

Review

Access and Assessment: Mechanisms to Foster Independent Learning

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Abstract

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This article attempted to review Lemanski's (2011) study that explored the impact of assessment and access to resources on students' independent study/reading habits. Using content analysis, the review made a brief assessment of the introduction and examined the objectives, the literature review, the study context, the methodology and the findings of the stated work. Then, it established a conclusion based on the analysis of these components. The review revealed that Lemanski's study is of good quality for its concise and informative introduction, clear and achievable objectives, fairly comprehensive and critical literature review, relatively appropriate and elaborate methodology, relevant and well-described findings out of which emerges a sound conclusion. However, some limitations such as lack of clear theoretical framework, weakly explained research setting, inadequate statistical rigor and failure to devote separate sections for the objectives and the findings have been identified. On this basis, the review recommended that the study can be replicated and the findings implemented with certain adaptations.

Keywords: Access/ Assessment/ Incentives/ Independent study

1. The Introduction

The introduction (pp. 565-566) begins with a brief overview of the research issue. Initially, it argues that although formal instruction inevitably involves assessment, particularly, higher education should primarily focus on learning, i.e. it must not emphasize an assessment-driven instructional approach. This means that higher education should fundamentally aim to increase independent learning in favor of which Brookes and Grundy (1988, p.1) firmly argue saying: "It seems axiomatic that learner autonomy should be the goal of every learner and every teacher". Following this, Lemanski, the author, (in this review, 'Lemanski', 'the author' and 'the researcher' are used synonymously) highlights the main intent of the study and leads to the theoretical assumptions that underpin the study.

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Regarding the theoretical framework, the author claims that the study draws on **popular theories** (bold writing mine) that address *assessment* (summative methods for measuring learning such as examinations and coursework), including the contemporary ones that focus on assessment for learning. According to him, this is done since the study intends to challenge the traditionally assumed synergy between assessment and learning, and to introduce a complementary mechanism to encourage student-led independent learning through improved access to learning resources (Dornyei, 2001). The author defines ‘assessment’ as the efforts that make it easier for students to find materials necessary to support deeper learning.

Generally, the introduction fits in the research title and explicitly explains the focus of the study. The second strength of the introduction is the researcher’s effort to make the constructs of ‘assessment’ and ‘access’ clear to readers through the provision of operational definition for each term. It is also worth noting that the author attempted to provide a theoretical rationale for the study. However, it is not clear which learning theory (e.g. Cognitive Theory, Behaviorist Theory or Social Constructivist Theory) the author subscribes to and how this theory informs the study. The author mentions ‘popular theories’, but this does not clarify which particular learning or assessment theory is being advocated since there have been different ‘popular theories’ at different times (Alexander & Fox, 2004). Therefore, although the introduction is relevant and fit for its purpose, it lacks clarity in its theoretical grounding.

2. The Objectives

Lemanski did not devote a separate section for the objectives of the study. However, the introductory part of the article highlights them. Accordingly, the study attempted to a) explore the link between learning and assessment in the higher education context of greater student responsibility and independence, focusing on incentives for student-led learning, b) look into the reasons for poor student motivation to learn, and c) identify ways to stimulate rather than enforce motivation.

On the plus side, these objectives are relevant, clear, concise and achievable. They also allowed the researcher to compare the effects of traditional assessment-driven and non-assessed student-led learning (through access to learning resources) on independent learning. The objectives also allowed the researcher to explore better ways of fostering persistent student-initiated learning which enables students to take responsibility for the process and progress of their learning. However, how these objectives fit in the theoretical framework is not explicated. This limitation can be attributed to the author’s failure to explicitly state the theoretical underpinning of the study and imply how it embraces the objectives. Additionally, the author did not allocate a separate section for the objectives-while doing so could create ease of understanding, a strong criticism cannot be leveled here since readers can extract the objectives from the introduction.

