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Not seeing the woods for the trees: encouraging active reading

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Abstract

Academic reading is often the neglected counterpart to academic writing within higher education. This paper introduces a resource presented at 'Becoming Well Read 2021', which was designed to support students with academic reading. Using a fairy tale as an example text, students respond to structured discussion questions that are then applied to the academic context. This paper concludes with reflections on how the resource could be adapted for future use in order to support students to actively engage with academic materials.

Keywords: academic reading; fairy tales; learning development

Introduction

In my role as a Learning Development Tutor, I offer workshops on a range of topics relating to academic study. These include essay writing, using sources effectively, critical thinking and more recently, academic reading. In this paper I explore some of the issues relating to the teaching of academic reading and introduce a resource that I designed to help students navigate the act of reading academic material. I presented this resource online at 'Becoming Well Read 2021' and asked participants to take on the role of the student as I guided them through the activity. Each question posed to students acts as a catalyst for thinking about how to approach academic reading and these are detailed below. The activity is designed to be interactive, with an emphasis on the discussion as opposed to solely offering solutions or strategies for students to try.

The first iteration of this activity was delivered in-person and used *Hansel and Gretel* as the activity text (hence the inspiration for the title of this paper). With the move to delivering workshops online, I decided to find an alternative text that was freely available online. Using *Rumpelstiltskin* (Brothers Grimm, 2009) as the example text still allowed me to address the same areas for discussion. Following feedback from students and colleagues, I continue to adapt and develop the resource for future delivery.

Academic reading in higher education

Within higher education, there is an abundance of research relating to the practice of academic writing, but much less attention paid to academic reading (Baker et al., 2019; Morley, 2020). With assessments often focusing on written outcomes, it is understandable that there is an emphasis for both staff and students to develop writing-related practices. However, academic reading is arguably the foundation of achieving this written academic success, by acting as a "gateway to other academic practices" (Kimberley and Thursby, 2020, p.1). Moreover, through deeper engagement with academic materials, students will see modelling of academic writing which in turn could help to improve their own written work (Miller and Merdian, 2020). This intrinsic link between academic reading and academic writing reveals the importance of offering guided instruction in both practices.

Understanding the challenges related to academic reading is difficult to ascertain. Learning Development embraces a student-centred approach, and yet much of the literature on academic reading does not offer student perspectives on this issue, as found in the scoping study undertaken by Baker et al. (2019). There is, however, some consensus that academic material is often perceived to be inaccessible due to the language used (Baker et al., 2019; Kimberley and Thursby, 2020), as well as "difficult, frustrating, perplexing or simply 'boring'" (Rhead, 2019, pp.1-2). This creates a challenge for Learning Developers to produce resources that can break down or counter these narratives.

At degree level, students' competence in reading is often assumed (Kimberley and Thursby, 2020) yet there is growing evidence that students entering undergraduate degree programmes do not have the academic reading skills required to study at degree level (Miller and Merdian, 2020). Reading is mostly carried out in private (Rhead, 2019), and without witnessing the activity in practice, it can be difficult to identify where appropriate support is needed, unless explicitly stated by the student(s). Therefore, it is helpful to introduce a scaffolded approach, which can help to build students' self-efficacy (Abegglen et al., 2020; Nguyen and Henderson, 2020). With reading "inherent in all academic activities" (Morley, 2020, p.15), the importance of supporting students with their academic reading cannot be underestimated.

Creating the resource

The idea for creating an academic reading resource was inspired by a conversation with a colleague who had raised concerns about student engagement with academic texts. As a Learning Developer, my intention is not to tell students what to do (Morley, 2020), but rather to open a dialogue about how to approach the topic in question and to offer some guidance and strategies that could help students navigate the academic environment. It has been suggested that a "playful, activity-based approach" (Kimberley and Thursby, 2020, p.10) that is "creative and diverse" (Abegglen et al. 2020, p.4) is preferable for the teaching of academic reading. As someone with a keen interest in playful learning, I wanted to embrace this and find a way to engage students in an activity that was interesting as well as useful.

Abegglen et al. (2020) argue that it is preferable to use texts that relate to a cohort's area of study, however, my Learning Development workshops are open to all students across the School of Area Studies, History, Politics and Literature (SASHPL), and so content is not subject-specific. This meant that any material used during the workshop would need to be accessible to a range of students across multiple subject areas. Initially, I was tempted to find a journal article about academic reading

to use as an example text, but was concerned that a long, unfamiliar academic text could be overwhelming (Kimberley and Thursby, 2020). I did not want to create a situation where students felt uncomfortable reading a long text in front of others as this could impact engagement with the activity. Therefore, I decided to use a fairy tale, believing this to be a "more readily accessible genre" (Cleto and Warman, 2019, p.113) and likely to be familiar to most students (Cleto and Warman, 2019; Davis, 2009). Whilst Cleto and Warman (2019) and Davis (2009) have used fairy tales in different contexts to me, the principle of using the familiar to facilitate a dialogue is echoed in my approach to creating this resource.

