THE USE OF LEARNING JOURNALS TO FOSTER TEXTBOOK READING IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PSYCHOLOGY CLASS

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Across disciplines, faculty members face a common challenge of finding methods to get their students to complete assigned course readings. It becomes an even larger task to develop strategies whereby students are also engaging in deep reading that promotes critical thinking. Reading positively impacts students on a number of variables, and when students do not read, they are considerably less likely to grasp difficult concepts and complete their coursework successfully (Ryan, 2006). This is especially important for community college students who enter college underprepared (Grubb, 1999) and may need assistance from faculty in providing structure for reading. Using a mixed-method design, this study examines the usefulness of a journal-type assignment created in a psychology course at an urban community college to foster textbook reading and critical thinking about the reading. Findings indicate that the majority of students in this sample did some level of reading, as evidenced by completion of the assignment. Student evaluations and scores on the assignment further suggest that the assignment fostered engagement with the reading and critical thinking.

Keywords: Community college students, textbook reading, psychology assignments

Background and Literature Review

College professors will not argue with Burchfield & Sappington’s (2000) assertion that “students’ compliance with reading assignments plays an important role in classroom social dynamics as well as individual achievement” (p. 59). Course reading benefits students on many levels including advantages in test taking (Sappington, Kinsey, & Munsayac, 2002), greater understanding of content related material (Ryan, 2006), retaining information from class lecture (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000), increased decisions to participate in class (Karp & Yoels, 1976), and more lively class discussions (Carkenord, 1994). When students are prepared for class, a more successful class session takes place (Solomon, 1979) and everyone benefits, including instructors who are often burdened by the thought that they have to “cover” everything. Extending beyond the classroom, employers increasingly cite deficiencies in basic skills among new college graduate hires. Hence, reading promotes not only academic success, but also may help with the skills and abilities that students will need to be successful in the workforce (Starcher & Profitt, 2011). Though there are a myriad of positive effects of reading, very often students are not in compliance with assigned readings (Burchfield &
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Sappington, 2000; Clump, Bauer & Bradley, 2004) even after urging from their instructors (Sappington, Kinsey, & Munsayac, 2002). In fact, only approximately one-third of students complete their text assignments on a given day with a decline found in reading compliance over a 16-year span (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000).

It is possible that some students don’t read because they do not have a textbook. Students typically don’t purchase a textbook for reasons such as finding them useless or too expensive (Sikorski et al., 2002). Even when textbooks are purchased, however, most students use them infrequently and spend less than three hours per week reading (Sikorski et al., 2002), with one study showing that while the large majority of students owned a textbook, less than half of the students completed the majority of the reading assignments (Starcher & Profitt, 2011).

Numerous reasons for non-compliance with reading have been discussed and, as cited in Starcher & Profitt (2011), include lack of student motivation (Rothkopf, 1988), lack of congruence between student and professor goals for the course (Nolen, 1996), and poor understanding of the role of the assigned reading (Brost & Bradley, 2006). Students may be too busy or too forgetful (Hoeft, 2012), lack useful exercises in class that may help them make the connection between reading and success on exams (Sappington et al., 2002), or assignments may not be structured enough (Ryan, 2006). Further, students may not comprehend what they are reading and may become overwhelmed with the reading as a result (Ryan, 2006). Moreover, there is evidence that when faculty do nothing to reinforce students’ reading and/or students believe that all ideas within the readings will be duplicated in class, students are less likely to complete the reading assignments (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Carney, Winstead, Gabriele, & Ballard, 2008; Sikorski et al., 2002).

In our current society, students may also wonder why they have to read when they could pull up information on the internet or view the instructor’s Power Point slides.

