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Academic reading as a grudging act: how do Higher Education students experience academic reading and what can educators do about it?

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Abstract
This article examines Higher Education students' experiences of academic reading as a grudging act: something that is performed reluctantly or half-heartedly, because it has to be done. Drawing on group interviews with 30 social science undergraduates, registered at a research-intensive UK university, we offer a reflexive thematic analysis of academic reading, experienced as 'a struggle', as 'a chore' and as 'pointless'. Our analysis centres the experiential dimensions of reading, revealing how student orientations towards reading—and the teaching that surrounds it—can influence their practices. The article makes two original contributions to the developing literature about student reading experiences in Higher Education. First, by examining student accounts of reading through Bottero's (2022) sociology of 'grudging acts', we extend what is known about the intersection between reading experiences and practices, raising important questions for educators in the social sciences and beyond. Second, by examining what educators can do in response to these challenges, we *collate* and *extend* existing guidance for educators that seek to support student engagement with academic reading in Higher Education.

Keywords Reading · Experience · Grudging · Academic · Active · Social science

Introduction

This article contributes to the Higher Education literature by analysing students' experiences of academic reading as a grudging act: something that is performed reluctantly or half-heartedly, because it has to be done (Bottero, 2022). Academic reading is key to academic success and, as such, is a fundamental part of most degree programmes (Afdal et al., 2022). Yet, very little is known about students' reading experiences, compared to other aspects of literacy, like writing (Baker et al., 2019). Studies of academic reading in Higher Education have shown consistent discrepancies between student reading practices

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and faculty expectations (Baker et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2018). In the social sciences, students tend to read less than they are assigned (Hoeft, 2012; Howard et al., 2018; Roberts & Roberts, 2008). Across disciplines, the level of study skills support available to students can differ within and between institutions (Bosley, 2008; Desa et al., 2020; Weller, 2010). Reading has also been cited as a key source of difficulty, anxiety and frustration for Higher Education students (Jonas & Hall, 2022; Kimberley & Thursby, 2020; St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018). Despite widespread acknowledgment that academic reading is essential for undergraduates' academic success, reading still receives limited pedagogical attention in Higher Education contexts (Desa et al., 2020). There is a need, therefore, to develop (i) more robust understandings of students' reading experiences and (ii) evidenced-based support for educators who seek to engage students with the readings they assign.

Drawing on in-depth group interviews with a sample of 30 social science undergraduates, registered at a research-intensive UK university, this article examines student orientations towards reading, alongside the relationships between their reading experiences and practices. The article makes two contributions to the developing Higher Education literature about student reading experiences. First, by examining students' accounts of reading through the analytical frame of *grudging acts* (Bottero, 2022), we bring new sociologies of practice into conversation with the Higher Education literature, extending what is known about the intersection between reading experiences and practices. Second, by examining what educators can do in response to these challenges, we *collate* and *extend* existing guidance for those who seek to support Higher Education students with the reading they assign. The article is organised into five substantive parts. We begin with a brief review of the existing literature that examines student reading experiences in Higher Education. This is followed by an introduction to Bottero (2022)'s sociology of *grudging acts* and its relevance for the present study. We then provide details of the research design before presenting our thematic analysis of student reading experiences as 'a struggle', as 'a chore' and as 'pointless'. The final section of this paper brings together some of the existing recommendations for educational practice before presenting our own student-led recommendations for educators.

Student reading experiences in Higher Education

Experiential accounts of reading in Higher Education remain limited compared with other aspects of literacy, like writing (Baker et al., 2019). However, recent developments in Higher Education research have offered some indication of *how* students experience academic reading and *why* students might struggle to meet faculty expectations. These studies offer insights into the reading challenges students can face, particularly in terms of (i) time (ii) confidence and (iii) barriers to participation in Higher Education (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2022).

Students can have complex and ambivalent relationships with their studies. The contexts in which academic reading takes place can also influence how reading is approached and understood. Mann (2000), for example, has argued that student reading experiences are *disrupted* by the academic context. Her work with linguistics students found students regularly distinguished between academic reading (as 'work') and the more neutral activity of reading for pleasure. The students in her study made reference to the normative dimensions of reading *for the purpose of assessment* as a characteristic that shaped their orientation towards the practice. Reading in the academic context is also imbued with meaning. Baker et al. (2019), for

example, have argued that reading offers 'epistemic access' to the institution. Fine & Wohl (2018) have also examined the valorisation of academic reading. Their work with US graduate students revealed the legitimation of some reading practices (like deep reading) over others (like skim reading), alongside the associations between reading, academic reputation, and narratives of success (Fine & Wohl, 2018; Wohl & Fine, 2017a). The stakes, as such, are high and the pressure to read—*and read well*—can have substantial implications for students' experiences of wellbeing and belonging in Higher Education. In an interview study with UK undergraduates, Kimberley & Thursby, (2020: 10) made the case for 'reading as an area of academic practice [that] is particularly burdened with affect'. Their student participants repeatedly used nouns like 'boredom', 'stress' and 'frustration' to describe their reading experiences. They also expressed low confidence as a barrier to engaging with challenging texts. More recently, Jones & Hall (2022) have shown that Higher Education students who report lower levels of writing and reading efficacy are more likely to experience higher levels of academic self-doubt. Their findings, based on an international survey spanning 45 countries, underscored the importance of supporting students' reading (and writing) abilities to facilitate quality work and promote better psychological wellbeing.

