THE UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHAMPTON

Structured abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to reflect on the results of continuing professional development sessions delivered to academics on the importance of a properly annotated reading list to the student experience.

Approach: As part of the session the academics were asked to take part in a 'pop quiz' providing their interpretation of commonly used reading list labels.

Findings: There was quite a broad interpretation of the labels, with several eliciting strongly positive or negative reactions. The similarity of meanings between some reading list labels made them redundant for helping students to prioritise their reading.

Value: This case study could be used to provide sessions on reading lists at other institutions and the results from the quiz can be used to simplify reading list labels.

Introduction

In the UK Higher Education sector, there is a focus on information literacy skills development. Key participants in the development of such information literacy skills are the librarians that work in the sector, as demonstrated by the work and activities of members of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) Information Literacy Group (2013; Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC), 2013). With the development of online reading list tools, interest has increased in seeing how reading lists can aid the development of information skills (Siddall and Rose, 2014). In order to progress the understanding of how reading lists can be used to develop such information literacy skills, the author undertook research between 2013 – 2015, with a

selection of academic staff to explore their perceptions of reading lists. Specifically, issues related to how such reading lists are structured and the labels used to describe them were explored. The opportunity arose out of a request to run a session on reading lists for new academic staff at the University of Northampton. In the two-hour session, the author discussed the role of reading lists in the students' experience and facilitated discussion on the different types of list, as well as the organisation and labelling used in reading lists. As part of the session, the author asked the academic staff for their interpretation of the meaning of some common reading list labels. The results obtained were analysed to see if there was agreement amongst this sample of higher education tutors around the meanings of the labels in the hope that recommendations could be drawn on how and what language to use when constructing a reading list and what information about them needs to be communicated to students.

What is a reading list?

Typically in UK Higher Education, lecturers' reading lists are designed for each module to provide students with the necessary reading to understand their subject and enable them to start researching the information required for completing their assessments. Reading lists have been identified as a communication channel between Academic staff and students (Brewerton, 2014). A reading list is normally a list of (sometimes annotated) references that students are encouraged to use to discover information on their topic. Although the name "reading list" implies that all references are to text-based materials, in practice they can, and often do, include references to videos, websites, audio recordings and other resources. Some institutions have changed the name to

'resource list' to reflect the breadth of the media types the items cover, for example Nottingham Trent University. It was common practice to provide an alphabetical list of references, much as would be seen at the end of many academic research papers. However, with the development of online reading list software such as Talis Aspire (Talis, 2015), reading lists have been adapted to include sessional reading and themed reading, as well as the traditional alphabetical list.

Previous research

Student perception of reading lists

A few papers have reported on research on how students use and view reading lists. Maher and Mitchell (2010) identified confusion around academic staff expectations of how much and what students should read. This idea is supported by Brewerton's research (2014). In their research, Piscioneri and Hlavac (2012) saw a number of lists providing no differentiation between reading list items, even when there were over 40 items on a reading list (p.431). This result highlights why some students struggle to choose what to read, in what order and in what depth. However, students evidently use reading lists as a source of resources for their assignments (Thompson *et al*., 2003/2004). There are clear benefits to reading lists, offering an insight into sources of information in, and the research outputs of, a particular subject area. They have also been shown to be a useful starting point for students when researching an assignment (Siddall and Rose, 2014).

At a basic level, the reading list offers an introduction to a subject area, but Chelin *et al*. (2005, p.51) suggest that academic staff should be more explicit

with what they expect students to read, for example "**further reading** is ideally limited to materials that are readily available". This highlights another issue that should be linked to a reading list – accessibility. An exhaustive reading list that has not been given to the library, may lead to a situation where the resources are not there for students to access; this, in turn can lead to students' frustration as they cannot get hold of tutor-recommended resources (Martin and Stokes, 2006).

