

Improving Textbook Reading Assessment in History Courses:  
A Case Study of Learning Blogs vs. Quizzes

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The textbook is the Waterloo for History education. Even the most student-friendly books are often shunted to the side by students who are resistant to reading on their own.

Despite this hostility to the textbook, it is an extremely important tool for broad survey courses where not all material can be covered in class. For my work at an open-access college in a public university, where many students lack any background in history beyond the basics of the American narrative, a class without a textbook is not a real option.

I have attempted to address this problem by making reading a point-earning exercise. In particular, I have had students take open-book online quizzes based on their textbook reading. While this is one measure of student reading, I am not convinced it is the best method for promoting reading (rather than hunt-and-search for quiz answers) and processing material. For this reason, I have developed a small classroom research activity to compare the use of two popular means of assessing textbook reading in two particular survey sections. I will therefore investigate whether the use of learning blogs (summing up and commenting on an assigned reading unit) better promotes textbook reading than reading-based quizzes as described before. In addition, as reflect on my experience in this classroom activity, I will discuss what insights surveys of student attitudes toward reading might give instructors.

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**The Problem**

*“Scholarly effort is in decline everywhere as never before. Indeed, cleverness is shunned at home and abroad. What does reading offer to pupils except tears? It is rare, worthless when it is offered for sale, and devoid of wit.”-- Egbert of Liège, 11<sup>th</sup> century*

In the 1000s, a local educator at a Belgian cathedral school made the same complaint many educators have today: Students do not read, or desire to read, their classroom materials. They practice instead intense resistance to what Egbert called “scholarly effort,” a conclusion that still stands a thousand years since that Belgian instructor wrote. Indeed, a quick look at a tool Egbert lacked, Google, yields over 24 million hits on the phrase, “why don’t students read their textbooks.” This article serves as my own modest reflection this problem, utilizing an activity in my own classrooms to grapple with this issue and contemplate if particular assessments would stimulate better reading performance by my students.

While all educators must face off with this problem, in some cases—based on course topic and student background—the need to read is even more critical to student success. My own college fits this criteria, serving students who come from an academically and economically challenged background. I work at an open-access two-year college with a current enrollment of approximately 5100 students, nearly half of which are first generation college students. According to our 2016-2017 data, 64% of these are full-time and 40% identify as a racial or ethnic minority, making ours the most diverse college in our university system. Although an ACT is required, there are no admittance requirements of score or GPA on incoming students; incoming students who fall below a certain GPA and ACT profile are simply shifted into a conditional admittance program. The academic vulnerability of our overall population is clear

when one studies persistence and retention: fall-to-spring retention of first time, first year students sits at about 88% since 2013, but fall-to-fall retention of first time, first term students hovers at around 60%. Completion rates, as one might imagine based on that profile, are an ongoing challenge.

Within that college setting, I teach introductory history surveys for which students do not have any prerequisites, including basic Composition. My classes serve students who are interested in an Associate's in History as well as students in many other majors, all requiring History as a gen ed; there is no dominant group entering my classes with a solid frame of historical knowledge (or an ardent desire for it.) From my own experience, I am very aware that students enter my classroom knowing very little of the world beyond what they believe they recall from high school, most of which applies only the United States and the twentieth century.

As a result, I have approached my courses with a firm belief in the need for a textbook and heavy use of it. As a specialist in World and European history, I cannot cover everything in class, and I know what I leave out of lecture will not be common knowledge to my students.

But, as our friend Egbert warned, I find the same resistance: the students don't read. I have therefore resorted to external motivation to entice them to engage with their books. In my courses, I had traditionally addressed that by using regular online textbook quizzes to motivate reading. But I saw a problem—students weren't applying that reading elsewhere in the course, such as exams; this made me question whether those reading quizzes were the most effective way of inspiring students to draw knowledge from their books. Thus in 2015-2016, I designed a classroom experiment. In particular, I wanted to look at blogs, requiring students to summarize and comment on the readings, and see if students would get a deeper reading and better course performance from using those instead of the online quizzes. While due to the small sample size

(just two sections), I cannot generate global conclusions from this project, but it has served to promote my reflection on the textbook and its uses.