Reading takes time, and studies of academic reading have shown that time can be a substantial barrier to student reading engagement. Sharma et al. (2017) explored the influence of time on the decisions that students make about their academic reading. Their survey of 1103 students in a US university found those with more sustained and consistent reading practices (including reading on the weekends) were more likely to complete reading assignments than those with less sustained and consistent reading practices. Students' commitments, beyond their degree programmes, also impacted on reading practices; those who allocated more time to non-academic tasks were less likely to complete readings than those who allocated less time to non-academic tasks. These findings indicate the value of organising and committing time to academic reading. However, they also signal (i) the level of commitment it takes to manage the 'temporal realities' of Higher Education alongside (ii) the inequalities that might exist in students' *capacity* to read (Wohl & Fine, 2017a). Time, as a resource, is not evenly distributed. Students with caring responsibilities and/or those committed to paid employment, for instance, will have less 'reading time' than others. The time it takes students to read academic texts also varies substantially between students. Reading speed has been identified as a particular concern for those experiencing language barriers and learning differences (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006), many of which remain inadequately supported in Higher Education contexts (Clouder et al., 2020). Such experiences can exacerbate what are already widespread anxieties around students' (in)ability to 'keep up' with the volume of assigned texts (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018; Wohl & Fine, 2017a). They can also have detrimental impacts for students' motivation to read and their engagement with the practice (Andrianatos, 2019; Baker et al., 2019). Inequality, as Baker et al. (2019) have observed, remains underexplored in academic reading research, and more research is needed that focuses on academic reading from an equity/social justice standpoint.

Academic reading as a grudging act

Grudging acts are the activities we would rather not do but perform anyway, reluctantly or resentfully, because we feel like we have to (Bottero, 2022). It is not uncommon for people to do things they do not straightforwardly enjoy. As such, grudging acts constitute a routine feature of everyday life. Yet, as Bottero (2022) has acknowledged, serious attention to such

things remains surprisingly absent in social analysis. Both the sociology of work and theories of practice have struggled to account for the ambiguity and ambivalence that grudging acts entail. Grudging acts are also under-explored in Higher Education contexts. This is despite the fact much research has shown students can have complex and ambivalent relationships with their studies (Mann, 2000, 2001). Bottero (2022)'s sociology of grudging acts—we argue—has considerable utility for framing and interpreting aspects of student experience in Higher Education. Before proceeding though, it is important to introduce grudging acts and to offer some explanation of their parameters and attributes.

For Bottero (2022: 2), tasks become 'grudging acts when we feel we *must* undertake them'. Grudging acts may (or may not) have inherently unpleasant qualities. They *become* grudging because of our orientation towards them and the relational features that surround them. Understanding grudgingness, then, involves some consideration of the social properties that surround acts and influence actors' interpretations of them. Much of this is to do with experience. The experience of reading a complicated text, for instance, might be pleasurable for readers, if they practice this in their own time, for their own purposes. However, as Mann (2000)'s study of student reading attests, the same act may be experienced more grudgingly if it is undertaken under duress, for the purpose of assessment (Mann, 2000). In Higher Education contexts, grudging acts can conceivably arise from a wide range of circumstances and relationships. For example, grudging acts might stem from the distribution of tasks in unequal relationships: like the need to carry other team members in group work projects (Bourner et al., 2001). They might arise from actors' commitments to broader purposes that involve actions deemed tiresome: like studying for an exam as a 'means to an end' (Lukes & McConnell, 2018). They might arise from the imposition of tasks (or standards) in unequal relationships of power: like the stifling of student creativity in formalised assessment practices (Mann, 2001). Or, they might arise from normative expectations and notions of accountability: like the need to read material thoroughly to adhere to expectations of being a 'good student' (Mann, 2000). In any case, grudging acts occur when a student's orientation towards a task lacks the positive disposition and affect associated with doing something freely and wilfully.