A single reading list strategy will not suit all students at all levels, as highlighted by the work of Thompson *et al*. (2003/2004) for a variety of reading lists structures. As such, academics need to be aware of how they can use different reading lists and that different strategies can be used to support students' reading depending on the subject and academic level (Chelin *et al*., 2005, p.50). Students face competing demands on their time. "These external factors include time and access limitations as well as financial factors that all contribute to a student's overall capacity to engage successfully with his or her learning" (Piscioneri and Hlavac, 2012, p. 442).

Benefits of a good reading list

A reading list offers a gateway into the resources available on a particular subject area, whether these are a historical record of the lecturer's own reading or a current list of key readings in the area. A good reading list is "generally regarded as having a role in moving students from dependent to autonomous learners by offering some guidance" (Martin and Stokes, 2006). Maher and Mitchell (2010) identified that some students were frustrated when too much reading was set and there were no clear links to the assessment (p.142). In

their exploration of a minimalist reading model, Maher and Mitchell highlighted that "most students tried to identify what readings were necessary and important and to complete that portion of the reading" (2010, p.143). In other words, time was being expended researching what to read (or the minimum required reading), rather than reading and learning on the subject area. However, if a focused reading list was offered, with annotations guiding students to specific readings such as a book chapter rather than a whole book, it can encourage students and help them to develop (Stubley, 2002). Such a tailored reading list would also help combat confusion amongst students about what academics want them to do (Maher and Mitchell, 2010).

Thompson *et al.* (2003/2004) identified three types of reading lists that students preferred:

- A list divided into key reading/titles for specific weeks
- A list divided into specific topics/subject areas
- A single core text with background/supplementary reading (Thompson *et al*., 2003/2004, p.60).

In other words, students benefit from a reading list with structure, rather than an alphabetical list of references. Another recommendation that could improve reading lists is through an explanation of the labels used by academics staff "to clarify the distinction between 'essential' and 'further' reading" (Chelin *et al*., 2005, p.50). A tailored list with annotations explaining terminology used would act as a communication device between staff and students and help to clarify expectations.

"It had become obvious, in discussions with academic staff, that a variety of vocabulary was in use across the institution with respect to readings, e.g. 'indicative', 'core', 'essential', 'additional'. This all added to the confusion and miscommunication of expectations to students."

(Chelin *et al*., 2005, p.50).

An exploration of how academic staff viewed these labels would arguably lead to consistency of use of such labels at a higher education institution.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions

In 2011, the author and a colleague were the recipients of a Library and Information Research Group (LIRG) research award (CILIP, 2014). This money funded a small action research project into reading lists (Siddall and Rose, 2014). Through the research, the authors identified a number of different labels used in reading lists. In separate focus groups, it was found that students and staff prioritised and translated the meaning of the labels differently. It was clear that there was a mismatch between student and staff expectations when they used and saw specific terms on a reading list, such as 'indicative' or 'core'. As a result of the research (Siddall and Rose, 2014), the author was asked to deliver a session (twice a year) to academics, new to the higher education institution, on reading lists. This session was designed to explain the purpose of a reading list, students' experience of a reading list and to encourage these academics to focus on the student when structuring and writing their own module reading lists.

The session is a two hours long and is designed to encourage academics to engage and interact with one another. Initially, the group is broken down into smaller groups to discuss the purpose of a reading list in higher education. They are given a selection of three reading lists to review, with guidance on things to consider when looking at them. The groups then come together to discuss the things they liked and disliked about the reading lists, debating the benefits of a specific structure or style that they can see as relevant to their subject field and level of academic study. After the debate, each academic takes part in a 'pop quiz' where the session facilitator reads out the ten common labels found in reading lists and asks them to individually write the meaning for each of these words [Table 1]. The whole group can then discuss the way each of them explained the term, again – discussing opposing viewpoints and agreeing on key terms. This then offers the group an insight into how a student may view these terms, when confronted with their module reading list for the first time. Quotations from Twitter are then used to highlight the students' views on reading lists. The session draws to a close with a reflection on the research project that inspired the work, concluding with quotations from the student focus groups on how they perceive and use reading lists (Siddall and Rose, 2014). The session encourages the academics new to the university to debate their previous experience and their expectations of reading lists – for example, whether one style is particularly useful for new students or post graduates.