### **The Literature**

Scholars have considered the utilization of the textbook in collegiate classes. The most significant studies have considered students' approach to the book. For example, Barbara and Fred Phillips, writing "Sink or Skim: Students' Textbook Use in Introductory Accounting" for the February 2007 *Issues in Accounting Education*, analyzed 172 introductory accounting students and their contact with textbooks. They found that students required external motivation (such as an assignment) to engage with the textbook, and that when they did so, the students typically resorted to inefficient reading strategies like skimming. Kent Divoll and Sandra Browning (2013) have agreed with this assessment; in addition to these points, they argue that instructors should consider assessments that aid in retention of reading material. In a presentation at the American Psychological Association and later article, Regan A.R. Gurung and Ryan Martin surveyed students to find out what made them more likely to read their books. Of these characteristics, Gurung and Martin highlighted the amount and quality of visual material and the depth of connection between the professor's lectures and the text (Gurung & Martin, 2011).

For historians engaged in scholarly teaching, there has been significantly less review of how to best use a textbook in a survey class. Most textbook critique for history education revolves around questions of bias in textbooks. For example, Jörg Lehmann, writing in the 2015 *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, has asked about leading language used in describing societies at war. There is no modern study of the best assessments for textbook reading, or a comparison between the two specific models of learning blogs versus textbook

reading quizzes. And there is just one modern study of the connection between the history textbook and student grades; this work has suggested that instructors approach textbook usage in a more deliberate fashion. Ryan Swanson, in a February 2014 article for *The History Teacher*, has determined that textbook usage is not always linked to course grades, since while syllabi may demand student reading, examinations and assignments in reality do not. Most recently, textbook publishers have bypassed the debate about utility and developed and sold adaptive learning digital packages to emphasize textbook interactivity (such as Norton's Inquizzitive, or Bedford/St. Martin's Launchpad) as a way of promoting reading.

### **The Solution(?)**

My proposed answer to the problem of textbook reading for my classes was to focus just on whether a change in assessment, a blog versus a quiz, could support textbook reading at the college level.

My methodology to study this was simple. I took two sections of my European History survey class in spring 2016, with starting enrollments of 21 and 25 respectively. I chose these sections because they were the only sections of a survey I had that term, and because having the two sections of the same course would make a natural comparison point. All students were given a basic demographic survey, partly as an extension of my standard efforts to understand my students and partly to be able to track any possible connections between reading performance and various life characteristics (economic status, employment, age, and so forth.) Students were also given a survey on attitudes toward textbooks at the start and at the end of the term. (See the appendix.) In addition to studying student attitudes, I wanted to compare exam and final grades, to see if one section performed better, and compare assessments, to see if one assessment

inspired students to do more work. Finally, I also wanted to know if one group particularly found their assessment to be useful in supporting their course knowledge.

To achieve this, I set up the two sections so that they differed only in what reading assessment they were assigned. One section was assigned the textbook quizzes throughout the term, while the other had blogs. For the textbook quizzes, students were required to take 10-question open-book multiple-choice quizzes over assigned readings. These came from the publisher (Bedford/St. Martin's) and typically required only that students be able to spot exact quotes from the textbook within the possible answers; one cannot say that students were not challenged on their interpretation of the reading, merely that they had read it. For the blogs, I attempted to require no more than the quizzes, rewarding signs of reading (specific evidence and correct identification of major chapter themes), rather than an in-depth analysis. Students followed this prompt and were graded by a simple three-point rubric:

“For each of these assignments, you will look at the chapter or chapters assigned.

You will then write up EITHER a short summary of the chapter OR an outline of the chapter. (Your choice.) Your post should incorporate the main points of the chapter(s) and should include ONE additional question or thought you had about the reading. I'm looking here simply to be able to say, ‘This student clearly read the chapter thoroughly.’

Your response shouldn't be more than 3 paragraphs (or 1 page in Microsoft Word). Your writing doesn't have to be

perfect and I'm not looking for an introduction/conclusion.

Again, I'm grading you on whether you've convinced me you read the chapter thoroughly.”

For both assessment groups, the assignments were available from the start of the class onwards, with closing dates printed in the syllabus. Students who felt pressured by other commitments would, in theory, not have to worry about fitting these small assignments into a specific week.

There was one other distinction between the two assessment groups: I had to be aware that the sections were not necessarily equal in ability or background. Because students schedule individually, I had no ability to sort students between sections to create perfectly comparable groups in terms of workload, age, college experience, and GPA. As a result, when I reviewed the profiles of the classes, they showed distinctive personalities. The 9 AM was clearly less mature, with almost 40% being freshmen (compared to 13% at 10 AM). The 9 AM section had no students above the rank of sophomore, and none of them were the sole providers for their household. (The 13% of the 10 AM were the sole provider in their households.) Not surprisingly, the 9 AM course was far more traditional in terms of course load—100% taking 9-15 credit hours—while the 10 AM had a more diverse group (46.7% between 0 and 9 credit hours, plus 33.3% above 15 credit hours a term.) The ages of the students repeat this theme, that the 10 AM tended to be university veterans—62.5% of the 9 AM were under the age of 20, while the 10 AM section was evenly split at 46.7% below 20 and between 20-25.

