grade. Here are some strategies that I and others have used to get students to read. Have a pre-discussion. This strategy, I have been using for over 20 years, and basically, the strategy works this way. Towards the end of your class, the last class of that particular week, you will hand out a reading assignment. It could be written on your syllabus, it doesn't matter. You're going to hand out a reading assignment, and the goal is that the reading assignment has to be completed before the weekend is done.

In order to make sure that the reading assignment was done, students will contribute to an online thread of discussion that's in your LMS that you close up by 10 PM on Sunday evening. You can grade this based on quality or simply participation, but what you want them to do is you want them to read, then you want them to think about it and do some type of an assignment. In this case, it's a discussion, and they will also comment, perhaps, on other discussions that are going on. Then, say Monday is your class you will go in and look at those discussions ahead of time. That's why you do it at ten o'clock on a Sunday evening, so you still have time to look at them.

You can then identify what students' have-- I mean, you'll see based on their writing, you'll be able to get a sense of their strengths and weaknesses around a topic. When you go into class, you are going to have a discussion rather than a lecture which is going to be huge because that leads us to the second item. Do not lecture over the material in the chapter. If you rehash what they're supposed to have read, that you assigned, then there's no motivation for the students to do the reading. They'll simply watch the movie, so instead, you have to do some type of activity

based on the reading in order to get them engaged. This may be a short quiz, that you have them take a quiz when they walk into the classroom.

First thing, “Here’s a quiz based on your reading.” You may have a Socratic discussion where you’re just asking questions, and they’re providing the answers. Don’t give up if there’s a lot of silence. Just wait, somebody will crack. Somebody will answer it, and then you’ll just continue going. Ideally, walking into your class, you’re trying to get your students verbally answer some type of question. Always ask a question that is an absolute yes regardless, and have each student say it because this just opens up the valves, and then they’ll start taking. Another activity-- You can have a short quiz, another activity that you’re doing something with the reading. Don’t just lecture from page 1 to page 15 and just rehash that material.

Why would I need the book if you’re going to highlight everything for me? If you do that, stop doing that if you want them to read the book. You may also want to consider providing reading guides. When assigning reading, tell students what you want them to focus on. Not only that, let them know why what they’re reading is important. Tap into their prior knowledge of the subject. Start priming them for what they’re going to read. You may also want to consider preparing a worksheet that they have to complete as they’re reading the chapters, that they’re grasping the essence of those reading assignments. This will also help them stay focused on the reading.

One of the other things that you may want to do is teach them, actually, how to read an academic book. Many students don’t know how to read academically. Teach them about the SQ3R method for reading a book or a chapter. I talked about this in-depth in ITC:90 so go check that episode out. This method will help your students understand what is important, as well as help them prepare their own study guides, their own way of preparing for tests. If you haven’t read the book, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* please put that on your things-to-do. It discusses how to read a book in-depth. It also takes this idea of the SQ3R approach to an entirely different level.

I found it extremely useful, and I use those techniques all the time when I’m reading. Like I said, students don’t necessarily know how to be an expert in the field, so we have to teach them those skills. Don’t assume that they already know. You may want students to do a reading journal, consider assigning reading journals. I have to be honest, I have been assigned journaling exercises in the past, and they were not successful for me. However, since leaving college, since, well, past my degree, I have come to understand a lot more about journals and their importance. As I mentioned, these entrepreneurs I listen to, they journal. They read and they journal.

It’s not a skill that I’m proficient in. It’s not a skill that I use all time, but it’s a skill that I keep coming back to, this idea of journaling. I’m going to advocate for it. I’d say that you should be doing journals. This is one of those life skills that we should be teaching students, but we need to teach them how to do it correctly. Coming in a future episode, I’m going to talk more about journals. Come back; make sure that you check that out. Another strategy you can try is, “Ticket to enter.” When students come in, have them take an index card, and have them write three questions that they have from the reading to include

page numbers related to their questions, and use these questions as part of small group exercises.