In one study, only approximately half of students strongly agreed that textbook reading contributed to their learning or improved their grades (Marek & Christopher, 2011). Rather, taking class notes and studying them, along with attending class and listening to the lecture, have been rated by students as more important than reading for success in class (Murden & Gillespie, 1997; Sikorski et al., 2002). In one of the few studies focusing on community college students specifically, Maaka & Ward (2000) identified four factors that impacted students’ abilities to read independently and effectively: students’ motivation, the learning skills and strategies students bring to their reading experiences, students’ ability to comprehend information from assigned readings, and the instructors’ methods of instruction. The following were cited as the most common reasons students provided for lack of motivation to read: excessive length of readings, difficulty of the readings, the lack of time available to read, an inability to relate to the readings, and a lack of interest in textbooks in particular.

It is difficult to motivate students to read (Carkenord, 1994) and as Solomon (1979) stated, “unfortunately, in many classroom situations there is no incentive to read the assigned material prior to the class in which it will be covered” (p. 77). Tests serve as one incentive for reading the assigned material with studies showing that while the general rate of reading before class is only 27.5%, reading compliance rates rise to 69.8% prior to an exam (Clump et al., 2004). Quizzes have also proven effective as a means of increasing students’ rates of textbook or journal article reading and assessing student preparation for class (Connor-Greene, 2000; Hoeft, 2012; Marchant, 2002; Ruscio, 2001; Sappington...
et al., 2002; Starcher & Proffit, 2011) with one study demonstrating that 92% of students who were given daily quizzes reported that they always or almost always completed the reading by the scheduled date in comparison to only 12% of students who had fewer tests (Connor-Greene, 2000). Students are not fond of quizzes, however, and tend to perceive surprise quizzes as particularly punitive (Connor-Greene, 2000), with such discontent possibly disrupting a positive student–instructor alliance (Carney et al., 2008). Faculty may also view quizzes disparagingly, looking at them as extrinsic motivators (Starcher & Proffit, 2011) and as too teacher-centered (Hemderson & Rosenthal, 2006). Further, as Roberts & Roberts (2008) posit, quizzes may promote a superficial level of reading versus the type of reading where students are interacting with the text and formulating their own thoughts.

The desire to increase motivation to read, while simultaneously fostering deeper engagement with what is being read, serves as an impetus for creative pedagogies. Femald (2004), for example, created a unique approach titled the Monte Carlo Quiz by which the rolling of a die determines whether a quiz is administered, which section of the assigned reading will be covered on the quiz, and the type of question administered. While this approach also relies on the use of quizzes, the types of questions students are asked were designed to tap into various levels of thought and require essay type responses that foster deeper levels of processing from the reading. Additionally, Yamane (2006) created what is called course preparation assignments (CPAs), which require students to complete readings in advance of class and respond to prompts that also will set the basis of in-class small group activities.

With learning and critical thinking as goals for reading, combined reading/writing assignments have been highly valued (Bean, 1996) as alternatives or supplements to traditional exams and quizzes that rely on memorization (Linderholm, 2006). Reading/writing strategies such as reading logs, learning logs, and double entry notebooks have proven useful in motivating students to read and contribute to class discussions (Carney et al., 2008), while also enhancing critical engagement with the text and metacognitive awareness (El-Hindi, 1997). The literature on journal writing is particularly rich, with advocates connecting it to critical thinking and self-expression (Hettich, 1990), reflection (O'Connell & Dyment, 2006), and active learning and rapport building between faculty and students that leads to positive learning experiences (Fritson, Forrest & Bohl, 2011; Phillips, 2005). Hoeft (2012) found the use of graded journals, in particular, to have the largest impact on reading compliance versus other strategies.

**Rationale for the Current Study**

In keeping with Carney et al.'s (2008) assertion, that “both seasoned and novice professors bemoan students’ lack of preparedness for their classes” (p. 195), the assignment under examination originated from my own frustration with the lack of independent, assigned reading taking place in preparation for class as well and an attempt to have students read with greater purpose. I teach developmental psychology at a large urban community college in Brooklyn, New York that is part of the larger institution of the City University of New York. The college provides liberal arts and career education and has a widely diverse student body. Reading is particularly important in this course, like other upper level courses, because the course serves as a prerequisite for entry into specialized programs at the college such as nursing – programs that rely heavily on reading and critical thinking skills. Further, students in these upper level classes are closer to graduating and need to have critical thinking skills for their
ongoing educational and career endeavors. Though some research suggests that students in advanced classes may be more likely to complete assigned readings than those in introductory classes (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000), others (Clump & Doll, 2007) have not supported this finding. Nonetheless, these studies have only examined students at the university level; data on community college students is lacking.

