Course Readings and Other Natural Disasters—How to Encourage Students to Read for Class

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TL;DR—OMG, LOL!

j/k, dude, r u?
Aims of this workshop:

—identify a significant course problem

—suggest reasons why this problem exists

—discuss various ways of addressing the problem and its underlying causes
The problem: students who don’t read.
In my experience:

—anywhere from 10-50% of undergraduate students don’t complete their assigned readings (from zero to partially complete).
Even in literature courses.
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Ouch.
General Discussion:

What are your worst case scenarios?
Why don’t students read?
Possible reasons include:
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—too much material
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—class sessions or assignments/exams don’t fully incorporate readings
—overwork in other courses (too much work leads to rebellion)
Each of these issues requires a specific solution

— but!

• there are solutions available which are workable and reasonable
Potential solutions:

—Assign less material
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• *Rationale*: it’s better to have students do 100% of one reading than 10% of five.
Potential solutions:

—Assign more strategically
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• *Rationale*: having one work illustrate a key aspect or alternative point can be more attractive than having several each addressing a general issue
Potential solutions:

—Anticipate a low reading rate, incorporate readings directly into the lecture
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• *Rationale*: bring the readings to the students. Read key sections from the work aloud, to elicit comments/reactions to that specific component.
Potential solutions:

—Assign key components to specific students
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• Rationale: Guarantees student involvement, with a few caveats:

  • student presentations can be painful.

  • encourages selective reading: reading for the assignment only.
Potential solutions:

—Give a thorough introduction to each work before it’s discussed.
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• Rationale: students become aware of the relevance/points of interest of each work; students are more aware of the appropriateness of the level of each work; students develop anticipation (i.e., they know what to look for)
Potential solutions:

—Choose *good* material
Potential solutions:

—Choose good material

• *Rationale*: material that really excites us as educators, that we feel passionate about, can create passion in our students

—provided we *convey* that passion and the reasons for it
General discussion:

What are your best solutions for encouraging reading?