### The Analysis

Although my sample size (two sections) was too small to generate global conclusions, I nonetheless studied the data to better understand my own course experience and generate ideas for the future. Despite this difference in section demographics, for the question of which assessment scored better, there was no change. I saw no significant difference in how students performed cumulatively on the actual quizzes or blogs, with the average being 4.5 out of 10 points possible across the entire term. But since that score covers the entirety of the assessments for the term, it does not reveal student persistence in the assessments—that is, whether a student attempted multiple quiz/blogs with low results, or simply scored very well on one and slightly less on another. Digging deeper into the grades, the data suggested a difference between the two sections in this matter. The 9 AM had a U-shaped grade pattern on these assignments—31.25% earning below a 2.5 (in other words, probably trying just one of the assignments), 62.5% over 8.5, with just 6.25% in between them. By contrast, the 10 AM had a slightly flatter grade pattern—47.8% receiving beneath a 2.5, 17.4% from 2.5-8.5, and 34.78% above 8.5. That middle figure—17.4% at 10 vs. 6.25% at 9 AM, is important because the score assigned (2.5-8.5) is not something a student can gain in one exceptional performance or in repeated minimalist efforts. Given the larger number of students in that middle category at 10 AM, it therefore suggests the blog group was making more consistent efforts, if doing so in a less-than-ideal level, than at 9 AM.

Although the total scores for both classes were equal, we can see the blog group appeared to try harder on their assessment. In grades, again the data initially suggested no major difference, but a closer look indicated more. There was no major difference in exam grades: the average midterm grade of the sections, for example, was 74 and 76. By finals, however, the



groups began to diverge. The quiz group, 9 AM, had 42% of students earning below a C for the entire class. At 10 AM, the blogs, over 50% of the course earned above a C.

The students' attitude toward their work may have played a role here. At 10 AM, 40% said their assessment, the blogs, made them more likely to retain textbook information. At 9 AM, their response was just 27%. While it cannot be concluded absolutely that blogging made the students better able to retain information and perform in the course, the students' perception of its value is certainly a distinction from the quiz group's attitudes. And yet despite this glimmer of hope in the blog group, both groups were consistently negative on the subject of textbooks. Students described reading as "pulling teeth," the information as "overwhelming," the process of reading the book "demoralizing," and expressed concern that the book was just an "add-on" with no real value to the course. (This financial concern was especially important, given the working class background of the students at my institution.)

The survey figures reveal a student body who has little support for textbooks. Furthermore, the surveys included eye-opening comments in which students reported problems with stress, anxiety, and ADHD interfering with textbook reading and in return, exacerbating those conditions. These hostile attitudes did not change over the course of the term. In both the first and final survey, students were asked, "To what extent do you think a textbook is helpful in a history course?" In the initial survey, 48% of students rated textbook reading as "very helpful." By the conclusion of the term, only 25% of students rated it as "very helpful," with students shifting over to rate books as just "a little" helpful. While this statistic is sobering to a history professor, as any instructor can attest, there is a certain honeymoon quality to the first weeks of class, and one wonders about the extent of students' honesty or optimism, whether they considered answering this question too negatively, even on an anonymous survey, would start

them out badly in the term. As one student wrote, clearly judging the question about our specific text and the class we would have together, “I hope to get the most out of this textbook.”

### **The Reflection**

Overall, it appears the blog group performed better across the term, made more consistent efforts in their assessment, and valued it more (despite still loathing textbook work). Another conclusion emerged for me from this experiment, though, and it was not about assessments. It was about time. Time was the theme that shaped both groups’ responses to the surveys and their attitudes toward their books. In their comments, students consistently wove in references to an overpacked schedule. For example, one student wrote, “I do not find textbooks very helpful, I like lecture better because I understand, and retain information better. The textbook reading is a lot of reading, and plus I have many other readings from other classes, and to make it all more difficult I work a part-time job.”