Getting students to comply and engage with reading is critical for community college students, as many of these students come from secondary institutions that did not prepare them adequately for college-level classes. As such, many community college students are lacking in motivation and basic reading and writing skills and this affects their ability to be retained and graduate in a timely manner (Grubb, 1999). These students need to learn the skills of how to decipher what is important in their readings. It is worth noting that students and faculty do not always agree about where the responsibility for understanding core concepts within readings resides. While faculty members believe assigned readings provide students with an opportunity to develop strategies for distinguishing between core and auxiliary ideas, many students believe that the onus is on the instructors to help them identify core concepts (Clump et al., 2004). Misunderstandings between instructors and students concerning what it means to read critically and on a college level might also contribute to students’ apparent unwillingness to complete reading assignments. This assignment aims to place focus on the students—allowing them to have an active role in their learning.

The Assignment

The learning journal assignment, which was essentially a required, prompted, written exercise, was worth 20% of the students’ final grade. My conceptualization of a learning journal seems to be a version of what Bean (1996) refers to as a semistructured exploratory writing task—one of the many forms of “thinking pieces” (p. 135). For each learning journal entry, students had to provide thoughtful responses to the following four prompts: (1) Which two things were the most interesting for you to read about in this chapter and why?, (2) How does this chapter relate to you and/or the people in your life in some way? and/or indicate why it is important for you to have knowledge about the content in this chapter, (3) List two questions that you have as a result of reading this chapter, and (4) If you were to go on and become a researcher in this field, what is a research issue that you would like to investigate?

The prompts for this assignment were crafted as a means to elicit forms of thinking such as comprehension and application versus simple summarization; they also reflect my thoughts about what would be most helpful for student learning considering my previous experience with discussions that tend to take place in the classroom. A literature review on the topics of journal writing and reading logs also helped with the development of the prompts as some prompts were based on similar pedagogical assignments (Bean, 1996; Henderson & Rosenthal, 2006) that research had proven effective in terms of encouraging reading and enhancing learning and critical thinking skills. In their study on community college students, Maaka & Ward (2000) found that students may not be reading because they can’t relate to the material. Hence, the prompts were designed to have students find ways to make the material personally relevant.

The assignment was also created in alignment with what the pedagogical approach known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) calls, “writing to learn” (Bean 1996). WAC is a movement that has emphasized writing as a teaching and learning tool that can be employed in any class to help students engage in active, independent learning and
develop better writing and critical thinking skills necessary for future success. Having assignments that integrate WAC pedagogy can be very beneficial for community college students as well, since many of these students received messages from their secondary schools that teachers were the authority (Brookfield, 2005) and, hence, students may be used to a passive style of learning versus one in which they could think critically. Furthermore, as VanOra (2012) posits from examining the lives of community college students in developmental courses, many students have anxiety about writing and find it to be a significant obstacle to success in class. Finding pedagogical strategies, therefore, that encourage reading and allow students to practice writing skills, could be integral to the academic success of community college students.

Purpose and Methodology of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the value of an assignment created both to ensure that students have done the assigned reading and encourage engagement and critical thinking with the reading. Sixty-six community college students, enrolled in two different sections of developmental psychology (PSY 32) during the same semester with the same instructor, participated in this study. Though total enrollment across both sections was 75 students, 68 total students were present for the administration of the surveys and 66 students completed them, yielding a 97% response rate. Approval to conduct this study was granted by the college’s Institutional Review Board. The sample consisted of 15 males and 47 females, with 4 students who did not identify their gender. The majority of participants reported having between 0-30 total earned credits on their transcript (74.1%) and having been enrolled for 12 or more credits during the semester in which the study was conducted (63.7%). The average grade point average for this sample was 2.9.

