Active Online Reading

A QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project

April 2021-May 2022

Final Report

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About this report

Executive Summary

Active Online Reading, a QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement project, investigated how students learn online and how they are taught to do so in higher education in the UK. Gathering and generating a range of pedagogic resources and presenting at several conferences practice-sharing events, the project team also administered a survey to higher education staff and students.

The headline finding of the project is that online reading is an indispensable element of learning in higher education, irrespective of discipline or level of study. If deployed in a constructive manner, it has a number of benefits for students and academics, including:

- **Learning**. It can function as a powerful driver for learning, especially when students are encouraged to engage actively with readings, for example by adding annotations.
- **Social**. Online learning can be a highly social activity and many students spoke of the benefits to comprehension and socialisation that accrued from working collaboratively on a text.
- **Accessibility**. Students and staff spoke repeatedly about how online reading is accessible because it does not tie them to a physical space and provides for a significant degree of flexibility.

The survey also identified a series of disjunctions between staff and student expectations and experiences of academic reading in general and online reading in particular.

- **Deficit understanding of student reading among staff.** The project team identified a widespread deficit understanding of student reading among staff, who generally rated their students' reading skills for academic study rather poorly.
- **Disjunction between staff and student ratings of skill levels** Conversely students rated their academic reading skills much more positively than their lecturers. This disjunction between academic staff and students is concerning because it suggests that there is a lack of understanding on both sides that needs to be addressed.
- **Lack of focus on online reading within modules.** Further, despite the overwhelming majority of staff rating online reading as indispensable for study in their discipline and their view on students' lack of skill in reading in general, academics generally do not seem to pay much attention to cultivating online reading skills in their modules.
- **Undeveloped pedagogies for reading.** Despite identifying some pockets of best practice and some innovative work on online reading, the survey results from staff and students do not seem to reflect particularly well-developed or structured pedagogies for teaching reading in higher education. For example, there appears to be minimal consideration of how reading skills might be developed over the course of a degree programme.
- **Timing of reading development activity can be an issue.** There are also issues relating to the timing of reading development activities. Many students and staff talked about instruction in reading at university level taking place early in the course, often during induction. In general, this approach does not seem to have been particularly successful engaging a wide range of students.

Another significant finding is that reading online is a highly physical activity – many students spoke about digital texts causing headaches, back pain, and other side effects.

Finally, it is important to note that reading cannot be treated separately from other skills. Writing, information literacy and research are all predicated on the ability to read effectively, but similarly reading derives from the ability to find texts in the first place. Similarly, online reading cannot be separated from 'offline' reading and clearly forms part of students' broader skills packages.

The Active Online Reading project team has produced numerous [resources](#) to help staff and students overcome (or at least minimise) some of the challenges associated with reading online and to maximise its potential as a support – or even a driver – for student learning.

Recommendations

Pedagogically, identification of good practice and student feedback suggests that the following approaches might prove fruitful at an institutional, module and programme level:

- Develop and share best practice in teaching students how to read online.
- Carefully structure student engagement with texts to develop their skills in reading, through the use of guiding questions, worksheets, and other kinds of individual and collaborative tasks.
- Adopt a stepped approach that embeds reading development work across curricula and addresses progression between levels.
- Create the conditions, using online platforms and tools, for students to engage actively and/or collaboratively in texts.
- Work in collaboration with the library and study skills teams to identify potential gaps and to ensure an effective balance between generic and discipline-specific reading skills.
- Pay careful attention to how reading development activities relate to other skills, especially writing and information/ digital literacy.
- Consider the full range of implications of accessibility in online reading. Online readings can be extremely accessible, but for some students making they can be very challenging. Do not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

The various disjunctions that we have outlined in this report lead us to make a number of recommendations for staff, students and institutions:

- Staff and institutions can develop students' reading habits and practices to address the skills gap that academics identify.
- Students could be encouraged to adjust their perceptions and recognise that reading at university may require a different set of skills to those they have deployed before.
- Staff will need to adjust their expectations if they are to meet students halfway, 'where they are' rather than where we wish they would be.

We would encourage students to do the following:

- Engage actively with texts, whether online or offline, through annotating them, responding to prompts from your tutors, or asking your own questions. When writing notes.
- Read together to develop your understanding and confidence with texts – and your reading skills. This can be done in class, formally in online spaces set up by tutors, or informally (online and/or in person).

Practically, the following considerations are particularly significant:

- Do not take the 'accessibility' of online readings for granted and certainly do not assume that all students will find them equally accessible.
- Recognise that students can frequently experience 'platform confusion' when asked to cycle between different formats of text and online spaces. Consider reducing the number of platforms with which they are expected to engage.
- Digital poverty affects many students, especially those who are accessing online readings away from campus.
- Finally, remember the very considerable physical challenges that can affect students when reading online and provide guidance and support on how to mitigate these.

Introduction

Across Higher Education, reading is ubiquitous - it is relevant for all disciplines and all students. Students' reading practices have transformed over the past 20 years, with the increasing digitisation of resources, the emergence and then prevalence of virtual learning environments, and the widespread use of mobile technologies. The pandemic has accelerated such developments, with the rapid roll-out of online and blended learning. Yet we know strikingly little about how students read online, how this relates to their overall learning, and which pedagogic strategies are effective.

