

# An Exploratory Analysis of Students' Use of the Textbook

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*While the textbook is generally an integral part of the course for faculty, it is less clear the role the textbook plays for students. This study consists of a survey across three universities and focus groups of students to explore how and to what extent students use the textbook and how it relates to their study process to prepare for class and exams. We also examine what students feel would motivate them to increase their usage of the textbook.*

## INTRODUCTION

For most instructors the textbook serves as an integral course component providing the linkage between the lecture, assignments and examinations. Typically the textbook will represent the collective beliefs of the profession on what is important for a particular course topic. Often instructors will assume, or at least hope, that students use the textbook to facilitate and enhance their learning process. It is imperative that careful attention be paid to the assumptions of student textbook usage as an instructor designs a course, creates course materials and makes the textbook selection.

It would surprise few faculty to learn that students spend significantly less time reading and studying than they did even twenty years ago. A major study conducted in 2003 of over 275,000 students found that only 34% reported studying more hours a week, while in 1987 that figure was 47% (Nonis and Hudson, 2006). Study Clump et al (2004), Sikorski, et al (2001), Sappington et al (2002), and Conner-Greene (2000), among others, report that the vast majority of students do not read assignments to the best of their ability and do not consider the textbook to be a critical component of learning (relative to other factors such as attendance, etc.). In addition, the majority of students reported spending three hours or fewer per week reading their textbooks and working problems. In research on business students, Phillips and Phillips (2007) found that only 26% of accounting students in the study used the stated learning objectives as a guide to reading.

The objective of this study is to explore how and to what extent students use the textbook and how it relates to their study process to prepare for class and exams. Instructors must consider a variety of issues such as to what extent does the textbook become a critical component for the students. Does the instructor's belief about how students prepare for their class match the students actual behavior? Is the textbook a critical component for the students' learning plans, and to what extent do they rely on the textbook in general? Finally, we also examine what students feel would motivate them to increase their usage of the textbook.

## METHODOLOGY

Data were collected using an internet-based survey based on a compilation of previous research assessing student usage of textbooks in the classroom (The Teaching Professor, 2001; Holschuh, 2000). The survey consists of three main components; when reading is primarily done, how the textbook is used for studying, and other general aspects of studying. Each of the constructs described were measured by a five-point Likert-type scale. Additionally we ask what would motivate the students to read their textbook more.

Empirical data for this study were collected during the spring of 2008 from undergraduate students enrolled in finance courses in ten different course sections across three universities. For each class the professor emailed the students the survey link and participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. A combined total of 267 useable surveys were received, out of which 3 surveys were eliminated due to incomplete responses, leaving 264 responses and an effective response rate of 32%.

The respondents were almost equally divided by gender, with 49.6% male and 50.4% female. The students were predominantly juniors (62.9%) and seniors (27.4%) with an average age of 21.6 year old. Over 90% the students reported that they were taking four or more classes. Most students (81.4%) reported attending their finance class all or most of the time even though 83% reported working outside of school. The students self reported GPA breakdowns were 26.8% between 3.5 to 4.0, 41.8% between 3.0 to 3.49, 18.3% between 2.5 to 2.99 and 1.1% between 2.0- 2.49. Most respondents reported (perhaps optimistically) that they expected to get either an A (42.6%) or a B (46.8%) in their finance course.

## RESULTS

Figure 1 displays the results for how much time students spend per week reading their finance textbook. The results are consistent with Silkorski, et al (2002) who also found that students on average spend less than three hours per week. In Figure 2 the responses contrast with the student's perception of the professor's expectation of reading time for their finance course. It is apparent that students realize they are not spending the time expected of them.

Q5. In an average week, how much time do you spend reading the textbook for this class?

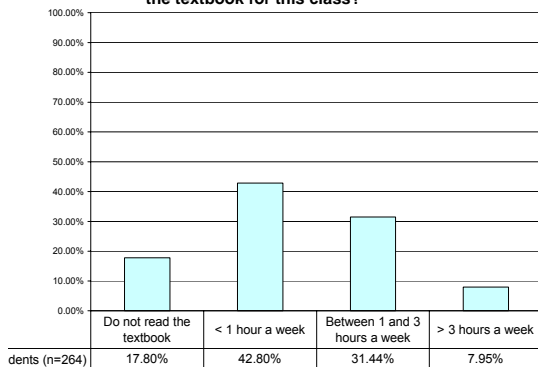


Figure 1

Q6. How much reading do you think your Finance professor expects you to do each week?

