A Year of Reading

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By: Jennifer Babcock, Associate Professor of Law, Golden Gate University School of Law

Professor Helen Kang, my colleague and the director of the Environmental Law and Justice Clinic at Golden Gate Law, frequently tells students that to improve their writing, they need to read more. I’ve heard her say this many times. I believe in this message – it’s a widely supported idea – and I’ve adopted the message, sharing it with my own students regularly.

But did I follow it? Not really. My reading was sporadic and without reflection. My reading habits were more like everyone else’s. According to a 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center, the median
American reads four books (in whole or in part) per year. Last January, after a dinner with Professor Kang and two other colleagues, in which everyone talked of recent books they’d read, I endeavored to prioritize reading.

I started reading immediately and kept track. I read daily, making use of my long train commute. Having naturally gravitated to non-fiction in the past, I introduced variety by alternating fiction and non-fiction books. I selected books on all manner of personal and professional interests. I worked through my pre-existing book pile at home. If a title was referenced on a professional listserv, I’d find it and read it. If an author discussed her new novel on an evening talk show, I’d purchase it and place in the cue.

By the end of 2018, I had read 65 books. The results of my project were good in every way. A significant outcome was sharing the benefits of reading with my students – whether improved writing or something else like expanded knowledge, increased vocabulary, or reduced stress.

**So, what did a year of reading do for me as a teacher?** The following are key takeaways and how they impacted my teaching.

**I gained credibility in compelling students to read.** Winning buy-in from students that reading is important was much easier when I demonstrated that I read a lot myself. By far the best outcome of my increased reading was the credibility gained by being a person who practices what she teaches. Upon telling my incoming first-year students about my reading goal, their curiosity was struck. Throughout the term, they asked: How many titles
had I read? What title was my favorite? What did I recommend for their winter break reading? It seemed they were internalizing the merits of reading.

**I had extra support for the principles I taught.** The writing and research skills I teach in my course are thoroughly covered in textbooks and other course tools. Last year, I also brought my extra reading into the classroom. Anytime my reading overlapped with a subject covered in class, I mentioned it. For example, when students created personalized checklists for their memo assignment, I pointed to the medical field’s use of checklists described by Atul Gawande in *Checklist Manifesto*. The extra support substantiated skills students were learning and served to cast our course work in additional ways with the effects of making the “why” and the “how” of the course work more meaningful and more reachable.

**I acquired an entry point of discussion for tough topics with my students.** Law school is a challenging undertaking for anyone. Many of my students are minorities and/or first-generation college graduates. As such, they often grapple with circumstances that are not readily apparent or easy to broach, such as imposter syndrome and feeling like they are not fitting in. I read books about these topics and increased my knowledge and vocabulary about these issues. In individual conversations, I used my new vocabulary to help students identify circumstances that were making law school extra challenging for them. Just having the books around my office supplied an entry point for important conversations.
I had more things to talk about with more people.
Being able to talk about a variety of topics with other people is helpful in almost any profession. This is true for new attorneys, at a minimum, when networking for employment or business development. I shared with students, especially those who self-identify as introverted, that increasing my reading made an enormous contribution to my conversations with others. I had few conversations in which one or more of the books I'd read did not intersect with the discussion or inform my comments. Reading more made all my conversations better.

These takeaways strengthened my teaching and made prioritizing reading worthwhile. Moreover, other outcomes formed benefits students could appreciate. Reading decluttered my brain at the end of a work day. It served as an escape during the noisy, stressful commute period. My reading pace increased. It felt great to donate lots of books to the Little Free Library on my street and share my project with neighbors.

I always knew Professor Kang’s message about reading was good advice for students. Now I’ve observed how her message is also good advice for teachers.

What good books have you read lately, and how do they enrich your teaching? Share your ideas at teachlawbetter@gmail.com.

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