In this course, 15 of 16 total chapters are generally covered in a 12-week semester. To keep grading manageable, students were asked to complete a learning journal entry for 9 of the 15 chapters. Furthermore, in an effort to curtail the potential for the grading experience to be too overwhelming, the learning journals were collected twice per semester—in the middle and end of the semester. Students were told they needed to have at least 4-5 entries from the first set of chapters covered in class (1-7) and the remaining entries, to total 9, from the latter half of the chapters covered (8-15). Each learning journal entry was worth up to 2 points (for a total of 18 points) with 1 point allotted for overall quality of the journals per each set turned in (2 in total) in terms of being free of grammatical and spelling errors. During this pilot semester, students were given the full 2 points for a journal if all of the prompts were addressed to the degree that responses reflected effort, familiarity with the chapter, and understanding of the concepts. Students received only one point if they were missing one or more major prompt and/or did not demonstrate a level of thinking that reflected a connection to and understanding/application of the reading. Students received a zero if they failed to submit journals.

In addition to the learning journal assignment, students enrolled in this course were responsible for 4 in-class examinations on material that was already covered in class, brief extra credit quizzes that corresponded to new material they were supposed to have read for class that day, and a one-and-half page end of semester reflective assignment that asked them to think about where they would focus their research efforts if they were to be a developmental psychologist. Further, participation was 5% of their grade.

During the second to last week of the semester, participants were asked to complete a 24-item questionnaire, titled the Learning Journal Questionnaire, which was developed
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by the researcher to assess their general impressions about various dimensions of the assignment. Participants were also asked to complete a 12-item demographic form and an informed consent form. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items based on a four point Likert-type scale (see Table 1 in Appendix A) ranging from strongly disagree (value of 1) to strongly agree (value of 4) as well as the following four open ended questions: (1) What did you like about the learning journal assignment for this class?, (2) What did you dislike about the learning journal assignment for this class?, (3) If this assignment were to be given again, what would you recommend changing so that it can be more worthwhile for students in the future?, and (4) Any other thoughts about this assignment or about how your reading tendencies could be increased in class? All forms took approximately 20-25 minutes to complete.

Results

Quantitative findings

In regard to compliance with the assignment, of the 75 total students enrolled between the two class sections of this course, eight students (10.7%) failed to submit any learning journals at all and 10 students (13.3%) submitted only half of the entries, either at the first or second collection. Although it could be the case that students read and just failed to complete the assignment, 13.1% of students self-reported that they did no reading at all for this course (see Table 2) and 19.4% reported that they did not have a textbook. While these numbers show that initial reading and consistency with reading may still be a challenge for some, 67 students (89.3%) made attempts at this learning journal and, hence, completed reading at some level, as prompts could not be addressed without some familiarity with the chapter material. When looking specifically at the quality of the assignments, there is strong evidence to suggest that once students do take the time to read and complete the assignment, they are capable of thinking critically about the information from the text. In this sample, 47 of the 67 students (70.1%), including the 10 students who only did half of the entries, received the full points on the learning journal assignment, demonstrating engagement with the reading and, at least, a beginning ability to think critically about the material. Only 20 of the 67 students (29.9%) earned one point for each journal entry, thus, indicating some challenges with ability to engage with and think about the reading.

Table 2 Amount of Hours Spent Reading for Class per week (n= 61)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of students</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>No reading at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.7%</td>
<td>Between 1-5 hours per weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>Between 6-10 hours per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Reasons Given for Not Completing the Assigned Reading or Why Reading was Minimal (n= 41)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of students</th>
<th>Reason for not reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>Lack of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>Get more from classroom lectures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>Doing well without completing the reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.75%</td>
<td>Too many details in the book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
<td>The material is not interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>Indicated 3 or more reasons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Some students indicated more than one reason, which is why percentages exceed 100%

Table 1 (see Appendix A) provides the means and standard deviations for the Learning Journal Questionnaire based on students’ self-report ratings of this assignment. Generally, participants in this sample regarded the learning journal favorably as an alternate
means of expressing themselves outside of class discussion \(M=3.24, SD=.777\) and a way to: apply the material to real world situations \(M=3.08, SD=.809\), enhance critical thinking skills \(M=3.00, SD=.601\), and prepare themselves for an exam \(M=2.90, SD=.946\). Participants prefer this type of assignment over a term paper \(M=3.23, SD=.965\) and would suggest assigning it to future classes \(M=3.00, SD=.849\). Further, and of importance to note, students indicated that the textbook reading had enhanced their overall knowledge of developmental psychology \(M=3.17, SD=.809\), hence, providing evidence that completing assigned reading is important.

