

Reading Well and Being Well Read: A Study on the Combined Use of Textbooks and Trade Articles in Marketing Courses

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Abstract

Reading is a primary source of adult learning, both during and after college. Marketing educators can have a profound effect on their students by helping them to read well and to be well read within the marketing domain. A quasi-experimental design is used to compare the use of textbooks to the use of practitioner articles by students in junior-level marketing courses. Findings suggest that college students enrolled in marketing courses are served best when instructors use a combination of different reading materials written for education and practice. Surprisingly, the effect of using both types of literature results in a multiplicative, rather than an additive, increase in students' reading skills.

Keywords: Business Education, Reading, Learning

1. Introduction

What role does reading play in the lives of current undergraduate business college students? Marketing instructors rarely view reading as anything more than a tool for our students to prepare for our lectures and exams. Out of force of habit we require students to read assigned course materials without considering how truly significant the act of reading is to their ultimate success. Think about it. Reading connects college marketing students directly to the ideas and advice of the leaders within the marketing domain at a pace, in a quantity, and at a level of convenience that cannot be matched by any other pedagogical method. This makes reading the most effective means of educating college marketing students [Pugh, Pawn, and Antommarchi, 2000], and at its core, a quality business education is about teaching students to be effective and efficient readers of the essential writings of their specific professions [Weinstein, 2002].

While the immediate benefits of strong reading skills and good reading habits are obvious for college students who are assigned large amounts of materials to read, the rewards compound as students enter their professional careers. For instance, Longenecker and Fink [2005] interviewed 106 executives to determine how they promote their own professional growth: 66 percent reported actively seeking out and reading materials pertinent to their careers and industries. Reading not only keeps executives informed but also promotes critical thinking and it is a source of new business ideas. These benefits led Longenecker and Fink to conclude, "Despite tremendous work demands, managers must make reading relevant industry/business publications a consistent part of their regular routine" (p. 18).

So what's the problem? In spite of all the good things that come from reading, the current generation of college students spends less time reading and is not as skilled at reading as their predecessors [NCES, 2007b]. More important to college marketing educators, business graduates do not have the literacy skills necessary to be self-directed learners within their professional areas: they aren't skilled at independently locating and retrieving reading material (aka information literacy); they are not skilled at efficiently extracting information from text (aka reading fluency); and, many suffer from being "aliterate" and are not interested in using reading as a means to improved learning [Artis, 2008; NCES, 2007a; Weeks, 2001]. Research and advice are provided within this article to help guide college marketing educators to improve students' life-long self-directed learning via reading.

For marketing students to succeed in their future professions post-secondary marketing educators must teach their students how to find, consume, evaluate and apply what they need to read regardless of students' pre-existing reading skills or attitudes. We must accomplish this by working within the parameters set by college curriculum committees and textbook publishers; however, if we hope to effectively prepare students for success after college we need to teach them another set of reading skills—how to effectively use practitioner literature. To accomplish this, marketing educators need to understand how college marketing students perceive the influence of reading instructional literature and practitioner literature has on their general reading abilities. For our purposes we define *instructional literature* as any published document specifically used for educational purposes within academic course work. For business college instruction, textbooks make up the lion's share of instructional literature. *Practitioner literature* is any published materials specifically written to provide advice to working professionals within a specific industry or career field (e.g., marketing, advertising, logistics, etc.). Trade journal/magazine articles are an important component of this type of reading material.

2. Theory and Hypothesis Development

The *interactional theory of reading* [Rumelhart, 1985] posits that knowledge comes from outside the reader and reading provides the means to accumulate information (e.g., treats the brain as an empty vessel that can be filled like pouring water into a cup). Textbooks often promote "interactional" learning; new terms and concepts are laid out for quick consumption (e.g., designed for recall: information is summarized for the student for easy memorization, etc.). In contrast, the *transactional theory of reading* [Rosenblatt, 1994] posits that knowledge is an internal "sense making" process that occurs when the reader compares and contrasts what he/she knows about a topic to what he/she reads about that topic (e.g., the brain is an active agent that tries to sort, categorize and apply new information to solve problems). Some reading specialists complain that textbooks are not typically written to promote "transactional" learning [Pugh, Pawn, and Antommarchi, 2000]. Practitioner articles are more likely to prompt students to use a contextual framework within a content area (e.g., marketing) to evaluate the importance and application of knowledge extracted from reading these materials.

