Make Reading Your Summer Plan
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What are your plans for the summer? A little facilitation? Some program writing? Catching up on all that sleep or maybe even travelling somewhere exotic? (No, Bloomington, Indiana does not count.)

What about reading and professional development? There are, at worst, 61 days in your summer break. That’s 61 days without students popping in randomly; 61 evenings free of meetings or programs to run to; 61 perfect opportunities for you to develop yourself as a person and as a professional. So, how can you take advantage of a few of these days to grow?

First of all, you have to take time for it. You’re probably already thinking about that Netflix queue or the summer workouts you’ve been planning, but don’t forget to include reading in your summer schedule at work and at home.

Once upon a time, I didn’t allow any time for professional development at work. I had an “I must always be producing” mentality; if I wasn’t meeting with students, writing or running a program, or finishing administrative work, I wasn’t giving my employer their full due. Then, a wise mentor reminded me that part of the joy of not working in a widget factory is that we’re not being paid by the number of students we mentor or the number of programs we create. We are paid for the knowledge we can impart to others and for our skills in developing them. If we don’t continue to grow in that knowledge or those skills, we are doing our students a disservice. So, now, on Fridays during the school year, I take an hour or two to catch up on leadership and innovation articles. My favorite sites include http://inc.com, http://fastcompany.com, http://ccl.org, and http://blogs.hbr.org. Additionally, I search for journal articles focused on areas I’m working on or read the latest from Gentry McCreary (http://doctorgentry.blogspot.com) or John Shertzer (http://fraternalthoughts.blogspot.com). Take some time in your work schedule for reading; heck, block it off on your calendar if you have to remind yourself to do it.

These next two times for reading—evenings and weekends—can be a little harder to plan. I will own the fact that I am privileged with a large amount of free time; I’m a young, single introvert with no house. My personal responsibilities are minimal, and this, coupled with my personality, makes it easy to spend large amounts of time reading. During the summer, when my evening obligations are no more, I make a concerted effort to spend time reading. My evening plays out like this: get home, change, work out, grab dinner, read, then reward myself with mind numbing television (Food Network never disappoints). In The Power of Habit, Charles Duigg talks about feedback loops; we can train our brains to notice a stimuli (home from work), have a specific thought or reaction (I should read!), and then expect a reward from that action (TV time). Essentially, you can train your brain so that you feel guilty about watching TV (or whatever other activities you do in the evening) until after you’ve been productive with a book. Start this habit now and you’ll be amazed what you can achieve over the summer and how it carries into the year.

My other favorite reading time might be treading on sacred ground…Saturday morning. Judging from my Facebook and Twitter feeds, Saturday morning is probably the most underused time of the week. Why? Because we’re still sleeping. But, imagine waking up even an hour earlier and spending that time reading. I personally don’t change my waking time on the weekends and get a good 3 hours of reading in (9 a.m. to noon). Then, I get that reward my brain has been trained to expect. Even if you’re not a
morning person or morning reader, you can use that time to knock out those things that would otherwise haunt your afternoon and keep you from the pile of books on your table.

Alright, Matt, you’ve sold us. We can find time to read. But what? There are so many books out there, and sometimes it’s hard to choose. Two suggested approaches to follow, and you should feel free to choose whichever will excite you more throughout the summer.

Pick one specific topic for the summer. What do you want to learn about? Leadership? Hazing? Quail hunting? Pick something that fascinates you. If you’re trying to get back on the reading train, knowing that you’ll enjoy a book or article will make you all the more focused on reading it. Don’t worry if you’re not made of money; not many of us in the field are. Use your library (campus or community) to find these books. As you read, take note of those authors that keep getting mentioned. Write them on a notecard or add them to your Amazon wish list (my prime method for keeping track of reading wants). And, for even more ideas of what to read, visit websites to look for other books people recommend on the pages of the books you already like. Doing this will also lead to my second point.

Go random with reading. In a *Perspectives* article (Deeg, 2013), I wrote about how innovation is spurred by reading beyond our field. Sure, you can learn a lot from reading Wooden on leadership, but you can also learn from a biography of George Washington. Don’t confine your reading to a certain topic if you don’t want to be in a silo during the summer. Find connections and grab other books in that vein. Perfect suggestions are books in the popular psychology section, like *Freakonomics*, *Moonwalking with Einstein*, and *Maphead*. Go random with your reading; you’ll be surprised what you find.

Finally, you need to read correctly. Yes, you’ve been reading textbooks and papers throughout college, but sometimes, we forget to read properly when we’re not studying for a class. Take notes as you read; this means you read with the expectation you will take notes. I write my summaries, quotes, or ideas on index cards, and leave them in the book. Mostly this is because I can’t bring myself to highlight in a book, but it also allows me to find those ideas and the surrounding thoughts easily. Share your thoughts via social media. I’d love to scroll through Facebook or Twitter some day and see a bunch of quotes and discussions from reading this summer! Also, remember that sharing encourages others to do it, thus giving you more reading ideas.

Reading in the summer is a perfectly acceptable (and enjoyable) way to spend your time. You’re bettering yourself and getting new ideas for your students. It doesn’t have to be a chore: take time during work to dive into an article, make reading a book a goal you get rewarded for, and replace some of your daydream time with reading. As Levar Burton would say, “Take a look, it’s in a book, a reading rainbow.” Get out there and find yours!

References