

An Examination of College Students' Reading Comprehension and Study Strategies: A Case Study of a Hospitality Management Course

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ABSTRACT

This multidisciplinary, mixed method research project examined comprehension and study skills strategies undergraduates utilized to complete course readings and to prepare for class and examinations as part of their hospitality human resources management course. The survey results collected from thirty three students' responses to the Metacognitive Reading Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ; Taraban, Kerr, Rynearson, 2004) were analyzed in relationship to students' performance on the course examination. The quantitative analysis detected a positive correlation between the two variables with somewhat weak statistical significance. In order to further probe the quantitative results, a focus group interview protocol was developed. Four students were interviewed, three of whom performed poorly on the examination, representing over 20% of students who performed below the class average. The interview provided researchers insight regarding the students' comprehension and learning strategies utilized for class and examination preparation. Results suggest students used surface learning approaches as opposed to deep learning strategies that would help students successfully link course material to the real industry applications. Instructional implications for the course were identified and will be implemented for future courses in order to facilitate student learning in a class environment that is more integrative and collaborative in nature.

Background

Reading for college courses is demanding; unfamiliar concepts, terminology, and the volume of reading required for some college level courses places considerable cognitive demands on students (Francis & Simpson,

2009; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009). The assumption is that students entering college have developed a repertoire of effective comprehension strategies, and have adequate study skills necessary to navigate course readings, projects, and exams; however, research suggests that many students may

enter college with weak metacognitive skills related to reading and comprehension, and lack learning strategies necessary for academic success (Alexander & Fox, 2011; Blitz, 1997; Pintrich, 2002; Rachal, Daigle, & Rachal, 2007; Vacca, 1998). In fact, a large body of research points to a strong and consistent relationship between the students' comprehension, learning strategy use, and their GPA; students with low GPAs use fewer reading comprehension and learning strategies (Taraban, Rynearson, & Kerr, M. et al., 2000).

Studies on poor performing college students suggest that many employ unsophisticated or ineffective reading strategies when reading for their college classes (Garner, 1990; Wood, Motz, & Willoughby, 1998), or view reading as a passive endeavor (Saumell, Hughes, & Lopate, 1999; Pressley, Brown, El-dinary, & Afflerbach, 1995). In contrast, studies that examine skilled adult readers suggest that such readers employ multiple reading strategies including previewing the text, setting a purpose for reading, connecting new knowledge to prior knowledge, monitoring, predicting, paraphrasing, and summarizing, as well as reflecting on ideas learned and the success of their choice of strategies after reading (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009; Shanahan, 2009; Taraban, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2000). The purposeful application of these reading strategies leads to deeper comprehension (IRA, 2007; Nicaise & Gettinger 1995; RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG), 2002). Not surprisingly, skilled readers academically outperform their less skilled peers (Taraban, et al., 2000). Mulcahy-Ernt and Caverly (2009) assert,

The mark of a successful college student is the mastery of knowing not only what to study but also how to study it. The successful student is a discriminating decision-maker, an expert who has cultivated a repertoire of fine-tuned study-reading strategies, seamless and transparent, the result of much practice and effort. The result of using study-

reading strategies effectively, is a deep rather than surface understanding of what is read, a fuller understanding of both text and discipline content, and the ability to create critical connections both in and outside the text. (p.177)

While it seems that metacognitive skills and particularly effective comprehension and study skills strategies would be developed as a result of increased educational experience, research substantiates that this is not the case (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009). Compounding this problem, most students receive little formal strategy instruction beyond the elementary school (Alexander & Fox, 2011), despite the fact that text becomes more challenging and comprehension demands become more complex as students progress through school (Donald, 2002; Shanahan, 2009).

The reality is that college classrooms are filled with students of varying abilities and motivational levels with regard to comprehension and learning strategies, and many may benefit from specific strategy instruction embedded into their courses. Smith, Holliday, and Austin (2010), in their study of a first-year university biology course, documented learning gains after students were prompted to use interrogation questions (“why?”) when completing course readings. As well, Parr and Woloshyn (2013) reported changes in first-year university students’ reading behaviors after direct instruction and modeling of comprehension strategies within the context of their English course. Although these studies suggest potential for the strategic instruction of comprehension in first-year university courses, it has not been widely studied how this type of instruction might impact student growth in upper-level discipline-specific courses.

Further, there exists evidence that strategy instruction, as well as providing opportunities to apply such skills, benefits students that are characterized as at-risk or with reading disabilities (Caverly, Nicholson, & Radcliffe, 2004; Falk-Ross, 2001; Grossman, 2009;

Henderson, 2008; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2011; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Weinstein, Husman, & Dierking, 2000). However, the exploration of how strategy instruction might benefit upperclassmen in their discipline-specific courses is relatively rare.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the reading comprehension and study skills strategies upperclassmen at a small, private, four-year university utilize to complete course readings and to prepare for class and examinations in the context of a hospitality human resources management course. The study findings are expected to add to the limited literature on specific contextual examinations of strategy usage in discipline-specific courses, as well as to have implications for subsequent instruction of the examined course. The following research questions frame this study: Do students use and apply reading and study strategies to class assignments and examinations? If so, what strategies are utilized? What instructional implications might the study findings have?