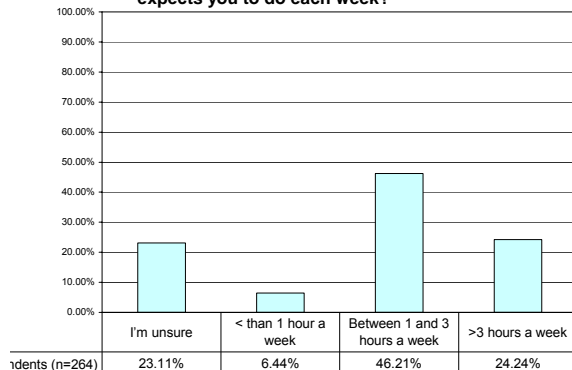


Figure 2

Figure 3 displays when students reported they read the textbook for their finance class. The results provide a time series view of reading in that students are increasing their reading as the material is covered in the course. It appears that exams and homework seem to provide some motivation for using the textbook. The students reported that they predominantly read in

preparation of exams, if they have a specific question or are working on homework. A smaller number report actually reading prior to the class. In fact, 52.5% of the students stated that they never or rarely read the textbook before coming to class. Charet al (2004) found that students read an average of 27.46% of assigned material prior to class and 69.98% prior to an exam which corresponds to our results.

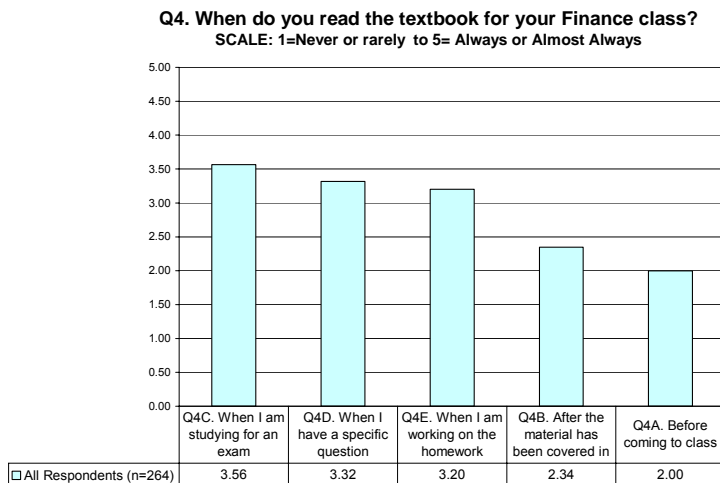


Figure 3

Figure 4 displays the responses to the question “When studying finance, how often do you do the following?”. The options presented provide examples of both deep and surface study strategies. Deep strategies facilitate scaffolding of new information to prior information and surface strategies tend to focus on task completion versus learning (Biggs, et. al. 2001; Holschuh, 2000). Most students reported using surface study strategies more often than deep study strategies. In addition, 60% of the respondents indicated that they “rarely or never” do any unassigned homework problems.

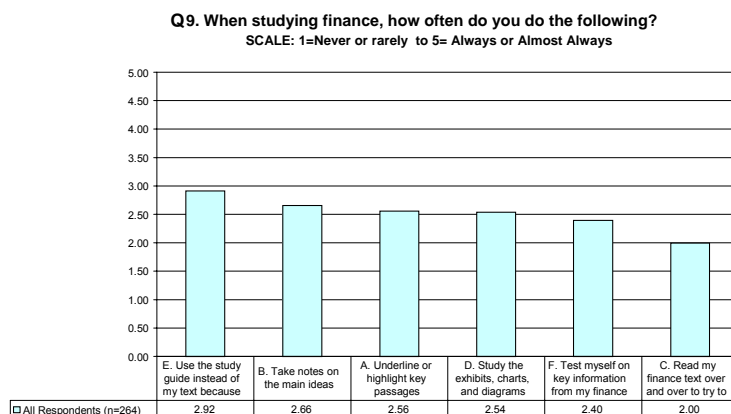


Figure 4

Figure 5 displays the results when asked about more general studying strategies. The students report essentially the same results as Figure 4, a general lack of deep studying strategies and a greater reliance on shallower strategies. Students tend to cram for exams and rarely try

to anticipate exam questions. A positive result is that students do report a tendency to change study tactics if they do poorly.



Figure 5

As previously shown in Figure 1 and 2 there appears to be a disconnect between students reported actual reading time and their perception of the professors expectation of time spent reading. Figure 6 displays that students do not perceive that reading their textbook is important as it relates to their course grade. This is an immediate tendency to label the students as 'lazy' but the actual answer is more complex. Perhaps more importantly, the issue of how they can be motivated to read more should be addressed.