In the context of academic reading, we think that attending to grudging acts is important for at least three reasons. First, if we are attuned to them, student accounts of academic reading as grudging are ubiquitous (Kimberley & Thursby, 2020; St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018; Mann, 2000). Most educators will be at least somewhat aware of the reading difficulties that Higher Education students can face. This, we suggest, is itself a good reason to notice and examine the ambivalent dynamics of student reading experience. Second, *understanding* student accounts of reading as a grudging act has the potential to extend what is known about the practice of academic reading itself. As Bottero (2022: 12) argued, addressing 'how practices work' requires a focus on the variable nature of commitment because 'people's motivation and affect is consequential for [their] recruitment into practices and [their] performances within them'. Studies in Higher Education have offered excellent examples of *how* students read (Fine et al., 2021). Yet, the conceptual work underpinning student reading *experience* remains somewhat limited. Finally, interpreting how and why acts become grudging allows us to make sociological connections between students' individual accounts and the broader systems and practices that influence them. Interrogating grudging acts then, in the context of academic reading, has the potential to extend what is known about student experience and raise important questions for educational practice.

It is important to address the subject however with a level of temperance. In her work, Bottero (2022) has signalled the danger of conflating grudging accounts with the reactive

'impetus to change'. 'When assessing the implications of grudging acts it is important not to overstate the degree of control that people have' (Bottero, 2022: 4). Both students and educators operate within constraints, and these conditions are shot through with asymmetries of power and resource. Witnessing and analysing grudging acts, then, does not necessarily lead straightforwardly to a roadmap of systemic or behavioural solutions. The accounts we share in this article suggest that undergraduate students routinely manage a range of reading challenges and persevere (sometimes grudgingly), despite the imposition of barriers that impede their practice. Understanding grudgingness in Higher Education, then, also means paying attention to the conditions that limit students' *and* educators' freedoms and capabilities. To this end, we have sought to develop recommendations for educational practice that are both measured and cognisant of the constraints that students and educators can face. The next section introduces the study and the details of our reflexive thematic analysis.

The study

Our research design was influenced by a pragmatic motivation to understand (i) how students feel about academic reading and (ii) how educators can support students with the reading that they ask them to do. Philosophically, pragmatism has emphasised the salience of human experience. Contributors like Dewey (1922/2008) have modelled experience as an interplay between beliefs and actions. From Dewey's standpoint, our experiences—*as agents who actively interpret our worlds*—are characterised by an interplay between emotions, beliefs and actions (Morgan, 2014). Our actions—what we choose to do in a given situation—are informed by our beliefs (what we know) and our emotions (how we feel). In turn, what we do influences what we know (our beliefs) and how we feel (our emotions). In the present inquiry, these principles focused our attention on the interplay between students' reading practices and their experiences of academic reading in terms of motivation and affect (grudgingness). Pragmatism, as a paradigm for research, is also insistent on treating research as a human experience that is based on the beliefs and actions of actual researchers (Morgan, 2014: 1051). This is aligned with our reflexive, interpretive approach, alongside our ethical commitment to understand students' experiences and 'struggle together' to generate more inclusive and supporting reading environments (Noddings, 2013: 15).

Participants, sampling and recruitment

All data were collected between October 2021 and April 2022. Students in the second year of their undergraduate degree, across a Social Sciences Faculty at one UK university, were contacted via email with information about the study. We purposefully recruited students in their second year of study to explore both synchronous and retrospective accounts of reading, at different points in their degree programmes (Neale, 2019). All students were offered a modest £10 gift voucher to participate. Those who 'opted in' were provided with further information about the study and invited to join a remote group interview, alongside subjectively rating their experience of academic reading difficulty on a scale of 1–10 (where 10 was most difficult).

We recruited 30 undergraduate students in total spanning 10 disciplines: Economics [$n=3$], Education [$n=3$], Law [$n=3$], Management [$n=4$], Politics [$n=6$], Sociology

[$n=3$], Urban Studies [$n=3$], Geography [$n=2$], Journalism [$n=2$] and Research Methods [$n=1$]. All but one ($n=29$) submitted a self-rated score of academic reading difficulty. These scores ranged from '3' to '9' and the average was '6.5'. Though this is a crude measure of reading experience, it offers some indication that selection bias did *not* influence the sample to the extent that all participants found reading 'extremely difficult'. Instead, the results show that our sample encompassed a range of academic reading experiences and that most found reading somewhat difficult. A rough indication of reading proficiency can also be gathered from external measures, like programme entry requirements. UK A-level entry requirements ranged across the programmes in our sample from 'ABB' to 'AAA'. This is equivalent to International Baccalaureate scores of between 33 and 36 points. Programme entry requirements for non-native English language speakers also included International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores, ranging from 6.5 to 7.0, with scores of no less than 6.0 in all listening, reading, writing and speaking components. Hence, though reading proficiency ranged across the sample, this study engaged students that were enrolled on highly selective programmes, with high levels of English reading and writing proficiency.

Of the 30 student participants, 13 identified as male, 16 identified as female, and one identified as non-binary. Twenty-one participants identified as White British and nine identified otherwise as Chinese ($n=4$), Indian ($n=2$), Pakistani ($n=1$), Black African ($n=1$) and Nigerian ($n=1$). This study received full ethics clearance from the ethics review board at the host institution. To protect the identity of participants all identifiers appear as pseudonyms.