[Table 1 to appear here]

This session on reading lists is delivered as part of a programme run by the Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT, [n.d.]), designed to equip academic

staff with the skills to help them design, teach and reflect on their modules. Lecturers may also attend as part of continuing professional development, to update their skills and on the pathway to register for Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy.

Findings

Over the course of two academic years (2013 – 2014 and 2014 – 2015), several sessions on reading lists were run with academics. 47 participants took part in the sessions, with 32 providing their quiz answers for analysis. The session participants were lecturers at the university, including both newly appointed and established staff who had taught in higher education before, who were attending the session as part of their continuing professional development. Participants came from across subject areas at the University, a mix of male and female, ranging in age from early twenties to sixties.

As noted above, 32 answer sheets (out of a possible 47) were collected from the 'pop quiz' on reading list labels. Participants were asked to write their interpretation of the meanings of the words on a separate sheet of paper. No identifying data was taken from the participants, i.e., the only information required was their written answers. At the end of the session, participants were given the option to take or destroy their own answers (BERA, 2011). If they were happy for their answers to be used, the answer sheets were collected by the author.

Six of the ten labels used in the quiz came from the original LIRG funded research (Siddall and Rose, 2014), plus one drawn from the reading list software

Academics' perceptions of reading list labels reviewed amendment NECTAR.docx

Talis Aspire (2015). The final three labels were identified from institutional reading lists and the virtual learning environment. It was felt that these ten labels offered a variety of terms for the quiz element of the CPD session [Table 1].

The participants provided brief responses when offering their translation of what a label meant. Some left a response blank if they did not understand or could not articulate a meaning that differed from the other labels in the list.

With 32 papers, each with potential answers to up to ten questions each, there were 320 potential responses to analyse. There were, however, four blanks and seven responses that were simply a question mark that questioned the meaning of the word. Over 25 respondents used a derivative of the word help (helpful) or additional support, indicating that the respondents saw the reading list labels as positively supporting students to learn about a subject. Ten answers made reference to assignments or assessments, indicating that the lecturers saw a link between reading lists and assessments. 35 responses linked the reading to the module content or course. Six answers referred to lecturers or module tutors, for example 'recommended': "texts that the tutor feels are a good text and would be of benefit in learning". Two responses refer to time negatively "if" you have time or "don't read" if you do not have time. This would reflect that the participants were asked to respond to each word as though they were a student or how they thought a student would see the label.

One respondent answered each label with grades of essential from "really essential!" to "unessential".

To review the staff perceptions of each reading list label, the results listed below reflect each label taken in turn [Table 2]. The respondents were almost unanimous in their perception of 'core' as an essential book or reading for a module, with three respondents indicating that they would view any book listed as core, as the basis of the module which would be "used heavily". Specifically "You need to read this to understand the key concepts of the module". 'Essential' was similarly clear in terms of the respondents answers, translating it to mean "must read" and linking it to assessments. One respondent wrote "the reference that must be read and listed in written assignments". In contrast, the responses to the term 'suggested' was divided between those that viewed it as a possible reading that one could "feel free to ignore", ten respondents viewed anything listed as suggested as "enhancing the knowledge". Although generally eliciting positive responses, there was also a clear feeling of lower priority around the idea of suggested reading.

The label 'indicative' was equally divisive and confusing, with six respondents questioning the meaning of the word with one suggested it should "only be used within a sentence, i.e. this reading is indicative of x …" and another listing it as a "non-word???" 13 respondents saw the word as indicating that the text would be helpful and cover a topic, five answers saw it as a general text until core texts are provided and eight respondents linked the label to a permissive sense of reading, if a student wanted to – but not essential. It is clear, therefore, that there was no consensus about the meaning of this word.