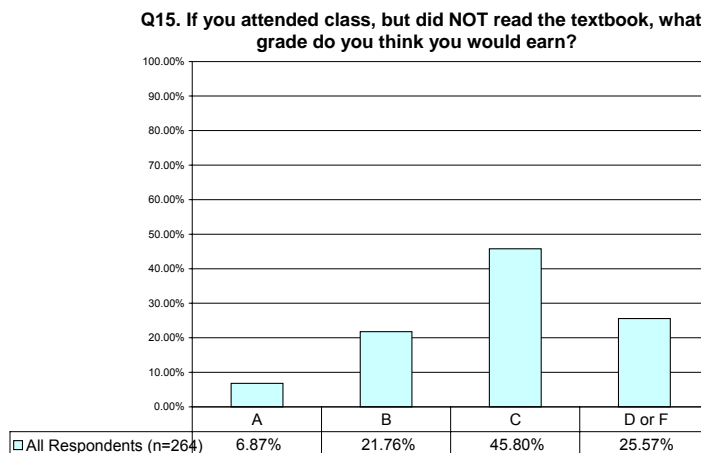


Figure 6

To further understand the motivation of students we provided a checklist of actions the professor could do to motivate the students to read the textbook. The results presented in Figure 7 show the percentage of students which checked a particular option.

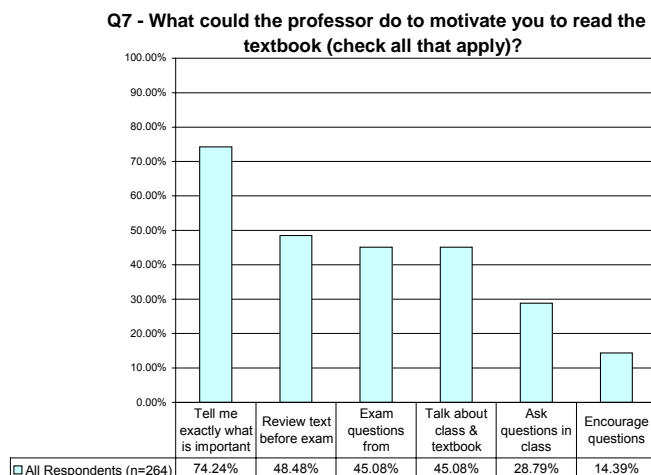


Figure 7

Prior studies suggest that quizzes over the textbook material are a very effective way to motivate student reading (Conner-Greene, 2000; Patton et al 2002). The results in Figure 7 support this notion but by far the strongest response was that the students wanted to know exactly what to read.

A follow-up focus group was conducted with students to help understand the complexity of their responses to the amount of reading, timing of reading and various studying habits. Student participants included both those who had completed the survey and those who did not complete the survey. The responses between the groups were virtually identical. The students reiterated the importance of the professor providing direction for the reading assignments. The students insisted that they were not lazy but rather very busy. This is reflected in the demographics as 83% of the survey respondents reported working and over 66% working 10 or more hours per week in addition to taking a full course load and engaging in outside the classroom activities. The students overwhelmingly said that being busy was the number one constraint on reading and that they simply lack the necessary time to accomplish everything.

The second most cited reason for needing specific direction from the professor was the amount of material presented and a sense of being "overwhelmed" by the textbook. Similar to results found by Murden and Gillespie (1997) many students downplayed the role of the textbook and felt it was a "substitute" for the lecture material rather than an enhancement of learning process. In addition to the textbook, with the ease of uploading to sites such as Blackboard there is often a multitude of materials available including extra readings, videos, web links, additional study problems, etc. Students felt there was such a vast amount of material available but most of the material did not contain "key" material. Many perceived the various supplements to be "extra" and not critical for learning the core concepts. In essence the students stated they wanted to study but they needed direction and guidance as to where and how to focus their efforts.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study indicate a potential disconnect between student perceptions and those of faculty members. As instructors it is our responsibility to create and sustain a supportive learning environment for our students. Faculty members often make many assumptions about the student learning process. For example, a core element in designing a course is the selection of a textbook. The faculty member may assume that students know how to use the textbook and various supporting materials to be successful in their respective class. However, the introduction of various technologies to supplement the textbook often results in students facing a daunting choice of learning tools and aids. While the goal is to enhance the learning environment, in fact they may have the opposite effect.

Most of the students entering our classrooms today are at ease with technology and have been exposed to computers and quick information change. The challenge the students face is that they do not have the insight to prioritize and utilize all the tools available to them. Students do feel the textbook is important to being successful in their course but they are presented with so many choices that they are simply confused as to how to effectively use them. Ultimately it is the instructor's role and obligation to help provide the pathway to success in their respective classroom.

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