3. The Literature Review

In the review of the literature headed: “Literature review: learning and assessing-two sides of the same coin”, Lemanski states that learning and assessment are interdependent components of formal learning. She begins this part with a restatement of the intention of the study and then introduces the focus of the literature review as follows:

The empirical focus of research, creating incentives for students to complete weekly readings, does not fit into an obvious body of literature. However, the broader interest in motivating learning via independent study clearly links to theories defining and understanding learning, including student responsibility for learning, as well as theories and approaches understanding the role of assessment in motivating learning. As a counter to the focus on assessment-driven learning, the possibilities for non-assessed learning are also considered (p. 566).

Next, the literature review discusses the classifications of approaches to learning into **surface** and **deep** (based on Marton & Säljö, 1976; 1984; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden, 1984, 1997, 2003) and **strategic** (based on Miller & Parlett, 1974). Surface approaches involve reading texts in order to memorize facts and acquire information, while deep approaches view reading as a means to understand reality and abstract meaning, ultimately leading to a change in the person. Based on Boud (1990, 1995), Newstead (1992), Elliot, McGregor and Gable (1999), Minbashian, Huon and Bird (2004), the author argues that although a deeper approach is usually preferred, recent studies are indicating that this approach alone does not always result in success at higher education, especially when it comes to examination and grades. On the other hand, strategic learning involves the skills of organizing information and of time management. As the author comments, strategic learning is typically the most successful approach in higher education that combines surface and deep approaches to learning according to the context (the author cites Biggs, 1979, 1983; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Elliot, McGregor & Gable, 1999).

The researcher goes on commenting that although strategic learning is useful at higher education level, only deep approaches involve true learning, while surface and strategic approaches are a by-product of formal education and focus on specific ‘rewards’ rather than on learning itself (Biggs, 2003 is cited here). Furthermore, based on Scouller (1998), Fazey (1999); Newstead (1998), and Solomonides and Swannell (1995), the author explains that the deep/surface/strategic classification relates to the learning process rather than the individual student—most students change learning approaches according to the subject, the context and the stage of learning. The researcher, drawing on the works of Boud (1988), Harris and Bell (1990), and Brown and Knight (1994), also claims that a crucial aspect of higher education is the rising student responsibility to direct and manage learning rather than relying on teachers or parents. This is an important aspect of effective learning since an independent learner is a “lifelong learner” (International Reading Association, 2012, p. 378). With this, the literature review proceeds to assessment-driven learning and then turns to non-assessed learning.

Firstly, the author stresses the link between assessment and learning capturing the fact that the former ideally provides evidence of the latter. She also underlines that while assessment should stimulate learning rather than merely measure it (based on Gibbs, 1999; Biggs, 2003), in practice it had been confined to measuring, certifying and classifying learning or learners, especially within formal education contexts. As Lemanski maintains, assessment should be a tool that initiates learning and helps lead students to the desired behavior. However, this author, based on Boud (1995), Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002), Lea and Street (1998), Merry, Orsmond, and Reiling (2000), Norton (2004) and Norton et al. (2001), notes that assessment does not necessarily create the types of learning envisaged by instructors.

To offset this problem, Lemanski, based on Briggs (2003), stresses the need for the compatibility between assessment and instructional objectives. That is, assessment must be

aligned with objectives and based on concrete criteria that measure changes in performance that are the result of learning, rather than on personal criteria that compare students with one another. In this regard, the author explains continuous assessment which provides persistent feedback to students and lecturers (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009, p. 257). Lemanski describes assessment as a continuous learning tool, rather than a terminal measuring device (according to Knight, 2001). Thus, she recaps that assessment for learning is a valuable contemporary educational tool since it explicitly links assessment with learning, subsumes formative assessment, and has useful implications for higher education. Accordingly, the spirit of assessment for learning is that tasks should be devised to arouse and improve planned learning rather than simply to measure it. Here, the author relates the literature review to the focus of the study emphasizing that assessment for learning places strong emphasis on feedback (e.g. formative assessment) as information that can be used by both students and teachers to evaluate progress and consequently modify future learning and teaching activities (based on Black & Wiliam, 1998b). As a result, it encourages higher education students to take responsibility for their learning and to engage collaboratively with teachers in the learning process.