Literature Review

According to the Model of Domain Learning (MDL) by Alexander (1997, 2003), comprehension and knowledge develop over a lifespan. Knowledge, strategy use, and interest are interdependent, and as each area strengthens, learners can develop deep-processing strategies that become automatic, effective, and efficient (Alexander & Jetton, 2000). Deep approaches to learning allow the learner to build on previous knowledge in order to see relationships among ideas (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009). Students who adopt deep approaches to learning have been shown to be more successful at both selecting strategies and monitoring when comprehension breaks down (Holschuh, 2000).

According to Holschuh and Aultman (2009), researchers initially believed that if students knew some general study strategies, they would be able to transfer these skills to a

variety of domains; however, some argue this is not the case. Because the structures of domains differ, strategies to understand information differ as well; therefore, the efficacy of comprehension strategies is context-specific (Alexander & Judy, 1988; Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, & Stewart, 2013; Dunlosky, 2013; Holschuh, 2000; Buehl, Murphy, & Alexander, 2002; Simpson & Nist, 1997). For example, findings from Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) suggest experts from respective fields read text differently, have varying ideas about the types of reading, writing, and thinking tasks that best prepare students for discipline-specific success, and consequently recommend different comprehension strategies as being more effective for discipline-specific literacy tasks. Thus, proponents of disciplinary literacy argue that literacy instruction across disciplines must be situated as an integral part of the content (Moje, 2008) so that literacy within the discipline becomes the goal (Zygouris-Coe, 2012). In this way, Brozo et al. (2013) assert, “students develop the capacity to think, read, and write like an insider or expert” (p. 355). On the other hand, Brozo et al. (2013) argue: the generic strategy approach can, indeed, be of infinite value to students when content area teachers and literacy specialists engage in thoughtful dialogue about how to contextualize these strategies. When literacy specialists spend time talking with content area teachers, opportunities are created in which the processes and practices experts engage in as they “do” their disciplines are made explicit. These conversations can function as a vehicle for helping content area teachers demystify the literacies of their disciplines and ensure that these processes are made obvious to students. (p.355)

Research suggests strategy efficacy is dependent upon a few factors. First, strategies vary as to the types of learning they promote. For example, Dunlosky (2013) notes that keyword mnemonic and imagery for text may help improve students’ memory of core

concepts or facts while self-explanation might promote students' reading comprehension. Other strategies, such as self-testing, appear to promote both memory and comprehension.

Second, strategy efficacy is influenced by student ability level. For example, in a recent meta-analysis, Credé and Phillips (2011) examined the relationship between subscales on the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) an instrument that includes 81 questions that measure 15 subscales related to student motivation and strategy use (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993). Responses of over 19,000 college students indicated a low and sometimes insignificant relationship between those subscales and student grades. The authors note one reason for these low relationships might be due to the fact that some strategies were used largely by average students. For example, high performers might not need to use repetition and low performers might not be motivated to use repetition.

Third, motivation can affect the use of effective learning strategies (Pintrich, Roeser, & De Groot, 1994; Perry, Turner, & Meyer, 2006. For example, Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, and Pelletier (2001) found motivated students exerted more effort, reported less boredom and anxiety, used self-monitoring strategies more often, and achieved higher final grades.

Although a great deal of research points to the effectiveness of strategy instruction, literacy instruction is often foregone as students advance through school and the instructional emphasis shifts to content. For example, Dunlosky (2013) argues, "the emphasis is on *what* students need to learn, whereas little emphasis - if any - is placed on training students how they should go about learning the content and what skills will promote efficient studying to support robust *learning*" (p. 12).

Although there is significant literature on college students' broad usage of comprehension and learning strategies, there is less exploration of contextualized and discipline-specific-strategy usage. In addition,

while research substantiates the benefits of embedding comprehension and learning strategy instruction into college courses, it is less clear which strategies might work most effectively in a discipline-specific course such as the hospitality human resources management course involved in this study.

According to our review of the hospitality management education literature, most of the research explored issues from the perspective of instructors rather than from the students. Research has addressed many instructional topics, such as incorporation of technology into classroom management (Cho, Schmelzer, & McMahan, 2002; Deale, 2004; O'Halloran & Deale, 2006), benefits of e-learning mostly from the constructivist approach (Roberts, Williamson, & Neill, 2006; Sigala, 2002), active and engaging learning, (La Lopa, 2005; Schoffstall, Arendt, & Brown, 2013; Sigala & Baum, 2003) diversity in student profile (Barron & Arcodia, 2002), and assessment of teaching effectiveness (Kay, Moncarz, Petroski, & Downey, 2008). However, students' preparedness, especially in the area of their reading comprehension and study skills, has been ignored in this discipline. Due to the hospitality management discipline's unique nature of a close tie with the industry and the emphasis of experiential learning, including the curricular requirement of an internship and/or significance of industry work experience for students' future professional career development (Petrillose & Montgomery, 1997), it is even more important to emphasize the learner-centered model of hospitality education rather than an educator-centered one. Hence, understanding the level of students in terms of their perception, behavior, preference in reading and study skills is a crucial component for hospitality educators to better facilitate their students' effective and active learning in and out of the classroom.