Structure of the resource

At the start of the activity, I ask students to read a short text. I devised five questions (detailed below) in order to stimulate discussion on different areas of academic reading, with a focus on two fundamental aspects: purpose and process (Rhead, 2019). As Abegglen et al (2020, p.14) note, "the development of advanced academic reading strategies is best done through discourse" and I wanted the discussion to be the core part of the activity, rather than providing a checklist of things for students to do.

Question 1: What is the story about?

The first question invites students to discuss the difference between skimming (to get an overview of the text) and scanning (to find specific details). Whilst Kimberley and Thursby (2020) highlight that instruction on academic reading must go beyond merely offering advice on these techniques, starting with this discussion provides an opportunity for students to share *how* they approach reading academic materials.

Responses to this question range from a brief synopsis to philosophical interpretations relating to social issues such as poverty. I emphasise that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer and elicit responses from several students in order to highlight that each student interprets the material in different ways. Through this discussion, it is possible to identify that most students skim the text in order to gain a general overview of the content. To relate this to the academic context, we discuss the benefit of skimming academic texts in order to gain a broad outline of the material, followed by a more focused reading of the abstract, introduction and conclusion in order to identify which texts to read in more depth (as illustrated by Baker et al., 2019).

Next, I ask students if they are familiar with the story. Even for those who are not, there is a sense of familiarity with the concept of fairy tales and this not only allows students to explore what they are learning from a basis of what is already known (Davis, 2009), but also helps me to illustrate how reading academic material does not take place in a vacuum (MacMillan, 2014). To relate this to their academic reading, I encourage students to think about, and look for, connections between what they already know on the topic and what is in the academic text, thus, helping to provide a 'way in' to the material (Weller, 2010, cited in Baker et al., 2019).

Question 2: Why is the miller's daughter asked to spin straw to gold?

This question is intended to instigate a conversation about context. In asking *why* the miller's daughter spun straw to gold, students are asked to consider the background to the events in the story, and by extension, the context of the academic materials that they read. This question also opens a dialogue about how students can think about situating material into a wider context (Manarin et al., 2015) rather than solely reporting or summarising information.

Most students suggest that the king's greed is the main reason for the miller's daughter spinning straw to gold, but sometimes the poverty of the miller and the powerlessness of the miller's daughter are also mentioned. Interestingly, most responses relate to the actions or situations of other characters, rather than broader issues such as poverty, despite this being a response to Question 1. The discussion of not one, but multiple contexts, demonstrates the range of influences on an individual text. When applying this to academic material, it challenges students to reflect on how an idea is conveyed depending on the theoretical, cultural or political viewpoint of the author, as well as the contemporary events and ideas of the time. Situating this in a broader context, students can then analyse whether the ideas in a text are supported or refuted in other materials. In considering the context of the material that is read, students can start to think about reading critically and how context might influence both the writer's and their own perspectives (Misson and Morgan, 2006, cited in Nguyen and Henderson, 2020).

Question 3: What does the miller's daughter give to the manikin on the second evening? How many days is she given to guess the manikin's name? What colour is her hair?

The third point of discussion revolves around three short questions and allows us to revisit the previous conversation about scanning a text for specific information. With students often conscious about the time commitment needed to read and understand a text (Kimberley and Thursby, 2020; Morley, 2020; Shahabudin, 2011), this part of the activity directs students to think about the *purpose* of academic reading (Rhead, 2019).

Usually, responses to the first two questions are found quite quickly but the third has students guessing the answer or wondering if they have missed the information. The truth is that the answer to the third question is *not* in the text, but asked in order to stimulate a conversation about what is being sought from the material being read. Whilst the absence of a piece of information does not necessarily render a text unusable, it is important to encourage students to think about what they are looking for within a particular text. Through only mining texts for specific ideas or themes, students risk not "applying a critical lens" (Nguyen and Henderson, 2020, p.3) to the material, which in turn, will have an impact on written outcomes. One of the ways to mitigate this is to try to impress upon students the importance of reading throughout the course in order to broaden their knowledge and understanding of the subject (Rhead, 2019).

In addition, the third question allows us to think about assumptions that are made by the reader. Often, the guessed answer to the third question is 'blonde' and yet there is nothing in the text alluding to this – in fact, the image at the top of the webpage shows the miller's daughter to have a whisper of dark hair under a light-coloured scarf. Having already discussed the idea of connections

to the reading (Question 1), it is important to acknowledge that any pre-conceptions might influence the reader's interpretation of the material.

Question 4: What is the moral or lesson of this story?

By asking students about the moral or lesson of the story, we can begin to think about the message that the author is conveying in their text. Following the conversation about details in Question 3, this brings the discussion back to the idea of considering an overview of the text, albeit in a more focused and concise manner.

