

Critical Reading Skills For The 21st Century: The Role Of Universities

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ABSTRACT: Tangible evidence clearly shows that students' abilities to interact critically with written text have tended to decrease during their university years. Kerr & Frese (2017) report that 20-30 percent of undergraduate students do not complete reading assignments resulting in poor performance in examinations and research. Lack of motivation, time constraints and underestimation of the role of reading are common barriers. The information age and the technological innovations being pursued everywhere call for high levels of education where specialized training in critical reading ability is extremely essential. Unfortunately, institutions of higher learning seem not to be perturbed by an information processing gap that could translate to serious socio-economic stagnation and even deterioration. Without critical reading dispositions, education's prerogative to develop an enquiring, problem-solving, innovative and open-minded attitude remains an admirable but an unattainable goal. This paper challenges university teachers and students alike to accord teaching and learning of reading its rightful place in the higher education agenda. It does this by focusing on a redefinition of reading to capture its multiple perspectives and by re-emphasizing that promoting reading is intrinsically tied to the attainment of university goals—however we conceive them. The key question underlying this discussion is: How can the 21st century university remain relevant for national development if it remains unmindful of the learning tools that are key in higher learning processes?

Key words: critical reading, reading skills, teaching, learning, thinking, critical pedagogy

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I. INTRODUCTION

An increasing body of literature has continued to raise concern over the cycle of literate graduates who are not able to contribute to the development of their nations due to poor reading habits. The illiteracies among university graduates have been brought to light by the economic transformation taking place all over the world. In very significant portions, this problem affects graduates from developing countries as much as it affects those from developed nations. The ability to read well is intrinsically tied to that of development and university administrations, lecturers and students cannot afford to take it for granted.

The concept of good reading habits is not widely accepted in the context of teaching and learning in higher education. When used, the concept is used to refer, albeit in a rather narrow sense, to the ability to read and understand printed material, even when all there is to read are lecture notes (Ndethiu, 2007). Effective reading encompasses the ability to read regularly, as well as efficiently, to meet both academic and non-academic needs of the individual. Efficient readers use reading as a means of self-awareness, as a tool for learning, personal growth and development and also as an interest (Kerr & Frese, 2017; Beard, 1988). Good reading habits have been operationally defined to embrace multiple abilities that include possessing a need for information, knowing what to read, being able to locate information from various media, applying critical thinking to what is read, recognizing a writer's purpose, drawing valid conclusions as well as being able to communicate gained information in speaking and writing contexts (Conley, 1992; Brown and Atkins, 1994; McWhorter, 2001).

When students join the university for the first time as undergraduates, they do not bring these critical abilities to their new learning environment. Yet, without good reading habits, it is impossible to engage effectively in the complex intellectual processes that define the higher educational experience. Good reading habits make it possible for students to experience *higher* learning in the authentic sense of that term. Without good reading habits access to information is limited and a critical response to academic material is largely obscured. The information age and the technological advances being pursued by all nations of the globe call for high levels of education where specialized training in good reading ability is critical (Anderson, 2000). Unfortunately, Kenyan public institutions of higher learning do not seem to be really bothered by this academic inefficiency even when it bears enormous socio-economic implications for a developing nation. In 1985, Mwai

Kibaki, the then vice-president of Kenya and now the outgoing President casts this predicament into proper perspective when he lamented in *Kenya Times*, 1985, April 1st. p.13:

The greatest problem in public institutions is the fact that people who leave university and are employed in government or state corporations and the private sector make up their minds that they have had enough education. You meet the same brilliant student five years later and he has gone to becoming quite illiterate in the science in which he got a distinction as a graduate.

Of course, there are many ways of interpreting this observation. The most obvious, but nonetheless, the most misleading would be to conclude that for a student to graduate with a distinction, the university must have promoted his reading habits. Such thinking would be fallacious. The truth of the matter is that the very opposite has been proven to be true. The majority of our graduates leave university without having developed the kind of reading abilities demanded by the rigors of intellectual analysis. Their academic “success” is often times not the result of the application of critical reading but is in most cases the result of rote-memorization of lecture notes. The brilliant student in the president’s lament is unable to continue reading because he did not have any good reading habits to take into his world of work in the first place. The university that awarded him a distinction has failed him, so to speak. This reflects a very real academic gaping hole in which there is obvious lack of effort in promoting the survival skills for the 21st century.