The *Active Online Reading* project was funded by the QAA as part of their Collaborative Enhancement funding stream in collaboration with Talis and ran from the beginning of April 2021 to the end of May 2022. Led by a core team of historians from the universities of Lincoln, Nottingham and UCL, the project explored pedagogies for online reading and sought to understand how students read in online spaces, both individually and collaboratively. While the project was primarily located in 'reading-rich' Humanities disciplines, its findings are of potential interest and benefit across the sector.

The core team was supported by student researchers at each institution, who were each asked to engage in auto-ethnographic reflection on their experiences of reading at university and took responsibility for different work packages, including conducting a literature review, running workshops, analysing survey results, and contributing to the dissemination of project findings. In addition, we worked with academic partners and student researchers from the School of Design at Sheffield Hallam University and from the Salford Business School at the University of Salford.

Two surveys constituted a key element of the project. One staff and one student survey gathered data on experiences, practices and pedagogies in relation to online reading. The surveys, together with the reflective writing of our student researchers, the desk-based research that we conducted, and workshops with colleagues and students revealed significant disparities between academic and institutional expectations, and student experiences and practices of online reading. These findings have been captured via a range of project outputs, accessible via the website, and are outlined more fully later in this report. We also generated a suite of resources to support staff and students in developing their practice in relation to online reading in higher education.

Defining Active Online Reading

At the start of the project, we defined a number of key concepts that, we felt, collectively constituted Active Online Reading, including 'online learning', 'online reading', and 'active reading' but we did not define the term itself. Inevitably, our thinking has developed over the course of the project, which now allows us to offer the following definition.

Active Online Reading is reading that takes place in an online space and involves a process of active engagement with the text. Such reading promotes of deep engagement with a

digital text using techniques of annotating, responding, questioning, summarising, and sharing. It may take place synchronously or asynchronously; it may be done individually or collaboratively. An example would be reading an academic article that has been accessed via your university library's website and making notes on it with a fellow student in a shared document. Our project website offers a wide range of other examples, some of which will be summarised in this report.

Although there is some overlap, we conceive Active Online Reading as somewhat distinct from *digital reading*, an overarching term which refers to reading an electronic text, does not necessarily entail a process of active engagement, and correspondingly is not rooted in pedagogic practice. Similarly, it is distinct from *digital literacy*, processes of finding and evaluating sources online, effective engagement with the internet requires processes of active reading and reflection.

Methodology

We adopted a methods approach to gathering information, developing our thinking and sharing our findings about online reading in higher education, including:

- surveying staff and students;
- commissioning auto-ethnographic reflections from our student researchers, published on the project website;
- reviewing literature and collating existing pedagogic resources relating to digital reading;
- developing new resources for staff and students, including case studies and hints-and-tips documents;
- running and contributing to workshops and other events with staff and students within our own institutions, across the UK, and internationally;
- sharing our interim findings for the project website and for external organisations;
- gathering input from beyond the UK and from outside higher education, by working with international partners, teachers and teacher educators;
- developing our own teaching practice, including discussing interim findings with our students.

Results

Our surveys, which were shared via mailing lists, professional networks and social media gained a total of nearly 800 responses from across the world, from as far afield as Argentina, the USA and Australia. Just short of 100 members of staff from 38 institutions responded to the survey. Almost 73% of staff respondents were from Humanities disciplines and they occupied a range of roles, with the majority in academic positions, as illustrated on the following table.
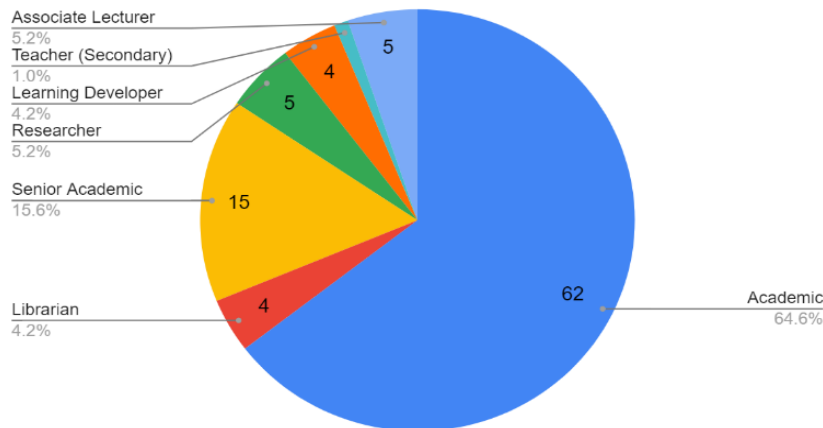
Figure 1: Staff roles