Therefore, this multidisciplinary study is a first step of a multi-semester project that addresses the gap in the existing literature through a contextual examination of the

reading and study strategies upperclassmen, participating in a hospitality human resources management course, use to prepare for class and examinations. Results provide practical implications not only for hospitality management instructors, but also for others who are deeply concerned about their students and interested in developing effective discipline-specific instructional strategies.

Methods

The Context

The two researchers who conducted this study are faculty at a small liberal arts university in the northeastern United States and participate in the university's Faculty Learning Community (FLC). This study is an outgrowth of our collaborative work as part of the FLC and crosses the fields of Education and Hospitality and Tourism Management. Our initial discussion centered on the disparity across the first examination scores for upperclass students participating in the hospitality human resources management course. In the hospitality management discipline, a critical learning outcome and key factor for future professional success is students' ability to apply the knowledge and skills they obtained in class to actual business environments and various situations. Most of the hospitality management programs require a certain amount of industry experience as a curricular requirement to obtain a college degree and a qualification criterion to hire their faculty members; a demonstration of the industry emphasis and the professional career-centered nature of the discipline (Petrillose & Montgomery, 1997; Phelan, Mejia, & Hertzman, 2013). Hence, testing students' true ability of work-related capability rather than simple memory of class material is an important measurement of the course's learning objectives. Students need to devote a significant amount of time to reading course material, including textbook chapters, along with studying lecture notes in order to successfully complete this type of class.

One of the researchers, who has taught this course for several years, observed that a significant portion of the students struggled with multiple choice exam questions that are industry situation-based and several lines long. These students admitted that they could not understand what the questions were asking, sometimes got lost in the middle of reading the question itself, and subsequently, did not get a decent exam grade even though they felt they had spent enough time studying. For the purpose of this research, it was hypothesized that students utilized different reading comprehension and study skills strategies for course reading assignments, as well as preparation for class and the exams, thus leading to the large disparity in performance.

While the ultimate goal of this research was to develop and implement active, integrative student learning strategies and instructional tactics for the hospitality human resources management course, we needed to first ascertain what reading and study skills strategies students were utilizing in order to identify instructional techniques that would build upon student strengths to best address their needs. Thus, we chose a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design that would allow for a two-phase examination of our research questions.

Research Design

Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick (2006) define mixed methods as a procedure for "collecting, analyzing, and integrating quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study, for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the research process" (p. 3). This study's design entails two phases. In the first phase, quantitative data is collected and analyzed. In the second phase, qualitative data is collected and analyzed to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results gleaned during the first phase. The qualitative phase builds upon the quantitative phase with the two phases connecting in the intermediate stage of the study. Ivankova et al. argue that

the rationale for this approach is that “qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain statistical results by exploring participants’ views more in depth” (p. 5). When used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for more robust analysis (Green & Caracelli, 1997; Green, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Phase one: quantitative data collection and analysis. The goal of the quantitative phase was to ascertain the potential predictive power of students’ reading comprehension tactics on their examination performance. Because we initially speculated that the disparity in student examination performance might be a result of disparity in reading comprehension abilities and tactics the students utilize, we chose to administer the Metacognitive Reading Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ; Taraban, Kerr, & Rynearson, 2004), as opposed to other instruments such as the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI; Weinstein, Schulte, & Palmer, 1987) or the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MLSQ; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991, 1993). We reasoned that because LASSI and MLSQ were meant to measure a broad array of motivation and learning factors related to college learning and study not necessarily the reading strategies per se, the MRSQ would be more helpful in ascertaining college students’ reading strategies considering the students’ perception of and struggle with the exam questions. A total of 33 students who were enrolled in a hospitality human resource

management course were the subject of the survey for quantitative analysis.

Quantitative findings. We used Pearson’s Correlation Analysis (Pallant, 2007) method to compare the students’ survey responses and their performance on the exam and overall course grade. In order to represent the students’ reliance and usage of the reading/comprehension strategies for their college courses, the total average of student responses across all the survey questionnaire items were calculated (mean = 3.13, standard deviation = .454). Then the correlation between this average score and Exam #1 grades were calculated (Table 1). We found that the two variables were positively correlated but with a relatively weak statistical significance ($r(31) = .305, .05 < p < .10$). The positive correlation was not surprising considering that the students who have implemented more rigorous reading/comprehension strategies may perform better on their exams as compared to the performance of those who don’t. However, the students’ exam performance cannot be decided solely by their reading/comprehension-related behavior. The exam consists mostly of multiple choice questions that are based on hypothetical or actual business situations, where students need to be able to apply their understanding and knowledge successfully in order to find the correct answers. Therefore, students’ performance on the exam may be affected by other factors such as their industry experience, other study skills and tactics, attitude toward the course contents, and so forth.