College students need a minimum level of general reading skills to successfully complete their course work. General reading skills are comprised of many independent skills. For college students this includes: (1) *reading rate* which is determined by the number of words read per minute; (2) *reading comprehension* which is the ability of the reader to understand the author's intended meaning; (3) *integration of ideas* which is the reader's ability to combine different concepts with the ideas provided by the author; (4) *reading vocabulary* which is the ability to understand words used in context; (5) *critical thinking* which is the ability to reformulate existing ideas in new ways; and, (6) *information literacy* which is the ability to locate and retrieve appropriate reading material.

College reading research suggests that mature students with normal metacognition—able to evaluate how they think and acquire knowledge—can assess their reading abilities [Artis, 2008]. Hence, students enrolled in junior-level marketing courses should be able to evaluate their "interactional" learning via reading textbooks and their "transactional" learning via reading trade articles. In addition, college students interviewed for this study reported that they have sufficient experience to assess their general reading skills across different reading materials. Given that textbooks appeal to the interactional aspect of reading, their use would be expected to increase the reading skills of students; while practitioner literature appeals to the transactional aspect of reading and would also be expected to enhance student reading skills, but in a different way. Hence, two hypotheses are created:

H1: Students perceptions of their Instructional Literature Reading Skills are positively related to their perceptions of their general reading skills.

H2: Students perceptions of their Practitioner Literature Reading Skills are positively related to their perceptions of their general reading skills.

3. The Quasi-Experiment

3.1 Survey and Sample

Two scales were developed for this research (Table 1). General Reading Skills were measured by a seven-item scale. Instructional and Practitioner Reading Skills were measured by the same 12 items for each type of reading material; students rated themselves for each item for textbooks and then again for practitioner articles. The answers were on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. The 361 students in the sample were enrolled in a basic marketing course (n=240) or a marketing management course (n=121) at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Demographic descriptions of each set of students can be seen in table 2. A textbook was the only required reading material for the basic marketing course while practitioner articles were the only assigned reading materials for the marketing management course. The basic course is a prerequisite for the management course so there was no “double counting” of survey participants.

Table 1: Scale Items

Instructional and Practitioner Literature Reading Skills

1. Using this type of material helps me to develop the critical thinking skills I need for my profession.
2. It requires little effort for me to read this type of material.*
3. I can easily comprehend the ideas within this material.
4. I can read this type of material quickly.
5. I understand how to use this type of information to complete assigned tasks.*
6. I can understand this material the first time I read it.*
7. My existing reading skills are well suited to using this material.*
8. I can easily integrate the multiple ideas encountered in different sections of this material.*
9. I can easily recall the information introduced in this material.*
10. I can easily understand the technical jargon in this material.*
11. I know where to find this type of business literature.
12. I can easily acquire this type of business literature.

General Reading Skills

1. Speed (Words per minute)*
2. Comprehension (Ability to understand what is read)*
3. Integration of ideas (Ability to combine different concepts)*
4. Professional vocabulary (Ability to use the language within your field of study)*
5. Critical thinking (Ability to reformulate existing ideas in new ways)*
6. Ability to use library tools to retrieve reading materials*

NOTE: * denotes a retained item after the factor analysis and reliability analysis stages.

Table 2: Demographic of Samples

Age	Basic Marketing		Marketing Management		Total	
Minimum	18		19		18	
Maximum	49		56		56	
Mean	22.05		22.94		22.35	

Gender	Basic Marketing		Marketing Management		Total	
Male	117	48.75%	50	41.32%	167	46.26%
Female	123	51.25%	71	58.68%	194	53.74%
Total	240		121		361	

Work Experience	Basic Marketing		Marketing Management		Total	
Yes	128	53.33%	50	41.32%	178	49.31%
No	112	46.67%	71	58.68%	183	50.69%
Total	240		121		361	
	Mean years	1.65	Mean years	2.63	Mean years	1.98

Major	Basic Marketing		Marketing Management		Total	
Marketing	34	14.17%	98	80.99%	132	36.57%
Accounting	50	20.83%	0	0.00%	50	13.85%
Finance	44	18.33%	3	2.48%	47	13.02%
Management	46	19.17%	7	5.79%	53	14.68%
MIS	6	2.50%	0	0.00%	6	1.66%
General Business	45	18.75%	12	9.92%	57	15.79%
Non-business	15	6.25%	1	0.83%	16	4.43%
Total	240		121		361	