Research methods

Remote (online) group interviews were the primary method for the study. Our group interviews were organised by discipline and conducted by the lead author (Mason), via the video-communication service Google Meets. All students were familiar with this platform because of the widespread shift towards technology enhanced learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tang et al., 2020). Willemsen et al. (2022) have described online group interviews as an excellent alternative to face-to-face methods, providing respondents are able to access it. In line with their recommendations, we ensured that our group interviews were (i) commensurate with the amount of time students were used to spending on remote learning activities (one hour) and (ii) organised into groups smaller than the six to eight participants usually recommended for focus groups (Ritchie et al., 2013). Our interviews began with an elicitation activity. Here, students were invited to reflect on their experiences of academic reading and the reading challenges they encountered. Students then typed written reflections synchronously onto a shared interactive whiteboard (see Fig. 1). These comments formed the basis of an initial discussion, followed by a semi-structured group interview schedule featuring questions about student reading experiences, motivations, supports and practices (see 'Appendix'). In the single case where only one student was available to participate, the same schedule was used to structure the interview, but the group elicitation activity was not undertaken.

Data analysis

All data were transcribed in full and analysed thematically using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. Our analytical process followed the steps recommended by Braun

Fig. 1 Jamboard elicitation activity. This figure presents an anonymised Jamboard activity, generated as part of the study. The Jamboard displays several our student participants' open text box responses. These entries each respond to the following prompts: (i) How do you experience academic reading? (ii) What kinds of reading challenges do you encounter?

& Clarke (2022), including a thorough reading of the transcripts, data coding and theme development. We used theoretical (deductive) and data-driven (inductive) coding to explore the transcripts and document regularities that addressed our research questions *and* illustrated other, unanticipated areas of interest. For example, based on our reading of prior literature, we deductively coded for student reflections on 'reading and time' (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018). However, our analysis also featured unanticipated regularities like 'reading competitiveness'. These codes formed the basis of a more iterative and reflexive process of theme development, where coded regularities were considered with reference to each other, and the extant literature. It is this process that led us to Bottero (2022)'s sociology of *grudging acts*. Analytically, Bottero (2022)'s work also enhanced our interpretation of the data, to the extent that it focused our attention on the interactions between motivations, experiences and broader conditions in student accounts. The findings presented in this article report what might be characterised as 'sub-themes' under the dominant analytical theme—*academic reading as a grudging act* (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These sub-themes represent points of coherence between Bottero (2022)'s work and the reading experiences expressed by our sample. They are categorised as follows: (i) academic reading as 'a struggle'; (ii) academic reading as 'a chore'; and (iii) academic reading as 'pointless'. The next section offers a brief reflection before our thematic findings are presented in turn.

Confessional narratives and hopes for change

Independent learning is a key feature of university education (Hockings et al., 2017). Academic reading is a substantial component of this work. Yet, for many of our students, this was the first opportunity they had been given at university to reflect explicitly and openly about the *experience* (not the content) of academic reading, with staff. The students we spoke to told us they derived some enjoyment from reading. They enjoyed the 'eureka'

feeling associated with locating relevant texts. They also felt rewarded when their understandings of texts were confirmed, reinforced and embedded in learning and teaching contexts. However, our conversations also prompted what felt like *confessional narratives* about students' reading difficulties, prompted by the opportunity to speak safely and openly about their experiences at university. Though all our students had access to some optional study skills support (at the level of personal tuition and more centralised academic skills guidance) uptake varied considerably, and our students routinely struggled with impenetrable academic language, the volume of assigned reading and the absence of clear guidance around *what* to read and *how* to read it. These experiences were not trivial. Students described feeling 'paralyzed', 'deflated', 'anxious', 'stressed', 'drained', 'disengaged' and 'alone' by the reading difficulties they encountered.

Several authors have already expressed the importance of dedicating time with students to explore how to approach, understand and analyse academic texts (Afdal et al., 2022; MacMillan, 2014; Wohl & Fine, 2017). However, the relief our students expressed in sharing their accounts also signalled to us the value of creating time and space to reflect *with* students on (i) the experience of academic reading and (ii) the expectations that might get taken for granted in Higher Education contexts. As Roberts & Roberts (2008) have acknowledged, reading is a complex process that educators spend surprisingly little time thinking about. Our students hoped, as a result of this work, that future cohorts would benefit from more discussion around academic reading. They hoped their narratives might be used to familiarise reading difficulty, so that staff might address it more explicitly and students might 'know that they are not alone' (Beth, Sociology). Beyond this, our students hoped to see more support with reading for future cohorts.