The label 'recommended' was generally viewed positively (25 respondents) and four respondents linked the label recommended as linked to a tutor recommendation and "a trustworthy good read". The link to "trustworthy" sources is interesting and leads to the question of whether non-trustworthy items should be on a reading list. In a discussion, the author heard the argument of the benefits of including a dubious source in a list of readings in order to encourage debate and to offer students a chance to see a range of quality of sources so that they learn to differentiate between them, thereby developing evaluation skills.

As a label 'useful' prompted generally positive responses, although eight respondents indicated that it could be translated as relevant for expanding knowledge of a subject area or if there was spare time during the course. Again there was an element of choice with respondents stating that "you may not need to read it" or that items labelled as useful were "supplementary" and "may cover aspects not necessarily related to specific assignments". Although a largely positive label, there was an indication that some respondents would view an item labelled as 'useful' as only partially relevant and not a priority for reading.

One label that offered a mix of positive and negative responses was 'optional' with the inference being that students could ignore this reading: "don't read it, you haven't got time" clearly identifying this label with irrelevance. Ten respondents stated that any items under this label would not be compulsory and therefore there was a clear focus on choice, with six writing that an optional text would likely "further knowledge" and 11 stating it might be helpful. If used on a reading list, there would need to be some annotation or verbal communication

about the intent behind the texts labelled as 'optional', for example if there was a choice in assignments and the readings could be linked to one or other of the choices.

A term that indicated an option to provide context was 'background', with respondents indicating that it could offer students texts that provided a historical perspective of theory (3), or (17) that the term would indicate a wider context or understanding "creating a picture of a subject". There were some negative connotations, with some respondents suggesting that it was "reading on assumed knowledge" and that students would be directed to background reading if they were struggling. Therefore, if used on a reading list, the label 'background' would require further explanation to indicate to students if they should read those items as a starting point, or if they faced confusion in the topic area as a remedial step.

Twenty-five respondents saw the label 'introductory' as a starting point in their reading, with four respondents indicating that 'introductory' texts would be useful: "something to get you started, probably quite basic". The label of a 'set' text however did prove challenging to some respondents, with three questioning its meaning and two failing to respond. However, 19 respondents linked a 'set' reading to preparation for a session: "read this or suffer wrath!" Some of these respondents may have been influenced by their subject culture, for example if it is normal for them to provide weekly reading to students. However, the majority of respondents viewed 'set' reading as either preparation for a lecture or linked to an assessment.

[Table 2 to appear here]

Discussion

It is clear from the responses that some labels are viewed more positively than others, and some are viewed more consistently than others. The labels 'suggested', 'useful' and 'optional' have negative connotations: "don't read it, you haven't got time"; a tutor would gain nothing by adding items to a reading list that students will ignore. 'Core', 'essential' and 'recommended' however have much more positive and consistent responses, indicating that these labels are far more valuable in encouraging students to read. However, the distinction between 'core' and 'essential' is unclear, so it would be important to use one or the other, but not both. The label 'recommended' evoked ideas of trust and linked to lecturers. Prioritising these two labels would encourage students to focus on reading relevant for their assignments and lectures, thereby addressing the concerns in Maher and Mitchell's work (2010) noted earlier.

The CPD session is not designed to enforce a one size fits all reading list model; it is designed to encourage discussion and debate around the purpose of a reading list. The clear message is that academic staff should discuss their expectations of students' use of reading lists with them.

A reading list for a first year undergraduate course would benefit from clear labels and annotations (Siddall and Rose, 2014). However, a reading list for a master's module would be a lot briefer. Tutors discussed that they would expect to provide fewer items on a reading list and would want students to find and provide their own perspectives from reading (Thomson *et al*., 2003/2004). An

agreed set of vocabulary and their meanings would benefit both academics and students, as it would clarify expectations and avoid confusion (Chelin *et al*., 2005; Maher and Mitchell, 2010). This is something that the CILIP Information Literacy Group should take up, and issue recommendations on labels to use and what each label should mean.

