

## Reading Strategies in the Digital Environment: Initial briefing document

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The challenge of providing an environment conducive to reading for a degree in a world dominated by e-resources is being considered by the eRes project.

It is anticipated that the outcomes of this work will inform and support academics in their work with new pedagogies, as well as librarians seeking to develop new ways of delivering information literacy skills. All of which may contribute to a greater academic literacy. There has been up to now only limited research conducted on reading strategies, particularly reading within the digital environment.

Successful critical thinking, learning outcomes and pedagogy are all central to the concept of reading for a degree. Critical thinking is an “elusive concept” (Moon, 2007) which can provide some context for developing a definition of successful reading, describing activities required to read for a degree. To become autonomous learners, students need to be motivated and acquire the skill of “deep learning” as described by Marton et al (1984). Marton et al also identify a separate skill of “strategic learning” focussed on achieving the highest possible grade or mark.

To link the internal dialogues necessary for deep or strategic learning, Laurillard (2002) has taken the concept of the conversational framework and developed it to include the

conversation between learner and teacher. Scheja (2006) describes the notion of “delayed understanding” which captures the complications of a study situation where perceived lack of time to reflect on learning material obstructs students understanding of course material. Scheja observes that time to reflect on previous experiences is an essential component in the understanding of learning materials.

The National Level Descriptors (2000) describe the characteristics, achievements and attributes of learning at each level, from Level C at undergraduate level to Level D at doctorate level. There would appear to be a clear link between most, if not all, of the attributes of critical thinking, deep or strategic learning and becoming an autonomous learner and what is expected of students reading for a degree.

Richard Paul and Michael Scriven of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking suggest that the effective handling of information is an essential element of critical thinking,

“Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.”

The interactive nature of the learning process in the electronic environment is discussed by Crook (2005) who observes that “the growth of new information and communication technologies (ICT) demands a broader view of academic literacy...” and refers to Ware and Warschauer (2005) who identify four ways by which ICT “re-mediates the tradition of printed language”.

An extensive search of the literature has shown that there has been little written to date on reading strategies and academic skills development in a digital environment. In 2003, librarians at the University of the West of England (UWE) coined the term “reading strategies” to draw attention to the fact that reading lists are only part of a wider “reading strategy” that should consider not only what students read but how they will get access to their reading material.

The results of the work at UWE have led to what can be described as a hybrid solution, identifying and providing electronic material to supplement and complement print resources (Chelin, 2005). This work did not address how reading, critical thinking and learning might take place in this digital world. Work at Edge Hill College (Martin and Stokes, 2006) describes reading lists as “Cinderella

rather than superstar despite their time under the spotlight” and note concerns from both academics and librarians that strategies need to develop autonomous learners and avoid spoon-feeding.

Reading e-books has not reached the maturity and acceptance associated with e-journal use and there are many differing views of the challenges (Ball et al, 2007) (Gharbi, 2006) (Rowlands et al, 2007). Following an extensive survey at UCL, Rowlands et al (2007) report “a substantial level of interest in and use of e-books in at least one major research-orientated academic institution in the UK”. Their findings are supported by the experience at BU, where book issues have

declined by 28% between 2002/ 3 and 2006/7 whilst usage of full text books and journals during the same period has increased by 146%. The aggregate of hard copy loans and electronic downloads has risen by 55%, suggesting that students and staff are reading more, or at least accessing a wide range of materials (Ball et al, 2007).

If hand held devices such as Apple’s i-phone or i-player, Sony’s e-book reader or Amazon’s Kindle gain acceptance in the marketplace, and page-turning software such as Olive and PageSuite reach wider markets, then it is reasonable to conclude that e-books will rapidly follow e-journals into wide use in higher education. Integration into VLEs

are already facilitating this process (Browne et al, 2006) (Ball et al, 2007).

A case study drawn from the eRes project can make a timely contribution to the debate by considering aspects of critical thinking that are relevant to learning strategies and aspects of access such as the acceptance of hand held reading devices and page turning technology. The case study will also consider the pedagogies that can facilitate the development of academic skills, including reading for a degree in a predominantly digital environment.

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