Though I believed that students would perceive that their ability to participate in class discussion was enhanced as a result of the assignment, this was not found to be so strong \(M=2.60, SD=.890\) based on students' self-reports. According to the data, students in this sample also reported some challenge staying up to date with the learning journals \(M=2.61, SD=.981\). Further, students indicated that they were not strongly motivated to read by the learning journals alone \(M=2.35, SD=1.019\) and, rather, seem to be driven to read primarily by quizzes \(M=3.10, SD=.810\) and exams \(M=3.17, SD=.834\). This latter finding is consistent with the literature and could be due to the fact that students are accustomed to this type of classroom approach versus an assignment that encourages them to think more deeply. In this study, exams were worth 60% of students' final grade and learning journals were worth only 20%. As such, it is also possible that they placed less focus on the learning journal as a motivator for reading since the bulk of their grade was not dependent upon it. Considering these factors, more assignments of this nature are needed and could be designated a higher percentage of students' final grades so that students become accountable for the reading, learn to think, and take the assignment seriously. As a result, we may see even higher rates of engagement and critical thinking.

**Qualitative findings**

Forty-one participants provided qualitative responses for the last four questions of the survey, with several participants indicating more than one response per question. When participants were asked what they liked most about the learning journal, qualitative responses revealed that the journals allowed them to: apply the reading to their personal life \((n=11)\), voice their opinion and share thoughts more comfortably since they are shy to speak in class \((n=10)\), express their thoughts more comfortably since they are shy to speak in class \((n=10)\), express their thoughts more comfortably since they are shy to speak in class \((n=10)\), think critically as a professional/researcher by analyzing and questioning the material in a way that wouldn't ordinarily get done \((n=8)\), gain a better understanding of the material \((n=6)\), become more interested in the reading \((n=6)\), become motivated to learn more \((n=6)\), and recall information needed for the exams \((n=4)\). Overall, this information supported the quantitative data from the surveys. In favor of the assignment, some students noted, "It was like a study guide for a test," and while most students indicated that it did not motivate them to read, a few noted, "it was the only reason that I read the textbook." Hence, again, students viewed this assignment positively.

When asked what they liked least about the journal assignment, participants revealed two main points: that the journals should have been collected more regularly, such as weekly or biweekly, so that students remember to do them and that their value is not limited \((n=14)\) and a dislike for having to answer specific questions each time \((n=8)\), with one student noting that it felt "robotic" to address the same prompts each time and another noting the assignment was "overkill" and that it was "enough to have discussions in class about the reading." These responses support the
quantitative item of wishing that the journals were more open ended (M=2.90, SD=.740). Another unfavorable aspect of the assignment endorsed by some students was finding time to complete them before they were due (n=4).

Though a few students struggled with aspects of the assignment, the following excerpts from learning journals that were done well, demonstrated students’ ability to think critically, engage with, and apply the material in a meaningful way:

Prompt 1: What are two things that were most interesting to read about in this chapter and why?

Two things that were most interesting to me while reading this chapter were Erikson’s intimacy versus isolation stage and the types of love. This chapter was like a mini therapy session for me. It gave me tips on how to establish a good relationship with my boyfriend. Also, I’ve seen many people go through Erikson’s stage intimacy versus isolation. They can be in a relationship and if things don’t go right they become depressed and sometimes give up on life.

I found the learning disabilities of the disabilities section to be interesting because I could relate to it having a sister with dyslexia and I could understand the topic better. It was also good to know that 80 percent of children with learning disabilities have a problem with reading. This piece of information helped me let my sister know that she is not alone and should not feel alone with her disability.

