WHAT IS A READING LIST FOR?

A guide for module leaders on aligning reading with learning outcomes

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Background

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Introduction

Reading lists are, and seemingly always have been, an integral part of learning and teaching in Higher Education. Whilst almost every other aspect of teaching and learning has been re-examined and re-interpreted through various pedagogic lenses, reading list practice seems to have quietly gone on in more or less the same form as it always has.

There is value in consistency, but there is also a danger that in staying the same while all else changed, reading lists have become detached from contemporary pedagogic practice and are drifting into insignificance. This guide uses **Constructive Alignment** - alongside the experience of Oxford Brookes staff and students - to try to draw reading lists back into the heart of modern teaching practice.

> **Constructive Alignment** (Biggs and Tang, 2011) is currently a major pedagogic theory where all learning activities and assessments on a module directly contribute to students achieving a specific set of Learning Outcomes. Oxford Brookes is constructively aligned in that all modules have a set of Learning Outcomes that are chosen from the programme-level Learning Outcomes when a module is designed.
>
> **Learning Outcomes** are constructed around a verb and describe what the student will be able to do after successfully completing the module, eg 'Design a product from a brief using the materials listed in the brief'. An important idea of Learning Outcomes is that they focus on what the student does, rather than on what the teacher does.

A key aspects of Constructive Alignment is to shift the focus away from the teacher and onto the student. Biggs and Tang take the example of the traditional lecture as a situation where we know what the teacher should be doing (lecturing!) but the participation of the student is far less defined (should they be listening, thinking, taking notes, asking questions, discussing with peers, Tweeting?!). They describe numerous ways in which the lecture format can be updated so that students are participating in designed activities, with the intention that their role in the lecture will be structured, known to both teacher and student, and - as a result - the intended Learning Outcomes are more likely to be achieved.

Just as Biggs and Tang identified and addressed a gap of understanding in the traditional lecture format, this guide aims to close the thoroughly documented gap of understanding between teachers and students regarding traditional reading list practice (Stokes and Martin, 2008; Brewerton, 2014; Siddall and Rose, 2014, amongst others). The gap is a significant matter: when reading lists are poorly designed and their relevance to modules is misunderstood by students then a fantastic opportunity for effective and efficient teaching and learning is missed, and the considerable expenses of academic staff time, library staff time, and the resource budgets spent on reading lists are wasted.

This guide describes four levels of practice - **Organise, Annotate, Engage, Flip** - through which module leaders can redesign their reading lists and bridge the gap of understanding so that both the student and teacher of any module could answer the question **what is the reading list for?**

Organise

SITUATION   The reading list seems detached from the rest of the module and the student doesn't understand how the reading materials relate to the teaching or assessment of the module

SOLUTION   Arrange your reading list into sections that correspond with the other learning activities and assessment of the module

BENEFITS   Clarifies the relations between the resources and other learning activities for both student and teacher

The student is more likely to read and reference the right resources at the right time

Refines the reading list down to only the items that directly relate to the teaching and assessment of the module

IDEAS   Would it benefit the student to have a separate reading list section for each week, topic, or even Learning Objective?

Could you arrange your reading list into sections that correspond with the sections of your module's Moodle page?

Are all the references in your teaching resources (eg presentation slides and handouts) also on the reading list?

Would a section of resources directly applicable to each assessment help start students off on their assignments?

What does the order of the resources within each section tell the student?

Is there a realistic number of resources for the student to read in each section of the reading list?

Can the resources on the reading list be read in an amount of time that is appropriate to the credit value of the module?

Does the library have sufficient resources to cope with the demand that the resources will be under?

Experience

Jonathan White
University Teacher
(Oxford Brookes University)

"I'd like to align the lists even more closely to get more learning benefits"

It seems like common sense to me that any reading list provided should be directly related to the module content and assignments. On previous undergraduate modules I've taught I made a conscious effort to set chapters from core reading list books as reading homeworks early on in the module. This came from a desire to capitalise on the resources available, and also to just get students reading. Drawing students' attention to core texts worked very well in many cases and was a less intimidating starting point than the journal articles that came later in the module. In fact, it was actually more revealing of which students had not grasped the key concepts, so there were potential learning benefits there, providing the students had enough time and motivation to seek extra support.

In my current module on Research Skills I've incorporated activities and extracts from the reading list texts into the teaching materials and I directly link the books on the reading list to particular skills and assignments. This seems to have worked, as students have successfully used the study skills books on the reading list in their presentations to add depth, credibility and % points to their marks. I notice some of the keener students (more mature usually but not always) have also been seeking out some of the books earlier on for their own reference.