Academic reading as 'a struggle'

To 'struggle' with something, is to make efforts to persist, despite experiencing difficulty. Academic language was a key difficulty for the students in our sample. Academic reading is often complex, and when students lacked prior knowledge of specialist terms (or the disciplinary contexts in which they were referenced), this could influence their capacity and propensity to read. Academic jargon made reading feel less accessible to students and this experience impacted their confidence and motivation to read. The following exchange between three Education students is illustrative:

> Jess: If I don't understand the words in the first paragraph, how am I going to understand the whole thing, let alone know what I'm supposed to take from it?
> Emilia: I agree with Jess with that one. I feel like it's quite overwhelming when you don't really understand the words and then you've got to read a whole text on it.
> Hannah: I'm the same. We had a reading last week for one of our modules and literally within the first, about halfway through the introduction… I'd run out of space to write down definitions of these huge words that I had no idea what they meant.

Students' accounts of reading were often emotively framed in terms of 'struggle'. Meera, a Law student, described the process of 'Googling each individual word and then trying to put a sentence together'. Daniel, a Politics student, described his experience of lacking the 'stamina' to complete readings before 'feeling saturated'. Our students also described the need to manage their emotions in order to 'battle' through academic content. These experiences were consistent with Kimberley & Thursby (2020)'s work, which

found Higher Education students' emotional reactions to reading could include 'boredom', 'annoyance' and 'stress'. As Daniel, a student in our study, put it:

> When language gets tough it's annoying. I mean, I want to battle through it, I'm not one to sit there and feel sorry for myself [pause] but it is annoying.

Accounts of feeling 'annoyed', 'frustrated' and 'daunted' by academic reading were widespread across our sample. These experiences signalled an orientation towards reading that was both grudging and affected by the difficulty of working with academic texts (Bottero, 2022). That the experience of reading was so often described in terms of combat ('battle'/'struggle') is also something that should be taken seriously. Research in secondary education has demonstrated that motivation is an important predictor of reading comprehension (Becker et al., 2010). Studies have also shown that students who enjoy their reading are more likely to understand what they have read (Rogiers et al., 2020). Conversely, when reading tasks generate anxiety, because they are experienced as being too difficult, comprehension can be impaired (Zaccoletti et al., 2020). Emotional responses to academic texts, as such, can have concrete impacts on students' ability to read actively, for understanding.

Barriers of language and terminology were also exacerbated for those studying in a second language and/or experiencing neurodiversity or other differences in ability. Qianfan, an Urban Studies student from China, explained that reading was disproportionately time consuming for her 'because English is not my mother tongue'. Indeed, all the students in our sample who spoke English as an additional language (EAL) reported compounding difficulties like (i) accessing (sometimes poorly) translated materials, (ii) comparing translated texts with English texts, and (iii) making sense of complex sentence structures. Kate, a Journalism student shared her experience of chronic headaches, explaining that she had to 'break up [her] reading into tiny bits, which takes hours' and Marcus, a Sociology student, explained that the lack of instruction on *how to read* or *what educators are looking for* can be particularly challenging for 'people on the spectrum [who] struggle to understand things they haven't experienced or seen before'. Hence, whilst the challenges of reading and understanding academic texts were widespread, they were particularly acute for those already experiencing educational disadvantages. Presenting further guidance on how to approach assigned readings and what to take from them has the potential, therefore, to generate more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Academic reading as 'a chore'

Motivation is an important driver for academic reading (Becker et al., 2010). The impetus to read can inform how texts are selected and approached. What and why students read is also influenced by the demands that are placed upon them. Whilst some of our students reported reading proactively (for enjoyment and understanding), most described academic reading more grudgingly as 'work' undertaken to complete a high volume of assessments. Mann (2000) has offered a useful account of the distinctions students can make between reading for work and reading for pleasure. For the literacy students in her study, it was the normative dimension of reading texts (set by other people) *for the purpose of assessment* that made academic reading feel like 'work'. The emotive dimensions of this work were captured neatly by Ralph, a politics student in our study:

> I think the constant effort of trying to just limp over the next [assessment] finish line means that you can't, well I can't look past the next two steps or something. You get no sense of the big picture and it kind of creates a sense of numbness because you just never get any gratification, it's just that plodding on … It feels a little bit like me versus the academic machine at the minute. To a certain extent I love learning. I enjoy the process of gaining and analysing information … so, I don't want to learn less, but then at the same time it seems like it's incompatible with being able to do it and enjoy it …You don't want to do any less but you also don't feel able to keep doing what you're doing.

Ralph described a complex and ambivalent relationship with academic reading. Though it was clear, from his account, that he enjoyed the process of learning, the experience of reading for successive assessments (or 'finish lines') undermined this enjoyment. Ralph's reference to the 'big picture' also suggests that the volume and pace of reading undermined his ability to make sense of the connections between texts (MacMillan, 2014). As philosophers of interpretation have explained, the realm of understanding resides in the connections between the particular and the general (Mason & May, 2019). When these connections cannot be met, it is difficult to justify understanding. Hence, in the absence of enjoyment, Ralph's references to 'numbness' and 'plodding on' depict an approach to reading that is grudging and, in the end, feels 'incompatible' with the pursuit of understanding. The irony here, as with Mann (2000)'s students, is that the conditions of reading (i) assigned in large volumes *and* (ii) for the purposes of assessment, impacted Ralph's orientation towards it in ways that undermined the ultimate goal; understanding.

