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Can the use of reading tasks enhance students' confidence in the use of academic literature?

Caroline Searing, Course Leader, BSc (Hons) Beauty and Spa Management and Dr Mustafa Varcin, Course Leader, Integrated MSc Cosmetic Science, London College of Fashion

Abstract
This article explores the growing diversity of the modern student body and the growing need to prepare students for reading at a tertiary level. It describes a small-scale case study that was devised with the aim of assessing and enhancing student engagement with academic literature by introducing guided reading tasks during the first term of Year 1 of the BSc (Hons) in Cosmetic Science at London College of Fashion (UAL). After outlining the literature that informed the design of these tasks, this article discusses the project results, which indicated that students found guided reading helpful with the added effect of increasing their confidence as independent learners.

Keywords
higher education; student transition; first year experience; reading groups; academic literature

Introduction
When students enter university they are likely to arrive with learning strategies that were developed during their time at school. These strategies may prove less effective at university where the emphasis is on independent learning and access to staff may be more difficult (Vinson *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, a study of first year science students at the University of Ulster by Lowe and Cook (2003) questions whether students are properly prepared for higher education by schools, reporting that between 20 and 30 per cent of students experienced problems with adapting to university life and tertiary level study. The shift from a controlled learning environment at secondary school to one that is self-directed, in which students are suddenly expected to take responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives, can be daunting and not all students are ready to accept this challenge. Even among those who achieved A Level qualifications, many are often unprepared for the changes in teaching styles or the requirement of supplementary independent study.

A great deal of literature has been written on the topic of the social, personal and academic journey that students must complete if they are to make the transition from school to higher education successfully (Smith, 2003; Marland, 2003; Lowe and Cook, 2003; Knox, 2005; Hultberg *et al.*, 2008; Bussell and Mulcahy, 2011). More specifically, many of these texts indicate that a poor first year experience can result in academic underachievement or the student leaving the course. When looking at nursing students in their first year of study, Sutherland (2003) expressed concern about their basic academic skills, in particular their ability to read textbooks, while their skills in writing essays, listening to lectures and contributing to seminars was satisfactory. The case study described in this article aimed to address these difficulties of transition by implementing teaching strategies that encourage a paced introduction to independent study.

Britain has seen a rapid expansion in the numbers of people progressing from school into higher education over the last seventeen years following a pledge in 1999 by the Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair, setting a target that aimed for 50 per cent of young adults to enter into higher education in the next century (Blair, 1999). Though this target of 50 per cent has not quite been met yet – in 2015 the figure was 47%, up from 43% in 2012/13 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015) – it has resulted in increased student numbers, many of whom come from non-traditional social and academic backgrounds. Figures compiled by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) for the academic year 2014/15 showed that there were more than two million students registered on higher education courses in that year, with 33% of those students coming from National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) classes 4 to 7 and 11.4% from low-participation neighbourhoods. This rise in numbers of diverse students was noted in a paper on 'Widening participation in higher education' (Chowdry *et al.*, 2012), in which the authors comment that many of these students may have experienced poor achievement in secondary school and thus face increased difficulties during the transition to university.

Failure to engage with informational texts has been noted by authors including Ediger (1991) and Spires and Donley (1998). As commented by Bischoping, the majority of studies 'do not address the thorny question of why university students decide whether or not to pick up a reading in the first place' (2003, p.27). The genre of the text and the difficulty of its language may also effect whether students choose to read it (Francis and Hallam, 2000). Students' previous educational experiences and their struggle to make a successful transition to the environment of higher education are also significant factors. To succeed in higher education, students must realise that their role is to learn and not merely to be taught (Railton and Watson, 2005). This problem raises many concerns, as independent critical reading is one of the principal skills required for success in higher education. The ability to find information, evaluate it, use it and present it effectively to others, is of great importance if students are to be successful in their chosen courses and become life-long learners (Samson and Granath, 2004). The main aim of the project described in this article was to investigate whether it is possible to promote the use of academic literature to first year students, in this case within the curriculum of the BSc (Hons) in Cosmetic Science at London College of Fashion (UAL). The problems of student transition have since been addressed by LCF, which introduced a separate, more generic study skills course in 2007 for first year students studying a number of different degrees entitled 'Introduction to Undergraduate Study'. As stated in the course handbook for the BSc in Cosmetic Science of 2007, the unit introduced students:

> to a range of creative approaches to learning used within a higher education context [...]. The aim of the unit is to ensure that you become familiar with what will be expected of you as a new undergraduate while on your degree course. It will provide you with opportunities to develop the study skills essential for successful study (LCF, 2007, p.36).