Concerning non-assessed learning, Lemanski explains that the term ‘non-assessed’ designates ‘indirect long-term assessment’ (e.g. completing weekly readings that improve student performance in end-of-year examinations). That is, she maintains that ‘non-assessed learning’ is a kind of learning that is indirectly rewarded in terminal summative assessment as opposed to reward via continuous formative or summative assessment. Lemanski also summarizes the works of researchers such as Callaghan et al. (1994) and Eva Dobozy (2008). She captures that the former concluded that students preferred non-assessed work for improving group-dynamics but favored assessed work for motivating learning, while the latter investigated non-assessed online learning and found out that students engaged more in ‘deeper learning’ when participation was non-assessed although the number of students involved declined when learning is non-assessed.

The author also notes that whilst Callaghan et al.’s (1994) research indicated that assessment increases student motivation, Dobozy (2008) counteracted this by stressing that the focus of this motivation is to fulfill the requirements of the assessment. Dobozy found out that non-assessed work results in deeper learning but involves a reduced number of students. Lemanski also comments that assessments should be devised to counteract students’ use of unproductive learning strategies in such a way that they should corroborate with the very obvious role of non-assessed approaches in encouraging deep learning and self-responsibility for learning. The author also brings to focus the role of appropriate resources (e.g. books) to encourage independent study (Cunningsworth, 1995; Cookson & Crew, 2011).

In conclusion, the literature review is one of the strong parts of Lemanski’s work. Firstly, it has a strong nexus with the context (higher education) and the focus of the study. Secondly, it is comprehensive enough to bring to light the various aspects of the research issue. In addition, the author considers and successfully synthesizes the key points and competing views pertaining to the issue in focus. Finally, Lemanski does not merely limit herself to compiling scholars’ views and research findings. Instead, she makes critical comments, clarifies concepts and relates them to the aim of the study. Relevance, comprehensiveness, fairness and critique are important qualities of a literature review (Stewart & Kamins, 1993).

4. The Research Context

Lemanski's study was conducted on second year undergraduate human geography class (110 students). The researcher selected a course which was an optional component of the BA and BSc geography degree. This course had the highest student take-up of all 'optional' courses in the department since it dealt with the subject matters of 'development' and 'poverty' which are perceived as relevant and interesting, and thus student motivation was relatively high.

Lemanski's choice of university undergraduates is sound since maximum independent learning is highly required at this level. However, the setting of the research (country, province, institution), and why that particular setting was chosen is not elucidated. Readers may guess the setting based on the institutional affiliation of the author: Department of Geography, University College London, UK (indicated on the title page). However, there is also the possibility that a researcher affiliated to one institution can conduct a study in another institution located in another country/region/locality. Based on this premise, one can argue that the author should have made the context of the study clearer so that the article could have become more reader friendly.

5. The Methodology

To collect data on the perceptions and experiences of the 110 second year geography undergraduates about self-motivation to learn, Lemanski used two questionnaires containing qualitative and quantitative questions. At the beginning of the course (September 2008), all students were given a reading list that was also accessible online. Readings were listed for each lecture under the headings 'essential', 'recommended' and 'extra'. Students were informed that the 'essential' should be read weekly and were crucial for comprehending lectures. Course-based tutorials were unavailable in the Geography Department, while formative assessment was present via non-course-based tutorial essays; the essays were rarely marked by tutors with appropriate specialist knowledge. In these ways, students were not forced to complete course readings until the submission of the coursework and the examination.

The two questionnaires had different foci. On the one hand, the first contained four questions which focused on (1) whether the students were completing their weekly readings, (2) why they were not able to complete weekly readings, (3) whether they preferred to read when exams approach or earlier and (4) what incentives the respondents thought would help them to complete weekly readings. This questionnaire was used to examine the accuracy of anecdotal evidence on whether students would engage with weekly readings, to understand the reasons for poor student motivation and to elicit students' preferences of incentives that encourage engagement with weekly readings. On the other hand, the second questionnaire included questions that asked students to rank their peers' proposals for incentives to complete weekly readings. This questionnaire was intended to assess support among a representative sample of students for the ideas that a few students had forwarded regarding mechanisms to stimulate student motivation to learn independently. In addition to the ranking exercise, the researcher required the respondents to provide qualitative comments which gave details on their rankings. The data (qualitative and quantitative) collected via the two questionnaires were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods.

