

HOST: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live *Boot Camp*. OK. I'm going to be talking about reading in this next session with Carol Azumah Dennis. Thank you for coming along today. Now, you're a senior lecturer in educational leadership and management, but you've completed your MA as an adult learner. So you know quite a lot about reading, and I imagine you've read a lot of things.

As students who've registered for the Open University, I think one thing that's safe to assume is that they're going to do a lot of reading.

CAROL AZUMAH Absolutely.

DENNIS:

HOST: So why do we need to talk about reading in this session then?

CAROL AZUMAH Yes.

DENNIS:

[LAUGHTER]

HOST: Or shall we just talk about biscuits?

[LAUGHTER]

CAROL AZUMAH Biscuits are always welcome.

DENNIS:

I think that when you start on an Open University course, on a degree course, and any higher-level course, the reading that you do is quite unlike any other reading that you do in any other aspect of your life. It's not like reading a novel or reading for pleasure. It is pleasurable. You do enjoy it. But I think that a novelist has one job, and that is just to draw you into their story. And they'll use whatever tactics they can-- beautiful language, a compelling narrative-- And they'll create scenarios and characters that you're interested in. You want to read more about.

An academic writer doesn't have those kinds of tools at their disposal, and they don't have the same aim of drawing you into the narrative in the same way as a novelist does. So it's a very different type of experience.

I also think that, when you're reading a novel, it can be quite a passive process. The writer does all the work, and all you have to do is engage with what they've written. There's imagination involved, but largely your job is to let them do what their beautiful words are intended to do.

When you're doing academic reading, it's a much more active process. You're much more involved in the text, and you're much more involved, I think, in something which is much more like a conversation with the writer rather than just simply allowing somebody to tell you their story.

HOST:

Now, OU study is a little bit different from other universities where you might go to a lecture. You might go and read a primary text. We have these module materials and study guides and things that sort of help shape some of that reading. But nonetheless, there are large amounts of reading that students would need to do. And I think you mentioned that sometimes we have a reading list, and students might identify things that they need to read or chunks of text that they might need to look at. And we've talked in other sessions about how they might plan their time to sort of factor in when they might be more or less alert to that.

So how do students then sort of start dealing with this complexity of very dense text that, as you say, is unlike things that they may have been more familiar with?

CAROL AZUMAH

Well, I think, yes, you're going to start a module, and you're likely to be presented with the

DENNIS:

reading list which may at first glance feel a little bewildering. How on earth am I going to get through all of these different things within the short amount of time that I have?

And I think the first thing that you have to do is to begin to make decisions about what it is you're going to read. I don't think it's enough to say I'm going to read this because it's on my reading list. I think you've got to be a bit more selective than that. Which isn't to say that you're not going to read everything, but you're certainly going to decide how much of it you're going to read, what bits of it you're going to read, and in what order are you actually going to read it.

So I think that involves looking at the book and being really quite-- I would say that you're almost going to audition the book. So, is this book what is going to help me? Is this book going to help me do whatever it is I need to do. Bearing in mind that the writer has one set of reasons for writing a book, but that's not necessarily going to be the same as your reason for reading the book. So you've got slightly different purposes going on there.

So look at the title. Look at the index page. Look at the contents page. Look at the bibliography. What other writers have they quoted? Are they writers that you've read elsewhere and that you enjoy reading? What kind of company are you going to be in in reading this book? Look at the chapter headings. If you know that you've got an assignment that you're marking-- that might be what you're preparing for-- or if you know that you're going to be writing about the particular subject and you know nothing about it and you just want a general introduction to the subject, or if you know that you're midway through writing this assignment but there's a particular point you just want to check. The contents page, the index page will help you make decisions about what bits of it you're going to read.

Ideally, what happens is once you get started with reading, you'll find yourself reading perhaps more of it than you intended to or more of it than you imagined. But one thing I must say, I think there are few of us who would say that we would pick up an academic book, start on chapter 1, and read it right through to the end. That's not how most of us read. What we really do is read the bits of it that we're most interested in at a particular time. And you may well find that there are some books that you do read like that, or you do end up reading the whole book, but you don't necessarily read it in the order that the writer has written it.

