

You are leading, but are you learning?

Dennis Sleigh



We have heard that leaders are readers – but is it true? Are we as keen to read as we are to lead? Or do we see reading as something we would do regularly in an ideal world, but in our real world there is no time for such luxuries? If we have that attitude, perhaps we need to reflect on the importance of developing our knowledge as we gain leadership experience.

Educational leaders must develop their knowledge and understanding, or stand condemned as hypocrites: can we expect others to learn if we don't? A true leader leads by example, and for us this means showing commitment to increased awareness. We must be willing to learn from the collected wisdom that surrounds us in this knowledge-conscious world.

As leaders our success will be influenced by what we learn from others – but how do we access this knowledge?

Going to professional development courses is not always the answer. Even high quality leadership conferences have their limits, as they are rarely available when our most worrying problems are emerging. Talking to experienced colleagues is useful, if both parties are free. However, the soundest solution is to turn to the books. In that way we can truly learn.

Reading alone is not enough

Knowledge of itself is not much use to anyone; applied knowledge, on the other hand, is the source of future progress. It is not enough that we read; we must read wisely and then apply what we have learned. For some people application is seemingly impossible and so they pass their lives as know-all and do-nothings. They are certainly not leaders in the way that most of us aspire to be. They may be learned, but those who apply what they read are actually learning. Eric Hoffer sums it up well:

In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

We have probably experienced lectures by qualified experts who knew nothing useful; we may also have had a seemingly uneducated person explain to us, simply and engagingly, some truth that had puzzled us for years. As leaders, which person would we prefer to be?

The answer is obvious, but there remains a difference between wanting to be a leader and actually becoming one. I suggest that this gap explains why some people never quite achieve their true potential. They know the theory but

lack the vigour to apply it. Their knowledge input is limited; they need to read more.

But I've tried to read...

We've all heard the call to read many times and perhaps we have tried to follow it, but the busyness of our work makes it hard to persevere. Therefore, I would like to suggest some tips to help us to cultivate the reading habit. Don't take them all on at once but identify three or four that appeal to your needs today and implement them. Gradually you will discover yourself increasing your reading portfolio and also adding to your leadership skills base.

Set a time for reading each day - and let others know about it. Many of us have decided over the years that 15 to 30 minutes reading each afternoon after lunch would be profitable, but as soon as we make that decision, we suddenly discover that the busiest time of the day has suddenly become that period just after lunch. Why? Perhaps because we forget to tell the gatekeepers about our plans. Make sure the secretary knows that phone calls, visitors or other interruptions should not normally take priority over your reading period. If you don't have a secretary, or if you don't have any self-managed time in your day (not all leaders are principals yet!) try the same plan at home and ask someone you live with to support you. (If you offer to reciprocate in some way, it makes your request more palatable.)

Read credible people. I love the sign that says "Life is too short to spend it drinking inferior wines." The same message applies to our reading. If we want to spend our time reading trash, we shouldn't be surprised if our professional growth is impeded. I have no trouble with "experimental reading" where we read the work of unknown authors and become exposed to the Michael Fullans or the Patrick Duignans of tomorrow. However, there is no excuse for wasting time on those books or articles by blow-hards, sloppy thinkers or writers who sprout rubbish. Leave them for others; spend your time on people who can actually make a difference to your knowledge base.

Use the web – and access the wisdom of professional associations. Books and journals have a place in our lives but they are not the only source of written material. There are many outstanding items on the internet, and if you don't have time to find them, be guided by the wisdom of relevant professional associations.

Both the Australian College of Educators (ACE) and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) offer excellent materials and these include the papers from conferences you didn't get to, national trends in education, and brief articles on a myriad of useful issues for you and your peers. Principals Australia is another useful source of current and informative reading.

Use lists prepared by peers. Faced with the seemingly endless list of recommended books and journals, it is hard to decide where to start. Ask your colleagues what they read; see if they know of lists of recommended readings like those you used at university; offer to start a list for your peers at your next meeting and see if you can expand it using the ideas of others. Most of us have a favourite book or a much-loved journal and sharing this information can be very useful for others. It is a significant example of collegiality.