In sum, the research methodology appears appropriate since questionnaire is suitable to collect data on students' perceptions and experiences regarding self-motivation to learn. Besides, the items of the questionnaires (both quantitative and qualitative) could help achieve the research objectives, are comprehensive and have content validity since they addressed the key aspects of the research issue. However, it would have been better if the author had explained how the questionnaires were designed (adapted from standard questionnaires or formulated by the researcher), accounted for how the items in each questionnaire were related to the objectives, and justified how they could inform the study as a whole. Besides, while why Lemanski preferred to quantify qualitative data to a certain extent is not clear, her deep explanation of qualitative findings according to certain categories suitably fits in the interpretative approach (Nunan, 1992; Rosaline, 2008). Additionally, whilst the inquiry seems to require inferential statistics, the researcher's decision to use only descriptive statistics does not appear obvious.

6. The Findings

Here, the author does not devote a separate section for the discussion of the findings. The findings which just follow the methodology addressed the following issues.

Regarding whether students complete weekly readings or not, the findings indicated that the majority of the respondents completed weekly readings only sometimes as shown in **Figure 1** below. The author attributes this phenomenon to the fact that students were not engaging in independent study during term time because of their perceptions that term-time reading is unimportant and/or unhelpful. The findings indicated that the vast majority of students believed that weekly readings should be completed before exams rather than solely at exam times, while some of them argued favoring the need to complete readings both during term and during exam times (**Figure 2**). However, there is a clear mismatch between the respondents' belief and their practice since most of them completed weekly readings infrequently.

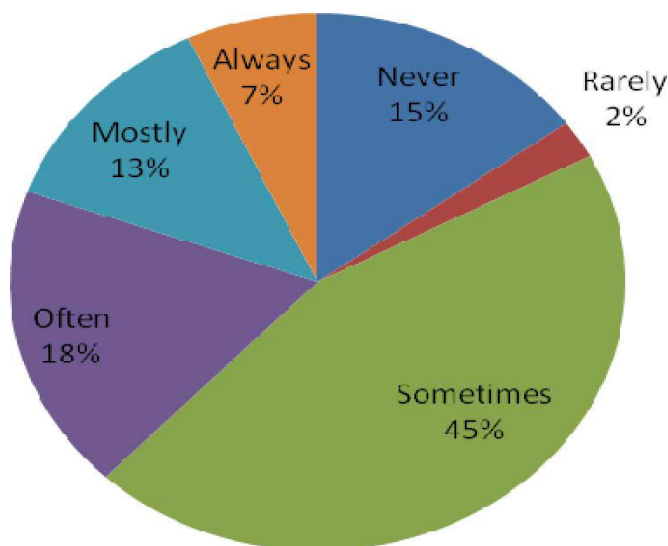


Figure 1: Frequency of completion weekly readings

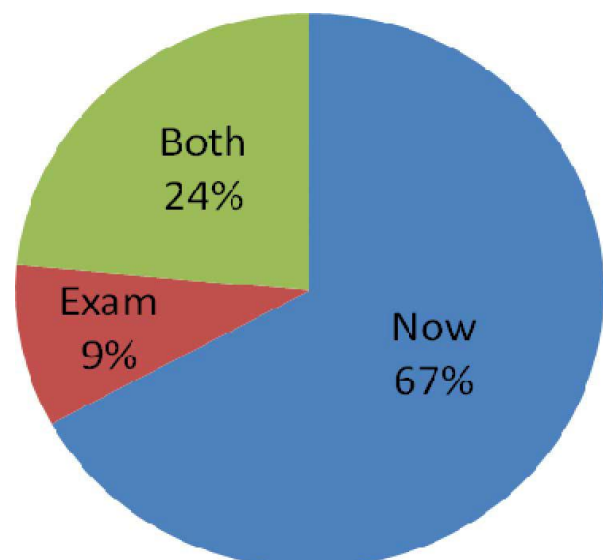


Figure 2: Students' reading time preferences

Having identified the mismatch between students' opinion (i.e. it is important to complete weekly readings during term time) and their action (i.e. the majority of the respondents were not

