

Active Online Reading

A QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project

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Executive Summary of final project report

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About this report

This report is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project is led by the University of Lincoln in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University, Talis, UCL, the University of Nottingham, and the University of Salford. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the QAA website here: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/collaborative-enhancement-projects>.

Executive Summary

Active Online Reading, a QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement project, investigated how students learn online and how they are taught to do so in higher education in the UK. Gathering and generating a range of pedagogic resources and presenting at several conferences practice-sharing events, the project team also administered a survey to higher education staff and students.

The headline finding of the project is that online reading is an indispensable element of learning in higher education, irrespective of discipline or level of study. If deployed in a constructive manner, it has a number of benefits for students and academics, including:

- **Learning.** It can function as a powerful driver for learning, especially when students are encouraged to engage actively with readings, for example by adding annotations.
- **Social.** Online learning can be a highly social activity and many students spoke of the benefits to comprehension and socialisation that accrued from working collaboratively on a text.
- **Accessibility.** Students and staff spoke repeatedly about how online reading is accessible because it does not tie them to a physical space and provides for a significant degree of flexibility.

The survey also identified a series of disjunctions between staff and student expectations and experiences of academic reading in general and online reading in particular.

- **Deficit understanding of student reading among staff.** The project team identified a widespread deficit understanding of student reading among staff, who generally rated their students' reading skills for academic study rather poorly.
- **Disjunction between staff and student ratings of skill levels** Conversely students rated their academic reading skills much more positively than their lecturers. This disjunction between academic staff and students is concerning because it suggests that there is a lack of understanding on both sides that needs to be addressed.
- **Lack of focus on online reading within modules.** Further, despite the overwhelming majority of staff rating online reading as indispensable for study in their discipline and their view on students' lack of skill in reading in general, academics generally do not seem to pay much attention to cultivating online reading skills in their modules.
- **Undeveloped pedagogies for reading.** Despite identifying some pockets of best practice and some innovative work on online reading, the survey results from staff and students do not seem to reflect particularly well-developed or structured pedagogies for teaching reading in higher education. For example, there appears to be minimal consideration of how reading skills might be developed over the course of a degree programme.
- **Timing of reading development activity can be an issue.** There are also issues relating to the timing of reading development activities. Many students and staff talked about instruction in reading at university level taking place early in the course, often during induction. In general, this approach does not seem to have been particularly successful engaging a wide range of students.

Another significant finding is that reading online is a highly physical activity – many students spoke about digital texts causing headaches, back pain, and other side effects.

Finally, it is important to note that reading cannot be treated separately from other skills. Writing, information literacy and research are all predicated on the ability to read effectively, but similarly reading derives from the ability to find texts in the first place. Similarly, online reading cannot be separated from 'offline' reading and clearly forms part of students' broader skills packages.

The Active Online Reading project team has produced numerous [resources](#) to help staff and students overcome (or at least minimise) some of the challenges associated with reading online and to maximise its potential as a support – or even a driver – for student learning.

Recommendations

Pedagogically, identification of good practice and student feedback suggests that the following approaches might prove fruitful at an institutional, module and programme level:

- Develop and share best practice in teaching students how to read online.
- Carefully structure student engagement with texts to develop their skills in reading, through the use of guiding questions, worksheets, and other kinds of individual and collaborative tasks.
- Adopt a stepped approach that embeds reading development work across curricula and addresses progression between levels.
- Create the conditions, using online platforms and tools, for students to engage actively and/or collaboratively in texts.
- Work in collaboration with the library and study skills teams to identify potential gaps and to ensure an effective balance between generic and discipline-specific reading skills.
- Pay careful attention to how reading development activities relate to other skills, especially writing and information/ digital literacy.
- Consider the full range of implications of accessibility in online reading. Online readings can be extremely accessible, but for some students making them can be very challenging. Do not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

The various disjunctions that we have outlined in this report lead us to make a number of recommendations for staff, students and institutions:

- Staff and institutions can develop students' reading habits and practices to address the skills gap that academics identify.
- Students could be encouraged to adjust their perceptions and recognise that reading at university may require a different set of skills to those they have deployed before.
- Staff will need to adjust their expectations if they are to meet students halfway, 'where they are' rather than where we wish they would be.

We would encourage students to do the following:

- Engage actively with texts, whether online or offline, through annotating them, responding to prompts from your tutors, or asking your own questions. When writing notes.
- Read together to develop your understanding and confidence with texts – and your reading skills. This can be done in class, formally in online spaces set up by tutors, or informally (online and/or in person).

Practically, the following considerations are particularly significant:



- Do not take the 'accessibility' of online readings for granted and certainly do not assume that all students will find them equally accessible.
- Recognise that students can frequently experience 'platform confusion' when asked to cycle between different formats of text and online spaces. Consider reducing the number of platforms with which they are expected to engage.
- Digital poverty affects many students, especially those who are accessing online readings away from campus.
- Finally, remember the very considerable physical challenges that can affect students when reading online and provide guidance and support on how to mitigate these.