The volume of weekly reading varied across our students' accounts from one article to six book chapters, per module.[1] However, the *accumulation of reading across modules* left all students feeling like they were struggling to keep up. These experiences had concrete implications for practice. Bottero (2022) has explained that, when actions become grudging, our attention towards them can shift, from an orientation focused on the act itself, to an orientation focused on the completion of the act, for proficiencies sake. Grudging acts are the things we want to 'get out of the way' as quickly and painlessly as possible. We observed a similar dynamic in our participants' accounts. April, a Geography student, acknowledged that the need to read for multiple assessments reinforced the practice of mining information and 'looking for quotes'. Meera (a Law student) described her use of the search function to locate the relevant parts of texts and Rowan (an Economics student) described his reading as 'disposable' admitting that he could rarely recall any of the content he had engaged in this manner. Hence, for our students, the practice of academic reading was often characterised by a strategic disposition to extract just enough information to deliver assessments, even though they knew this was not conducive to understanding.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that these accounts were never entirely one-dimensional in their exposition. Where grudging adjectives were used, they were also often juxtaposed by examples of when and how academic reading felt less like a 'chore'. The following example from Asha, a Journalism student, is instructive:

> I experience academic reading as a bit of a chore, a type of chore sometimes. But, other times as a helpful tool. So academic reading can be quite challenging – espe-

[1] The structure of academic programmes varies within and across HE institutions. The students in this sample (all of whom studied full time) were enrolled on between three and four modules per semester (amounting to six to seven modules per academic year).

> cially if it's like a topic you're just learning because it's part of your degree; it's not something that you particularly find interesting. That's why I list it as a chore. [But] if it's a topic that you find interesting just by itself and you discovered it through working [if] it's just a topic that really piques your interest … Like, an example for me was 'compassion fatigue', I found it very interesting because it's very modern and very on trend. When I was writing the paper about that, I also found that the more I read into it, whether it was on the slides that were given or lectures or other aspects of other reading material, I found it very interesting.

Asha's reflection emphasises agency (the personal discovery of a topic) and interest (in the topic) to depict a more wilful—less grudging—reading encounter. Understanding how and why student motivations towards reading can shift is important. This is because 'people's motivation and affect is consequential for [their] recruitment into practices' (Bottero, 2022: 12). Making sense of students' reading experiences also means understanding their opinions of (i) the practice itself and (ii) their own priorities in relation to it (Mann, 2000). For Asha (and Ralph), academic reading was experienced as 'a chore' when there was (i) too much of it, (ii) it was practiced solely for the purpose of assessment and (iii) it was not deemed valuable, beyond the context of assessment. Conversely, key motivators included agency, personal investment and the arrival of understanding. How then might educators support students towards these more positive orientations? Addressing that question requires some further analysis of when students are at their least engaged.

Academic reading as 'pointless'

One of the findings in our study presents as something of a paradox. Though the purpose of reading for assessment can impact negatively on students' orientation towards it, reading was also experienced grudgingly when it was not structured or directed towards a specific end (like an assessment). It is not enough then, to argue that the imposition of assessments alone is what compels a grudging orientation. Unpacking this problem adds a further dimension to our analysis. For some of the students in our study assessments did constitute a useful motivation to read. Asha's more positive account, for example, was about reading *for assessment.* However, beyond the *volume* of assessments (which impacted students' reading capacity) many of the students in our study struggled with the absence of clear guidance around *what* to read and *how* to read it. Beth, a Sociology student, said:

> It felt like, at the beginning of university, we were expected to just immediately understand how to approach all these different really complicated texts. We were never really, I don't know, shown or told by lecturers or other students that this will take practice.

Our students felt the least engaged—and the most grudging—when the purpose of assigned reading was not clear. They wanted to know (i) why they were being set readings (ii) how they should approach those readings and (iii) what they should seek to take from them. They also sought a clear link between the reading they were being assigned and the module assessment or content. Without this, students reported that their reading felt 'pointless' and, as Bottero's sociology of grudgingness attests, when reading felt 'pointless' they were less motivated to do it. Emily (an Education student) told us she knew 'people who have… literally just stopped [reading] because it felt like it was pointless'. Jess and Hannah

(two Education students) explained how demotivating it could feel to persevere with reading and find that it was not discussed in subsequent learning and teaching encounters.