frequently completing weekly readings), Lemanski tried to find out the reasons for low student motivation to learn independently (**Figure 3**). The reasons for inadequate independent study included personal factors such as slow reading ability, laziness, being disorganized, feeling overwhelmed by ‘too many readings’, and other commitments (paid jobs, family duties, other extra-curricular activities). However, the two most frequently mentioned institutional reasons were assessment and access related hindrances to motivation to learn independently. About more than a quarter of the students did not complete weekly readings because of absence of direct assessment and due to pressure to complete work with time-bound deadlines (i.e. formative and summative assessed work). On the contrary, a similar proportion of students indicated that the primary reason for inability to complete weekly readings was poor access to books. Thus, lack of assessment and poor access are the primary reasons for evading independent study/reading (**Figure 3**).

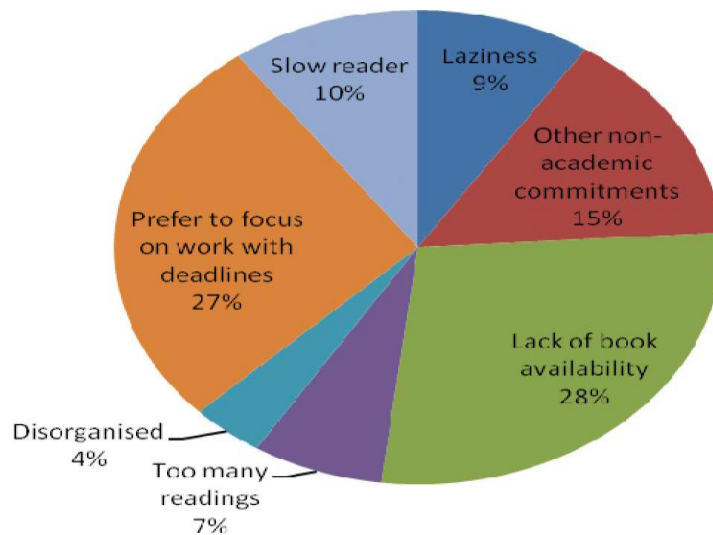


Figure 3: Reasons for failure to complete weekly readings

Concerning incentives for engaging with independent reading, the author required the respondents to indicate their perceptions of lecture-based incentives (**Figure 4**). The majority of them rejected lecture-based mechanisms such as random questions or tests in lectures, discussing key/essential readings during lectures and question-answer lectures about students’ reading. The respondents believed that the first nurtures in students a tendency of withdrawing from lectures for lack of readiness and preparation; the second hinders students from reading on their own and the third does not make students read since it is not the result of intrinsic drive to read. On these grounds, the respondents considered these incentive mechanisms inadequate to motivate student-led independent learning.

Lemanski also had the respondents to rate other incentive proposals such as student-led discussion-based incentives (E-forum and discussion questions in the reading list), access-based mechanisms (photocopying essential readings into a single pack, making all essential readings accessible online and raising all essential readings from two to three books/increasing the number of recommended reading), and assessment-based mechanisms (assessed submission of reading notes or no assessment-related incentives) as shown in **Figure 4**. The majority of the study participants perceived that instructor-initiated E-forum could not be used as the sole mechanism to encourage independent study since students may not read lecture notes posted by

their instructors. On the other hand, most of the students' comments indicated that while reading-based discussion questions would focus students' reading, it would not make them read. Thus, it is not a suitable mechanism to motivate independent study since it provides focus rather than motivation. Generally, E-forum and discussion questions in the reading list were mostly favored by students as a support for reading, but not an incentive to learn.