HOST:

I still hope to sometimes, but again, you never have time, do you? You're often selecting and picking up for your own purposes.

We asked our audience about whether they'd heard about different reading strategies. And you know what? 63% have heard of different reading strategies, which is brilliant. And we also asked, when reading long texts, I often lose track of the points. They've been very honest here, and 65% of them have agreed that they do. I do. It's really difficult.

But we also asked about their ideas for active reading, and they've come up with some absolutely brilliant ones. Let's take a look at what you had to say. Highlighting, key thing there. We love our highlighters. Short bursts, ibooks, night mode, read out loud, drawing pictures, skim reading, thesaurus, look for headings, stop and think, coloured pens, taking breaks, summarising, last chapter. I mean, there's some brilliant, brilliant ideas. I don't think you guys need to listen to some of this because it seems like you've already got lots of ideas. And the most important thing is that it's important to recognise that there are different ways of writing at different times depending, again, on what you're hoping to get out of it.

Scotie has recommended a book by Adler called *How to Read a Book*. And you've got a book

here as well, Azumah, which you've drawn all over and things. Talk to us about some of these different sorts of strategies and ways of interacting. Some of our students have already picked up on these.

CAROL AZUMAH Yes. All really good ideas, which is great.

DENNIS:

HOST: They're very conscientious students.

CAROL AZUMAH Yes. That's fine. I mean, if I'm thinking about active reading, I think that there is a process of

DENNIS: actually interrogating the text. And I would say that you need to be asking this writer very particular questions. So how does this writer structure what it is they want to say? How well organised are they in terms of how their ideas are presented? How many examples do they offer of the point that they're actually trying to make? And do those examples fit? Do they really give you a good insight into the argument that they're making or the point that they're trying to put forward? When and why do you think that this writer has written this book? Who are the other bits of research? How do they justify the points that they're trying to make?

In other words, I think it's important to not just read it and to, say, read and try and understand it, but to read and actually be interrogating it, asking the text questions and responding to it and actually engaging with it, and treating this reading like a conversation. So when you get to the end of it or the end of the section, it's fine to sort of try and summarise it, but also try and have a response to it. Are you convinced by it? How does this piece of writing and what this writer has said about the subject compare to what this other writer has to say about the same subject? Where are they similar, and where are they different? How would they talk to each other? If these two writers were sitting there having a conversation about this subject, what would a writer X say and what would writer Y say? How would they be different?

So it's really, I think, quite an active process of engaging each time.

HOST: Now, this is really relevant for-- for example, social science, art students, et cetera, who here need to recognise that a writer is presenting something from a situated point in time within a context and has generated knowledge from a certain stance. But some of our students may be doing STEM subjects, might be reading things quite differently. There might be less of a negotiation in terms of what is factual. They might be reading quite a lot of dense definitions. There might also be a lot of diagrams.

So this process of reading, I guess, sort of can be different depending on what subject you're studying. I know you're from Department of Education, but what advice would you give to students who maybe are presented with content that is diagram, text, et cetera, and they're needing to sort of make links between some of that? So their reading might look slightly different.

CAROL AZUMAH Yes. I think it's always good to question the basis upon which a writer is saying something and not just taking their word for it. So everything you read will relate to lots of other things, and the advice would always be to ensure that you're also checking those other things that the writer is referring to.

I also think that it's good to be completely marking and annotating the text all the time. And that really helps because it helps when you come back and you're looking at what you've read previously. So you can see your own annotations and remember what you were thinking. And it also just helps you to bring out the key points for yourself. So you can know, OK, I think this point is really important here, and so obviously you'll give it a highlight, which is what I think we tend to do.

And you can use different colours in your highlighting. Well, you can use it in whichever way pleases you, but I think if there is just a point that you think is worth a point of memory, then obviously you would highlight it. If you think, oh, this is really beautifully put, really beautifully phrased, and I think that I would want to quote this at some point, then you can also highlight that and perhaps use a different colour. If you think that this is a really good example of quite a complex theoretical point or research point that they're making, then you can also use a different colour highlight for that.

And again, that helps you when you look back at your text, and it gives you an insight into what kinds of things we're mainly talked about and discussed in that text.