Such clear recommendations on labels and their meanings, together with possible structure and layout of reading lists would benefit both academics and students. Tutors would be able to see how different structures could be deployed for different teaching strategies. The three sample reading lists used in the CPD session encourage discussion of the pros and cons and enables tutors to take away good practice.

There was no formal evaluation of the CPD sessions. Feedback from participants has been individual and informal. They express their enjoyment in having a chance to debate established practices. Ideas discussed in the sessions have later been debated in team meetings, with a lecturer promoting the importance of structured and annotated reading lists with colleagues. Therefore demonstrating how the ideas from the CPD session are spreading beyond the participants into the wider institution. With lecturers leading by example in their subject area.

Recommendations:
- Reading lists should be annotated and use institutionally agreed labels.
- The label 'core' should be used where there is a single key text as the basis of the module.

- 'Essential' would signify items that provide reading that underpins the module context.

- Ideally the labels 'core' and 'essential' would not be used together in the same reading list unless their meanings are distinguished by tutor annotation i.e. these essential texts should provide the basis of your understanding for the module themes. From these you should explore related research literature.

- 'Recommended' labels can highlight items that help further the subject knowledge and are personally deemed relevant by the tutor.

- The label 'optional' might be used for readings that support one of a choice of assignments.

- 'Set' reading should be used when reading is expected before a session, e.g. seminar or learning activity.

- Readings broken down into sections help students to navigate a reading list. Dividing the list with labels, themes or by session is recommended (Thompson *et al*., 2003/2004).

- One reading list format [i.e. one core text and four recommended readings] is not suitable across an institution. Reading lists should be tailored according to the subject area and student level.

- Reading lists should not be an exhaustive list of every single item on a subject area as this can be overwhelming for students and eliminates the opportunity for subject exploration and information literacy skills development.

- Ideally lecturers should use reading lists as a way of communicating with students – starting them on the journey and offering the foundation from which the students can explore the subject further.

Conclusions

The role of reading lists and their importance in higher education is often debated (Stokes and Martin, 2008; Thomson *et al*., 2003/2004; Piscioneri and Hlavac, 2012; Rose and Siddall, 2014). Software offers more interactive ways of creating reading lists but also raises more questions about how to develop them for teaching (Talis, 2015). A CPD session run by an Academic Librarian offers a rare opportunity for new academics to discuss and debate their purpose and structure. It provides a reminder, when answering the quiz, of the choice offered to students and encourages academics to develop a reading list strategy that is suitable for their subject and student level. The success of the session run at the University of Northampton is that it has provided a platform for the debate of reading lists in an HE arena, where typically they are taken for granted and often overlooked. In the future I plan to develop and recommend to the CILIP Information Literacy Group reading list guidelines that reflect the variety of reading lists required in Higher Education.

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Label	Source	Source	Source
Core	Siddall and Rose (2014)		
Essential	Siddall and Rose (2014)	Talis Aspire	
Suggested	Siddall and Rose (2014)		
Indicative	Siddall and Rose (2014)		
Recommended	Siddall and Rose (2014)	Talis Aspire	
Useful	Siddall and Rose (2014)		
Optional		Talis Aspire	
Background			Reading Lists and VLE
Introductory			Reading Lists and VLE
Set			Reading Lists and VLE

Table 1: List of labels and sources from which they were drawn

Label	Interpretation	Quotation – staff perceptions
Core	Positive	"used heavily"
Essential	Positive	"the reference that must be read and listed in written assignments"
Suggested	Negative	"feel free to ignore"
Indicative	Neutral	"reference the students may use in case of doubt"
Recommended	Positive	"a trustworthy good read"
Useful	Negative	"You may not need to read it"
Optional	Negative	"don't read it, you haven't got time"
Background	Neutral	"You should hopefully know this already"
Introductory		"Something to get you started, probably quite basic"
Set		"minimum reading"

Table 2: Overview of meanings of reading list labels