

My Students Won't Read!

Part One: The Reason Why

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“Do you think this class will be a lot of work?”

“I don't think so. I've heard that the prof is really nice.”

“How much did you pay for the textbook?”

“Almost \$100! I wonder if I'll really need it.”

“I doubt it. My friend took this class last semester and got a C+ just from going to lecture.”

“So are you planning to buy the textbook?”

“No way! This teacher covers all the important stuff in lecture anyway.”

It's hard to argue with such student logic. After all, many of our students have made it into college with only the most rudimentary of language skills. Every semester, they aim for that “barely passing” grade, and most of the time they achieve it. Certainly there are exceptions. For example, my office neighbor teaches a course that is prerequisite for entry to the nursing program. When he arrives for work in the morning, he has students lined up outside his office waiting to ask questions about the homework assignment. However, this is not the norm at Delta—or at most community colleges.

If we faculty are going to challenge the status quo, we have our work cut out for us. It is with embarrassment that I relate the following story.

Some years ago, while teaching college-level English, I concluded that weak reading skills were largely responsible for the educational lethargy of my students. So I went back to graduate school, received training in reading education, and returned, eager to tackle prevailing attitudes. I signed up to teach my first reading course and found a text, *The Fight in the Fields*, that was both interesting and culturally relevant to my students. This book chronicled the rise of Cesar Chavez and the farmworker movement right here in the San Joaquin Valley.

The students really enjoyed our class meetings. There was only one problem. They weren't reading the text! They kept coming to class unprepared... and I blinked. Mind you, this was a reading class, yet I ended up summarizing each chapter and posing provocative discussion questions so that our time together was not completely wasted. And yes, most of the students passed based solely on what they learned during class discussion.

After this false start, I realized the immensity of what I was up against. Although I wish I could say I had a sudden breakthrough, what I've experienced instead is incremental progress, one semester to the next, as I have come to better understand my students and the options that are available to me as their instructor.

Since reading is as natural to me as breathing, it took me time to appreciate the difficulty my students have with reading. It's not that they *can't* read. They're fully capable of decoding words off the page. However, they resist reading because (a) it is truly hard work for them and (b) they're convinced they can achieve their goals in life without developing solid reading skills.

In Part Two, we'll examine the three levels of reading comprehension, appreciate why reading is such hard work for students, and make clear what we faculty must do to change this paradigm.