

What is the purpose of a reading list?

Staff

- To provide a baseline of knowledge/'safety-blanket'
- To supplement lectures/to evolve over the course of the module
- To encourage students to engage with further reading
- To highlight key texts, 'quality' sources, the 'right' resources

Students

- To strategically choose readings
- To meet assessment objectives
- To get direction towards credible resources

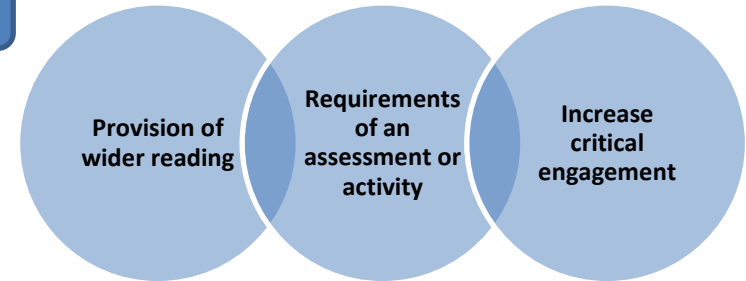
What are the problems of reading lists?

- Doesn't motivate students to actively engage with readings
- Risks of 'spoon-feeding'/assessment-driven
- Lack of integration with face-to-face activities and content
- Open to bias of lecturer/personal/political/ethical sway
- Limiting interdisciplinary and cross-programme perspectives
- Doesn't meet different learning preferences
- Scale and scope of lists too big and intimidating to students
- Students don't challenge the authority of lists create by lecturers

What if reading lists (lists of references) were banned?

- Provide students with a stimulus/starting point for searching
- Weave in resources more closely with sessions/activities
- Students forced to adopt 'academic' persona and skills
- Ask students to create resource lists in activities:
 - Wikis, blogs, social bookmarking (delicious/diigo)
 - Resources to feed directly into seminars, required activities
 - Students to justify choices/critical analysis/challenge
 - Information literacy skills required and developed

The challenge



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.

Making reading lists an **active learning resource** (collaborative, problem-based or critical) offers opportunities to overcome some of the common problems of reading lists. Such activities may include: prompting students with search terms; generating a class bibliography; starting with one author, looking at citations and progression of the idea; using new forms of list (podcasts, mind maps, collaborative).

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.



Reading strategies

Reading lists are presented to students on every module, with different lecturers each with different agendas and attitudes to the role of reading lists. The list itself may take the form of a long list or be broken down into weeks/topics, or have 'essential', 'recommended' and 'background labels. In order for students to engage, they 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 to deal with limited resources (Chelin, et al , 2005).

As you create reading lists, or indeed include other resources in your courses, consider your own justification as to why they are important. If they are not, then you can question whether the resource really needs to be included at all.

Share your justification with students, or challenge them to identify the significance of the resource. This provides context and direction, enabling the student to not only understand the role of the resources and how to use them appropriately, but also to give them insight into the process of selecting resources. You can write justifying statements for individual, activity-based resources, or as an introduction to a collection of background readings.

Example

You suggest all students look at three text books in preparation for a seminar activity. Your reference specifies the latest edition of the books, but other editions are available and, in this case, just as valid. The students assume that only the specified edition is acceptable (they can't check each edition to make sure the content is the same).

You should state that other editions can be used, and prompt why those books were chosen, e.g. 'Consider how Book B and Book C present XYZ in the context provided by Book A. As I mentioned in the lecture, I find the tension between the interpretations fascinating, especially Book B, page 123.' You have shown an awareness of resource restrictions, have set your expectations to read all three books and there is a 'hook' to spark interest.

Reading list design

Reading lists are exceptionally important at underpinning a module. As with all resources, giving yourself time to prepare is essential. Avoid the temptation to pull out the same list from the previous year without engaging with the list yourself to see how it needs to change in the context of revised content.

Consider

- Date, edition, availability? What alternatives are there (also consider in terms of format, print vs online, particularly for high-demand resources)?
- Is the resource part of a face-to-face activity? How does it link to lectures and seminars? Should it be on the list, or embedded within the activity?
- Is it essential, recommended, background? How do you convey your rationale to students?
- Does the list need splitting by week or topic to direct students' reading?
- Does the resource need digitising for easy access (CLA digitisation)?

Programme context

When considering resources, reading lists and activities to engage students with resources, you will need to also think about the place of the module within the programme. Stokes and Martin (2008:122) present a model of the different tutor and student perceptions of resources at each stage of a programme. The level of interaction, critical analysis and knowledge transfer will differ for each stage. The net effect is going from a position of dependence (student) to that of autonomy over the selection and evaluation of resources (thinking and acting as an academic). Utilising reading strategies early on helps this journey.

Dependency

Autonomy