> Jess: It can feel pointless when you've made a real effort and you've persevered, and you've done the reading and then you get to the lecture and it's not mentioned at all
> Hannah: That's exactly what I was going to say, Jess!
> Jess: I feel like I've invested all this time and concentration and you didn't even refer to it so no don't even know why we had to read it

Emily, Jess and Hannah all describe something of a negative feedback loop between the effort expended upon academic reading and the acknowledgment of that reading in class. The key message here is that, though *realistically* some assigned reading is always likely to be experienced grudgingly by students (we cannot *all* like *everything*), the strength of this orientation might be mitigated if that reading is appropriately justified, scaffolded and addressed within the learning and teaching contexts. Grudging acts, as Bottero (2022) put it, can be accepted if they are part of a wider set of activities, or purposes to which we are committed. An important puzzle for educators, then, is how to more clearly express the wider purpose of assigned readings, whilst also supporting students to do them. At this point, we turn to some recommendations for educational practice.

Five recommendations for educational practice

Several authors have begun to map the implications of reading scholarship for learning and teaching practice. Afdal et al. (2022) have expressed the importance of engaging students in learning how to *approach*, *understand* and *communicate* about academic texts. They advocate the practice of scaffolding student reading with learning resources, like reading templates. Tomasek (2009) has offered a comprehensive list of reading prompts to support more active and inclusive engagement with academic reading. Wohl & Fine (2017b) have argued for the importance of knowing when to read in detail and when to skim. Their earlier article on *Textwork in Higher Education* also offered a draft reading syllabus to introduce reading and notetaking skills (Wohl & Fine, 2017a). MacMillan (2014) has demonstrated the value of creating time and freedom to read deeply, considering the connections between texts, and Nguyen & Henderson (2020) have noted the value of involving students in text selection (including non-academic texts) to boost personal investment, interest, and engagement with academic reading.

These outputs each offer useful and practical suggestions for educators—we encourage readers to access them in full. However, our analysis also generated recommendations that extend these outputs, particularly in terms of *moderating*, *contextualizing* and *justifying* the reading that educators assign. Recognising that both students *and* educators operate within constraints we have sought to develop suggests that reflect our students' concerns directly but can also be piloted by educators with relative ease.

Focus on the fundamentals It is easy to forget what it is like not to know things. Our respondents hoped that '… staff and lecturers could be more … understanding [about] how basic some people's first grappling with a topic or subject is' (Fraser, Economics). For first year students particularly, assumed knowledge in the classroom could leave even introductory texts feeling inaccessible. Opinions on what counts as accessible may differ substantially between staff and students. To address this barrier, our students recommended an

extended focus on 'absolute basics' in the classroom, in order to (i) avoid assumed knowledge and (ii) present a better foundation for understanding. This could include dedicating time within introductory units to outline key concepts and/or providing glossaries in module handbooks.

Be realistic about the volume of assigned texts Students are more likely to engage deeply with a *realistic volume of core reading*. As educators, it is worth remembering how much material we (realistically) read in a week, whilst acknowledging that we can almost certainly do this more efficiently than our undergraduate students. It is also important to acknowledge that reading times may differ substantially for those experiencing educational disadvantages, like language barriers or other differences in ability. Taking a *programme level approach* to reading could help staff to avoid over subscribing academic reading across modules. Our students expressed a preference for reading lists that were structured and annotated with a clear *prioritisation* and *justification* of texts. What readings are essential, and why?

Explain why you are assigning texts Our students sought a clear rationale for the readings they had been assigned. As Fraser put it '… it always tends to be at the end of lectures and seminars that [lecturers] suggest these pieces [of reading], there's never much guidance given at the time …. they're just plonked onto a screen'. Without a clear rationale for the readings that are being set, students found it more difficult to commit their time and effort to the task. Adding a brief annotation to reading lists, presenting a clear justification for assigned texts, could begin to address this issue. Equally, committing a few minutes during lectures to explain *why* readings had been assigned and *how* they will feature in the following week could substantially improve student experiences and motivations.

Prioritise access (and diversify) The solution to problems of access is relatively simple—do not assign readings that students cannot access. Our students' active learning practices also extended far beyond the conventions of reading book chapters and journal articles. Module convenors might consider responding to this by diversifying the content of preparatory materials (including videos and podcasts, for instance). Benson (2022) has offered some useful pedagogical reflections on the introduction of podcasts to teaching in sociology.

Scaffold student reading In educational theory, 'scaffolding' refers to the process by which educators help students to solve problems, or complete tasks, more fully than they could have done otherwise (Clarke & Graves, 2005). Our students almost all sought guidance on *how* to approach their reading and *what* to take from it. Acting on this need means acknowledging that academic reading itself is a complex skill and equipping students with the pedagogical tools they need to approach it. Examples of good practice included (i) written prompts directing students to specific features of assigned texts, (ii) providing questions for students to answer with the text and (iii) credit-bearing portfolio assessments, instructing students to provide short summaries of assigned readings.