I'm definitely going to continue and develop this practice as I'd like to align the reading list even more closely to get more learning benefits. What I've found is that I need to promote the list more in actual classes. One problem is the students have so much to read anyway for their assignments, etc. that study skills or core texts become peripheral as the semester develops. I think the key is to have core texts early on, when students are fresh and keen, and then any other texts that we want them to read should be directly relevant to assignments.

Annotate

SITUATION

The reading list contains only the bibliographic details of the resources and the student has to guess why each resource has been chosen, which part they should focus on, how they should read, and what they're meant to gain from the reading

SOLUTION

Annotate your reading list with comments that explain why you have included each item on the reading list and how the reading should be approached

BENEFITS

The student is guided in their reading rather than having to guess why each resource has been chosen

Makes it more likely that the student will gain from the reading what you would like them to gain

IDEAS

Would a basic rating of Essential, Recommended, or Optional for each item on the reading list help student to prioritise their reading?

For each resource could you succinctly explain how it relates to the other teaching activities?

Might drawing connections between each item on the reading list and the assessments of the module illustrate the relevance of the reading?

Is there a particular section of each resource that the student should focus their attention on?

Is there any guidance you could offer on how the student could read each resource (eg skim, in-depth, revisit, make notes, compare with, etc.)?

Could you succinctly critique each resource on its quality or significance to the subject?

Do you have a personal view on the resource that the student would find useful or interesting?

Experience

"An example of inclusive learning and teaching"

Fiona Kelner
Dyslexia and Specific
Learning Difficulties
Team Manager
(Oxford Brookes University)

When I first heard about this work through the Brookes Learning and Teaching Conference it was clear how much the students I work with would gain from this approach. It is an example of inclusive learning and teaching or Universal Design for Learning, providing students with varied ways to engage with the material (Rose and Meyer, 2008). Inclusive teaching is now widely seen as one of the most important ways universities can offer an optimum learning environment for students with disabilities, whilst also improving the experience for all students.

Students with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties may experience difficulties with phonological processing, working memory, attention and concentration, processing speed, visual processing or visual stress. All of these make reading more challenging, so guidance, such as annotating the reading list, helps the student engage with the text. For students who experience difficulties with reading, use of a preferred strategy or software for study is recommended (see the Upgrade website for **reading strategies** and **assistive technology**).

Students with English as an additional language, international students, students with other disabilities including mental health conditions, care leavers and mature students may also find some traditional reading lists difficult to engage with. Use of the suggestions in this guide could provide students with a scaffolded reading experience; increasing their ability to read for meaning, learn from the recommended sources and improving their study skills in general, through an inclusive approach that can benefit all students.

Teaching and assessing in more inclusive ways has become an essential part of how university's design courses in recent years, following a shift in legislation and funding away from external bodies to the institution, with all staff having a responsibility to ensure reasonable adjustments are made in line with the Equality Act (2010). Inclusive practice is the primary method for meeting our anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities and is recommended by HEFCE, JISC the HEA, QAA and the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group. In 2016/17 Brookes issued a set of guidance to meet this aim which can be found on the website **Supporting Students' Learning Needs**.

Level 3

Engage

SITUATION The student doesn't engage with the reading list resources or seems to retain very little of what they've read

SOLUTION Design your reading list to include structured activities for the student to complete

Design an assessment strategy so that the reading list activities are either directly addressed or integral to success in the assessment

> **KEY IDEA**
>
> **Students focus the time and attention they invest in a module on the assessed activities (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005; Lemanski, 2011) so if reading is to be an integral element of a module then it must be assessed or explicitly linked to assessment**

BENEFITS Activities encourage the student out of a 'passive' reading state and increase the likelihood that they will engage with the reading materials

The student is more likely to understand and retain ideas and information

Makes it more likely that the student will gain from the reading what you would like them to gain

The student is highly motivated to engage with the reading activities

IDEAS Would asking the student to summarise a resource - perhaps using a template - encourage them to read in more detail and process the ideas more thoroughly?

Might an online discussion stimulate interest in the reading?

Might an automated online quiz persuade the student to pay more attention to the reading and also give you feedback on their comprehension?

Could you put a database on the reading list and ask the student to explore the literature themselves and perhaps share their discoveries with you and their peers?

Would asking the student to reflect upon their own understanding encourage them to revisit the reading?

Might asking students to write reviews of reading list resources, perhaps comparing different resources or viewing them through a particular theoretical lens, encourage them to read and consider the resources in detail?

Could students collaborate with the teaching staff to co-create a reading list as the module progresses?