HOST: It's a good idea. I teach in science as well, and one of the things that I'll encourage students to do is to identify where there's a theory, where there's evidence, where there's definitions, and to sort of separate those with colours. Because, sometimes, whilst everything can seem quite factual and can seem quite dense when you're reading it, sometimes being able to separate the layers and think actually there's not much evidence here, this is a very theoretical section, so how might that apply? Or there's lots of definitions here, I might need to bring those in. And then how do they maybe relate to something else? So it's about contextualising.

So whilst there's a lot of fact, it is still about interpreting what's going on?

HJ, how's everyone going? I imagine this has sparked a highlighting discussion.

HJ: Well, we did have a lot of talk about stationery tomorrow, so we may be out to get some different coloured highlighters now, I think. We are comparing some things as well, aren't we?

ZACH: Yeah. So we're comparing different kinds of ways in which we kind of read and different techniques, a lot of which is about highlighting and that kind of aspect of it. We've also got some students and some prospective students looking at kind of visiting the campus as well about their kind of reading and coming in to Milton Keynes to have a chat, which is quite funny. Milton Keynes is actually 50 years old today, and you can come to the campus and speak to the student support team if that's something that you want to do just to answer some of that stuff.

HJ: And the Students Association has conferences on, and it's worth checking out their page because they've got a lot going on for freshers where they'll do videos at the campus and there may be chances to pop up as well. And you can always pop to the library, which is really great. I like doing that.

But yeah, we've got lots of great tips because I struggle with feeling like I'm not reading very well. So I like these tips. Headingley says, it's useful to look at why you've been asked to read something. So what's the point? What are you meant to get out of it? And Jemma says, having a quick read-through first, seeing if you pick anything, then going back and going through more carefully may help with recall and identifying the bits you need. And Vicki's saying about, I have to highlight so many words to look up to understand what the sentence was going about.

So what I did, when I started off, my books were perfect. By the end of it, I had notes all in the margins writing definitions. And Jemma saying, my reading goes better if I bore my husband with everything I've learnt during the day. I have to bore my dog, and we've been boring cats and rabbits as well because, unfortunately, some family members have been a bit tired of what we've been reading them in the chat.

[LAUGHTER]

HOST: Well, there's a lot of chat going on. I imagine you're all having to read a lot of that. If it is going

quite fast, there's a pen button at the top. You can press that and scroll through. And don't forget, if you didn't watch our how to use the interface video, you can adjust the screen layout. So on the bottom right-hand side, you can get different layouts that will make the chat bigger or smaller. So that can be very helpful.

Azumah, we have an engineering student who uses black for highlighting. Is that crossing out?

[LAUGHTER]

CAROL AZUMAH It sounds like crossing out unless the text is white and they're reading on a digital reader.

DENNIS:

HOST: Ah. Now, I want to talk to you about digital readers and things because, yesterday actually, I found out you can get the software that will allow you to get PDFs read out loud to you in the car, which I think could change my life.

CAROL AZUMAH Yes.

DENNIS:

HOST: But you also use interactive things, and I guess in the digital age we're very keen to sort of say, how can we make this technology work for us, especially when we're so busy?

CAROL AZUMAH Mm hmm. Yes. I mean, I really like digital readers, and I think there's a really good idea. I

DENNIS: mean, I have heard students talking to me about doing all the reading that they need for their course on the train to work, to and from work every day. I don't know whether I would recommend that. But obviously, it's good to use it, use whatever time you have. And a digital reader can help you. Just block everything out and really focus on the text.

And I know there's an app you can get for an iPad called Voice Dream, which I think is brilliant. The digital reader does have this rather sort of strange robotic voice, but it does help to break up the text. If you're tired at the end of an evening, you've spent a whole day at work, you've done all your domestics and all things that you need to do, you don't get round to doing any readings till 9:00 in the evening, a digital reader will really help you to concentrate, focus, and stop your mind from wandering in a way that it might do otherwise. And as you say, you can read it while you're washing up, read it in the car. It gives you that kind of a choice.

And some of them are quite good. Some of them do have slightly more human-sounding voices. So yes, I think it's fine. And of course, your annotations are much better with a digital

reader. My handwriting hasn't been legible since I was 13 or 14. But when I've got a digital reader and I can put my sort of comments on the text and type them on the text, I'm much more likely to read and understand and remember the notes that I've made, the annotations that I've made on the text. So yes, I think they're really good.