Prompt 2: How does the knowledge in this chapter relate to you or someone you know in your life?/or Why is this knowledge important?

I never realized how important taking initiative and completing tasks would be in the development of a child. Berating a child for trying to do something can have profound effects. Using my own child as a basis, I recall him making a mess of the toothpaste because he wanted to be a “big boy” and do it. He had more toothpaste on the sink than on the brush. Taking into consideration what is contained in this chapter, I didn’t blow up at him. Rather, I spoke with him and showed him a trick to help himself. I really try to be an emotional coach with him, because most boys are taught to withhold emotions, which could be detrimental later in life.

People often have expectations that prescribe how females or males should act, think, or feel. This related to my personal life because, often times, my parents think that females should get married and be in the house. However, I still want to go to school and find a job. These gender role stereotypes really do have an effect on me because it may be discouraging to think that females should be at home taking care of the kids when I am trying to pursue a career.

Prompt 3: What are two questions you have as a result of reading this chapter?

If boys and girls have slightly different inherent abilities as far as performance in verbal communication versus spatial skills, would children benefit from having separate schools that were tailored to their specific sex?
I would like to know if those who adhere to a feminist theory have a greater likelihood of being divorced? I ask because I felt like before the feminist movement, marriage was lasting longer than in today's society.

Prompt 4: What is something that you would like to study? or What would be an important study if you were a researcher in the field?

I would like to see a study of children with parents who wait until their 30s to have children and children whose parents had them in their 20s or maybe even earlier. Often times, parents who are younger are more lenient than "old school" parents and how does this affect the children?

I'm thinking if there was a class dedicated solely for the purpose of educating adolescents from the age of 11-18 about adolescence, it would make a difference—a place where they can feel comfortable to talk and listen to both their peers and teachers and where they can engage in activities and projects that will continue to help promote a healthy outlook on life and allow them to deal with the stress it brings. What would be the benefits of this?

Discussion

This study investigated the potential uses of a writing-to-learn, journal assignment. A major goal of the assignment was to increase the amount of reading done prior to class, as experience and data suggest (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000) that compliance with reading is often low. A secondary goal of the assignment was to increase students' opportunity to engage more meaningfully with the text. Through analyzing students' compliance with and grades on the assignment as well as my own reflection and students' perceptions of the assignment, information was gathered about its usefulness and how it could be modified to be more meaningful in the future. Moreover, the data gathered has shaped ideas for future studies. Findings from this investigation show that for the majority of students, there is some level of textbook reading being completed. With the absence of a control group, it is difficult to say definitively, however, to what extent the assignment, alone, encouraged such reading. Evaluations from this sample, on the one hand, indicate that students were more strongly motivated by exams and quizzes versus the assignment itself. On the other hand, when students were asked about the amount of hours they read for this course versus their other courses, the rate of reading was 86.9% for this course versus only 58.6% for their other courses. Anecdotally, in comparison to previous semesters when this assignment was not used, on the whole, it appeared that the classroom atmosphere was less lecture-based with greater and more dynamic classroom discussion and integration from students of interesting studies and facts that were mentioned in the textbook, but not necessarily included in my Power Point presentations. Hence, giving support to the value of the assignment. Without question, though, there is evidence to suggest that the assignment fosters engagement with the reading as evidenced by the amount of students receiving the full two points on the assignment.

In regard to reasons reported for failure to complete assigned textbook reading, as table 3 indicates, similar to findings from other studies (Hoeft, 2012; Maaka & Ward, 2000; Starcher & Proffit, 2011), the majority of students in this sample indicated that they did not read due to lack of time or because they tend to get more from classroom lectures. VanOra (2012) notes that many community college students have multiple demands on their time such as full time work and come from
backgrounds where there is extreme financial stress whereby they must work to support their children or other family members. Of the participants in this sample, 56.5% indicated being employed, with 25.7% reporting working 21 hours or more per week. As such, employment may certainly interfere with making time or having energy to read. Some students indicated that they were doing well without having to read and, although students might earn a high score without reading, saying that reading is a necessary skill for college students and for future success in the workforce is an understatement.

