

# Teacher to Teacher

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## A Literary Rx for Teachers

Autumn Tooms  
 Kent State University

When I was in grade school, my favorite room in our house was the library. My father, a pharmacist, had always collected books; he eventually turned his office into a floor-to-ceiling shelved library. To me, this room was like the curious places described in my Nancy Drew books. There was the mandatory deep leather chair in one corner and a roll-top desk that contained the Magic Drawer. Just like Boo Radley's secret tree hole in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1959), our magic drawer contained little toys from gumball machines and Cracker Jack boxes. There were also strange, wonderful treasures in it like the glass eye from an anatomical teaching dummy. Other treasures hidden in the corners of the drawer were corks from unusual bottles of wine, marbles, sea shells, and a lady's gold compact that had lost its powder.

What made the drawer magic was that my brother and I were allowed one "pick" as a reward for extraordinary acts of bravery and achievement. So when I held back the tears when the dentist pulled three teeth and my brother won the third grade spelling bee, a pick was in order. Of course, good report cards earned also earned a "pick" from the magic drawer. On truly glorious occasions, such as a birthday, we were allowed *two* picks. Visits to the magic drawer were always short because if we picked around too long the magic would run out. Furthermore, my father made it explicitly clear that the drawer held no magic unless we were invited to open it. To my mother's shock, I never opened the magic drawer unless Dad had proclaimed I had earned the right to.

Late one night, I just had to visit the magic drawer. Nancy Drew and I had finally solved the Secret of the Old Clock, and there was a library in her adventures that sounded an awful lot like ours. I crawled down the hall and slithered my way around a corner in time to see my Dad, smoking his pipe, sitting in his leather chair, reading. "Young lady, it is two in the morning. What are you doing?" Being the first-born child as well as a super sleuth, I answered, "Daddy, it *is* two in the morning-- what are *you* doing?"

Apparently brass and charm worked in the wee late hours, because on this occasion my father decided a teachable moment was in order. "I am reading a journal," he said. I climbed up in his lap and quipped, "That's a magazine. A journal is the pink thing with a lock on it that Beth McCarthy gave me for my birthday."

"Well, yes," he replied. "But this kind of journal is different. It is written so that folks like me can learn about new

things that are happening in the profession of pharmacy."

"You don't have to learn anymore. You went to college. You even went twice to two different ones. You said when you get an education you are free." I pointed to his framed diplomas from the University of Tennessee and the University of Michigan. "Those papers up there say you are done learning."

"Well, that's sort of correct. A degree does announce to the world that you are a learned person. However, in my profession, people need to know the current ideas and research because that allows us to keep our licenses to practice. We have to take tests every few years, or prove that we have taken classes, in order to stay current. I subscribe to professional journals like this one in order to learn as much as I can so that if I meet a patient with a particular kind of problem at the hospital I might be able to help him or the doctors I work with."

Now I was confused, "Daaaad, I thought you helped to run the hospital, you are not a pharmacist anymore. Your office is in a different place than the pharmacy and you told me you sit in meetings all day. Why do you bother reading this stuff if you don't give out prescriptions?"

"Because I still am a pharmacist even though right now I do not directly deal with patients and prescriptions. I don't want my skills to get rusty. That would be a waste of all that work I did to earn my degrees. Someday, when you become a professional, you too will make a promise to keep learning, even after you earn your degrees. That is what being a professional is about. Now, because you have listened carefully to me, you may -- this one time-- have a pick from the magic drawer. Hurry up, go to bed, and do not tell your mother you were up this late."

Like it or not, my father was correct. His words about professionalism left me for many years until one day when I was an assistant principal. I was trudging through paperwork in my office while our reading specialist was trying to talk me into subscribing to *The Reading Teacher*. After reminding her for the tenth time that I was a high school chemistry teacher who just happened to end up at Ocotillo Elementary, she replied "Look... this journal will help you look at the classrooms you evaluate in a different way. It will give you the professional perspective a reading teacher has."

There was the magic word: professional. I was immediately transported back to the library, The Magic Drawer, and my father's late night lesson on what it means to be a professional. I shelled out the money for a subscription to *The Read-*

ing *Teacher* without any further hesitation; I did it out of guilt.

Specifically, I did it out of my father's guilt. The same sort of permanently embedded parental guilt that gets you out of bed on a cold night to brush your teeth because you are supposed to. The guilt that forces you to, do your homework, mow the lawn, run on the treadmill, and take it easy on your bad back. Sometimes we do things that are good for us because we *just know* we need to.

My father would call this guilt "responsibility." He might also describe it as "commitment." Maybe investing in your professional reading is not something you have time to do. Make time anyway. Make time for the same reason that you make time to keep healthy and love your family. Make the time because you are weary of occasionally being described as "just a teacher." Make the time to stay current because you are a professional.