But nonetheless, the process of questioning, the process of checking, that process of interrogating and conversing with the writer, I think it's pretty similar whether you're reading a paper-based text or a digital text. Of course, you have to be worried with a digital text. if it's not your book. The freedom that you would have to annotate your own book is not the same as the freedom that you might feel to annotate a library book. But maybe that's obvious.

HOST:

Yeah. No, I think there are lots of different opinions. People are talking in the chat about various things, so do keep sharing those tips. We've had things like ClaroRead, Sonority, Balabolka, lots and lots and lots of different things. It sounds some people are very used to annotating and using digital technologies to enhance their reading. Some people may not be, though, and some people may like books.

But nonetheless, it's an important thing to be able to identify your own style and to sort of get this idea that we are interrogating something. However, I remember when I first started-- well, when I was an OU student-- and I got these books, and they looked so clean and nice. And all the language was really beautifully expressed, and I thought I couldn't possibly do any better than this. And sometimes I'd read something that was a whole paragraph, and I'd think well, I'm not really sure what that's saying because it was sort of making a point. It was trying to contextualise something.

So when I was reading, I was sort of thinking, well, this book sort of seems to be very sensible. I trust it. I read it. I wasn't up for interrogating it. I wasn't up for sort of saying, well, who is this person who's done this? It's quite a different concept that we sort of need to get familiar with in higher education is this idea that knowledge is constructed and is situated in a given time and place.

So could you tell our students who might be at the start of their journey some of the things-- I know you mentioned some of the questions like who has generated this knowledge and how have they sort of considered it. But when you're faced with something that looks very sensible like a module material book chapter, what sorts of things would you recommend in terms of just making a start and also thinking about how things may be more factual or opinionated

depending on what sort of subject people are looking at?

CAROL AZUMAH I think the important point about interrogation is that you're all the time asking yourself, on what basis is this person making this statement? Are they appealing to other authorities? So they're saying you should believe this person because this person comes from this university and has written this number of books. And is that the basis on which they're saying that you should believe them?

Are they offering you evidence? So are they referring to research? Are they referring to statistics? Are they referring to any other type of empirical evidence? In which case, you are entitled to form a view about that. So go and check the evidence that they are referring to. Or are they referring just to the force of good argument? In which case, then you sort of retrace with them the steps of their argument.

One of the brilliant things, I think, about HE is that academics spend their entire lives arguing with each other. So it doesn't matter how authoritative or well-known this scholar is. There is always going to be a group of people who have looked at their work and critiqued their work. So I think it's a matter of you also engaging in that conversation.

OK. I've read this text. It absolutely convinces me. It's brilliantly written, so robustly argued. The evidence seems watertight. Is this the definitive word? Well, who else is reading this book? Who else is referring to it? What critique have they offered of it? And that will give you some kind of, I think, critical insight, which allows you to cast doubt on what that person is saying.

So it's not just critique for the sake of it. It's critique for the purpose of weighing up and working out, well, you are the adjudicator between these two people having this critical discussion. And then it's up to you to weigh up both sides or both elements of that argument and decide where you would position yourself within it. You're certainly not called upon to read and just accept what they say. That would almost be a betrayal of that person.

HOST: Yeah. So it's almost this idea of a hierarchy of evidence, that you say some things are very robust. And certainly in the STEM subjects, we do have these hierarchies, where a randomised control trial seems to have a bit more weight than a case study. So again, it's about thinking maybe just basically about what methods have these people used, how big is what they've done, when maybe did they do, and is that even relevant. We've got some great assets that you can look at on the Student Hub Live catch-up and from the library about using

things like prompt and various sorts of techniques to be able to sort of try and think about some of these questions when you're actually reading something very dense.

So it's really just sort of starting to think about who said this, what have they said, and in what context can we then apply it-- so being active in that process. HJ and Zach, what's everyone talking about at home?

ZACH: We've got a few people discussing maybe singing ideas about what they read to try and help them remember.

HOST: Is that the music from Fiona?

ZACH: It was-- oh, I don't know actually. Who was it? I'll have to scroll up.