As noted earlier, reading is significant predictor of student success on a number of academic outcome measures and, for community college students, reading may be even more salient as many of these students arrive at college lacking in basic skills. In their study of community college students, Maaka & Ward (2000) found that students rate their reading abilities higher than faculty perceptions of their reading abilities and are used to summarizing information versus thinking critically about it. Considering these factors, this assignment holds value for students moving forward. As students reported, it helped them relate to the material, apply what they read about, think like a researcher, and prepare them for exams. Similar to what others have found with similar assignments (Phillips, 2005), students noted that it gave them a chance to share ideas that they were reluctant to share in class.

Reflecting on the assignment, however, certain aspects could be modified to maximize its potential, with the following points as practical considerations to consider when using assignments of this nature in the future. While I verbally reviewed the instructions of the assignment and placed emphasis on the thinking versus summarizing nature of it a few times during the first few class sessions, I did not provide students with sample journal entries, which could have been beneficial for some students. As many scholars point out (Eliason, 2009; Henderson & Rosenthal, 2006; Maaka & Ward, 2000; O’Connell & Dyment, 2006; Phillips, 2005; Starcher & Profit, 2011), students need to be taught to journal properly, to ask pertinent questions from the reading, and generally learn how to learn. Students need instruction and scaffolding and time in class should be spent on developing these skills through special trainings. Considering that the large majority of participants in this sample indicated that they had never done a learning journal type assignment for other college courses, it is very possible that the lower scoring students needed extra support and visual, concrete examples to build this skill, as it is different from what is done when one is just reading to memorize for a test or quiz. In fact, data from the students in this sample supported the fact that the learning journals made them think differently about the material than they did when reading for an exam.

Due to the fact that the journals were only collected twice per semester in large batches, students were also not given the opportunity to make improvements based on instructor feedback, something well documented in the literature (O’Connell & Dyment, 2006; Phillips, 2005) as critical in building journal-writing skills. Therefore, it is recommended that assignments be collected weekly or at the start of each new chapter to ensure time in between journals for instructor comments. Weekly collection could also get students in the routine of reading more regularly and would aid in time management skills (Phillips, 2005), since many students self-reported that they had the tendency to complete multiple learning journals at once. For the assignment to be most useful, faculty need to develop a thoughtful grading rubric and review it explicitly with students so that from the onset, students know how they will be graded, which could lead to
higher quality journal entries. Deciding on the right rubric was challenging and if there was a more stringent rubric used for the assignment during this pilot semester, one might find greater variations in the quality of students' work with different degrees of thinking and perhaps more students demonstrating deep reading and engagement with the text. As others have (Eliason, 2009; Henderson & Rosenthal, 2006), it is also recommended that the learning journals be used as a means to engage students in small group discussions with student responses serving as springboards for in-class conversation that can expand their understanding of the text they have read. Further, with students aware that they will be discussing their responses in small groups, perhaps, some would take the assignment more seriously.

An additional and very practical factor to consider with this type of assignment, as others have noted as well (Hettich, 1990; Ryan, 2006), is that it is extremely time consuming for the instructor. The time involved in both reading the assignment and providing feedback is much greater than the time needed for scoring multiple choice quizzes or exams, or even a term paper. To have to read and comment on journals every semester, for all courses may not be feasible with other demands faculty members are faced with. Given the needed investment of time, if one is to use this type of assignment, perhaps the assignment should be worth a higher percentage of the final grade. Further, while the assignment may have motivated students to read some of the chapters, students should be reading every chapter. As such, more thought needs to be given as to how to use a journal type assignment with courses/texts that have an increased amount of chapters. Lastly, and as documented by others (Fritson et al., 2011; O'Connell & Dyment, 2006), it is challenging to determine how to evaluate the journals, what percentage of the final grade should be allocated for this assignment, and whether or not they should be more structured or more open ended, electronically submitted or collected in hard copy, and the like.