Regarding provision of student reading packs, Lemanski reports that the responses were mixed: some respondents favored this mechanism while an about equal number of them were opposed to it (**Figure 4**). Those in favor of this proposal perceived it as a time-efficient way to manage their reading. However, other students claimed that making students' lives easier should not be the primary goal of higher education. They underlined that university students should be able to choose their own readings and must not limit themselves to recommended readings. To these end, the respondents in the second category argued that libraries need to make ample books accessible to students, i.e. access should be a priority at higher education institutes.

The author also reports that supplying essential readings online was the only proposal with nearly undisputed student support (**Figure 4**). The students who participated in the study claimed that this mechanism could initiate them to read every week since it makes books readily accessible to them and could eliminate excuses for failing to read. However, they suggested that online reading should not be restricted to recommended lists, i.e. it should encourage students to read other online resources based on their own preferences. Thus, according to the author, this mechanism appears to be a positive one to motivate student-led independent learning, which can lead to the use of blogs for reflective learning (Mynard, 2007; Yang, 2009). However, pertaining to raising all essential readings from two to three/increasing the number of recommended reading, students expressed opposition commenting that university-level study should include a variety of sources and not be dependent only on textbooks. This pertains to the importance of maintaining student independence and responsibility for learning through methods that stimulate not force it.

What is more, Lemanski asked the respondents to respond to the proposal of assessment-based incentives involving continuous summative assessment which provides direct reward for completing weekly readings, with 10% of the course grade requiring the submission of students' notes from weekly readings (**Figure 4**).

The majority of them were in favor of this proposal although a few legitimately opposed this mechanism. The latter labeled it as a practice that is suitable for primary schools not for higher education where independent learning should essentially result from intrinsic motivation, not from external pressure. Those in favor of this mechanism argued that direct assessment of reading notes could result in frequent reading and provide a reason to persist on reading/revising notes. According to these respondents, knowing that one is going to obtain something out of the reading is an important incentive to read, and provides adequate motivation to learn.

As the findings of Lemanski's study further illustrated, the most controversial student suggestion was actually a non-incentive approach (**Figure 4**). The respondents argued that university students are adults who should be left to manage their own learning based on self-chosen reading strategies which can enable them to become responsible for the decisions and actions they take. Some students reasoned that providing incentives is essentially contrary to the goal of higher education. However, this requirement for independence was matched by an almost the same proportion of students who objected to the idea that higher education students are adults responsible for their own learning; they indicated a tendency for greater support and incentives for independent study. These students held that although they are adults who must

take charge of their own learning, practically, they require additional encouragement and proper guidance for independent study.