We received over 650 responses from students, 56% of whom came from UK institutions. Not all of the respondents completed every question, as is apparent from the numbers on the figures in the report. 15.8% of the student sample self-identified as having a disability that affected their ability to engage in reading for their studies. Over 83% of student respondents were undergraduates, split more-or-less evenly between first years and what we termed 'advanced undergraduates' (i.e. second years and above).
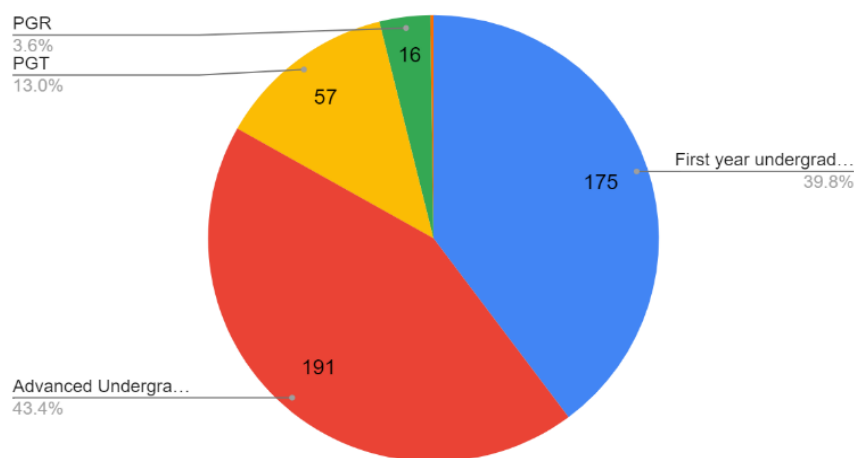

Figure 2: Student level of study

Contextual considerations

We begin with a series of caveats about the context in which we conducted our work that we think are important for understanding the subsequent summary of key findings.

1. A Humanities-heavy sample.

As the following graphs illustrate, the data that we gathered derived overwhelmingly from the Humanities and, to a lesser extent, Social Sciences, with over 88% of staff respondents.
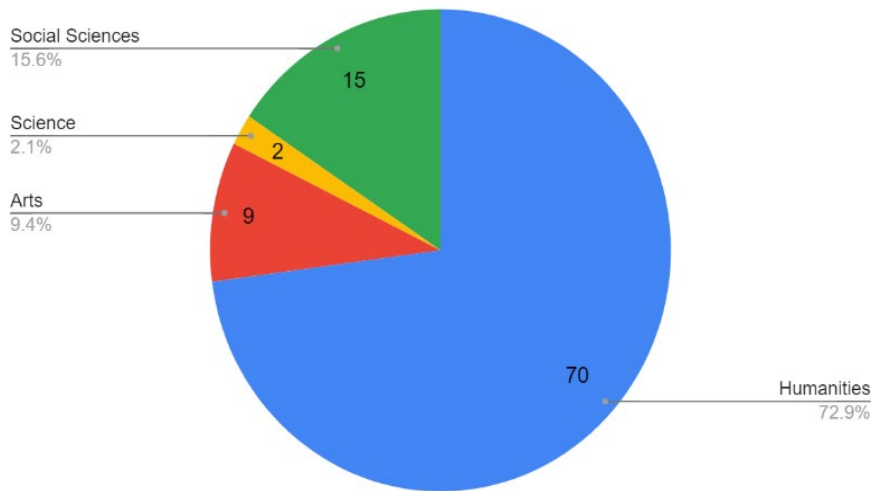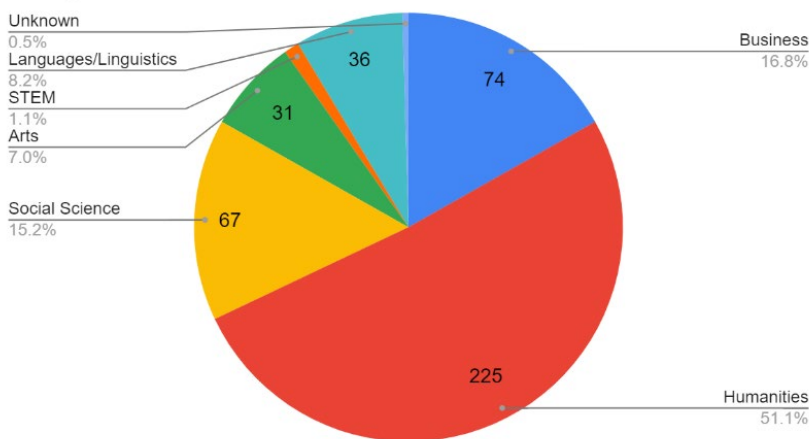
Figure 3: Staff discipline

Figure 4: Student discipline

While this may have implications for the broader applicability of our findings, the focus of our data on disciplines that are traditionally considered to be more 'reading-heavy' does raise interesting questions, including about practices and pedagogies in subjects where one might expect reading to be less of a priority.

2. The pandemic effect.

It is impossible to disentangle the work that we did from the pandemic context in which it was conducted. Aside from the challenges of running events, meeting as a project group, and gathering data when time and attention were in short supply, the experience of online learning during the pandemic clearly overshadowed many of the responses that we received to our survey. Attempts to discuss *online reading specifically* with students and/or staff often elicited responses that reflected experience of *online learning in general*. These were generally, if not universally, negative in tone.

3. Online reading and 'offline' reading.

Just as the experience of online reading was connected to online learning in general, so it is extremely closely related to practices of 'offline' reading: i.e. engaging with physical texts. For example, we discovered that many students print out digitised readings to reduce the eye strain that they report as resulting from reading on screen. Others simply prefer to annotate hard copies rather than digital versions of texts. Despite these observations, we believe that it is important not to oppose the reading of physical texts to digital reading because to some extent they are interchangeable. We suggest below that pedagogies for reading *in general* – including physical reading – are not well developed and several of the academics that we have worked with commented that the challenges they face when trying to encourage students to read online were strikingly similar to those that they encountered with reading offline.

