



Exploring emotional responses to academic reading: a cross-discipline analysis of second year students

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Presentation abstract

In this presentation, I outlined the initial analysis of results from a qualitative research project at UWE Bristol. The research explored the emotional and psychological responses to undertaking academic reading for second year undergraduate students within higher education.

Until recently, much of the literature on academic reading did not offer a qualitative student perspective (Barclay, 2021) of the role of student affect. However, newer papers from the last five years have taken a more qualitative view, aiming to understand why some students do not engage in academic reading and have begun to consider the emotional and psychological aspects (Gorzycki et al., 2020; Kimberley and Thursby, 2020; Soares and Badcock, 2020; Huda, 2022; Bergman, 2024; Mason and Warmington, 2024). My postgraduate research project contributes to the literature around academic reading, exploring how and why emotional barriers may have developed. I developed the following three research questions to add to the knowledge in this field:

- How do second year undergraduate students perceive and report their emotional responses or barriers to undertaking academic reading?
- How has their emotional response to academic reading been constructed, developed and modified during their educational experience so far?
- Which factors have positively contributed to students' development of successful academic reading skills?

I collected data via an online survey and semi-structured interviews during February-April 2025 and was in a position to present findings from the initial thematic analysis at

ALDCon25. The ethical considerations of the research were reviewed and approved by Catherine Rosenberg on behalf of the UWE Bristol Research Ethics Committee [December 2024].

The results from my research will be of interest to others within the field so that we can design learning development activities which enable all students to engage in strategic, successful academic reading.

Keywords: academic reading; emotions; transition to HE; metacognition.

Community response

Cooper's research resonated with the community and reflected a lot of their concerns and hopes for the future, as per the following community reflections: 'Tasha's (early) research finding really chimed with experiences I have had when talking to students who often feel reading isn't really "work" and can hold them back from completing their 'real work' as part of their degrees'; 'The issues raised by you Tasha really do resonate with me, as I also feel that student reading isn't valued, scaffolded or often acknowledged'.

Students often found it difficult to understand why so much reading is needed. Word clouds of the most commonly used words in the survey echoed with this and included: long, complex, boring, wording, challenging, time-consuming. The latter was one of the key themes that emerged in the community reflections. One attendee commented that students often feel 'reading isn't really "work" and can hold them back from completing their "real work" as part of their degrees'. This relates to Cooper's presentation referencing our output-focused society.

Some of the community feedback discussed the physical experience of holding a printed book and the embodiment that comes with it – something digital books cannot replicate. Many of the respondents in the community were students themselves. Some discussed the 'eureka moment' mentioned by Cooper during the presentation and the importance of moments when something that you are reading 'set off fireworks in [the] brain'.

Next steps and additional questions

So how do we celebrate these unique moments? Some of the respondents suggested reading rooms and a more collaborative discussion with students around academic reading. How can we ensure that the reading experiences are explored further? As one attendee reflected, 'in a HE environment saturated with onscreen reading and AI, [how can we] support students in understanding the reading strategies available to them and the value of grappling with a difficult text?' How do we work together across disciplines in HE to ensure students are engaged and appreciative of the process, reflecting Cooper's slides – 'can't run before you can walk, can't write until you can read (effectively)'.

Author's reflection

Presenting initial findings from my research at ALDCon25 was a worthwhile and thought-provoking experience and I would like to thank the community for their time in submitting reflections. Since June I have been conducting reflexive thematic analysis, coding the interviews and grouping them into themes. Although not yet complete, the themes I have developed build on the initial analysis presented at ALDCon. The first theme focuses on understanding and appreciating the importance of a student's individual identity as a reader and their mindset; how they approach reading, tackle problems encountered, and deal with the sometimes negative emotions that academic reading provokes. Many students described their attempts to balance conflicting emotions – self-doubt vs self-belief, motivation vs procrastination, responding positively to the challenge presented by academic reading vs feeling defeatist about their attempts. A key element of this theme relates to metacognition – and this was displayed at different times and in different levels for all participants in the study, relating again back to the importance of acknowledging individual identity and experience. The second theme relates to exclusionary practices as experienced by the students: the struggle to familiarise yourself with discipline terminology during the transition to higher education, a perceived power imbalance between a student reader and published authors, and a realisation of issues around bias within research and academic publishing which caused disillusionment for some students in the study. The third theme is still in development (and will probably be the one of most interest to readers of this paper!) but relates to the factors which help students conduct academic reading effectively or improve their understanding.

I applaud the community member who has been trialling online reading rooms with final year students and would like to draw our collective attention to the benefits of adapting academic reading circles as one way to help students appreciate the value of grappling with a difficult text. Originally a reading pedagogy published by Seburn (2016), to support EAP students, it has now been adopted in a variety of contexts. Previous work at my institution found that participating in one-off ARCs encouraged metacognition and created opportunities for students to acknowledge challenges, promoting a sense of belonging and increased confidence (Saville et al., 2023).

Even without a scaffolded intervention such as an ARC, I have come to the conclusion that regularly making space in the curriculum to talk about academic reading concerns – whether in a 200-seater lecture theatre, a small workshop, or on a 1:1 basis with students – is rewarding and worthwhile. I encourage the LD community to keep supporting the value of academic reading by making visible the emotional labour and difficulty that students often experience but rarely discuss. I hope to publish my findings in an educational journal towards the end of this year.

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Author details

Tasha Cooper worked in the Learning Development team at UWE Bristol (2021-24) and now teaches in the School of Computing and Creative Technologies. Her current phenomenological research project explores the significant role of affect in academic reading, with broader interests in critical pedagogy, digital literacy, and AI in education.

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