Could you assign even a small proportion (eg 10-25%) of the overall module mark to reading list activities to encourage the student to invest time in detailed and engaged reading?

Experience

"The quality and quantity of discussion has been raised and accompanied by much higher satisfaction ratings"

Georgina Glenny
Senior Lecturer
(Oxford Brookes University)

We anticipate that students at University level can read, but the quality and focus of that reading can vary enormously. We usually judge the results of that reading through students' writing and can be frustrated by the lack of reference to and engagement with key texts and key themes that we thought we had identified in our lectures and reading lists. This has been lucidly explored by Judith Seaboyer and colleagues through the Reading Resilience Toolkit (Barnett et al, 2012; Douglas et al, 2015) and what I would like to add to this debate is the potential for reading resilience to be supported by the way we design the online elements of our courses. The Moodle grid format (as opposed to the default linear and weekly format) makes a thematic organisation of the course very easy, so that each topic or theme of the module can be clearly represented and framed. That thematic organisation can then be mirrored in the headings used in the electronic reading list, which can be set up to easily identify key texts within those themes. Thus hopefully, the student's attention can be focused on the core reading for a particular curriculum topic.

However, directing attention to the core reading does not ensure students critically engage with reading, and so this aspect needs to be tackled more actively. Classically we model this criticality by sharing and discussing papers face-to-face in seminars, but class size, students surfing the sessions without reading the texts, and the pressures of course content can often make this problematic. An alternative is the online asynchronous discussion. This can be tightly framed in each thematic section of Moodle through the setting of two or three papers that present alternative perspectives on the identified theme which the students are then encouraged to discuss within a clear timescale. Like many colleagues at Brookes I have been doing this for a number of years, with some success, by making engagement a requirement for the module. However, in response to feedback from students about the inconsistent quality and quantity in students' contributions I recently assigned 20% of the marks for the module to the asynchronous discussion. In order to do this I needed to be much more specific about how I would value their contributions and so have developed a set of criteria for both the quantity and quality of response. The quantity criteria includes the contextual value of their comments (eg careful 'listening' to other participants, starting a discussion, acknowledging the contributions of others, developing a theme) while the quality criteria relates to the academic content of the contributions (eg understanding of texts, relevance, critical appraisal of the issues being discussed).

To my surprise, across three different modules, the quality and quantity of discussion has been raised and accompanied by much higher satisfaction ratings for this aspect of the course. Student feedback suggests an element of anxiety about the online discussions ("Online discussions made me read the papers but I do not like putting my ideas out there. I enjoyed reading everyone else's comments though!") but that overall they are valued ("Online discussions are useful and thought provoking - interesting to discuss with peers in similar and different settings"). Meanwhile the timescale allowed (typically two weeks for part-time students) gives students ample time to read and engage with the key texts and the monitoring of contributions results in everyone contributing.

Flip

SITUATION   During valuable face-to-face contact time the teacher 'delivers content' while the student passively receives it

SOLUTION   The module delivery is **flipped** so that information is effectively delivered by a range of text and multimedia resources on a reading list while face-to-face contact time is used for the discussion, examination, and application of that information

> **Flipped Learning** (Lage, Platt and Treglia, 2000) is a reverse of the traditional lecture, which is often used for the expert lecturer to broadcast information at the students and students then apply that information when working on problems or assignments outside of face-to-face teaching. The argument of flipped learning is that information is more effectively communicated by published media (eg through a reading list) and that the time of the expert academic is better used to help students apply that information to problems and assessments in face-to-face sessions.

BENEFITS   'Content delivery' is outsourced to a suitably organised and annotated reading list

Face-to-face contact time more interactive and interesting for both student and teacher

The student faces the challenge of applying information to new situations with the subject expert on-hand to assist

The teacher is more able to gauge the progress of the student through more frequent interaction

IDEAS   How much of your face-to-face contact time do you spend telling students information about a subject that they could get more effectively through a combination of resources on a reading list?

Would students be engaged by a truly multimedia reading list with print and online books, articles and reports, audio (eg podcasts, music, recorded radio broadcasts), video (eg documentaries, recorded television programmes, YouTube, screencasts, lecture capture), databases, datasets, online and physical archives, webpages, images, software, social media (Twitter, blogs, Facebook), online maps (eg Google Maps, Digimap), and even physical locations?

How could your subject expertise be more profitably used during face-to-face time?

What combination of explanation, discussion, and application of information and ideas could be done during face-to-face contact time?

Would some assessments be better worked on during face-to-face contact time with you as the subject expert at hand to assist when the student encounters difficulties?