4. Online reading and more general skills-related challenges.

Relatedly, it is also clear that online reading cannot easily be separated from other challenges relating to skills development and the broader experiences of staff and students. This illustrates both the scale of the challenge facing those seeking to enhance practice in online reading and its potential importance for learning and teaching more generally.

Key findings

1. Practical barriers to online reading.

As noted at the beginning of this report, reading in online contexts is fundamental across all disciplines and levels of higher education. Staff rate its importance for student learning very highly indeed, with just short of 35 rating it as indispensable (10/10) and under 5% rating it as not important at all (1-4/10).
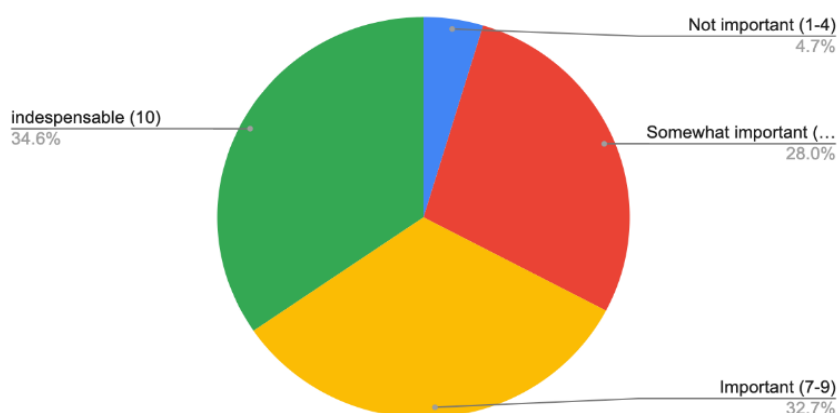

Figure 5: Staff rating for importance of online reading for student learning within their discipline

However, like many other elements of learning, reading online can be challenging - there are numerous potential barriers to access. Some of these barriers are pedagogic, and will be outlined below, but others relate to the contexts in which reading takes place and the personal challenges facing some students. Reference was made to digital poverty (low bandwidth or access to the necessary technology) or to lack of an appropriate space for reading. These are contextual factors that have been repeatedly mentioned in relation to online learning, especially during the pandemic. Much more often, staff and, especially, students spoke about the distractions associated with attempting to read online, particularly in relation to social media use and digital overload. Repeated reference was also made - even among students and staff who were highly enthusiastic about the potential of online reading - to the physical challenges of reading online, such as eye strain, headaches, and backache. Students reported adopting a range of strategies to overcome these challenges, including taking breaks, deploying apps that minimised digital 'clutter' while reading online, and using inbuilt functions of e-books and documents such as 'read aloud'.

We closed our survey by asking students what one thing they would change about their reading practices if they were able to start over again. The most popular response was to 'read more', a finding that tallies somewhat with what we found when we asked students how much reading they did for their studies in total on a weekly basis, with over 46% reporting that they did five hours or fewer and only around 24% doing over 10 hours. This was somewhat surprising to us, given the Humanities-heavy sample, where (in general) fewer contact hours are balanced by increased expectations around independent learning and, presumably, reading.
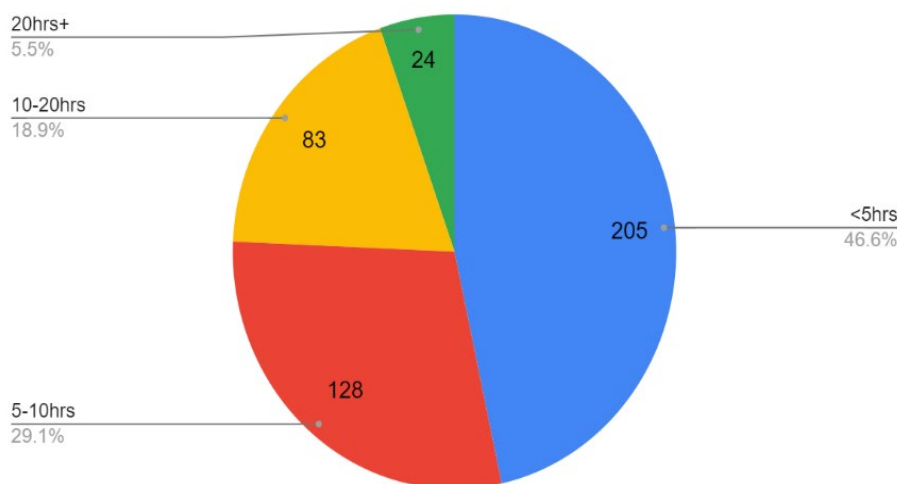