Table 1		
<i>Correlation between the total average of student response score and Exam #1 score (n = 33)</i>		
	Total average of student response score	Exam #1 score
Total average of Student response score	1	.305*
Exam #1 score	.305*	1

* .05 < p < .10 (two-tailed)

Table 2

Correlation between the Exam #1 score and course grade (n=33)

	Exam #1 score	Course grade
Exam #1 score	1	.624***
Course grade	.624***	1

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

In order to look into the consistency between the students' Exam #1 performances and their course grade, we analyzed the correlation between the two variables. If the students' Exam #1 scores are highly correlated with their overall course grade that is calculated based on the students' attendance, participation, assignments, in-class group discussions in addition to the exam scores, the exam may be considered a good assessment measure in alignment with the overall student learning. The result clearly shows an existence of a statistically significant correlation ($r(31) = .624, p < .001$) (Table 2).

Phase two: qualitative data collection and analysis. Once the quantitative data had been analyzed, we invited students to volunteer for a focus group discussion where we could further explore the specific strategies the students were utilizing for course readings, as well as preparation for class and examinations. In the end, four participants, Robert, Mike, Megan, and Brooke (all pseudonyms) voluntarily took part in a focus group discussion. Based on the conversation in the focus group, each of these students claimed to have studied for the examination; however, three of the four performed poorly, accounting for over 20% of 14 students who performed below the class average on Exam #1.

A general, semi-structured, interview guide was utilized, which allowed the researchers to request follow-up, clarification, and elaboration (Seidman, 2006). Participants were asked about the reading and study strategies they utilized in preparation for class and the first examination, as well as possible

factors that might impact the effectiveness of their study such as study environment and motivation to learn course concepts. Test taking strategies were also discussed by the group and scaffolded by the instructor (one of the researchers), as participants shared their strategies for answering some of the actual exam questions. Examples of scaffolding by the instructor included thinking aloud, linking course concepts, and picking out key words in the exam question.

In addition to the focus group data, and to provide richness to the qualitative data, multiple sources of data were utilized, including: (1) researchers' reflective notes recorded immediately after the focus group, (2) participants' responses to the survey, and (3) participants' performance on course examinations. During the second phase, the qualitative data collected from the taped and transcribed ninety-minute focus group, were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) including *open*, *axial*, and *selective* coding procedures - raw data was coded, then grouped by similar codes, as recommended by Creswell (1998). Verification procedures included triangulating the data through intercoder agreement, as well as reviewing and resolving disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Miller, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Qualitative findings. Participants utilized various comprehension and study strategies for their course readings, as well as for preparation for class and the first examination; however, they met with varying degrees of success on Exam #1. Results

suggest that specific strategies seemed to be more effective than others, and that the purposeful application of these strategies, as well as efficient time management and motivation to learn course concepts impacted exam performance. Findings from the focus group are summarized based on the three categories; reading comprehension strategies, general study strategies, and test taking strategies (Table 3).

Reading comprehension strategies. Specific reading strategies students discussed included: (1) effectively using the text and features of the text to guide comprehension, (2) scanning forward and backward in the text to find information relevant to the purpose for reading, (3) rereading, (4) using the PowerPoint presentation outlines as reading guides, (5) engaging in the text and making connections to life experiences.

Although all participants expressed that they read the textbook to prepare for the examination, two of the four students actually purchased the book before the first

examination. Robert explained his reasoning behind not purchasing the book this way:

Well, I never buy the textbooks... because it's kinda like...I approach the class for a couple of weeks and see if I actually need it. And a lot of times professors will put the text on reserve in the library. So that's where I read the text. But again, it's in the library so I don't really read it until the night before and ...I kinda cram.

Mike, who also had not purchased the textbook prior to the first examination, agreed that cramming the readings before the exam was problematic in that utilizing the reserve textbook only allowed time to review the bold terms; hence, he was not able to use the book to its full potential and he attributed his poor exam performance to lack of preparation.

Although Brooke and Megan purchased the textbook, they both expressed that they managed their time ineffectively with regard to course reading assignments and exam preparation. Brooke commented:

I work, but I can use my time better

Table 3

Summary of the focus group interview findings

Categories	Student feedback
Reading comprehension strategies:	(1) effectively using the text and features of the text to guide comprehension (2) scanning forward and backward in the text to find information relevant to the purpose for reading (2) rereading (3) using the PowerPoint presentation outlines as reading guides (4) engaging in the text and making connections to life experiences
General study strategies:	(1) reviewing the bold terms and surrounding text and relating them to life experiences (2) studying the PowerPoint outlines and previous quizzes (3) making flashcards (4) reviewing the case studies in the text (5) effective time management (6) motivation to learn course concepts
Test taking strategies	(1) more carefully reading the exam scenarios and answers (2) relating answers to class anecdotes and homework assignments (3) remaining patient and calm while reading the "long exam questions"

(whispers sheepishly)...I'm either at work or at school. And when I'm not at either, I just want to chill. I don't want to read.