GPA	Basic Marketing		Marketing Management		Total	
Lower than 2.50	9	3.75%	3	2.48%	12	3.32%
2.50 - 2.99	45	18.75%	24	19.83%	69	19.11%
3.00 - 3.49	129	53.75%	68	56.20%	197	54.57%
3.50 or higher	57	23.75%	26	21.49%	83	22.99%
Total	240		121		361	

3.2 Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis

To purify the scales, the items for measuring instructional literature, practitioner literature and general reading skills were coded into SPSS and subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using a maximum likelihood extraction technique and an oblique rotation. The final measures for both instructional and practitioner literature reading skills each contain seven items (item numbers 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10); additionally all seven original items in the general reading skills scale were retained for further analysis. Cronbach's alpha for each scale retained from the factor analysis step was above the .80 level, indicating acceptable fit and reliability; Cronbach's alphas of .850, .848, and .830 for General Reading Skills, Instructional Literature Reading Skills, and Practitioner Literature Reading Skills, respectively. See Table 1 for the original items and those that were retained for analysis.

3.3 Descriptive Statistics and Group Comparisons

Once the final measures were identified, the items in each scale were summated and averaged to create an average scale score for each construct.

The mean scores for the total sample and each subsample were examined for any abnormalities. The surprising result was that there did not appear to be a difference between the two groups on their practitioner literature or general reading skills scores, while the textbook reading skills score appeared to be higher for basic marketing students. A set of independent sample t-tests were performed to determine if any of these differences were statistically significant. The only significant difference was that the instructional literature reading skills score was significantly higher for basic marketing students while there was no significant difference in either practitioner literature or general reading skills scores between the groups.

3.4 Regression

The summated scales were subjected to a stepwise regression technique to determine the contribution of each predictor variable to understanding the dependent variable. In the first step, only instructional literature reading skills were used as a predictor; then practitioner literature reading skills were added as a predictor variable. As seen in Model 1 and Model 2 in Table 3, the instructional literature reading skills measure was predictive of general reading skill perceptions and accounted for almost 15 percent of the variance in general reading skills, and the addition of practitioner literature reading skills as a predictor accounts for an additional 5.5 percent of the variance in general reading skills, bringing the total to over 20 percent of variance accounted. The model fit statistics also show that these models are better predictors than random chance based on the model F fit statistic and the t-tests of the standardized beta coefficients for each predictor.

However, the researchers were disappointed in the magnitude of the predictive power of the main effects model, so it was decided to add a term to reflect the interaction of the two variables as it could be argued that the reading skills for one type of information source may have more than just an additive effect when including a second information source. To test this possible nonlinear effect, an interaction term between instructional and practitioner literature reading skills was created by multiplying the summated scale score for each term together. This term was then added as a third step in the stepwise regression sequence. The results of this additional nonlinear term appear in Model 3 in Table 3, and the interaction term was significant. The most surprising part of the inclusion of this term was the magnitude of variance it explained; the model now explained 92.6 percent of the variance in general reading skills perceptions.

Due to this unexpected finding when examining the model for all students, the model was also tested for each subset of students to see if the results were the same for students with different experience levels, and the results also appear in Table 3. The results for each model were similar to the overall model, which was also surprising as it would be expected the model may work differently for students with more exposure to practitioner literature when compared with students who have relatively little exposure to this type of literature. The overall model fit statistics were significant for each step of the model, as was the improvement for each additional predictor. For marketing management students, instructional literature reading skills accounted for almost 19 percent of the variance in general reading skills. Practitioner literature reading skills accounted for an additional 5.2 percent and the interaction accounted for 68.5 percent, with the model accounting for a total of over 93 percent of the variance in general reading skills. For basic marketing students, instructional literature reading skills explained almost 14 percent of the variance, practitioner literature reading skills explained an additional 5.5 percent and the interaction incrementally explained 72.6 percent, with the model explaining a total of 92.3 percent of variance in general reading skills.

Additionally, the standardized beta coefficients for each predictor were all the same direction, but the magnitudes were different. These results show that this interactive model applies to both more and less experienced students, but that the magnitudes of the different predictors vary slightly for each group. These findings provide support for the original two hypotheses. However, given the magnitude and unexpected nature of the interactive findings, we focus the remainder of the paper on these results.