Figure 6: Students' time spent reading for all classes on a weekly basis

We were less surprised to find out that first-year undergraduates generally read less than more advanced students, with a steadily increasing level of reading reported at subsequent levels. After all, we would expect students to develop their reading skills and habits as they progress, as they engage with gradually more complex texts, irrespective of discipline. Interestingly, the reported differences between advanced undergraduates (second years and above) and postgraduate students on taught courses were slight.
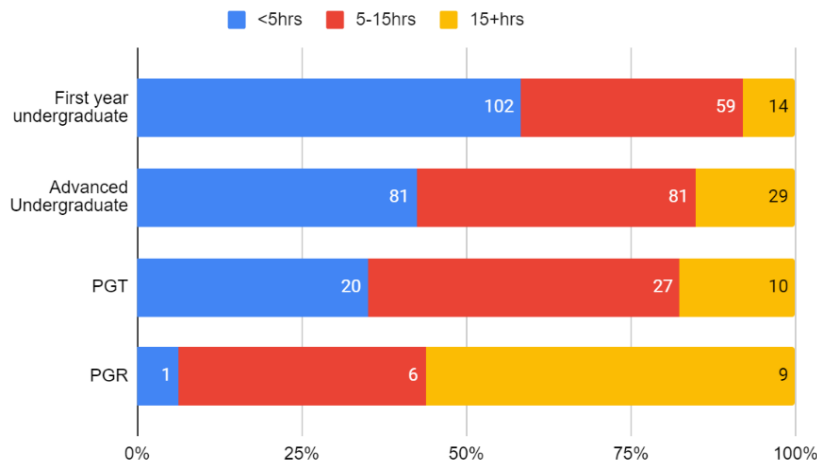
Figure 7: Students' time spent reading for all classes on a weekly basis, broken down by level of study

Especially worthy of note is the finding that students who self-report as having a disability that affects their ability to read, engage with less reading on a weekly basis than their peers who have no such disability.
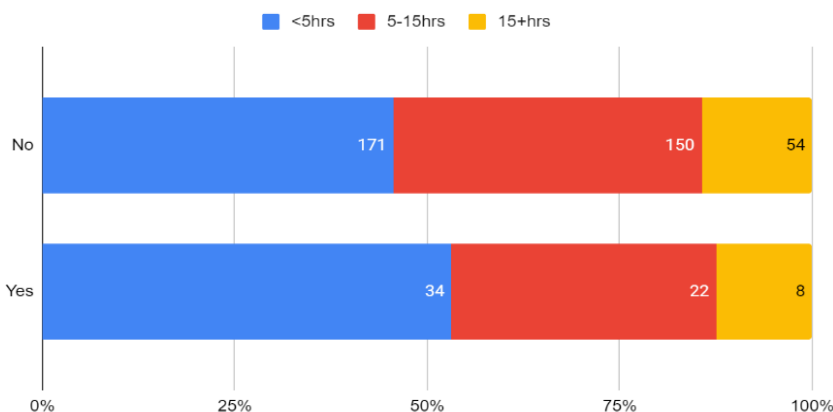

Figure 8: Students' time spent reading for all classes on a weekly basis, comparing disabled and non-disabled students

While it is hardly surprising that students who find reading challenging do less of it, given that such students are at a disadvantage anyway their lower rates of reading do raise questions about how best we can support them to engage in reading and with it learning more generally.

2. The potential of online reading: collaboration and annotation.

As figure 5 above shows, staff ascribe a high level of importance to online reading, and many students emphasise how it plays a fundamental role in their learning. Two elements bear particular emphasis. First, collaborative reading has a potentially powerful positive effect on learning. Students frequently referred to the benefits of being able to read together in online spaces.

> *"If you don't understand something then you can see what someone else thinks and sometimes that's really helpful to you figuring it out. It's also nice when you*

get a discussion going in the comments as you can take that forward into the seminar."

"It's useful to see what points my peers have picked up on whilst reading the same stuff, as it might raise points I haven't anticipated. It is sometimes useful to share my own thoughts as people sometimes respond with questions that change my perspective on matters."

Interestingly, students were considerably more positive about being able to engage with their peers' thoughts on reading than they were about sharing their own thoughts.
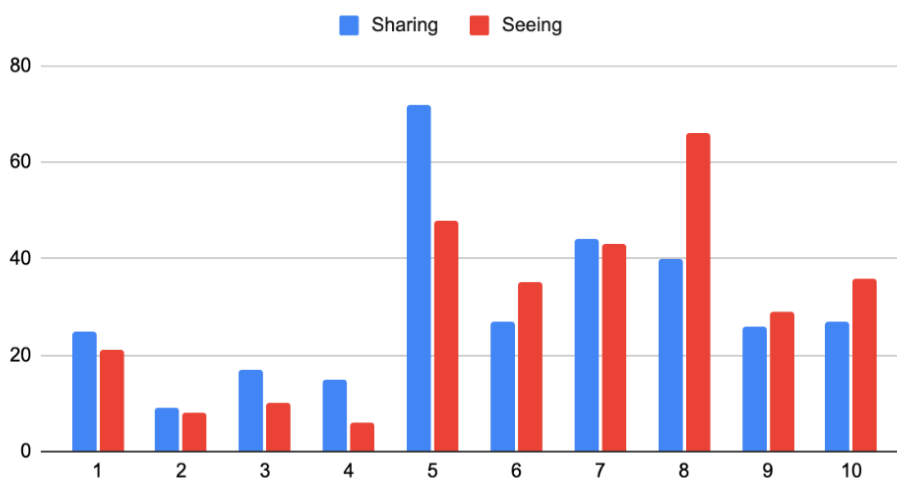

Figure 9: Students' rating of the value of sharing their thoughts about reading compared to being able to see the thoughts of others

Other research that we have conducted suggests that this reticence about sharing thoughts on reading is likely related to the fact some students experience anxiety when engaging in this sort of activity because they see it as potentially exposing, opening them up to judgement by others or 'getting it wrong'. Some students report feeling similarly about sharing their thoughts in face-to-face classes, a point to which we return later in this report.