HOST: Zach, you need to do your active reading.

[LAUGHTER]

ZACH: Yeah. I know, I know.

HOST: Where's your highlighters?

HJ: Yeah. Louise has said that she uses her Dictaphone to record the key points and then listen back and have a think about them after, which I think is really good. But someone did mention about black highlighters. Now, I'm not sure how useful they would be for active reading. But Jonathan says, I'm old fashioned, books and writing in notepads. And I think that just stresses the do what works for you thing. If you've found it and you know what works for you, just do it. That's what works.

HOST: All right. Well, Kirsty's going to try something as well. So it's important to try new things. Tell us about this book you've brought because you'd like to recommend.

CAROL AZUMAH Well, it really was to illustrate how I do the annotations on the text. And I'm sure we all see it.

DENNIS: It's not--

HOST: Can I show? I'll show everyone at home because this is impressive.

CAROL AZUMAH I mean, it's a book that I looked at some sort of years ago, but you can see sort of the

DENNIS: underlinings. He makes particular points, and I've numbered of points so when I go back and look at it I can remember that he was numbering points. I like the way he structured and

organised it and in fact used that in some other writing that I did. You see how unreadable my writing is all these years later. And I'm afraid a bit of doodling just in the corner. And of course, yes, this is my own book, one of the few books I would say that I'd read from cover to cover.

HOST: All right. So what's it about?

CAROL AZUMAH Adult education, professionals, activists, and entrepreneurs. Different types of personalities or
DENNIS: personality constructs who could be adult educators.

HOST: Excellent. OK. So I wanted to sort of end the session because we're going to start looking at note-taking in our next session, which is very sort of related to all of this. And we can sort of see how active one can be in this process and how you can sort of take notes from this. And without sort of going into the note-taking of when we're starting to take this out, what advice would you give to students who may be sort of starting to do a lot of this online and in books, trying new things, et cetera, and really speaking to the students who are just starting their OU studies? What would you say to them about all of these ideas?

CAROL AZUMAH I would say that there isn't a right or wrong way to go about this. There is only a way that you
DENNIS: find works for you, that fits in with what your preferences are. Some people get very irritated and would consider this an act of complete vandalism to mark a book in this way. But if it helps you, then I think it's worth doing it. Find out what kind of highlighters you like using and develop your own referencing system for what the different colour highlighters might mean.

We laughed at the lady who wants to sing her text. I mean, if you find setting your academic text to music is a good idea for you, then why not?

HOST: That should do well in exams as well because I think, once you have those memory aids, that can be really useful to sort of remember quotes and things.

CAROL AZUMAH Right. Yes.

DENNIS:

HOST: I'd do that.

CAROL AZUMAH Nice.

DENNIS:

[LAUGHTER]

HOST: Yeah. So it's all about finding different things, and you mentioned earlier as well that things will change as you're going through your studies, depending on what you're doing, depending on what level, and I guess what you're trying to get out of the text your reading.

CAROL AZUMAH And what stage you are in your studies. How you might first of all approach it will be very, very

DENNIS: different to when you've become quite used to deciding what you want to read and how close you are to an assignment, whether you're at the flip side of an assignment or whether you're just trying to get a general introduction to a subject. There isn't a sort of 1 to 10, this is how you do it, this is when you do it, this is the right approach. There is only an approach that you find helpful. So just try it, whatever it does, whatever works.

HOST: Thank you, Azumah. It's a big topic. You've given us some fab ideas, and you've certainly got the chat going with lots and lots of interesting topics. So thank you very much for coming along.

You've enjoyed engaging with Azumah. She's back again in a couple of weeks because we've got a session on postgraduate studies. And everyone is welcome to any of our events that we run. But on the 9th of October, we're going to take a specific look at postgraduate studies. And in that section, we're going to look at the importance of peer communities, reflective learning, and various things that you might find interesting if you've enjoyed this morning's programme so far. So keep an eye out for that.

Right. Well, Milton Keynes might be 50 years old and Walton Hall is a little bit older, and I know you guys are interested in seeing more of our campus. So we're going to show you a short video of Walton Hall before we're back to take a look at note-taking. See you in a minute.

[MUSIC PLAYS]