Developing Reading Lists

How can we make the most of this vital learning resource?

What do students think a reading list is for?

Do you agree?

- Expanding knowledge and broadening reading
- Recommendations and directed reading
- Identifies the 'right' resources for that module/lecturer
- Baseline of what is needed to complete assessment
- Insight into what the lecturer expects to be included in essays
- Lecturer to point out their own books
- Offers the 'experts' choice
- Sets the expectation of self-directed learning

What do students think the problems of reading lists are?

- Item availability
- Doesn't facilitate critical analysis
- Resources are seen as 'right' or 'wrong' by lecturers
- No expectations about what to do with the list (students don't use reading lists before University)
- Students 'not caring' and 'not academically engaged'
- Dictates what is to be learnt (students want ownership of their own learning)
- Imposes lecturer's bias/ideology
- Reading lists as lecturer's bibliography (too long)
- Reading lists not referred to in lectures and seminars
- Role of reading bridging lectures and seminars (problem of 3hr lecture-seminar combination sessions – if readings in advance, what is the point of the lecture)
- Getting the balance between 'spoonfeeding' vs breadth
- Core readings are seen as the bare minimum, background reading is only for the keen ones – but not identifying the core/background makes it difficult to focus reading.

The challenge

Provision of wider reading

Requirements of an assessment or activity

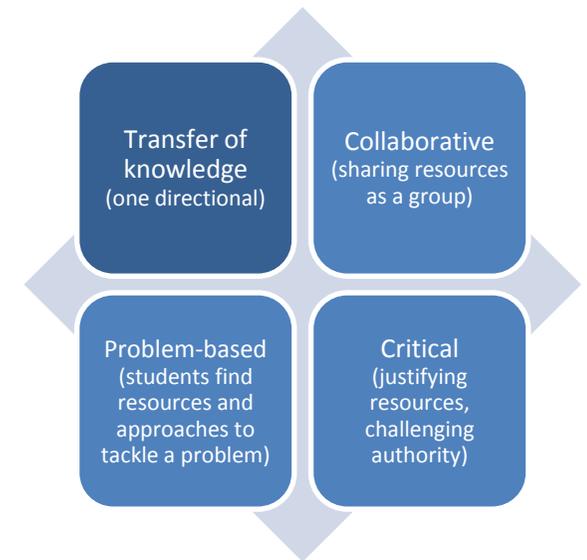**Increase critical engagement**

Potential learning approaches for engaging students with reading lists

Reading lists in their traditional format are **one directional** in nature. They indicate what the **expert** has identified is of benefit to students. We can question whether this approach completely addresses the learning aims of a reading list.

Thinking about a reading lists as an **active learning resource** (collaborative, problem-based or critical) offers opportunities to overcome some of the problems students have identified.

See over for some suggestions of approaches.

Whilst it is neither practical nor desirable to move completely away from traditional formats of reading lists for a whole module, a **combination of approaches** which include learning activities can increase engagement, hence encourage wider reading.

Transfer of knowledge (one directional)

Collaborative (sharing resources as a group)

Problem-based (students find resources and approaches to tackle a problem)

Critical (justifying resources, challenging authority)

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Try something new
Includes suggestions from students

Linking reading lists to sessions
Take 2 minutes at the end of each lecture to point out the specific readings on the list that would inspire students based on themes of the lecture.

Breadcrumb trail
Theories and practices may evolve between different authors. Identify start and end points of a trail (e.g. reading with the initial work and one with a current understanding of a theory) and ask students to form the links between these points by finding the connecting readings.

Beyond the institutional bubble
Students required to utilise social networks and online communities to identify the latest work in a particular field (e.g. link shares via Twitter, forthcoming publications on blogs).

Search rather than spoon
Provide students with suggested search terms and direction to what online search options to use (i.e. a particular database). This then leads to further activities:
- Collect readings together on a shared bibliography
- Provide short 250 word summaries
- Establish the strengths/ weaknesses of the reading
- Find readings to solve a problem

Encouraging challenges of expertise
If you are including your own writings in reading lists, encourage students to challenge or support your work by finding complementary or contradictory papers.

Treasure hunt
Similar to the trails, but starting from a single reading, students must work backwards through reading references to work out the major contributions to a particular theory. Can be combined with a 'reference bingo' list post-activity to judge success.

Improve what you've got

One of our overall aims is to take students from a position of 'dependency' (novice) to one of 'autonomy' (expert) (Stokes and Martin, 2008). Reading lists are products of expertise. However, often it is the process, rather than the product, from which we learn and understand.

The process of creating a reading list is obscure to students. Sharing your reasons for including a resource in a list will provide students with an insight into 'thinking like an academic'.

In addition, Chelin, et al (2005) suggest that students need to **understand the terms of engagement**: What are they supposed to do with these resources? What is their purpose in the context of the module? How should they deal with limited resources?

How to achieve this

Review your own lists critically
- For each resource, establish **why you have included** it in your list – if it is difficult to justify, perhaps remove it.
- For each resource or collection of resources on a similar theme, explain why you have included them and **what you expect students to get out of these readings**, to show students you have thought about these resources and hence **why they should value them too**. Amount of guidance depends on stage in the degree programme.
- **Is each item readily available?** If not:
  - Specify clearly that other editions are acceptable (students can't tell this if they don't have both editions to compare and don't know your expectations). E.g. statement at the top of the list.
  - Link to a digital copy, or create one if legal to do so.
  - Label the item as background reading only.
  - Remove the item (avoids student anxiety and does not set unrealistic expectations).

References: Chelin, J., McEachran, M. and Williams, E. (2005) 'Five hundred into 4 won't go - how to solve the problem of reading list expectations', SCONUL Focus, 36:49-51. Stokes, P. and Martin, L. (2008) 'Reading lists: a study of tutor and student perceptions, expectations and realities', Studies in Higher Education, 33(2):113-125.
See also: http://cloudworks.ac.uk/cloud/view/5549 which gives further examples and approaches to developing resource lists.