Second, and relatedly, many students related reading directly to note-taking for assignments and learning more generally. When the option was available, they also talked about the importance of being able to annotate digital readings directly. Finally, those who were able to annotate collaboratively found it particularly useful as a means of sharing their thoughts and seeing what others were doing. An important benefit here was that the notes and the resources were in the same place online, rather than dispersed. Some noted the social benefits of this kind of activity and of collaborative reading more generally.

3. Expectation and reality.

As the following figures illustrate, one of the most significant disjunctions that we identified between students and staff was in their respective ratings of student competency in academic reading in general (i.e. in online and offline contexts).
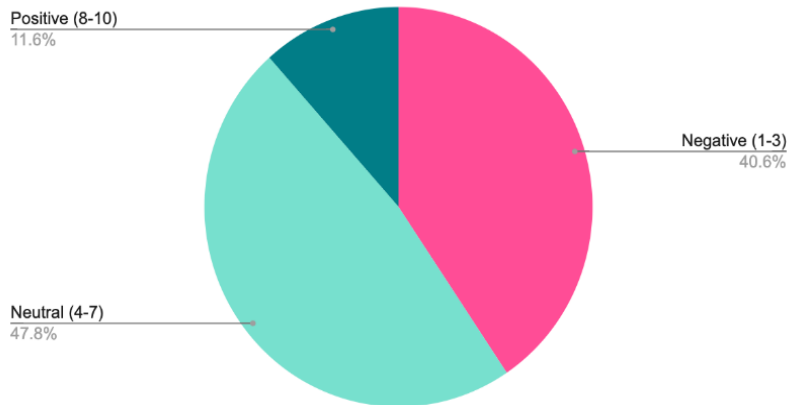
Figure 10: Staff rating of student competency in reading for academic study (online and offline)
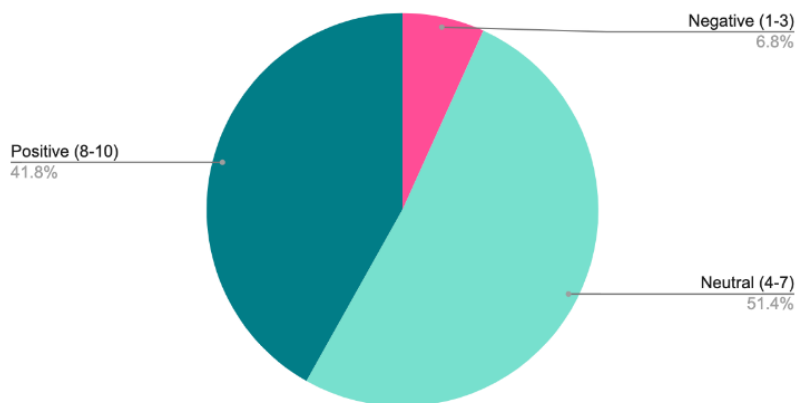

Figure 11: Student rating of confidence in reading for academic study (online and offline)

Student confidence in their reading for academic study contrasts sharply with the neutral-to-low rating that over 88% of staff gave to students' capabilities in this area.

This disjunction is worthy of further investigation but is thrown into sharper relief when related to staff responses when questioned about the attention that they devote to online reading in their modules, with nearly 40% reporting that it is a minimal focus.
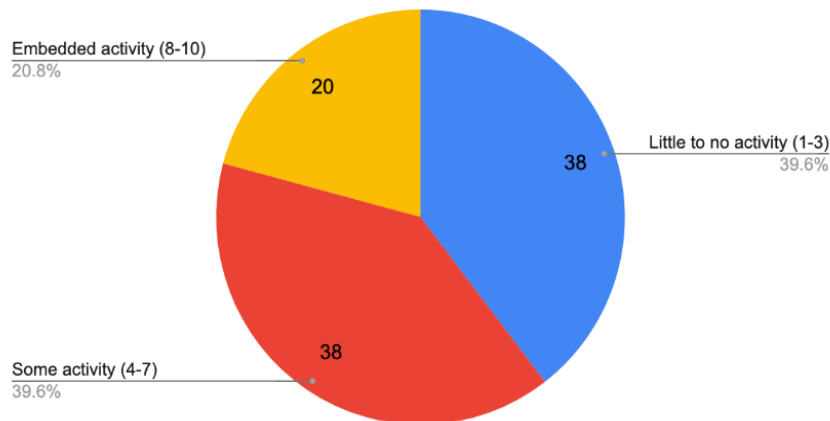
Figure 12: Staff attention given to developing students' online reading skills on their own modules

All of this suggests two significant gaps. First, there is a clear disjunction between perceptions of students' general reading capabilities between staff and students. Second, and perhaps more seriously, there is a divergence between the skills that academics – and institutions – think are required for online study in higher education and those that are actually delivered to students. This second gap is especially important - and hard to justify - because it points towards a systemic failure to address a widespread deficit in understanding of student reading on the sector level.