The definition of good reading habits provided by Wheat (1955) in Smith and Dechant (1961: 274) shows clearly that good reading habits have permanence and that they involve affective, linguistic and cognitive abilities:

...as a person learns to read, reading enters his mental make-up as a permanent mode of behavior. . . .Henceforth, he uses reading as a means of enjoyment and as a means of studying and thinking. To the extent that he can read with ease, reading is a major factor in the control of his behavior. He will often arrange his daily schedule of work and play in order to provide time for reading. He will make sacrifices in order to provide himself with books to read. He will turn to reading as a means of discovering new interests and losing himself for a time from the actualities of the world. It is at this point we see the application of advanced spontaneous attention. No longer is reading an end on the outside that conflicts with other tendencies. It is now a dominating interest that is within.

If we accept this broad and comprehensive view of what it means to possess good reading habits, then the higher education system must begin to accurately size-up the enormity of the efforts, commitment and innovation required to promote such habits among our learners. The current measures in which students in public universities have to undergo a communication skills course are, by large, fairly commendable. That alone, however, would not produce students with good reading habits. There are already very clear indications that even the reading abilities promoted in a students’ first year of study are not easily transferred to other years for lack of reinforcement by lecturers in subject specific areas of the curriculum. Today, more and more educators argue for an integrated approach that embeds the teaching of core graduate attributes of which communication is a key part (Johnson, Veitch, Dewiyanti,2015; McWilliams & Allan, 2014).

II. CONTEXTUALIZING THE READING GAP

By not paying attention to the promotion of reading habits, University educators administrators and students alike hold the mistaken view that primary and secondary levels of schooling have done it all. The truth is that primary and secondary education cannot promote reading habits beyond the mere acquisition of basic or lower order skills. In other words, lower levels of education cannot promote reading abilities suitable for higher education. Over-dependence on rote-learning and the teaching of surface- level knowledge at the expense of the deep processing of information is the major reason for this deficiency (Love, 1991; Paige and Kerre,1994). Unsuitable teaching methods, (Ogotu,in *Daily Nation*, 2002) and traditional assessment modes (Bunyi, 2006) have been labeled as the key debilitating factors.

Ochola (1983) carried out a research in Kenya in which he found that primary school teachers and pupils used several books as a means for generating information on various subjects. The role of activity and enquiry was, however, not evident. Chimombo (1988) undertook a study on the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Africa. He established that the English syllabus often focused on a kind of literary English which was not appropriate for the natural and social sciences that the pupils had to study in school. The language course tended to rely heavily on serialized narrative, and descriptive passages. During the science lesson, however, pupils were asked to deal with different kinds of theoretical patterns from expository prose. This caused problems with reading comprehension of science textbooks among many of the pupils.

Pupils in Kenya have continued to perform dismally in national examinations for the last three decades due to negative attitudes towards the subject and lack of qualified teachers (Ogotu in *Daily Nation* 2002; Wanjohi, 2006; Gathumbi,2006). The introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in Kenya in 2003 has further compounded this problem. FPE has resulted in notable strains in the ability for primary schools to offer quality education in which teacher adequacy, teacher morale, school wastage, inadequate teaching learning

resources and facilities have interfered with effective implementation of the system (Wamukuru, Kamau and Ochola, 2006).

This scenario bears one intrinsic implication. For those students that proceed to university, a systematic and concerted intervention is essential in order to address this glaring need. The institutions of higher learning must confront this problem, without which serious threats to educational standards, quality and innovation become the inevitable end result. To conclude as many have done, that higher education has nobler goals than this, is to forestall the greatest intention in the entire educational enterprise.

III. THE KENYAN UNIVERSITIES' RESPONSE

Universities in Kenya have been concerned about the academic pitfalls that students transport to the university. In 1990, they established the Communication Skills course as an academic support programme for all first-year students. This was done with help from the Kenyan Government and The British Council with funding from the Overseas Development Agency (ODA). This move was to echo what had been happening already in western universities mainly in Europe and America. Many of the universities in these nations have placed very strong emphasis on the need to equip university students with strategies for helping them cope with their degree studies. In mitigation of students' reading needs, special programmes have been designed even for learners in the most prestigious universities (McWhorter, 1988).

The courses that have been developed have gone by many different labels including independent study, study skills, learning skills, critical reading, critical thinking skills, thinking skills, creative and critical thinking, academic skills or merely reading and writing. Whatever the description, training in advanced reading skills has assumed pre-eminence in these interventions. Critical reading pedagogy covers reflection also known as (meta-cognition; Yorke & Knight 2006), self-efficacy, contextualization, critical interpretation, comparison and contrast, evaluation as well as application. These aspects are by no means all inclusive and the most comprehensive extrapolation is covered under *The 35 aspects of Critical Thinking* "that every one needs to survive in the 21st century" developed by the Community for Critical Thinking (2004).