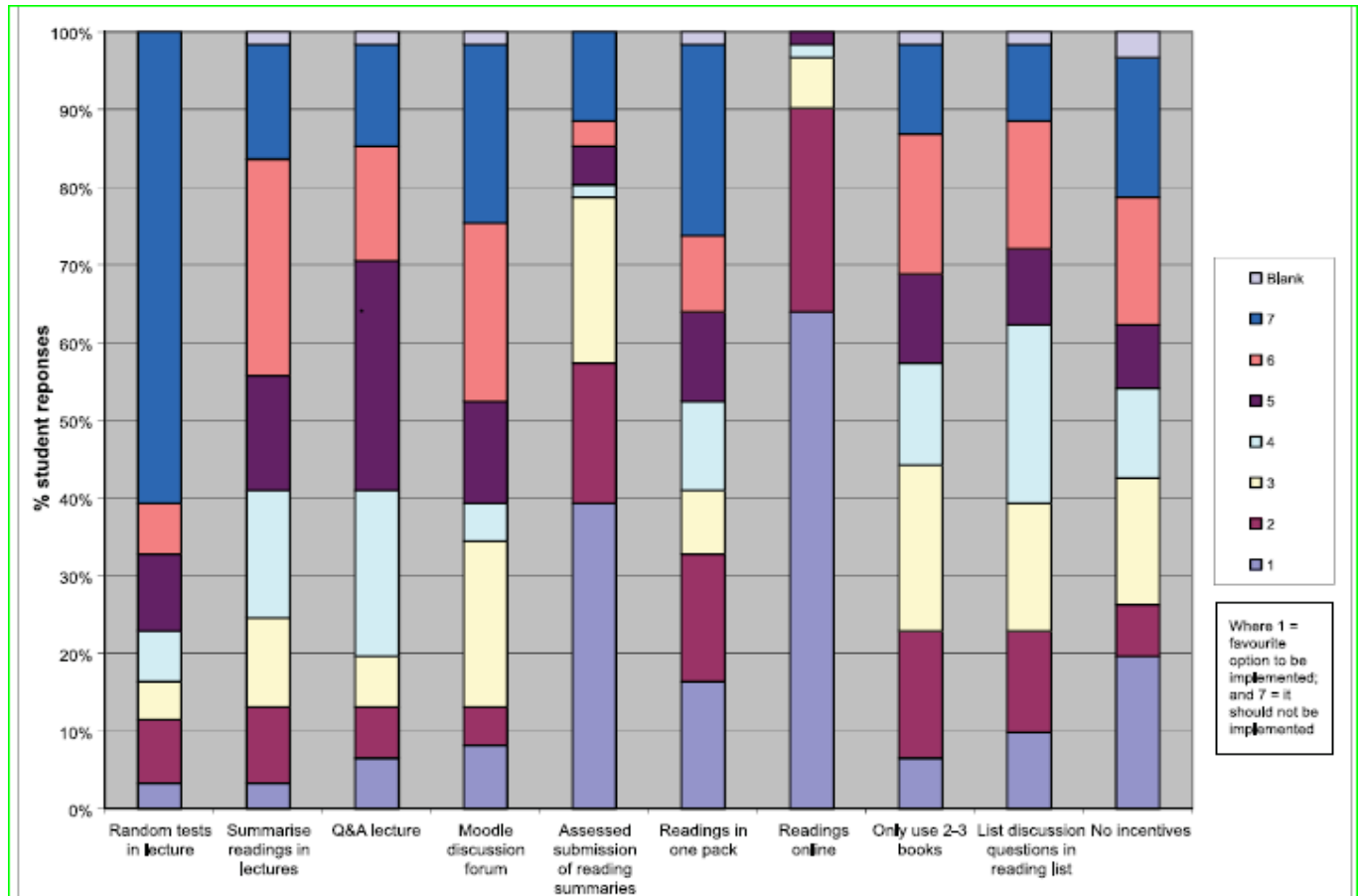


Figure 4: Student ranking list of 'incentives to read

Generally, the findings are linked with the main focus of the study, helped achieve the research objectives and closely dealt with themes discussed in the literature review. The author analyzed the data quantitatively and qualitatively, compared opposing views that emerged from the data, carefully synthesized information to establish the major findings that led to the conclusion. In the light of the findings, the author drew the following pertinent conclusions and connected them to the existing scholarship. Firstly, although assessment-driven approaches certainly provide credit for student work and acknowledge students' previous educational experience, they discourage deep understanding and threaten student responsibility for learning. Complete assessment-driven approach was strongly criticized by some respondents in opposition to the introduction of assessed reading summaries which they thought is not suitable for higher education. On the other hand, greater access to learning resources increases the possibility for students to engage with deep learning (and is still strategic in the long-run, thus recognizing student instrumentalism) but leaves the responsibility for learning to students.

7. Conclusion

This article reviewed Lemanski's work focusing on the introduction, the objectives, the contextual background, the literature review, the research methodology and the findings. The review revealed that this work is of good quality since it has concise and informative introduction, clear and achievable objectives, comprehensive and critical literature review, relatively appropriate and elaborate methodology, relevant and well-described findings out of which emerges a sound conclusion. Some of the limitations observed are lack of clear theoretical framework, weakly explained research setting and failure to devote separate sections for the objectives and the findings. However, these drawbacks do not significantly damage the quality of the work. Therefore, Lemanski's study is recommendable for replication in various educational contexts, in fact, with larger sample size and better research design.

Finally, this review has some limitations. Firstly, it did not make rigorous critique on the appropriateness of the descriptive statistical analysis to establish a causal relationship between access or assessment and independent learning. Secondly, whether the sample size used in the reviewed study enables the researcher to project the findings to a larger population was not ascertained in the review.

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