But it may be that the perception gap needs to be addressed before progress can be made in addressing the practice gap. Much work needs to be done in adjusting staff expectations and in developing students' habits in terms of the quantity and, above all, the quality of reading that they do. As part of this, students should be made more aware of disciplinary expectations and supported in reflecting on their reading practices.

4. Pedagogies for reading.

As noted, despite rating online reading as an important element of their students' learning, staff do not devote a corresponding level of attention to cultivating online reading skills in their modules. Some judge such work to be the responsibility of the library or other 'service' departments, while others, as we shall see below, likely assume that it is taken care of elsewhere in the curriculum and so do not see it as their pedagogic responsibility. Others emphasise that it is students themselves who should be responsible for developing their own reading skills.

> *'It's simply their responsibility as students. It's entirely up to them, frankly. Their marks will reflect their reading.' (UK academic)*

This links to a key observation of our study: the lack of clearly defined pedagogies for developing students' reading skills - both online and more generally - in higher education. When asked to describe *how* they teach students to read online, we received a range of responses. The most frequent reference was made to the importance of teachers selecting appropriate readings in terms of length and level of difficulty. The teachers' framing and

explanation of reading tasks was also mentioned frequently as a key approach to teaching students how to read online. There was also a focus on how such skills were cultivated outside of class, through techniques such as using guiding questions to structure student engagement with readings, collaborative reading (online and offline), and setting reading 'exercises' or 'tasks'. Less frequent reference was made, perhaps due to our focus on online reading, to in-class activities, although 'discussion' was undoubtedly the most frequently referred to strategy for engaging students in reading in such contexts. Social/ collaborative annotation activities were mentioned relatively often in relation to online/ asynchronous methods.

Our work has extended beyond History, the 'home' discipline of the core team, to other Humanities subjects and beyond. The work of our partners in Design and Business has been especially valuable in helping us to understand how disciplinary differences affect online reading. Importantly in this regard, we found that while there were significant disciplinary differences in terms of student preferences and practices when reading, there was little discernible differentiation in terms of staff pedagogic practices, except in terms of the selection of materials for reading according to perceived difficulty and length.

Finally, when it comes to pedagogic challenges, it is important to emphasise that some of the issues that have been identified are not peculiar to online reading. For example, student reluctance to share thoughts on reading due to anxiety about feeling exposed is also common in face-to-face classes. Of course, such issues may well affect a different student demographic than those who might be worried about contributing to in-person classes, indicating that this issue relates to broader challenges associated with student engagement and mental health and is not reading-specific.

5. Timing and transition.

Closely connected to pedagogic approaches to developing students' competencies in online reading, is that of *when* such activities take place. Training in how to read online - if it is offered at all - is frequently carried out as part of induction activities or early in programmes of study, where it is frequently delivered as part of generic skills modules, often by library staff rather than subject specialists.

The following graph illustrates the relative importance that staff ascribed to different parts of their institution when asked about their role in developing students' skills in academic reading, with libraries, courses and study skills specialists perceived to play especially important roles in the area.
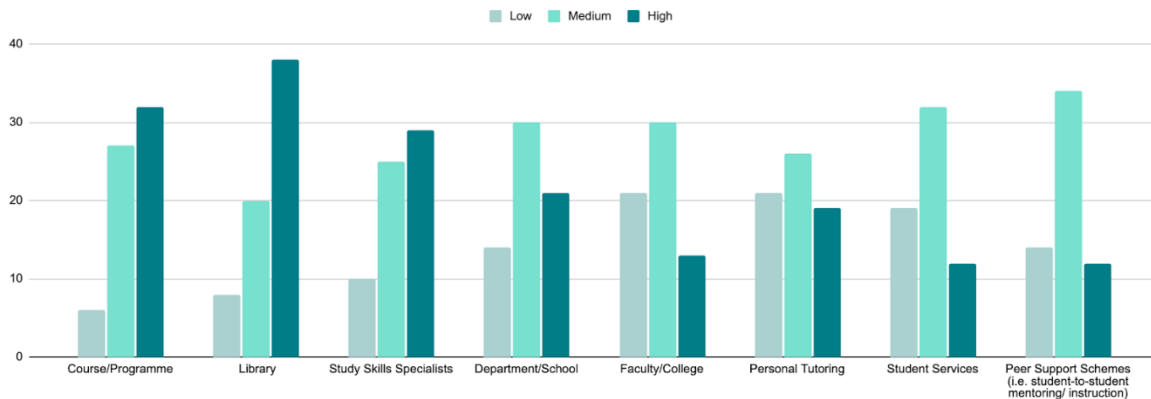
Figure 13: Staff views on the importance of different parts of institutions in supporting academic reading skills development

Here it is important to note the disjunction between the kinds of training that academic staff said was important in qualitative responses – disciplinary-specific interventions that promoted deep reading and critical engagement with texts – and what was frequently offered at an institutional level – training that promotes skills such as skim reading. There is an obvious reason for this disconnection – 'central' staff, at libraries, for instance – are unlikely, in most cases, to have the knowledge and experience to be able to deliver subject-specific reading skills training, while as figure 12 above illustrates, many staff do not devote significant attention to such issues in their own modules.