The student demographic surveys revealed a somewhat expected, but still horrifying, truth: our students work far too much for the credit load they carry. Every single student in my courses had a job outside of the classroom, and most of them required far too many hours for the credit load the student was carrying. At 9 AM, 50% reported 20-30 hours paid labor a week, while carrying a class schedule that was anywhere from 9-15 credit hours. The 10 AM blog group had a wider range of credit hours and work schedules, but it was still too much. 46.7% were taking between 0 and 9 credit hours, while 33.3% above 15 credit hours a term. This group had 40% working 20-30 hours per week, and 7% doing 30-40 hours paid labor per week. This heavy focus on paid employment is consistent with statistics provided by the Community College Research Center and the National Center for Education Statistics, which show 36% of

students have an annual income of less than \$20,000 per year, and 48% of that group being economically independent of family aid. From these same sources, we know that sixty-nine percent of community college students work while in college, with 33 percent working 35 or more hours per week.

This workload, according to the students, was responsible for moments when they failed to perform on the assessments. As one student wrote, “I didn’t take the time to read the assigned textbook chapters due to being busy with work and other assignments, although I know reading would have been really helpful.” Another commented, “They were very long readings,” as justification for not doing the assessment. (Each assessment was based on a single textbook chapter, assigned on the first day of the course.) Money did not appear to be the issue: Just 6% said access to the book (which was on reserve in the library) was the reason they failed to complete all assessments.

Student feedback on textbooks and how they feel the books *should* be used also underlines this point, that time was root of their academic issues. Their ideas almost entirely focused on ways to either reduce their time commitment outside of the course or make the assignment more worth the time investiture in course points. First, students suggested using more external motivation for reading—make it “more important” to the overall grade, one student commented. One wrote specifically that his/her use of the book was directly related to assignments: “i (sic) read textbook when i am studying for tests or exams and any given assignment.” A peer agreed, suggesting the instructor give “more reading quizzes. I only ever picked up the actual textbook to complete the online quizzes.” Second, students presented ideas in which the book’s use was in the actual class time, not out of it: “Make us bring them [the books] to class and read certain pages in class,” one wrote. Another thought that the instructor

could “require us to use them [the books] more often for assignments or quiz's (sic) and incorporate them into class...Maybe more assessments, Just read it a small amount, I felt like what we did was effective and enough....maybe go through it as class.” One student pitched in-class debates as a way to inspire reading: “The most effective way I have experienced a text book used is the class would have a reading assignment and we would have a class debate/discussion over the chapter. During that time I would then take notes on the discussion.” (It is to be noted that in this scenario, the student might be picking up information from debaters, not the book itself.)

Finally, in addition to arguing for more weight given to the book, or for use in the classroom, students simply gave up on the textbook, arguing for either brief selections from it, or short hand-outs. As one student put it, “I would say less reading...I believe that if professors assigned 1 small reading, assignment that was significant to each chapter it would make better use of the book. I think this because it would still give us a reason to read the book but it would not be a 20-30 page reading assignment.” One student expressed this as a financial gain as well as a pedagogical one: “I do not think that the students should be required to buy the textbook....My suggestions are that the professor provides handouts with readings on topics that will be covered. This will appear as less reading to students that don't like reading and will be cost efficient to students that cannot afford books.”

The student preoccupation with time, and their employment outside of class, leads back to an observation that Ryan Swanson of George Mason University made in *The History Teacher* article cited previously. In a series of experiments, Swanson surveyed over 500 of his students about their textbook use. Over the course of the term, he saw a clear trend, that the students did not find the textbook useful, and that they especially called out the disconnection between the

textbook and material on the exams. He took his study further by making textbook reading voluntary, and continued to assess the performance of self-identified textbook readers vs. students who did not utilize the book. While he had thought that textbook readers would have an overall better grade in the course than non-readers, he found that not to be the case. The students were correct, he realized; his course structure did not make textbook reading essential to a high overall grade. “After some deliberation, I concluded that I agreed with the students’ sentiment. In order to rationalize having students spend \$75 to \$100 for a textbook, I need to be committed to that text. I’m not. I need to require that the students read the textbook for exams and papers. I don’t” (Swanson, 2014, p. 289).

My students touched on the same points. Although it was stated in the syllabus that reading would be assessed only in online quizzes or blogs, students mentioned in the surveys that the textbook wasn’t a requirement for success on larger assignments. As a student wrote, “I would say less reading because most of the information we got from the book was not really on the exam or even the terms quiz” (both of which were explicitly described to students as tools to measure mastery of in-class content). “Textbook was okay to read and understand but it’s also a lot of information that I feel like we do not all need.” Another suggested a course design that made textbook reading essential for exams: “Make it essential that they read the book leave out some info from lectures that they will need to either look up or read.”