There are a few limitations of the study, which should be highlighted as well. For one, the data was collected at one large, urban community college with a relatively small sample size and, as such, the results may not be generalizable to all college students. The data was also collected in one discipline-specific course. Further, results were based on self-report, which may not always be reliable.

Reflecting on the study, there are many avenues for further research. Future studies could examine the uses of this assignment across a range of academic disciplines, as well as in other psychology courses besides developmental psychology. It might be interesting to make a comparison of the effectiveness of this assignment in introductory courses versus upper level courses, to determine if there is a difference in reading compliance and levels of critical thinking. Many students did well on this assignment, but it is an upper level course. As such, it would be interesting to see if students who are in their first or second semester would demonstrate greater struggle. Instead of simply examining compliance with the assignment and obtaining students' perceptions, studies could also examine the degree to which compliance with, and how well one performs on the assignment, is related to or predictive of specific outcome variables such as class participation, test scores, and comprehension (in which a control group would be implemented). Along with this, future studies could examine the specific types of critical thinking students are engaging in after scoring the journals and may utilize a pre/post type design to determine if levels of critical thinking change from the first journal entry assignment to the last. Furthermore, it would be valuable to see the degree to which instructor feedback aids in the improvement
of the quality of journals over the course of the semester as well as the degree to which training students to read and generate questions and the use of scaffolds for the assignment could impact students' performance on the assignment. There are two other avenues for investigation. It would be interesting to survey faculty to determine how they encourage or motivate their students to both read the textbook and read with greater purpose and engagement. Lastly, it would be important to continue to assess reasons why students may not be in compliance with their reading assignments at the community college level and how students feel they could be motivated to read, as most research tends to focus on students at the four-year college level.

Conclusions

College professors are often confronted by the challenge of a classroom full of students, many of whom have not completed their assigned reading and are thus ill prepared for rich classroom discussions. From the perspective of teachers, a lack of reading compliance is problematic. Many methods to get students to read, such as the jigsaw classroom; creating specific exam questions based around material from the reading exclusively; having students critique the chapter; and assigning various types of worksheets, journals and reading logs have been attempted and researched (Resor, 2008; Ryan, 2006; Solomon, 1979; Starcher & Profitt, 2011). Quizzes and tests, while the most frequent means of motivating students to read, (Starcher & Profitt, 2011) raise the question of whether students are actually interacting with the reading or simply reading to perform well on the particular assessment tool. Many educators (Bean, 1996; Sappington et al., 2002) are urging college professors to assume responsibility and explore various methods for getting students to read, as Burchfield & Sappington (2000) note, “the trend for permissive acceptance of non-effort is not in the best interest of students and the culture at large" (p. 60). In a community college setting, in particular, where we see high attrition rates and students who are lacking in basic levels of preparedness, an assignment such as the one discussed in this article, could be one such strategy.

References


## Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for the Learning Journal Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I stayed up to date generally with the learning journals for each chapter</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>.981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had the tendency to do many learning journals at one time, often before the due date</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a very hard time finding time to do the learning journal</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>.881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of this learning journal, my ability to participate in class discussion was enhanced</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>.890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of this learning journal, I was more prepared when it came time for exams</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning journal assignment fostered my critical thinking skills</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In order to write a learning journal, I read most of the chapter</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of the learning journal assignment, my reading skills improved</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend that this assignment be given again to future classes</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer having the learning journal assignment instead of a term paper</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning journals gave me another opportunity to express my thoughts in addition to class discussion</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning journals made me think about the material differently than the reading I do for an exam</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would have preferred for the learning journal assignment to be more open ended (without the four specific prompts)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The brief, extra credit quiz questions motivated me to read</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>.817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The exams motivated me to read more than the learning journals</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would have preferred for the learning journals to be collected more regularly</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was clear on how to do the learning journal</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning journal enhanced my ability to apply the material we are learning about to the real world/my own personal circumstances</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of the textbook reading, my overall knowledge of developmental psychology has been enhanced</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.708</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>