Like Brooke, Megan was juggling work and school, but added that her lack of being motivated to "fit in" the course readings was due to the fact she was not interested in Human Resources Management. Problematic in this thinking is that Human Resources Management is a core course in her program.

Although all participants expressed that they had not used the textbook effectively to prepare for class or for the first exam, they discussed reading strategies they have employed successfully in other contexts or would have been successful if they had not been "cramming" for the exam. For example, three of the four discussed utilizing the PowerPoint presentation as a reading guide.

Robert's stated:

I have the PowerPoint...and I know that pretty much what's on the PowerPoint and in the book, he's gonna put on the test... Well and it's not just with him; it's usually with other professors. If it's double covered, you know they want you to learn it.

All agreed that for the remainder of the semester, they would print out the PowerPoint presentation outlines and use them as a reading guide to complete the course reading assignments. They also agreed that dividing the course readings into manageable chunks, avoiding the need to cram the readings right before the next exam, would be a more effective use of time.

Another realization participants came to after taking the first exam is that they would be required to apply course concepts to case scenarios posed in the exam questions. This would require deeper engagement with the textbook, specifically, connecting life experiences to the case examples presented in the text. For example, Megan expressed that she "looked over" the case examples, but had difficulty making connections across courses, texts, and life experiences, as evidenced in her comment:

Well with this book, it's kinda hard to relate it to another class, because no other class is really like this one...besides my law class...other than that, it's just kinda common sense so there's nothing I can relate it to. All my classes are geared toward operations and stuff.

Exam performance propelled Megan to the realization that this approach was not sufficient for success in the course and that she would need to read the textbook more deeply and thoughtfully.

On the other hand, Robert, who performed well on the exam, talked about relating the case examples presented in the textbook to his own work experiences. He said this:

I'm really good in this class because I can see it relating to my past job experiences and I know that if I'm going to be a manager one day, this is one of the classes you gotta know...when I'm reading, I am constantly relating to previous job experiences.

Thus, the ability to connect course concepts to life experiences not only helped Robert more deeply engage in the course readings, but he perceived that it positively impacted his test performance.

Participants also discussed scanning forward and backward in the text to find information relevant to the purpose for reading and rereading text when understanding broke down. Robert expressed:

When I don't understand something, I reread it four or five times until it finally sticks. I have to constantly read a section and go back, reread it, move on, then go back again. I just constantly move back and forth when I read

All participants agreed that this was an effective strategy; however, in light of time constraints due to having to access the reserve textbook, or not factoring adequate time to complete the readings, participants met with varying degrees of ability to use this strategy.

General study strategies. Study strategies students discussed utilizing in their exam

preparation included: (1) reviewing the bold terms and surrounding text and relating them to life experiences, (2) studying the PowerPoint outlines and previous quizzes, (3) making flashcards, (4) reviewing the case studies in the text, (5) effective time management (6) motivation to learn course concepts

While all participants studied for the first exam, the degree and ways in which they studied varied. For example, one study strategy all the participants utilized was reviewing the bold terms in the textbook. For Mark, “looking at the bold terms and skimming the surrounding text,” was his only preparation for the exam. Megan made flash cards of the bold terms, commenting:

... I review the bold terms. When I do my homework or the online quizzes, I just go through the book based on the terms. Then if there’s an example I make sure I look at it...If there’s two pages with no bold terms then I don’t read that. I skip that. And for tests, I make flashcards (of the terms)...but obviously making that many flashcards was a lot of work. And then you have to go through them once you’re done.

When probed about whether she felt the flashcards had been helpful, Megan admitted that not only had they taken so much of her valuable time devoted to exam preparation, but were unhelpful in successfully answering the exam questions where application of course concepts needed to be made. She commented:

I understood the theories and the basics of the terms. Writing them down was helpful, but they weren’t helpful at all in relating the terms to the (exam) questions. Brooke explained that she utilized a strategy similar to flashcards in that she made a list of important terms; then wrote out the definitions. She commented,

I write things out because writing helps me remember it better...I went back and wrote down what I worked and what each thing was...it’s kinda

like flashcards. It’s just writing everything out.

When probed whether she felt this strategy was effective, Brooke, like Megan, felt that the method helped only with memorization of terms; it did not facilitate the deep understanding of concepts or the ability to relate concepts to the hypothetical situations that the exam questions required. Thus, the participants realized that memorization of bold textbook terms would not be sufficient for exam success.