In 2010 it was replaced by another University-wide unit named 'Introduction to Study in Higher Education', which has operated with a similar core purpose:

> to enable you to acquire and improve your skills, understanding and approaches to learning that underpin your studies in stage 1, in your course as a whole, and beyond. Emphasis is placed on the skills needed to locate, navigate and communicate information effectively and appropriately (LCF, 2014, p.21).

There is growing awareness among staff in the Science cluster at LCF that there is a lack of engagement with research literature among many students. This applies to both foundation and undergraduate study programmes and is far from a unique problem. As discussed by a respondent

who took part in a study conducted by Waters, 'the biggest problem for many first year students is their mindset, which presumes that all the material they need to complete the unit successfully will be provided in lectures, tutorials and lecture notes' (2003, p.299). In light of this growing awareness amongst staff, we thought it pertinent to share the findings of this case study, which despite being conducted before the college introduced the study skills unit at undergraduate level, sheds light on some of the attitudes of students as well as techniques that are effective in fostering reading and research early in a science degree.

Conducted over a three year period with separate first year cohorts, this project implemented guided reading tasks into the curriculum by integrating group reading tasks into an element on Skin Biology, which is part of a wider introductory unit on Scientific Principles. The Cosmetic Science degree anticipates five hours of independent study to support every one hour of lectures (UAL, 2007) and this grouped methodology aimed to address the difficulties of moving from secondary to tertiary level study early in the degree, during the first term of Year 1. This design adapted methods used in a 2005 study by Finlay and Faulkner, who developed group reading tasks tailored to the content of two undergraduate courses (a Level 3 undergraduate module – part of a wider course on 'Exercise and Sports Sciences' – and a Masters module in 'Media Studies'). Our own study was designed to not only promote engagement with academic literature, but also to evaluate students' ability to locate and search for information.

Methods
Three cohorts of students took part in this study. Each new intake to Year 1 of the BSc (Hons) Cosmetic Science degree course at LCF participated, during the academic years 2005/6, 2006/7 and 2007/8. Specially designed reading tasks were applied within the context of Skin Biology, a topic studied as part of a wider unit that introduces students to Scientific Principles. In total 49 students took part over the three years. Lasting between Week 1 and Week 9, groups researched and gave presentations on pre-selected topics, before completing a questionnaire about their experience.

(i) Reading groups
The premise for the implementation of reading groups was prompted by a study by Finlay and Faulkner (2005), exploring whether the introduction of group reading tasks within the first year of a course promotes the use of resources such as those available in the college library and on the internet, thus enhancing the students' skills in critical thinking and promoting independent learning. In this earlier case study, different texts were distributed to groups and each student was asked to write a one-page synopsis, summarising the information and meaning of this literature. The synopses were then shared with the whole group by distributing them in paper form and by giving presentations. The results indicated positive responses from students, who felt that they had benefitted in terms of improved critical insight, better time management and reduced overall workload. Railton and Watson (2005) also employed a similar technique, which introduced reading groups into the curriculum in order to encourage and assist students to become more autonomous learners.

For the study conducted at LCF, each fresh cohort of students was divided into small groups of three or four. The groups were asked to select a topic from a list supplied by the tutor. Having selected their topic, the groups were given links to three readings – journal articles, scientific papers or relevant websites – that had been identified as starting points for researching the topics. They were asked to read the articles and prepare a 10-minute group presentation on the topic for the rest of the class. Students were prompted to produce handouts and reference lists that could be distributed to the rest of the class, providing all students with the tools to research every topic on the list. Pre-arranged sessions were timetabled into the curriculum in order to ensure that the groups had time to work and were available to discuss the articles as well as decide on the format of their presentation or divisions

of labour within the group. Groups were assigned and students briefed in Week 1 of the course and the final presentations were scheduled for Week 9. Sessions providing guidance about presentations and the opportunity to practice were timetabled in Week 7, followed by self-directed presentation practice in Week 8. Groups also arranged other meetings, which took place independently of the scheduled classes.