The students' responses to this question are always quite varied. Some suggest that *Rumpelstiltskin* is a tale of caution about making promises that cannot be kept, whilst others believe it to be a lesson on the perils of arrogance or trickery, or a commentary on social issues such as poverty. The purpose of asking students to find a moral or lesson in the fairy tale is to reflect the action of finding the author's argument within an academic text. In academic material, the author's argument may be a specific point or claim, or an idea that is constructed and sustained throughout the text (Turner, 1999). Whilst there is no one 'right' answer when discussing the fairy tale, an argument is often more clearly stated in the abstract and introduction of an academic text and helping students to locate this information can break down the complexity of academic materials.

Question 5: What are your reflections on this text?

The final question asks students to offer a personal response to the story. The question is divided into two parts: what 'resonates' with the reader and what 'irks' them. (The answer to the former is sometimes the same as the latter!) As Nguyen and Henderson (2020) note, a common issue that arises in students' academic work is a tendency to be descriptive rather than critical, and through discussing the students' reflections on *Rumpelstiltskin*, we can start to consider critical thinking and how this can be demonstrated in assignments. Rather than describing the story, this question encourages students to react to it.

Some of the responses to this question mirror responses to other questions, including anger at the poverty of the miller, disgust at the king's greed, and despair for the situation of the powerless miller's daughter. When students have shared their reflections on *Rumpelstiltskin*, we discuss how some of those reflections could be drawn together, or contrasted, thereby mirroring the synthesising of ideas that is expected in their academic work. The important thing for students to remember is that rather than just stitching together a collection of sources in their academic work, it must be clear to the reader *why* this information has been included and *how* it supports the argument conveyed.

Reflections on the resource and adapting it for future use

This resource was designed as one of three activities in Level 5 (second year, undergraduate) and Level 7 (postgraduate) workshops on the theme of 'returning to study'. During these workshops, it became clear that time for discussion was too limited and students wanted more time to reflect on

how the themes in each question could be applied to the academic context. Therefore, I devised a workshop on the topic of academic reading, with this resource as the main activity. Whilst anecdotal feedback has been positive, there are still opportunities to adapt the resource further.

The first iteration of this resource included three different versions of *Hansel and Gretel* as the example texts. Students only became aware of the differences once working through the questions in small groups. Whilst this created interesting discussion, replicating this in an online environment proved challenging. The decision to focus on a single text, *Rumpelstiltskin*, still allowed for small group discussions in online breakout rooms, but reduced the administration of sending different texts to participants and organising groups comprising students who had read different versions of the story.

Moving forwards, it could be possible to re-introduce a variety of texts to the delivery of this resource. Following feedback from a colleague, I wrote a version of *Hansel and Gretel* from the viewpoint of the witch in order to facilitate conversation around context (Question 2), however, this text is yet to be used in a workshop. In addition to variations on a single story, different fairy tales could also be used, with students selecting which text they work with. Takagaki (2002, cited in Nguyen and Henderson, 2020, p.5) suggests that allowing students to select material leads to "increased motivation and improved student attitudes to academic reading" as students feel empowered when given this agency. Furthermore, offering students the choice of using a printed version or an online version of the text, may allow for individuals to engage with the material in a way that suits their own "preferences and reading styles" (Lim and Toh, 2020, p.27).

Additional questions can be used to highlight other aspects of academic reading. For example, Shahabudin (2011) notes that extensive reading lists and access to a vast array of online resources can become overwhelming for students. Whilst the facilitator could introduce these ideas in response to Question 1 above, a more focused discussion on how to select appropriate reading materials would be helpful. This would also allow for consideration of the function of different types of documents (Manarin et al., 2015) and the credibility and authenticity of materials (Miller and Merdian, 2020). Similarly, facilitators working in different subject areas may wish to add questions that draw attention to particular aspects of academic reading within their field. The key aspect of the resource is to ensure that each question is applied to the academic context.

In previous workshops this resource has been the central activity, but there are various opportunities to use this as a stimulus for further support for academic reading. For example, using a range of texts and creating a hypothetical assignment question relating to the fairy tales could encourage students to take an "informed position based on a thoughtful evaluation of multiple perspectives" (Nguyen and Henderson, 2020, p.4), thus mirroring the process of preparing an academic assignment. Also, during the discussion at the end of my presentation at 'Becoming Well Read 2021', participants commented on how this resource could be an introductory activity to further reading instruction such as Academic Reading Circles (Marinkova and Leslie, n.d.) and this is something that I intend to explore.

Conclusion

It is clear that academic reading is a fundamental element of studying in higher education, yet much of the support offered to students focuses on academic writing. This resource was designed to facilitate discussion with students about their experiences of academic reading and to encourage an

active approach to reading academic material. By using a fairy tale as an example text, it is possible for a diverse group of students to participate in the activity, irrespective of their subject area. The discussion questions stimulate wider conversations about the context, content and argument(s) found in academic material, as well as the consideration of how critical thinking can be demonstrated in written work. I have adapted the resource following student and colleague feedback, and it is clear that there are further opportunities for using this resource as part of a growing provision of Learning Development support in relation to academic reading.

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