Robert, the highest performing participant, was the only one who discussed making links between course concepts and life experiences while studying the bold terms and the case studies in the text, as well as his motivation to do so:

Well, I basically flunked out of my old school, so was surprised when I was able to get in here. My parents are making me cover a lot of the bills. So now that I am paying for most of my classes, I’m taking full advantage of every opportunity because that’s thousands of my dollars that I’ve saved up over summers to continue my education...I am 100% focused on studying...I can see (this class) relating to my past job experience and I know that if I am trying to be a manager this is one of the classes you gotta know....Like I know the owner of the hotel (where I previously worked) didn’t necessarily have a lot of business experience, he just had a ton of money. So he relied a lot on the general manager to answer a lot of the HR questions. It was a smaller hotel and we didn’t have an HR department. It was pretty much on the GM’s shoulders to figure things out.

Thus, in Robert’s case, past experiences and background knowledge motivated him to engage more deeply with the text and to make personal connections to course concepts; from Robert’s perspective, this realization propelled more effective study habits than utilized during his previous college experience.

PowerPoint presentation outlines for the semester's classes were available to all students taking HRT253: Human Resources Management and it was announced during the first class how and where they could be accessed; three of the four focus group participants had downloaded and printed them prior to the first exam. Further, while Brooke, Megan, and Robert studied the PowerPoint outlines and utilized the outlines to frame their readings of the textbook, they realized that the outlines could have been more strategically utilized during class to record clarifying notes and real case applications of course concepts discussed during class that would have been helpful in their exam preparation

With the benefit of hindsight, and the opportunity to reflect together on their exam performance, and the skills required of the exam during the focus group session, participants agreed that they would need more effective study strategies if they were to successfully complete the course. Some of the strategies they discussed as having potential to be more effective included: (1) dividing the course readings into manageable chunks, (2) annotating the text, (3) utilizing class time effectively (e.g. taking notes, asking clarifying questions, printing and bringing the PowerPoint presentation outlines to class) and studying notes taken in class, (4) more deeply engaging with the text - relating course concepts to life experiences.

Test taking strategies. Exam # 1 was predominately a situational test, thus, requiring of students the ability to apply course concepts and terms to hypothetical case scenarios. Participants expressed that many of the test-taking strategies they have utilized for multiple choice exams in other courses (e.g. eliminating answers, and rereading the question), were not as effective. For example, Robert expressed:

Well some of the exams that I have had with other professors, you're able to almost not know the answer, but get the right answer through process of

elimination. You know certain answers are wrong, so you're able to count those out through process of elimination. Some of these HR questions, the answer could go either way.

Megan said this of rereading the exam questions:

I think my problem with it was the questions themselves were like long! So I'd read through the whole thing and be like "oh, what's the question?" Read it a third time, "What's the question?" Then I'd be like, "ok I need to read the answers." So then I would read the answers and I would be like, "What's the question?" And then read it again and then at that point, my brain hurts and I'm lost.

With the benefit of hindsight, and the opportunity to reflect together on their exam performance, participants discussed test-taking strategies that could potentially be more helpful including: (1) more carefully reading the exam scenarios and answers, (2) relating answers to class anecdotes and homework assignments, (3) remaining patient and calm while reading the long exam questions. For example, in retrospect, Brooke expressed,

I was so sure I did well. I was one of the first done. That's why I am so surprised that I didn't do that well. I actually think I need to take a little more time. I need to slow down.

As Brooke reflected upon her performance, and we went over some of the exam questions, she realized that in her haste, she had missed key terms in the scenarios that led to her choice in incorrect answers. This was a common issue across all participants.

Another helpful strategy participants discussed was relating answers to class anecdotes and homework assignments. For example, Robert expressed that he had chosen a correct answer because he remembered and related it to an example brought up in class: "I got that question right because I related it to the bus driver drug test for the sake of public

safety.” However, participants agreed that this strategy would require more engaged participation in class, course readings, and assignments.

Megan talked about how her attitude impacted her exam performance. She commented:

I think part of it was attitude, because right away, after like the first five questions, I was like this took me 10 minutes, like it just...I was just annoyed by it at that point. So my attitude towards it was just not good for like the rest of it. It took too much focus to read one question...when I left, I knew I didn't do well...I didn't know like I knew anything...I guess I gotta go in with a better attitude.

As Megan reflected, she expressed that keeping her frustration in check, as well as remaining calm and focused would be important when taking subsequent exams.

Discussion

The results of this study provide insight into the reading comprehension and learning strategies students utilized for their hospitality human resources management course.

Although we acknowledge that other factors may have contributed to the students' exam performance including their industry experience, non-reading tactics, and attitude toward course content, the study results suggest that poorly performing students have not developed or do not utilize effective reading comprehension and learning strategies for success in the course.

The strategies some of the struggling students utilized, (e.g. flashcards, rereading the text) although time-consuming, were what Holschuh and Aultman (2009) characterize as a surface learning approach to study, and were admittedly unhelpful in answering exam questions that required students' ability to apply the content knowledge to actual business situations. Holschuh and Aultman (2009) also argue that deep versus surface

approaches to learning may tie into students' college performance because they are a result of students' perceptions of academic tasks (Biggs, 1988; Kember, Biggs, & Leung, 2004). Students who adopt surface approaches begin a task with the sole purpose of task completion rather than learning (Entwistle, 1988; Kember et al., 2004; Marton & Saljo, 1997). This is problematic because research suggests that an overemphasis on rote learning of isolated facts and concepts can impair students' ability to interrelate main concepts (Hammer, 1995; Holschuh, 2000).

