

## **8 Contributing Causes of Students' Reading Difficulties**

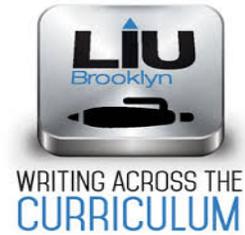
### **1. A School Culture That Rewards Surface Reading**

Our current school culture, which allows savvy students to get decent grades for minimal effort, cultivates surface reading. The prolific use of quizzes and other kinds of objective tests encourages "surface learning based in... short-term memorization for a day or two... rather than deep learning that is transformative of one's perspective and involves long-term comprehension." Moreover, many students don't value a course's "big ideas" because deep learning isn't needed for cumulating a high GPA. Multiple choice tests allow students "to skim material a few days before an examination looking for the kinds of facts, definitions, concepts, and other specific information that the particular instructor tends to stress in examinations" (p. 129). In short, unless we as teachers evaluate student performance at the levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, "reading at that deeper level will not occur" (p. 129).

### **2. Students' Resistance to the Time-on-Task Required for Deep Reading**

Students avoid the deep reading process, which involves substantial time-on-task. When experts read difficult texts, they read slowly and reread often. They struggle with the text to make it comprehensible. They hold confusing passages in mental suspension, having faith that later parts of the text may clarify earlier parts. They "nutshell" passages as they proceed, often writing gist statements in the margins. They read a difficult text a second and a third time, considering first readings as approximations or rough drafts. They interact with the text by asking questions,

(Adapted from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* Copyright (c) 2011 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)



expressing disagreements, linking the text with other readings or with personal experience.

But resistance to deep reading may involve more than an unwillingness to spend the time. Students may actually misunderstand the reading process. They may believe that experts are speed-readers who don't need to struggle. Therefore students assume that their own reading difficulties must stem from their lack of expertise, which makes the text "too hard for them." Consequently, they don't allot the study time needed to read a text deeply.

### **3. Teachers' Willingness to Lecture over Reading Material**

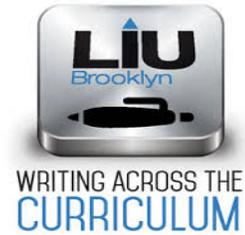
Once students believe that a text is too hard for them, they assume that it is the teacher's job to explain the text to them. Since teachers regularly do so, the students' reading difficulty initiates a vicious circle: Teachers, frustrated by their students' poor reading comprehension, decide to lecture over the assigned texts ("I have to lecture on this material because students are such poor readers").

Meanwhile, teachers' lectures deprive students of the very practice and challenge they need to grow as readers ("I don't have to struggle with this text because the teacher will explain it in class").

### **4. Failure to Adjust Reading Strategies for Different Purposes**

Inexperienced readers are also unaware of how a skilled reader's reading process will vary extensively depending on the reader's purpose. College students-facing enormous amounts of reading- must learn to distinguish among different reading

(Adapted from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* Copyright (c) 2011 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)



purposes and adjust their reading speed accordingly. Some reading tasks require only skimming for gist, while others require the closest scrutiny of detail. The lesson here is that we need to help students learn when to read fast and when to read slowly. Not every text requires deep reading.

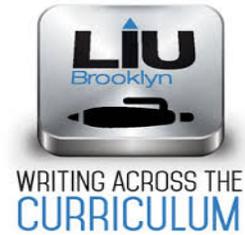
### **5. Difficulty in Adjusting Reading Strategies to Different Genres**

Besides adjusting reading strategy to purpose, students need to learn to adjust reading strategy to genre. Students tend to read all texts as if they were textbooks—linearly from first to last page looking for facts and information that can be highlighted with a yellow marker. Their tendency to get either lost or bored results partly from their unfamiliarity with the text's genre and the function of that genre within a discourse system. Inexperienced readers do not understand, for example, that the author of a peer-reviewed scholarly article joins a conversation of other scholars and tries to stake out a position that offers something new.

### **6. Difficulty in Perceiving the Structure of an Argument as They Read**

Unlike experts, inexperienced readers are less apt to chunk complex material into discrete parts with describable functions. They do not say to themselves, for example, "This part is giving evidence for a new reason," "This part maps out an upcoming section," or "This part summarizes an opposing view." Their often indiscriminate, almost random use of the yellow highlighter suggests that they are not representing the text in their minds as a hierarchical structure. To use a metaphor popular among composition instructors, these students are taking an ant's-eye view of the text—crawling through it word by word—rather than a bird's-eye

(Adapted from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* Copyright (c) 2011 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)



view, seeing the overall structure by attending to mapping statements, section headings, paragraph topic sentences, and so forth.

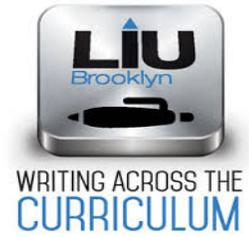
### **7. Difficulty Seeing Themselves in Conversation with the Author**

Possibly because they regard texts as sources of inert information rather than as arguments intended to change their view of something, inexperienced readers often do not interact with the texts they read. They don't ask how they, as readers in a particular moment in time, are similar to or different from the author's intended audience. They don't realize that texts have designs upon them and that they need to decide, through their own critical thinking, whether to succumb to or resist the text's power.

### **8. Difficulties with Vocabulary and Syntax**

Inadequate vocabulary hampers the reading comprehension of many students. Using a dictionary helps considerably, but often students do not appreciate how context affects word meanings, nor do they have a good ear for irony or humor. Moreover, the texts they read often contain technical terms, terms used in unusual ways, terms requiring extensive contextual knowledge, or terms that have undergone meaning changes over time. Additionally, students have difficulty tracking complex sentence structures. Although students may be skilled enough reading syntactically simple texts, they often have trouble with the sentence structure of primary sources or scholarly articles. When they are asked to read a complex sentence aloud, their errors in inflection reveal their difficulty in chunking

(Adapted from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* Copyright (c) 2011 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)



grammatical units; they have trouble isolating main clauses, distinguishing them from attached and embedded subordinate clauses and phrases.

(Adapted from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* Copyright (c) 2011 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)