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Volume 17

Issue 2 *Becoming Well Read: Charting the complexities of academic reading and navigating the reading journeys of undergraduate and postgraduate students*

Article 10

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2020

## Book Review: Reading at University: How to Improve Your Focus and Be More Critical. Jamie Q Roberts and Caitlin Hamilton

Georgina Spencer

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**Reading at University: How to Improve Your Focus and Be More Critical.**

**Jamie Q Roberts and Caitlin Hamilton.**

**London, Red Globe Press, 2020.**

**181 pages.**

**£11.99 (Ebook), £13.99 (Paperback).**

**ISBN: 978-1-352-00916-3.**

Writing this review during the United Kingdom's COVID-19 lockdown, I am reminded of George Orwell's essay 'Confessions of a Book Reviewer', "In a cold but stuffy bed-sitting room littered with cigarette ends and half-empty cups of tea, a man in a moth-eaten dressing-gown sits at a rickety table". Although neither male nor a smoker, but certainly a tea drinker in need of a new dressing gown, what better time to read about reading? The terminology 'reading' for a degree has been replaced in everyday speech by 'studying', yet this archaic usage of reading put the importance of this activity front and centre of what was expected of students for success at university. While this focus in the everyday language has been removed, the skills of reading are no less vital to student success. *Reading at University* aims to dispel assumptions around academic reading and help students become more critical and productive in their reading. It is another addition to the study skills shelf and there is a lot of competition out there, so it really needs to be offering something different to compete.

"It's not about speed reading ... It's about being an active, purposeful reader" are the opening headings of the book, clearly setting out its stall. The book aims to equip students with effective reading strategies they will need, not only to prepare and complete assessments but to navigate, evaluate and understand the plethora of reading materials they will need to tackle during their time at university. The authors are Jamie Roberts (Learning Advisor), and Caitlin Hamilton (Research Associate), from the University of New South Wales, Australia. The book draws on their experience of working with students at different levels and the challenges they face. There is a real empathy with the struggles and difficulties students encounter once they arrive in higher education, with some bringing a limited understanding of what to do with the reading lists and assessments they receive. The aim of this book is not simply to be useful to those students new to higher education, but also aims to enhance the productivity and criticality of undergraduates, postgraduates and beyond. That is quite an undertaking, but who could argue that their reading skills could not be improved in some way?

*Reading at University* opens with a useful introduction on how the book is organised and when you might need to dip into the different sections. This is particularly helpful as there is no assumed knowledge, but a recognition that the reader may have a specific need they wish to address. The rest of the book is in two parts; part one is aimed at what you need to know or do before you start reading. Yes, that is right, the first five chapters are given over to what you need to do before you read anything at all. I would argue that chapters 1 to 4 are particularly strong, covering everything from marking criteria to the purpose of universities. Beginning with a chapter on the common assumptions around reading at university, this part also offers a solid grounding in information literacy skills. Perhaps it is because I started my career in academic libraries that this element particularly appealed to me. Flashbacks to working with students who could not tell the difference between a book or journal reference highlighted how helpful this section could be for many undergraduates. There is also a section explaining the basics of the academic publishing process, including an exploration of peer-review and how you assess the authority of sources. While the aim of the book may be to improve reading at university, part one attempts to place the importance of

purposeful reading into the wider cultural context of universities. It both poses and answers the question of ‘why bother?’, guiding the reader to see how improving their approach to reading fits into a wider academic context and ultimately, academic success.

The holistic approach to reading laid out in part one sets the tone for the more practical advice provided in part two. I suspect many readers will head straight to these sections depending on their needs, but there are good links back to the more theoretical aspects of part one, should the reader need a broader understanding of the whys of academic reading. The authors’ understanding of the student experience of reading continues to come out strongly here too. The initial chapter covers note-taking and, throughout part two, there is an exploration of when and how to read for depth, breadth, or to simply get a feel for what a text may be saying. There are activities in each section to give readers time to explore the ideas and practice their reading skills, with each chapter covering different techniques that may be needed depending on the context of the reading.

The authors continually return to their fundamental point that for reading to be useful, it must be purposeful. The activities in these chapters could be easily used as given or adapted by staff looking to develop their students’ skills. One element of reading at university that is often missed by students is the need to read broadly for a general understanding of their field of study. It is easy for students to focus on the set readings or think only of their assessments, but throughout the book, the authors emphasise that in order to understand the current topic you need to read around your subject area. Explaining the different purposes of reading, and knowing what your purpose is, allows for an explanation of skim reading vs reading in-depth, as well as reading critically. This vital understanding of the rules of the academic reading ‘game’ is still something many students stumble upon or simply never master. I am sure I would have saved many hours as an undergraduate if someone had guided me to some of these practical approaches to tackling my reading list.

The challenge for writing any study guide for higher education is addressing the disciplinary differences across a whole university. While these differences may be real or perceived, they are nonetheless at the core of disciplinary identity. There is certainly an effort throughout the text to compare and contrast how approaches to reading and sources may differ between subjects, in particular between the sciences and social sciences/humanities. The examples and activities in part two draw from different subject areas, illustrating that their approach can still be applied successfully. It is possible that students of certain fields with more specialist sources of reading may struggle to make the links between the examples and their own studies. I would argue the approaches are applicable across subject areas, but a student with less experience in their subject may need support to make that leap.

This book is successful in tackling assumptions that many students have about reading at university, but it made me wonder about the assumptions that we hold as teaching staff about their ability to read successfully. The amount of sources students are expected to sift through is ever-growing and they often lack the basic skills to do this productively and efficiently. Despite working and studying in universities for 25 years, there were still new concepts and techniques to learn from this book. Without some basic understanding of how to approach the sources they are faced with, many students will not reach the levels of success they are capable of. If we want students to succeed, how do we ensure that they have opportunities to develop these vital skills? I was also struck by the aim that students could start to see themselves not simply as observers of their subject, but members of their field of study, not simply visitors but fellow travellers. I would recommend this book to anyone working with students looking to improve their study skills and you may even pick up some ideas for yourself.