Each student's contribution to the group presentation was individually assessed. Marks were awarded using academic judgement and consensus for the relevance and accuracy of the content that was discussed in the group presentation, with additional marks assessing abilities to work effectively in groups, communicate, impart knowledge to others and the use of library facilities or Internet resources to support research activities.

(ii) Questionnaires
During the final stage, after the group presentations had been given, participating students were asked to complete a one page questionnaire, to gather student data and responses to the reading group exercise overall. Participants were informed that this document was for the purpose of assessing the relevance of this study and assured of anonymity (and assumed to have consented to the use of this data). The questionnaire was completed by a total of 34 students. Not all these students completed all questions.

The questionnaire included mainly closed questions, to encourage wide-scale participation, but also invited students to add additional comments. The significance of the responses to the closed questions was assessed using a binomial test, for example the categories of yes/no into which the answers are sorted. Students were also asked to comment on the usefulness of the exercise, saying whether the exercise had increased their knowledge of library resources or increased their confidence when undertaking a literature search, whether they would use the library more and if being part of a group made research easier. For each question they were prompted to explain in what way the tasks had been useful/helpful and elaborate about aspects of the project that helped facilitate their learning and confidence. The qualitative textual analysis included in the responses section (below) is based on the subsequent open-comments provided in the questionnaires.

Participant / student data
Overall the mean age of the group of participants (over three years) was 21.43 years ± 3.51 (mean ± SD, n= 49). The specific data relating to each cohort is shown in the table below (Figure 1).

Cohort/group	n	Mean age (years)	SD
1 (2005/06)	20	21.40	4.38
2 (2006/07)	12	22.48	4.17
3 (2007/08)	17	20.74	1.78

Figure 1: Age profile by cohort (table 1)

This information is important when interpreting the results provided by the questionnaires. 'Mature students', who are defined as over the age of 21 at the start of their undergraduate course by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, 2016), may be better prepared for higher education than younger students, having already had some time and opportunity to acquire the skills needed for academic success (Stoten, 2015). Based on this UCAS definition, student participants were more mature overall, though cohort 3(2007/08) is slightly younger, with an average age of 20.74 years.

The questionnaires also gathered information regarding entry qualifications. Students joining the course held a wide range of qualifications from National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ, Level 2 or 3), through Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE/AVCE) to International Baccalaureate. Four students had already achieved undergraduate degrees, but the average educational level of the students who took part was equivalent to two A Level certificates or an Access to Higher Education diploma. For those applying from a less academic educational background, LCF's interview process is used to confirm that students are able to cope with the demands of the course. Another difficulty arises when assessing the exact equivalence of the qualifications gained by international students, as many participants had been educated in different countries, with implications for the way in which they were taught prior to enrolling on the course. In total 14 different nationalities are represented by these student participants, across all three cohorts, a numerical breakdown presented in the table below (Figure 2).

Cohort/group	Home	EU	International	Total
1 (2005/06)	16	1	3	20
2 (2006/07)	8	2	2	12
3 (2007/08)	9	3	5	17

Figure 2: Nationalities by cohort (table 2)

38 of the students who participated were native English speakers. English was the second language for 11 members of the overall case study group.

Questionnaire responses, data and comments
Out of 49 students, 29 completed the questionnaire. The others were absent from the classes when the research was conducted.

Question 1. Did you find the exercise useful?
All the students who completed the questionnaire agreed that they had found the exercise useful. Selected quotes taken from the open comment responses include:

'it motivated me to research'
'good to work as a group; to share opinions and views of the topic'
'daunting but a useful learning experience'
'it was up to us to sort through all the information'

Question 2. Has the exercise increased your confidence at literature searching?
23 students indicated that the exercise had increased their confidence at searching for literature. This is significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Selected quotes taken from the open comment responses include:

'group projects have made me take control of my research'
'good practice for finding the right materials from the library'
'Learned the importance of being specific'
'I feel I can sort through information more confidently'

The remaining students replied 'somewhat, or 'not really' to this question. One student responded 'not really', commenting that 'it's only me that can increase my confidence'.

Question 3. Has the exercise increased your knowledge of library resources?
21 students responded 'yes' to this question (significant at $p = 0.02$), nine said 'no' and two participants responded with 'somewhat'. One student commented 'I already know how to use the library's

resources'. When asked which resources they utilised for the project, students gave a number of replies, including journals and books, with the internet (general) receiving the most responses. The E-library, company literature and magazines received fewer responses.