In contrast, students who adopt deep approaches to learning tend to personalize academic tasks and integrate information so that they can see relationships among ideas (Entwistle, 1988; Marton & Saljo, 1997). This was the case for one of the focus group participants who had performed satisfactorily on the exam. He, unlike the other focus group participants, had a significant amount of industry experience, which enabled him to frame the assigned course contents through this practical lens. He was also motivated to understand course concepts because he could see the value in learning the key principles of human resources management, as these responsibilities often fall on the shoulders of the managers and supervisors. In this way, he was able to build on previous knowledge in a meaningful way that facilitated long-term learning (De Jong & Ferguson-Hessler, 1996).

Strategies that comprise the deep and surface approaches to learning appear to be domain specific (Elias, 2005; Holschuh, 2000). Thus, a deep approach in one domain might not be effective in another (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009). One of the insights elicited from the focus group is that students were not engaging with the text such that they were able to make connections; this seemed to impact their ability to apply course concepts to the hypothetical situations required of the course examinations. It is speculated that this may have had more to do with the lack of industry experience than disengagement with the text.

Implications

These results have implications for instruction specific to the human resources management course, but may also have potential for providing guidance to others interested in instructional strategies that result in more integrative, generative learning in discipline-specific courses. What follows is a description of suggested techniques that (1) formatively assess student knowledge, so that instruction can be adjusted to meet student need before course examinations, (2) address varying degrees of background knowledge and experience, (3) capitalize on peer scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) to build upon the practical knowledge and experience some students bring to the course, and (4) promote deep approaches to learning when preparing for class, as well as more active engagement in class.

Personal Response Systems

Technology has revolutionized the ability to easily and quickly assess student understanding of course concepts through personal response systems (PRS), commonly called clickers. PRS allow the instructor to gather real-time data about student understanding of a given concept. As a result, instruction can be strategized to better meet student need. For example, PRS can be worked into the beginning of class to gauge understanding of previously assigned readings and to draw out students' prior knowledge about the concepts planned for class exploration, thus creating opportunities for meaningful engagement (Deal, 2007).

As well, PRS can also facilitate a shift from what Deal (2007) describes as the ballistic model of knowledge transfer (plan and launch a lecture at the students, check later to see if you hit the target) to a constructivist model where students actively build knowledge as a result of meaningful interactions and activities. Under a constructivist model, the instructor poses a conceptual question, students are given one to

two minutes to formulate individual answers, then the instructor polls for initial responses. Once students see the distribution of responses, instructors encourage discussion, asking students to reconsider the question in small groups. Following the discussion the instructor polls students for their answers, which may have changed based on discussions, and offers scaffolding as necessary.

This type of case presentation, discussion, and scaffolding cycle could prove to be very effective in disciplinary courses which have close ties to the industry and an emphasis on experiential learning for professional career development (Petrillose & Montgomery, 1997).

Concept Mapping

Concept mapping could be an effective learning strategy to embed into any discipline-specific course, for a number of reasons. First, mapping has been shown to facilitate learning in many content areas because this strategy helps student organize concepts, as well as identify relationships among multiple concepts (Lipson, 1995), resulting in a deeper processing of information (Holschuh & Aultman, 2009). Second, Holschuh and Aultman (2009) argue that because mapping requires purposeful effort of students generating meaning by building relationships between the text and what they already know, their mind is not passive but rather "intentionally organizing, isolating, and elaborating on key information" (p. 131). Third, recent studies suggest that mapping can be effective, especially in classes where synthesis, rather than memorization of facts is required (Hay, 2007; Nesbit & Adescope, 2006), as is the case in the hospitality human resources management course.

Because some students, particularly those with low content knowledge, may have difficulty in organizing the relationships between and among ideas and concepts (Hadwin & Winne, 1996), instructors might capitalize on opportunities for peer

scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), through small-group discussion of concept maps. In this way, students with more experience guide the conceptual development of those with less experience. Small-group discussion would also provide opportunities for the assessment of student understandings or misunderstandings, which could be addressed in subsequent classes.

Write-to-Learn Tasks

Write-to-learn tasks can have a powerful effect on the quality of students' reading. In his book titled *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in Classrooms*, Bean (2011) identifies key strategies that instructors can encourage as they support students toward more engaged reading of course assignments. Techniques that would be particularly helpful to discipline-specific courses include, (1) marginal notes approach, (2) reading logs, (3) teacher-posed questions/thinking pieces, and (4) quick writes.