Table 3: Step-wise Regression Results

All Students	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Predictor	Std Beta	t	Sig	Std Beta	T	Sig	Std Beta	t	Sig
Textbook Skills	0.390	8.00	0.00	0.319	6.48	0.00	0.049	3.14	0.00
Practitioner Skills	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.242	5.00	0.00	-0.827	-34.85	0.00
TxP Interaction	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1.451	58.61	0.00
Model F (df1, df2)	64.034 (1, 358)			46.648 (2, 357)			1475.463 (3, 356)		
Model Significance	0.000			0.000			0.000		
Adjusted R-squared	0.149			0.203			0.926		
□ R-squared	N/A			0.055			0.718		
□ R-squared Sig.	N/A			0.000			0.000		

Marketing Management	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Predictor	Std Beta	t	Sig	Std Beta	t	Sig	Std Beta	t	Sig
Textbook Skills	0.443	5.39	0.00	0.414	5.14	0.00	0.093	3.58	0.00
Practitioner Skills	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.229	2.84	0.01	-0.891	-21.95	0.00
TxP Interaction	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1.460	34.40	0.00
Model F (df1, df2)	29.018 (1, 119)			19.413 (2, 118)			537.259 (3, 117)		
Model Significance	0.000			0.000			0.000		
Adjusted R-squared	0.189			0.235			0.931		
□ R-squared	N/A			0.052			0.685		
□ R-squared Sig.	N/A			0.005			0.000		

Basic Marketing	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Predictor	Std Beta	t	Sig	Std Beta	t	Sig	Std Beta	T	Sig
Textbook Skills	0.377	6.21	0.00	0.280	4.43	0.00	0.027	1.33	0.19
Practitioner Skills	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.254	4.02	0.00	-0.787	-26.74	0.00
TxP Interaction	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1.441	47.29	0.00
Model F (df1, df2)	39.311 (1, 237)			29.006 (2, 236)			947.970 (2, 235)		
Model Significance	0.000			0.000			0.000		
Adjusted R-squared	0.139			0.191			0.923		
□ R-squared	N/A			0.055			0.726		
□ R-squared Sig.	N/A			0.000			0.000		

4. Implications

Interactive model findings: It is not enough for college students to read from one information source. The interaction discovered in this study suggests that the development of reading skills in both textbooks and trade articles has a profound impact on the general reading skills of college students in a way that is much more than the sum of its parts. Thus, to provide an appropriate education to students enrolled in marketing courses, educators and those in charge of curriculum development should incorporate both types of literature for enhanced student development to make them functional and desirable employment candidates.

The t-test findings: Students who have limited exposure to practitioner literature (basic marketing students) seem to overestimate their skills regarding textbooks due to their lack of experience with non-academic literature. Additionally, by rating their skills with practitioner literature as equivalent to those students who have had more experience with practitioner literature (marketing management students) they indicate that they are overly optimistic in their assessment of their skills in this area.

This finding should remind marketing educators that it is our job to inform our students of what they do not know (even if they think they know it) and then provide them the necessary abilities (in this case both textbook and practitioner literature reading skills) to be successful.

5. Limitations

As with all preliminary research the findings should not be overly generalized without additional research to confirm the results. The authors would encourage fellow researchers to use and fine-tune the measurement scales provided here to improve our ability to evaluate the general reading skills of college students. In addition, researchers who attempt to replicate this quasi-experiment must put significant time and care in to the selection of the reading materials used. While selecting a textbook for the basic marketing course was relatively easy, the selection and use of the articles for the marketing management course was more difficult and very time consuming. The articles were chosen based on the topics pre-selected by the marketing faculty members teaching the course to fit within curriculum standards. Sources and content were the primary criteria. Readability was not a criterion. Hence, it is unknown if a different set of practitioner articles would yield the same results.

Future researchers are encouraged to employ methods that independently evaluate the general reading skills of the students. Previous research has shown cognitively mature students are able to use metacognition skills to monitor their reading ability—comprehension, reading rate, etc. [Artis, 2008]. In our study we assumed that college juniors have the necessary metacognition skills to evaluate their general reading skills, but our findings suggest that students who do not have extensive experience with practitioner literature may be overstating their ability to read, understand, and use it. While it is not contradictory that students who don't have experience with a type of reading material might not accurately assess their abilities to read/comprehend it, it does bring into question the metacognitive skills of college juniors in general. Additional research is needed to confirm the ability of college students to evaluate their self-assessment skills such as a comparison of self-assessment responses and objective measures.