Question 4. As a result of this project will you use the library's resources more?
27 students replied that they would use the library's resources more, three replied that they would not and one replied 'maybe'. Excluding the undecided student, this is significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Selected quotes taken from the open comment responses include:

'I feel I have learned a better and quicker way of finding resources'
'there are a huge amount of books and resources that I can use'
'the internet can be unreliable'

One of those responding 'no' added 'I already do use the library', while the 'maybe' commented, 'I'll try'.

Question 5. Did you find researching as part of a group easier than doing it alone?
19 out of 29 students commented that they found it easier to research as part of a group. Most of the comments in this section related to the usefulness of group work, for example open comment responses included:

'different answers generated discussion'
'when work was divided it was faster and more efficient'
'we encouraged each other – team effort'
'had someone to turn to if you were unsure of what you were doing'

Among them, 9 students found it harder to be part of a group and gave the following comments:

'I'm used to doing it all myself'
'easier to get side tracked in a group'
'some people research totally the wrong thing'
'I'd rather just take responsibility for my own work'

One student was unsure as to whether she found it easier or harder to work as part of a group and offered comments in support of both positions.

Question 6. Which aspects of the project helped you most to learn?

Responses	Total student responses
Searching for information	16
The group discussions	16
Preparing the presentation	11
Giving the presentation	7
Answering questions from other members of the group/class	4

Figure 3: Responses to question 6 (table 3)

Discussion, comment and analysis
The main aim of the reading task project was to investigate whether it is possible to increase the use of academic literature amongst first year students by means of assigning tailored group reading tasks. Within the context of these three cohorts and during this period of time, this aim was achieved. Within the scope of this exercise, it was expected that these students would, to an extent, continue to engage

actively with literature throughout the remainder of their course, though this ability to undertake independent study cannot be guaranteed and may be influenced by other factors, such as their encounter with different teaching styles and natural adaptation, gaining familiarity with the subject as the course progresses.

Even though one term is a very short space of time – particularly when attempting to effect a lasting change in student behavior – the importance of this first term of the degree cannot be over-emphasised. This is due to the fact that most student 'drop-outs' tend to take place relatively early in a course (Smith, 2003) and may be due in part, to the difficulties students face when adapting to university life and teaching methods.

It is encouraging that a significant number of students who participated in the case study reported finding the exercise useful and indicated that they would continue to make use of the library and its resources in the future. However, a significant question must be asked as to why these new students were initially unwilling to undertake the basic research connected with these reading tasks, an attitude explored by Parrott and Cherry (2011) in a paper on the challenges of persuading sociology students to complete assigned reading during the first semester of college. To address this, Parrott and Cherry developed a specific group-work format within their classes that facilitated reading alongside active discussion. Finlay and Faulkner (2005) – when referring to an earlier study (Gibbs, *et al.*,1995) – suggest that student 'unwillingness' to engage with wider literature may be partly due to a lack of research or searching skills and inexperience in reading. At secondary school students are subjected to a plethora of tests and exams that mean the expectation that they will be 'spoon-fed' information is commonplace. The expectancy that they will be 'taught to the test', follows students to university and they expect teachers to provide the answers. There is no shortage of literature available to students via the library or the e-library and the reading exercise of this case study demonstrated that students were capable and able to access these resources, providing they have a small amount of guidance that indicates the types of reading they are expected to do. It would be interesting to undertake a further study that investigates this process from the perspective of a student, rather than that of the lecturer, outlined in this article.

The three cohorts monitored in this study encompassed 14 different nationalities. Students had a variety of qualifications, ranging from degrees and International Baccalaureates through Access to Higher Education courses, National Certificates and vocational qualifications. This diversity of pathways and backgrounds is to be applauded from the perspective of inclusive education, yet it also presents real problems for teachers when ensuring that all students are adequately prepared for university level education. Several authors have addressed this issue and discuss the use of bespoke programmes to enable students to make the transition to higher education, many of which connect with the core module offered by UAL (Clerehan, 2003; Knox, 2005; Vinson *et al.*, 2010). When the early years of the case study described in this paper were originally undertaken, the generic study skills unit, 'Introduction to Undergraduate Study', had yet to be introduced into the curriculum at LCF. This unit was then replaced by the 'Introduction to Study in Higher Education' unit, introduced in 2010/2011 by the university as a response to the increasing diversity of incoming students. Similarly, this unit has been replaced in 2016/2017 by the 'Introduction to Cosmetic Science' unit which involves a common framework that allows for a greater degree of flexibility within the topics it teaches. Its core purpose remains the same and it has the following indicative content:

- Understanding of Higher Education (key aspects of course learning culture at LCF)
- Academic and Research skills
- Reflection, Learning and study techniques
- Collaborative working skills

- Introduction to Cosmetic Science and Skin Biology

(UAL, 2016)

Knox discusses a generic module entitled 'Next steps at university' (2005, p103), which is similarly designed to prepare students for life at university and acquire skills for coping with delivery and assessment at this higher level. In contrast to LCF's Introduction to Study in Higher Education, Knox's course was voluntary, delivered as part a summer programme. Knox believes that 'Next steps' represents a good design, a vehicle for preparing students. However, not everyone is convinced of the usefulness of a separate module teaching study skills. Within the scope of this particular case study, first year students indicated they would rather have such skills based courses offered as optional choices. Briggs *et al.* (2012) discuss several papers, each of which indicates that not all students have a clear idea of what university life entails and their student experience will be. Leung and Kember (2013) are of a similar opinion that many students coming to university for the first time have approaches that are unsuited to the requirements of higher education. Within Cosmetic Science we believe that a separate module focusing on study skills coupled with embedded skills tasks in other units, strikes an essential balance that enables students to have a successful learning experience. By ensuring that everyone undertakes a planned transition unit, all students have the opportunity to adjust to university-level teaching, develop their identity as learners and their autonomy as independent researchers.

The study by Finlay and Faulkner (2005) that precipitated the guided reading tasks we implemented, was originally designed to promote participation in learning groups, with all the students encouraged to play an active role. . Within the case study described here, we avoided this passenger issue by allowing students to earn individual grades rather than a group grades, as a lack of commitment to the group task becomes obvious during the presentation phase.

The need for graduates to be able to work in a team whilst also demonstrating a capacity for independent thought and action, is stressed by Kremer and McGuinness (1998) in a paper that advocates that student-led discussions should be based upon pre-established teaching techniques. Although the technique we used does present problems, particularly from the point of view of the conflicting roles/division of labour within the group, allowing students to decide how tasks are allocated promotes team work (during the group discussions) and also independent thought and action (through the individual research tasks performed by the student). By integrating other roles - for example peer assessment - it is theoretically impossible for a particular student to become a 'passenger' in the group. Parrott and Cherry (2011) discuss the problems resented by these passengers and the wider lack of enthusiasm often shown by students towards group work.

Conclusion

This small-scale case study has highlighted some of the problems being faced by students entering higher education and consequently by their lecturers. Students bring with them a wealth of social and educational experiences, which together shape their attitude to learning at university. This study revealed that reading projects can be successful in increasing students' confidence at using academic literature and in encouraging them to undertake research in relation to a topic. Although these findings are promising, a longer study is needed in order to establish whether these effects continue beyond the period covered by the study, a 10 week term at the very beginning of a student's undergraduate degree. In addition, further research is necessary, analysing why students are often unwilling to engage with texts or undertake reading and how this can be prevented or dealt with. The introduction of specific modules into the undergraduate curriculum has gone some way towards helping them develop the necessary skills for success and help them make the transition to tertiary education. The challenge for those designing and delivering early undergraduate modules is to make students aware

of the need to develop these skills and thus become the self-motivated, autonomous learners they need to be if they are to be successful in their courses and in future careers.

Acknowledgements

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Biographies

Caroline Searing is a Senior Lecturer in the Fashion Business School at London College of Fashion (UAL), where she is also the course leader for BSc (Hons) Beauty and Spa Management. She originally trained as a physiologist and worked for some years as a researcher before entering education.

Dr Mustafa Varcin is Course Leader for the integrated MSc Cosmetic Science at London College of Fashion (UAL) and is responsible for its academic leadership and management, including the design, development and delivery of the curriculum. He has a background in Pharmaceutical and Cosmetic Sciences and completed a PhD in Pharmaceutical Sciences, from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Brussels, Belgium).