Conclusion

This article has presented student accounts of academic reading as a *grudging act*. We have argued that bringing Bottero (2022)'s sociology of grudgingness into conversation with the Higher Education literature on student reading experience is useful for at least three reasons. First, student accounts of academic reading as grudging are ubiquitous. It is not at all uncommon for students to suggest that they do not enjoy their reading, or for students to demonstrate this through their practice (Andrianatos, 2019). Second, *understanding* student accounts of reading as a grudging act enables us to extend what is known about the practice of academic reading itself. Finally, interpreting how and why acts become grudging allows us to make clearer connections between students' experiences and the broader systems and practices that influence them. This allows educators to think differently about what they can do to (i) support students with their reading and ultimately (ii) to create more inclusive and equitable learning and teaching environments.

Acts become grudging when our orientation towards them changes. Though the students in this study enjoyed the experience of learning, we have shown that the demands and conditions of their programmes were not always conducive to that aim. Reading became grudging when (i) it was difficult to engage with, (ii) students felt like there was too much of it, (iii) they did not have the time to do it, (iv) they were unsure why it had been assigned and (v) they did not know how to approach it, or what to take from it. These experiences all generated emotional responses ranging from stress to disaffection. Though they were widespread, our data also suggest that they were felt disproportionately by those already experiencing educational disadvantages, like language barriers or other differences in ability. EAL students in particular reported the compounding challenges of interpreting complex material in a second language, via translated texts, or as a combination of both. These experiences all point to the importance of offering further support for students reading practices and potentially reducing the amount of reading that we ask students to do. If you want students to read more, consider asking them to read less.

It is important to acknowledge that our data were collected during the 2021–2022 academic year and that we asked students to reflect on their educational experiences during their first years (2020–2021) and second years (2021–2022) of study. It is likely, therefore, that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic—including increased stress and periods of virtual instruction—will have influenced these students' orientations towards academic reading. However, our findings also cohere with several other empirical studies, conducted at different timeframes and across different national contexts (Baker et al., 2019; Kimberley & Thursby, 2020; Mann, 2000; Muhammad, 2020; Roberts & Roberts, 2008). It is unlikely, therefore, that the experiences shared by the students in our sample can be reduced to the educational and emotionally disruptive effects of the Covid-19 pandemic alone.

The recommendations that we have offered in this article are not exhaustive, and we suggest that they are read alongside the other important contributions to educational practice referenced above. However, the students in our sample were clear that *moderating, contextualizing* and *justifying* the reading that educators assign would support their engagement with reading and make reading feel less 'grudging' and more rewarding/accessible. Not only are these interventions straightforward (and largely possible within the context of constraints that educators face), they are also likely to support students in a way that is universal and conducive to creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments. Reading difficulty is a common experience amongst Higher Education students, but

it is not insignificant. We hope—with our participants—that this work might go some way towards familiarizing that difficulty and prompting educators to reflect on what they can do to make reading more accessible and less of a grudge! Future research might apply Bottero (2022)'s sociology of grudgingness to other aspects of Higher Education contexts. It might also extend our work by focusing on the interrelationship between reading and writing (Lockhart & Soliday, 2016) or by piloting some of the suggestions we have offered and evaluating the impact on students' reading experiences.

Appendix. Group interview schedule

Opening activity: Jamboard (0–10 min)

- How do you experience academic reading?
- What kinds of reading challenges do you encounter?

Reflective discussion, based initially on Jamboard responses (10–20 min)

Additional questions and prompts to cover (25–50 min)

Experiences and motivations:

- Can you tell me about the different *motivations* you have for reading in general (reading of any kind)? *What* and *why* do you read?
- Can you tell me about the different *motivations* you have for reading academic material? Why do you read?
- What *obstacles* might prevent you from reading?
- Is anybody willing to share a *story* about academic reading?
- How would you *describe* the experience of academic reading within your student journey?
- How—if at all—has your experience of academic reading *changed over time*? What's different? What's consistent?

Reading confidence and expectations:

- What kind of *expectations*—with reference to understanding/memory—do you set yourself when you are approaching an academic text?
    - To what extent are you able to meet these expectations?
    - What do you feel is expected of you? Is it reasonable?
- How, if at all, does your experience with *language* impact upon your experience and motivation for approaching academic content?

Reading practices:

- How do you *manage your reading*?
    - What formats do you like to use (digitised vs physical texts)?
    - What do you do whilst reading (what techniques do you use to help you read)?
    - Where do you do your reading?
    - What technologies accompany your reading and how (i.e. Google? Translation software?)
    - What do you do with recommendations for readings from reading lists? How do you decide what to follow up and engage with and at what levels?

Reading supports:

- Are you aware of any reading support within your department/university?
- Do you access any reading supports within your department/university?
- What are the top three reading tips that you would offer an incoming student?
- What do you think could be done to improve the support that is available to students with respect to reading?

Closing questions:

- What makes a good reader?
- Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you consider important?
- What would you like us to do with your comments/stories?

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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