The final limitation to this study was the use of a quasi-experimental design. Due to the inability of the researchers to randomly assign participants to treatment conditions, it is impossible to assign causality to the findings of this study. Thus, future research utilizing a true experiment to determine the causal links between each type of literature and the reading skills of students is needed.

6. Discussion

As college educators we are so focused on delivering course content that we mistakenly take our students' reading and literacy skills for granted. Reading and literacy are not the same thing. *Reading* is the act of lifting information from words. It is a decoding process that can be learned, practiced and measured, and a person has to read to be literate. *Literacy* is more complex than just reading. "Literacy involves the ability to understand and make sense of information provided in a variety of forms and...in a 'hyperliterate' society, individuals with poor literacy skills face formidable barriers to success, beginning with their postsecondary education" [Pugh, Pawn, and Antommarchi, 2000, p. 25]. All business college students benefit from becoming highly literate.

Marketing educators are the first marketing professionals that our marketing students come to know, and we have the unique opportunity to model successful professional literacy behaviors. Hence, our ultimate objective should be to help our students to be highly literate, and this requires we achieve two broad tasks: first, to help students improve their foundational reading skills (e.g., to improve vocabulary, reading fluency, comprehension, reading rate, etc.); and second, to help students improve their literacy within our marketing profession.

The simple act of spending more time reading is a great place to begin. Spending more time reading and reading more material increase a person's general domain knowledge. Greater reading volume is promoted in two ways: by having pre-existing good reading ability [Pugh, Pawn, and Antommarchi, 2000], or by seeing reading as a means for goal attainment [Gibbons et. al, 1980]. As marketing educators we aren't trained to improve students' reading ability, but we can help students formulate their professional goals, and we can show students how using business practitioner literature is beneficial (even necessary) to achieve their goals and to acquire and maintain domain-specific knowledge. There is a welcome side effect to increased reading; students who read more tend to improve their general reading abilities. So marketing educators can indirectly help their students improve their reading skills by encouraging more reading.

Reading the right things matters. Our research findings suggest that a combination of textbooks and trade articles helps give college students the confidence that their general reading skills are adequate for the educational tasks that face them in college and the career tasks that await them after graduation. One successful approach is to immerse students in the themes, ideas, and writings that are valued by marketing professionals. Theory and research supports the notion of “immersion” [Falk-Ross, 2001]. For example, the social-constructive theory of literacy posits that cognitive development of members of a group comes from the immersion of each individual member in the language and writings of the specific domain and the conscious construction of meaning with other members of the group [Well and Chang-Wells, 1992]. Therefore, marketing educators can foster cognitive development in marketing students by identifying appropriate reading materials, requiring students to reflect on ideas lifted from those materials, and then helping students construct meaning with other members of the marketing community (e.g., students, teachers, and professionals). In addition, Maaka and Ward (2000) found strong evidence that selecting reading material preferred by students will increase domain specific reading; college students prefer that content-area reading come from articles (84 percent), newspapers (72 percent), novels (52 percent) and textbooks (39 percent). Hence, if we want marketing students to be functioning members of the marketing profession we need to immerse them in both the academic and practitioner literature of our profession.

Technology plays a “duplicat” role in how educators will need to address the problem. New technologies are changing how college students use their time. A negative effect is that college students spend more time using the Internet than reading academic materials—on average 2.47 versus 2.17 hours per day [Mokhtari, Reichard, and Gardener, 2009]. Technology can be used to improve the situation, too. First, advances in educational technologies and services require that marketing educators review what reading materials to use and how. For example, textbook publishers are using new digital technologies to empower educators to tailor their own textbooks and provide these materials in new formats: McGraw-Hill, Macmillan, and Flat World Knowledge have new services that allow marketing educators to mix and match textbook chapters, and allow students to purchase books as traditional printed copies or in digital format to be read on-line or with handheld devices like the Kindle [Young, 2010]. Second, technology has also made it more convenient for marketing educators to assign students practitioner literature as university libraries continue to make it easier and cheaper for students to electronically access on-line sources like articles from practitioner magazines and journals [ACRL, 2011].

Reading is a primary source of adult learning, both during and after college. Marketing educators can have a profound effect on their students by helping them to read well and to be well read within the marketing domain. To accomplish this we encourage our fellow marketing educators to adopt an instructional philosophy that fosters the adoption of general reading skills that will help our graduates to become life-long self-directed learners.

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