All institutions of higher learning do not necessarily employ the model used in Kenyan public universities whereby a team of language (reading experts) is recruited to address students' needs through just one service unit or department and usually in just one semester of study. Such a model may not produce a lasting effect. The model has been further disgraced by the addition of other communication skills to the syllabus that was developed in the 1990s. Today some public universities teach business skills, organizational communication and job-seeking skills thus sabotaging the important place of academic skills development. The other model is an approach that is generally labeled as language across the curriculum (LAC) in which reading is contextualized in every university subject. This approach poses several challenges and succeeds by primarily enlisting the support of specific subject lecturers and requires the university administration to expand opportunities for students to engage higher reading skills to meet academic needs in every subject. When applied innovatively, this method carries potential for a lasting impact by producing what many scholars have referred to as life-long reading interests (Price, 1982; Raaheim, Wankowski and Radford, 1991)

IV. EDUCATION, READING AND KNOWLEDGE CREATION

Inevitably, training in reading skills is generally, as well as specifically believed to confer our students with the key tools of production for today's information based economy. Effective reading skills empower individuals not only to become more competent learners, but also, more innovative individuals able to shape their destinies by adapting easily to the ever changing societies in which they live. These skills form the key tools required to sharpen the students' power of analysis and imagination, which intrinsically are the very tools applied in the process of knowledge creation. Wilson (1989:40) quotes Pecham (1967) to underscore the critical place of reading in the university:

Universities may, indeed, make learned men, but their best commendation is given of them when it can be said of them, that furnishing the material appliances of learning, setting examples in their professions and graduates, breathing the spirit of scholarship in all that pertains to them, they inspire men, by the self creative force of study and thought, to make themselves both *learned* and *wise*, (emphasis mine) and thus ready to put their hand to every great and good work, whether of science, of religion, or of the state.

Clearly, universities are challenged to promote good reading habits in every subject of the university curriculum, and more importantly, to esteem these skills not only as the *means*, but also as the *end* of the education process. The teaching of reading should be appreciated as being crucial for the development of intellectual skills as well as the ability to communicate with others, both professional and otherwise. According to Brown and Atkins (1994) university teaching must socialize students into the values and perceptions of each subject, discipline or profession. In other words, teaching must demonstrate, discuss and encourage certain ways of thinking, of using evidence and structuring ideas and procedures. Their extrapolations of the type of thinking skills which lead to intellectual and professional competence include the following:

Analyzing
Logical reasoning
Appreciating and judging perceptively
Thinking critically
Seeing new relationships
Synthesizing
Speculating creatively
Designing
Arguing rationally
Transferring skills to new contexts
Problem- solving.

Invariably, these types of thinking are the ones that both students and citizens should bring to bear upon information and they cannot be overemphasized. More than twenty years ago, Dressel and Marcus (1982:32) made their case on the centrality of teaching communication skills (reading skills) in higher education by concluding:

The object of instruction in higher education is to make learners or problem-solvers self-sufficient, individually, within appropriate limits and, collectively, in those matters that involve societal issues. To achieve this stage, the individual needs to acquire competency in the use of language as a tool for communication and thought and some understanding of how knowledge is stored, organized and retrieved.

If universities did this, they would have attained one of the most essential components of any education (Curzon, 1985; Lumsden, 2000; Wambari, 2001). Curzon argues that for university teaching to be effective, it must seek to enlighten students in the techniques of effective studying in which instruction in the use of the textbook (reading habits) is isolated as an important part. He stresses that detailed methods of active reading of a textbook should be explained as well as demonstrated using class texts.

V. THREATS TO UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

The three most important threats to the promotion of good reading habits are the teaching methods and institutional authorities and student's perceptions on the importance of reading at college level (Lei, Bartlett, Gorney & Herschbach, 2010). Gary (1991) has been particularly concerned by the lack of training for lecturers in Kenyan public universities. To others, and these include some key educators, the threat is perceived in terms of large student populations on university campuses, and lack of adequate human and physical resources. Whereas this in reality is the case, the real danger lies not, for example, in the scarcity of lecturers, but in the substance of their attitudes that define the understanding of how learning takes place. More libraries, computers, lecture halls and even less students per lecturer may not currently translate into better products or graduates. In fact, there are general indications that even universities awash with all manner of resources and facilities are also under threat as Lambert (1991) in *Eric Digest* (2007) laments:

We expend almost all of our national resources for foreign language learning on first-time low-level language learners among high school and college students, then watch these minimal skills decay and disappear through lack of use and reinforcement.

If higher education does not pay systematic attention to further improvement of the reading skills that students bring to university, chances that they will disappear are very high indeed. Even though Lambert comments within the context where language is taught as a foreign language, his observation is equally applicable to other contexts.