Don't forget to read fiction too – and some humour. All work and no play makes us dull. It is easy to succumb to the idea that we have no time to read novels or biographies or science fiction, but would even 10 minutes before going to sleep be too hard to manage? These books might not seem as enjoyable as the sports pages or the form guide, but they help to make us well-rounded people. Keep reading the sports pages and, if you are so inclined, the form guide, but add a little bit of fiction as well so that you will know what your community is reading. As for humour: suffice it to say that reading a few good jokes each day can do wonders for our disposition.

Use marginal notes. I might not endear myself to any librarians here, but I believe very few people can read a chapter or an article and remember the important points. If the material is worthwhile, make notes in the margin (in pencil, if you like) or underline pertinent sections. If the book is borrowed, use a note pad and write down important ideas, but this takes more time. Note the useful material and then review it on finishing reading for the day. It is far more likely to stay with us and to impact on our future action. Reading on-line, copy the content and use the highlighter facility to achieve the same result.

Don't pile up your magazines – you'll rarely

read them. One of my frequent embarrassments is to open a drawer and pull out the magazines I have stored there "to read later". My plan at the time of storing them is to read them tomorrow or on the weekend, but something goes wrong – and I am confronted by no less than 20 or 30 "reserved" readings. I now use a set of stickers that read "If you haven't read this by / /2012, throw it out. I write a date on the label, usually a month ahead of the day the journal arrives, and then I place the journal somewhere where I will see it. At first it was hard to abide by my own instructions, but once I got into the habit, I started to realise that I was called on less and less to toss out unread articles.

Use Post-It notes. When gauging the content of a newly arrived journal, I arm myself with a set of Post-It notes and when I come across an article that I think I should read, I simply mark it with the label protruding. When I next pick up the journal to actually read it, I don't bother with unmarked material – I go straight for the posted articles and read them. (I find that if I jump straight into reading a journal from cover to cover, I rarely get past page eight or 10, and later on discover that good content, like good wine, is often kept until last. By then, the chances of getting back to that journal are seriously reduced.)

Delegate to others. If we don't have time to read all that we want to, surely there are some people on our staff with whom we can share this important task. Ask a colleague "Please read this and see if it has anything to tell us about the way we do things here." The colleague might well be pleased to have some guided instruction, and his or her summary might be enough to alert us to the need – or otherwise – to read the whole article. Of course, as in all delegated tasks, we must make sure we follow up to see what came from the request.

Rip out magazine pages if they are good. While many of us view a book or journal as something to be treasured, not to be vandalised, the true purpose of such material is to instruct and if the best way to learn from an article is to tear it out and read it in a quiet moment later – perhaps while waiting for a train or even when caught in a traffic jam – why not do so? It's better than throwing out (or storing) unread journals.

(I don't recommend this with books – especially those borrowed from the library.)

Take a book to the doctors. Everyone knows the only people who take appointment times seriously are film projectionists, so the next time you go to see your doctor, or accountant, or the magistrate: bring some reading with you. The material provided in waiting rooms is rarely current, relevant or informative – unless we need to know how many times some pop diva has changed partners this year. When I have my own material, I often find that the doctor is actually running on time that day!

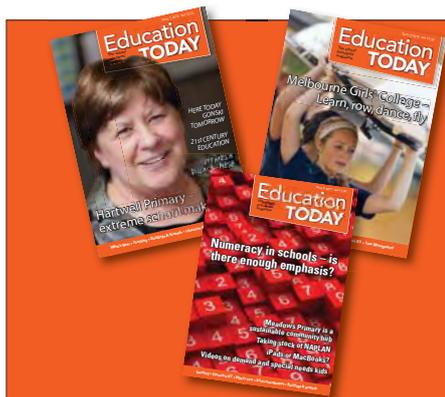
Skim read – many articles are padded out. There is little value in reading the whole of a book about classroom management if our interest is in managing the behaviour of autistic students. Read what you need. Use the list of contents; read the synopsis; and remember that conclusions often contain a succinct summary of the preceding material.

Don't overlook the ads in educational magazines. They often reveal the trends that are occurring in education – and because they are succinct and engaging, we can learn a lot from them. It is easy to be selective here, and if you have already installed a full quota of IWBs, skip ads that are pushing this invention. On the other hand, who wouldn't be interested in learning about the ergonomic office chair – an ideal aide for a leader's afternoon reading?

Being a leader is not easy and there is rarely time to do the things we need to do. However, if we are to become real leaders, we need to increase our knowledge and that means we must read. The hints listed here, judiciously implemented, will support you in your efforts to do just that **ET**



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