Marginal notes approach. Bean (2011) suggests instructors "encourage students to use the margins to summarize the text, ask questions, give assent, protest vehemently – not just color the pages. The goal is to get students to carry on a lively conversation with the author in the margins" (p. 177). Students could be encouraged to bring background knowledge or industry experience to their readings, or be asked to read the textbook from the lens of an expert while making these connections in the margins. For example, in the case of the human resources management course, students could be asked to read the textbook from the lens of a manager. A few students could be asked to volunteer to share their marginal notations in order to get class going. Raising the expectation that this is how some professionals read human resources management manuals could provide powerful insights for later professional use.

Reading logs. Bean (2011) writes, "Like an open-ended journal, a reading log requires that students write regularly

about what they are reading, but gives them freedom in choosing what to say. Students can summarize the text, connect it to a personal experience, imitate it, argue with it, analyze it, or evaluate it... Readers answer questions such as "what does this text mean to me?" "what effect does this text have on my values, my beliefs, my way of looking at the subject or world?" (p. 177)

Reflecting on these types of questions can be especially powerful for an experiential discipline as they can provide a context for what Schön (1983) describes as the phenomenon of "reflection-in-action" (p. 59). This emphasizes the ongoing learning of professionals whereby "practitioners learn by noticing and framing problems of interest to them in particular ways, then inquiring and experimenting with solutions (Fenwick, 2008, p. 12).

Class discussion can elevate the reading log's chronicle of the individual's initial understandings of course readings to a collective examination and processing of the field's issues leading to deeper understandings. Reading logs can also be collected at the end of class to provide quick checks for individual understanding.

Teacher-posed questions/ thinking piece. According to Bean (2011), posing critical thinking questions is an effective technique that requires students to respond thoughtfully to a text. In the case of an experiential discipline course, students could be asked to read and think about a hypothetical or real case posed by the instructor as part of the assigned readings. These initial understandings, in the form of brief written responses can be used to anchor subsequent small group or class discussion.

A think piece could also be used to precede a larger group project where teams are required to develop a management manual. Using text readings, individuals could be asked to think about what should be included in the manual as well as the laws that would govern those inclusions. Groups could

then use these initial think pieces to anchor subsequent work that would build on initial, individual understandings for the development of a more comprehensive manual.

Projects such as the described could have practical implications down the road for these aspiring professionals, as a real expectation for management within a particular industry would be the development and oversight of a management manual. Another added benefit from this type of project is the development of professional collaboration skills, which are particularly important for success in this field.

Quick writes. Quick writes can be a powerful means for checking for student's understanding (Angelo & Cross, 1993). With this technique, students are given three to five minutes at class conclusion to summarize the day's presentation and discussion. The writing can be purely free writing with no parameters, or prompts can be utilized such as: *How will you use what you learned today in a practical setting? What made sense to you? What questions do you still have?*" The prompts could also ask for student feedback, such as: *Was this class effective in terms of facilitating your learning? How so?* Quick-write prompts could then be used to formulate future instruction and, as described by Dirksen (2011), allow for data collection on the efficiency and effectiveness of student understanding.

Quick-write prompts could be particularly effective for discipline-specific, experiential courses because they could serve as a means to formatively assess the level of student understanding and learning prior to examinations. Likewise, student feedback, such as any misconceptions, could be addressed in future lesson development.

Limitations

While the present study provides meaningful insight into the specific reading comprehension and learning strategies students implement in order to prepare for class and course examinations, there are

several limitations which may guide potential expansions of this discipline-specific research. First, the quantitative analysis of this study is limited in that it is based on 33 survey responses. We plan to replicate the survey in subsequent classes to investigate the generalizability of the quantitative findings. Second, even though we hypothesized that there might be a statistically significant correlation between the reading strategies students utilized and their exam performance, only a somewhat weak statistical significance was detected. It will be interesting to collect more data from subsequent semesters to further examine the characteristics of this relationship. Third, while a focus group discussion of four students provided ample feedback and implications regarding the students' learning strategies not only in reading but also in other aspects, such as general study and test taking strategies, an expansion of focus group size would have given more comprehensive representation of the hospitality management students' overall learning strategies and their understanding and performance in class. In future semesters, we may strategically target students who seem to struggle both in their understanding and applicability of key concepts and send an invitation for a focus group discussion instead of relying on students' volunteerism to form groups. Also, in order to prevent a potential Hawthorne effect (Landsberger, 1958) from having the course instructor in a focus group discussion, we plan to conduct future focus group without the presence of the instructor. Lastly, due to the time constraints of this project, we weren't able to implement instructional intervention or examine the efficacy of instruction. This will be done during the next phase of our research.

Conclusion

Even with these limitations, we think this is an innovative interdisciplinary research project that benefits from the synergy generated by the expertise from two

seemingly heterogeneous disciplines and provides insights for other faculty members who are concerned with utilizing instructional strategies that may lead to more integrative and generative learning in their discipline-specific courses. In order to address some of the study's limitations mentioned above, and

to examine the generalizability of the study findings, we plan to continue this project by implementing the described instructional strategies in future classes and measure these engaging interventions' efficacy in facilitating students' learning.

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