In your feedback could you reference items from the reading list that the student should revisit?

Experience

David Aldridge
Reader in Education
(Brunel University London)
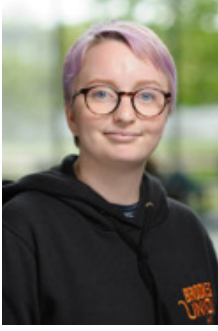
"The responsiveness and freedom means each run of the module develops differently"

My academic commitment has always been that academic engagement means reading, writing, and academic discussion through writing. I wanted a module that more consistently emphasised these elements and gave as many opportunities as possible for students to get formative feedback on their writing. I was influenced by the Reading Resilience Toolkit project in Australia (Barnett et al, 2012; Douglas et al, 2015) which found that if you attach even a very small proportion of the module mark to tasks that directly assess reading, this is enough to encourage students to do the reading. The project recommended quizzes that test comprehension and also whether students have read to the end. I never really got on with the quiz idea but another proposal was that students are expected to write a short response to the required reading and bring it with them to the session where those texts are discussed. I quickly realised that this could be done in something like a blog format, which would then allow students to post their response and get peer and tutor feedback on it in advance of the relevant face-to-face teaching session. That's where the flipped classroom element comes in.

My module runs as follows: I spend one lecture introducing the reading for the next couple of weeks (though I have also accumulated video recordings of these introductions which students can watch between seminars, freeing up more time for discussion) and provide a one sheet reading guide - this was inspired by the Reading Resilience Toolkit, which found that you shouldn't send students off to read 'cold' but give them a short introduction explaining why they are reading something, dealing with difficult vocabulary, and suggesting 'ways in' to the material. Students then respond to the reading through a concise blog-style response in an online forum, with appropriate academic tone and referencing, and are expected to comment on each others' posts. I also read and comment on each blog which means I can see that the students are reading and direct all of my formative comments to how they are writing about the reading. The result is that students turn up to the face-to-face session having all read and attempted to write about the same material, and they can direct the session towards the emerging issues that have interested them in particular or that they are struggling with. I can also deal with specific issues that I have picked up from the blogs. After the face-to-face session students have a week to add to or amend their blogs and responses, I then assess them, and the cycle begins again.

Over the course of the module students write six forum posts on a two-week cycle. Some of my colleagues are nervous about the assessment load as it means reading and commenting on all those posts. It is certainly a shift in work patterns, but it's not more work and I don't have a big pile of assignments at the end of the module. Also, my reading and commenting on the blogs is my session planning. It's not additional. I find it hard to get this shift in emphasis over to my colleagues, but I don't plan sessions any more. I choose a course of reading for the students, and then in face-to-face sessions I respond to what students write about it. This responsiveness and freedom means each run of the module develops differently according to what the specific group of students writes in the forums, while the students are engaged with the reading and with writing about the reading because it's the assessment. It's a different way of working.

Experience

"It encourages students to process, apply, and truly understand what they are learning"

A frequent talking point amongst students is the number of contact hours they get, with many students feeling that they don't get quite as many as they thought they would when they applied to university. While flipped learning does not increase the number of contact hours, it does aim to improve the usefulness and quality of those hours. Flipped learning encourages students to be active participants in their education, learning through interaction and discussion, rather than using their much-valued contact time on what they could have read in the textbook (another common student complaint!). It encourages students to process, apply, and truly understand what they are learning, and can be tailored to suit a range of learning styles.

Consultation with students shows that they value engaging teaching and high quality learning resources, and reading lists play an important part of this. If reading lists are well-organised, easily accessible and relevant to what they are studying, students are better able to engage with them and thus improve their learning. A phrase I heard many times as a student was "you are reading for a degree". Good practice in developing reading lists, and innovative teaching arrangements like flipped learning, bring reading for a degree closer to being a reality.

Harriet Cherry
Vice President:
Academic Experience
(Brookes Union)

Implementing this guide

If the ideas in this guide are of interest to you but you are not sure how to implement them in your teaching practice at Oxford Brookes then the following contacts may be able to help:

- Your Academic Liaison Librarian can advise on utilising a range of print and online resources, how to effectively construct a reading list using the library's **Aspire reading list** system, and how to integrate that reading list with the delivery of the module. To find out who your Academic Liaison Librarian is please choose your area of study from the **Subject help webpage**.

- OCSLD (**the Oxford Centre of Staff and Learning Development**) are pedagogic experts and consultants at Oxford Brookes who can advise on the theory and practice of Constructive Alignment, encouraging student engagement, and Flipped Learning.

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