Nonetheless, many students noted that the training that they did receive had been useful, even if they wished there had been more of it. Overall, students thought that their programme of study had impacted positively on their ability to read online, although around a quarter of our sample thought that it had had virtually no effect (rating of 1-3/10).
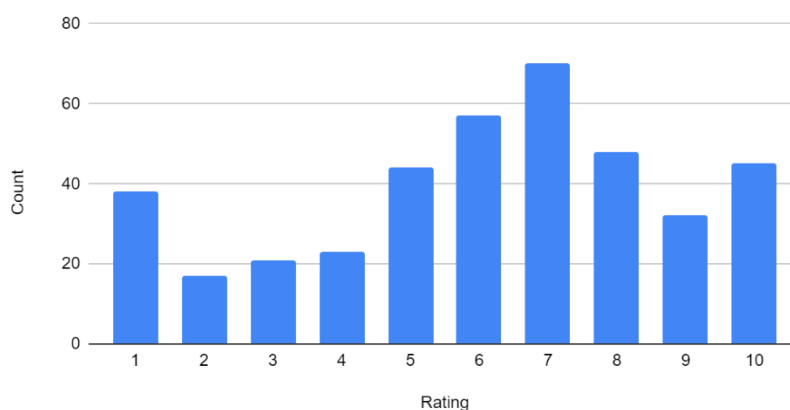

Figure 14: Student rating of the impact of their programme on their ability to read online for their study

Timing was another issue that was mentioned relatively frequently, with students especially mentioning that training in reading often took place early in the course and was not necessarily returned to later in any explicit manner. While the presence of *any* training in online reading is no doubt positive, its early placement in courses tends to divorce such instruction from its practical application in disciplinary-specific contexts, an issue that we have just explored. Further, it reflects a lack of pedagogic focus on how such skills might be

developed over time as students' studies progress: i.e. we saw minimal evidence for curricular-level approaches to inculcating and developing reading skills.

These observations relate closely to the issue of transition. As new students seek to bridge the gap between prior experiences and the requirements of study in higher education, they are generally provided with some instruction in how to read, sometimes with a specific focus on online reading. However, there is minimal consideration of students' readiness for academic reading in higher education, reflected in the low ratings that staff give to students' reading competencies (compare figures 10 and 11 above).

While there are concerns about students' readiness for engaging in academic reading when they arrive in higher education, our broader work with teachers and academics indicated a widespread lack of awareness of how students are taught to read before they reach university that hampers attempts to bridge the gap. Such a deficit view of student reading indicates that as a collective, there is a failure to meet students 'where they are', rather than where we wish they were. It hampers us from identifying what students are good at, as opposed to focusing on what they cannot do.

Evaluation

In the final month of the project (May 2021), an evaluative survey was circulated to those who had participated in project events and subscribed to our mailing list. We received fifteen responses spread across the various academic, student and professional 'constituencies' with which we had engaged. There were six responses from academic staff, three from professional services staff, four from undergraduate students and two from postgraduates. Respondents rated the relevance and helpfulness of project resources at 4.33/5 (qualitative response: "Thank you for sharing a breadth of project updates and resources in a timely manner with a public/global audience.") and project events at 4.14/5 ("The workshops and resources have been extremely useful and helped me to think about how I will embed reading skills sessions into my teaching next year."). When asked to rate the extent to which the project encouraged them to reflect on your learning (as a student) or teaching practice (as a member of staff), the average score was 4.6/5, with no respondent rating the project's impact lower than 4/5. Qualitative responses further indicate that the project has encouraged those who have engaged to reflect on reading practices and practices, and in a number of cases to change how they do things:

- "The blog posts from students have been really thought-provoking and well-written: hats off to all the students who have shared their experiences so honestly."
- "Really interesting to think about the online reading experience which perhaps is otherwise just assumed/disregarded as the 'way things are'. Some of the resources in particular really encouraged me to reflect."
- "The self-reflection its led to regarding how I read online has been the most fascinating takeaway from the project."
- "The project has encouraged me to think carefully about what reading I ask students to do, why I set it and how they will read and engage with it. It's stopped me taking reading for granted. I now offer more support, structure and guidance for students' reading, particularly for first years. I'm hoping in future classes to reflect on reading with students so I and they can learn more about how best to engage with set readings."

Outputs

All project outputs are listed and archived on the *Active Online Reading* website (https://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/read/active-online-reading/). We ran, participated in, or otherwise contributed to 12 events, from internal teaching and learning conferences at our own institutions to national and international events, including in Australasia and Ireland. As of early June 2022, we have published 32 blog posts on our work and have contributed to a range of online publications by organisations such as Times Higher and SEDA, with more blogs and events in the process of being published.

We have produced five case studies and a range of other pedagogic resources for use with staff and students, including a reading list about online reading, a literature review and hints-and-tips resources for staff and students. The surveys themselves have also been shared, with the question sets available for download and adaptation on the website.

Next steps

More news about the *Active Online Reading* project, including next steps and news of further publications and blog posts can be found here: https://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/category/active-online-reading/