You can use them to build quizzes that you're going to have your students do in the future. It could be a guide for your class discussion. This could tie back to this Socratic discussion method. This particular idea came from a faculty focus article, *Ready to Flip: Three Ways to Hold Students Accountable for Pre-Class Work*. I've put it in the show notes. Please check it out. I always include stuff in the show notes. Please go back, check those articles out. Folks are doing a lot of great stuff and we should be learning from them. Conducting an assessment, low-stake assessments at the beginning of class based on the reading is a way to help motivate students to prepare.

First thing, you tell them to read and then you whip a quiz on them; they'll start doing a little more reading. These assessments, they can be quizzes, in-class writing exercises, they can just be homework based on the reading. When you're doing these low stakes assessments, it should be worth at least a letter grade, if not two. In ITC:96, I explained how you can shape behavior through the use of your grade book. If you want students to read, you can shape your grade book to see that they do that. Make it count. A letter grade, two letter grades. Preferably if you want them to make reading important to what they do, two letter grades. They'll start doing it. Concept maps. I talked about concept maps in ITC:43.

In class, have students create a concept map over what they read. Normally a non-fictional book, you can use a concept map to basically outline the book. You can then tie that concept map to the previous week's concept map, and see how the whole concept map ideas start to expand. You can have students do it up at the boards or work in small groups. Now, while this is easier to do with non-fiction, it can also be used for fiction. You can talk about terms of scenes and characters, motivations, plots, backgrounds, relationships, just all kinds of stuff. You weave that in. Vocabulary quizzes are another strategy. If your reading material has a lot of new vocabulary attached to it, ensure that you're creating vocabulary quizzes.

I talked about those in ITC:42. One of the things that you may want to do is make sure that you present the vocabulary prior to the reading. This will help their reading otherwise it becomes a struggle if they come up to new words that they don't have previously defined. It'll make it a little more difficult, but if you identify those words ahead of time, get them out in front of the students it'll make the reading just go a little easier. Try that. Another strategy, just understanding that improved reading comes with practice. In order to continue to be a better reader and to really start enjoying reading, they have to practice. Make sure that you're assigning reading assignments throughout your class.

Don't take the shortcut and just give them videos. Make sure that they're actually reading. Provide assigned readings on a variety of difficulty levels. The difficulty of reading material has to be on a spectrum. Some of it may be really easy and some of it is mind-numbing hard but you can't do the mind-numbing hard content all the time. It'll just burn them out. It'll frustrate them. You can't do that. If you need to get into hard material, sometimes in order to strengthen their capability, they have to

read hard stuff. Keep in mind that you may have to provide some coaching as they work through it. This could be a great class activity that looking at some of these journal articles.

At the grad school level, we were analyzing journal articles quite often. Tearing those apart and putting them back together was an activity, but we usually did it in class. Then finally, highlight your own reading activities. Share with your students what you are also reading. Share the books that you're reading, what you're getting out of them, why they're important to you, why you chose that particular book. In my past course evaluations, my students highlighted my interest in reading. One student mentioned that she increased her reading because of my encouragement. Your students are listening. Keep sending the message, they'll get it.

I know through my discussion-- I typically teach an online class and when we're having discussions, I am constantly sharing books that I have read and how it will be relevant to what they're doing constantly. It's something that I suggest you do. Even in a face-to-face class, talk about what you're reading that week. Let students know that you're also out there continuously learning. The bottom line is students will assess your class and make a value judgment on whether or not they should dedicate time to reading. If you do nothing with what students have read, or you do the reading for them, they will not read. Towards the beginning of class or the beginning of the course, one of the things students do is see if they need to buy the textbooks.

One of the things that I do is, I emphasize the importance I place on reading through word indeed. In my syllabus, I point out that we will read every single page, how many pages they're going to read. It scares them a little bit, but they get the books and then we go right through them. You can get students to read, but like everything else, it has to be weaved into your instruction plan. Hopefully, these tips have helped some of these strategies. You got to make it count. At this level, until they're experts and professionals doing this as part of their day-to-day lives, you got to make it count. Hopefully, that helps. Speaking about reading, here's a quick plug from my book.