Without contextual information, an instructor seeing a student ask for less reading, want to do reading in-class, want an instructor to break down reading in class for student comprehension (much like a medieval professor of our friend Egbert’s day), or ask for a higher point value on reading, might be tempted to lift an eyebrow. Without contextual information, all of those requests would sound like the stereotype of the lazy, entitled student. But my study has

shown me the opposite for these two particular classes. Between work and classwork, let alone challenging family lives (6% of each class stating they had dependents, 13% of one section being the sole provider for the household), my students are truly overworked. They therefore make choices based on the dual factors of time required and impact on the course grade. It is no surprise, under those conditions, that reading outside of class for a small point value has not been prioritized. Moreover, as Swanson has argued, and as one of my students even implied in his/her description of texts, faculty are not off the hook, either. By separating the textbook from in-class activities and major grades, like exams, many of us do indeed treat the textbook as the “add-on” my student described; we send the signal that the book is not crucial and it not surprising that the students pick up on that.

After my modest case study on learning blogs vs. quizzes to support textbook reading, I have come to the conclusion for these classes was that the “solution” is truly neither. While we might see some small grade improvements in the students who write on their reading vs. those who think through multiple choice quizzes, the assessments themselves were too small a grade percentage (10%) to inspire the level of deep reading, retention, and holistic classroom performance improvement that I desired when crafting this study. Instead, I come away from this work thinking about how it is time to rebuild my syllabus to acknowledge the complexities of my students’ lives. While once upon a time a student failure to read might have been chiefly attributable to sloth, as Egbert of Liège implied, it is now absolutely not the case, and it is time that I, as a modern faculty member, take ownership of my role in creating course design that genuinely matches my priorities with my assessments.

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**Appendix: The Surveys**Initial Demographic Survey

- 1.) Is this your first term in college?
- 2.) What year level are you? (Approximately)
- 3.) How many credit hours did you carry this term?
- 4.) Do you work? (no) 0-15 hours 15-25 hrs 25-more hrs per term
- 5.) Which age group are you in?
  - a. Younger than 20      Younger than 25      Above 25
- 6.) Do you have any dependents (aging or disabled parents/siblings, any children)?
- 7.) Are you the sole provider for your household (that is, you don't have a parent or partner who is also paying the bills)?

Survey on Textbook Reading and Assessments: Initial Survey of Attitudes and Usage

- 1.) To what extent do you think a textbook is helpful in a history course?  
Not at all      Not very      Somewhat      Very helpful      Essential
- 2.) To what extent do you typically read textbooks when they are assigned for classes?  
Never      Rarely (1x a term)      Sometimes      Pretty Well—I keep up with assignments  
Always
- 3.) To what extent do pre-announced quizzes motivate you to read your textbook?  
Not At All      If I remember      Somewhat      A bit—I do what I can  
Significantly—I work very hard to be ready
- 4.) To what extent does writing about a reading assignment help your textbook reading?  
Not At All      a little      maybe/unsure      Probably      It definitely does.
- 5.) If you have any comments you want to share about textbooks, how you use them, and what assignments make the most effective use of them, feel free to share them here.

Survey on Textbook Reading and Assessments: Final Survey of Attitudes and Usage

- 1.) To what extent do you think a textbook was helpful this history course?  
Not at all      Not very      Somewhat      Very helpful      Essential
- 2.) To what extent did you typically read the textbook? (Be honest)  
Never      Rarely (1x a term)      Sometimes      Pretty Well—I keep up with assignments  
Always

- 3.) *For quiz group:* To what extent did the quizzes motivate you to read the textbook?  
 Not At All    If I remember    Somewhat    A bit—I do what I can  
 Significantly—I work very hard to be ready
- 4.) *For quiz group:* To what extent did the quizzes help you gain content for the class (in other words, more than just getting points)?
- 5.) *For blog group:* To what extent did the blog assignments motivate you to read the textbook?  
 Not At All    If I remember    Somewhat    A bit—I do what I can  
 Significantly—I work very hard to be ready
- 6.) If you didn't do the quizzes or blogs (either all or some of them), why?  
 Forgot  
 Didn't Own the Textbook  
 Took Too Long  
 Didn't Think It was that Important  
 Other
- 7.) In what ways do you think professors could make better use of the textbook in courses (that is, get you to read it and retain information from it)?