Higher education is said to have been engulfed by a "tide of mediocrity" that has led to "educational processes that can be described as academic game playing and awarding of degrees rather than a systematic educational process designed to help individuals reach their highest potential as human beings" (Ender, Winston and Miller, 1984:9). Illich (1996:76) has noted that institutional authorities and teachers present the greatest barriers to learning due to their authoritative styles. As he puts it, "schools are designed on the assumption that there is a secret to everything in life . . . and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets."

Such indictment compels each university to be responsive, not only to the intellectual and academic needs of students, but also to their personal and social needs. This perspective additionally calls for integration throughout the educational process of the skills and competencies needed to successfully educate the total student. The promotion of good reading habits must be seen to lie at the centre of this goal. To guarantee this outcome, the traditional role of the teacher, the counselor and the administrator must be altered. These roles have to be "redefined and become merged in a mutual attempt to enhance the educational experience of students" (Ender, Winston and Miller, 1984:10).

VI. CREATING CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE.

Each institution of higher learning must of necessity provide unequalled opportunities for students to interact meaningfully with as many members as possible of their academic community. Research has shown that environments that offer great amounts of student-lecturer interaction promote higher levels of student satisfaction than those that do not (Bowen, 1977). The use of tutorials, seminars, group discussions, reading and writing tasks are key avenues for such interaction. Teaching is a skill, which should result in organized learning activities that help students become competent self-teachers for life. Effective teaching is one that focuses on the way students learn. The goal of university lecturers in making students effective learners is strongly tied to their role in promoting good reading habits as Brown and Atkins (1994:172) have advised:

This combination of goals, reading strategies, and types of texts in a subject should inform any approaches to help students improve their reading. Clearly, therefore, a task in helping students improve reading in your own subject is to identify the different types of texts and to reflect upon your own reading strategies... Thus, it is important to provide them with brief specific tasks.

The critical question to ask is: how can such a perspective be accommodated in the context of the expansion and changes now taking place in higher education? With so many students demanding for places in the classrooms of higher education, the increased members are not only posing a challenge to educational processes and purposes, but are also forcing a re-evaluation of the nature of the student. The answer to this dilemma ought to be: the bigger our student populations become, and the faster the new changes arrive, the more urgent it becomes for learners to be empowered to take charge of their own learning. The more students populations explode, and the more diverse their backgrounds, the greater the need to accommodate different ways of teaching and also learning. Various tools of teaching reading that meets the needs of diverse learners are available and include the time old strategies such as summarizing notes (Miley & Read, 2012) and more technology based strategies such as getting students to make presentations using new technologies such as power point slides, video or short podcasts (Baker et al, 2011) or blitz play games where students write definitions of concepts on cards and read them aloud to peers (Benton, 2016). Moon & Yoon (2013) suggest group work with pre-reading strategies where a teacher gives an assignment before the lecture that will get students to read with a lecture in mind.

Whichever way universities may want to look at their role in enhancing students' learning abilities, one conclusion seems inevitable. To remain relevant, higher education must research diligently and continually into the future needs and lifestyles of their students and alter their methods of teaching in order to meet these needs and lifestyles. Philips (1989:86) argues for accountability:

In implementing new methods of teaching, the needs of students must be responded to. Students whose views on teaching are rarely sought and even more rarely welcomed will have to be fully involved in planning satisfactory views for teaching, acceptable systems of credit transfers and adequate child-care provision. The students become the 'experts' and fully involved in the academic planning they have been excluded from. The 'centres of excellence' will be those places, which allow the serious participation of students and do not seek to impose outdated and outmoded methods of teaching on reluctant, disinterested students.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is a fact that many of our public universities continue to graduate thousands upon thousands of students without the kind of reading habits that enable them to live fulfilled and productive lives in the complex societies of the 21st century where knowledge drives the economies. Universities continue to mislead young people by preparing them for an ideal world in which effective reading skills do not count. In the real world, the ability to read and understand, to locate information for themselves and for others, quickly and efficiently are demands that have intensified with the increase in information and information technologies. In a world where new information is released by thousands, there is not better way to deal with it than to read it. To become centres of excellence, to remain relevant and truly dignified, each institution has to start by understanding itself, by appraising the extent to which it is willing to equip its graduates with the skills that are so highly demanded by the information driven societies of which they are members. For any such appraisal to be honest, it must of necessity examine the commitment of institutional authorities, the extent to which lecturers are involved as well as students themselves. Beyond that, universities must be willing to look around and seek for examples of best practice in which reading and writing tasks have been adapted creatively in student learning, assessment. and evaluation.

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