Are you thinking that you don't know where to start? Consider subscribing to a journal for educators. Subscriptions to journals are often a perk given to those educators who join a particular organization. And do not be fooled in to thinking that these journals are just for K-12 teachers. Anyone who is involved with a school community can greatly benefit from reading a professional journal because it exposes the reader to the ideas and trends that are happening in learning communities and the whole of education. These subjects often serve as inspiration for those dealing with educational issues that range from literacy to adult education to community support. The value of a properly selected journal is that it will whet your appetite concerning a myriad of issues on a global level. It will also steer you in the right direction to read more about a topic that interests you.

*Phi Delta Kappan* is published by Phi Delta Kappa International (<http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm>), a fraternal education organization based in Indiana. It is a hugely read publication with articles that cover a wide range of educational topics. *Educational Leadership* is another prestigious practitioner's journal with articles focused on varied topics relevant to school teachers and leaders. It is published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: Their website is <http://www.ascd.org/>. Or, consider *The Journal of Adult Basic Education* if you are a person who is involved with adult and family education.

This author recommends the above three journals because in her view, they are the most widely read and perhaps prestigious of the scholarly journals for practitioners. What makes them a sound subscription investment is that they have a balanced coverage of issues concerning our profession. The global audience for both of these journals consists of teachers, principals, curriculum coordinators, superintendents, school board members, and professors. These periodicals also have a fantastic section in which books are reviewed. Book reviews are another great way to find information about issues that interest you.

Another global periodical is *Education Week*. As its title suggests, this newspaper formatted publication will come to your door on a weekly, rather than monthly, basis. The website for *Education Week* is <http://www.edweek.com/>. Once a year, *Education Week* publishes a special edition called "Quality Counts." This alone is worth the price of your subscription. "Quality Counts" is a thorough examination of school systems in the United States. You can look up all sorts of interesting information ranging from which state legislature spends

the most money on education to who has the highest standardized test scores. You can also read articles about the politics of testing. There are other special editions that examine various topics, such as such as "Technology Counts."

Are you a history buff? Then check out *Lessons of a Century* (The Staff of Education Week, 2000). This book is available online through Education Week's website. It is a collection of articles and photographs that explore our nation's schools. This book is a wonderful gift for a new teacher, a retiring teacher, and the teacher who is celebrating a new degree.

A periodical with a format similar to *Education Week* that focuses on our nation's universities and colleges is called *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Articles for this periodical are also available free on their website, <http://www.chronicle.com/>.

The above recommendations are all journals that serve a wide audience. You may want to augment your subscription with a journal that is more closely related to your specialized field or an area that interests you. For example, The International Reading Association (<http://www.reading.org>) publishes *The Reading Teacher* and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, both dedicated to literacy instruction. The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders publishes *Beyond Behavior*, a journal that focuses on students who have behavioral challenges such as Attention Deficit Disorder (<http://www.ccbd.net/beyondbehavior>).

One of the problems with journals (like other periodicals) is that they may not get read. If you are worried that you will subscribe and then fail to follow through with the reading, have the periodical sent to your home rather than work. Keep it by your bed or in the bathroom next to your *People* magazine. Also make a space to store these volumes. Or, think about a journal swap every semester. Start by getting your colleagues together and making a group list of all the journals that the members of the group subscribe to. Then agree as a group that everyone will save their journals. Set a date to meet in the Spring and in the Fall to bring your journals and trade with each other. When you throw this swapping party, invite your guests to share one article they really like with the group. Ask them make photocopies of that single article for everyone. Now your swapping party has turned into a discussion group. This twice-a-year commitment keeps everyone active in their reading. Make sure you choose a fun place to have your swapping party. Or agree that after you swap, you all go and share a cup of coffee (or other beverage). Talking about your profession does not have to be an exercise that only takes place when you need to complain or when you are sitting in a meeting. Another way to encourage professional reading is to keep some of these journals in the lounges where you work.

When you see a book mentioned or an article you enjoyed, don't forget to look for other works by the same author. Often the authors of an article will include their email addresses at the end of a piece. Take advantage of that information and email the author! The odds are in your favor that you will receive a reply to your question or request for further information.

Finally, consider the importance of giving a subscription to a professional journal as a gift. New college graduates are not the only choices for gifts of this kind. High school graduates who are starting in a college of education can benefit from subscriptions to any of the journals mentioned earlier for two reasons. First, they will undoubtedly have an assignment that requires them to read professional articles. Having their

own subscriptions will save a trip to the library. Second, reading these journals will keep them excited and updated about what is happening in their fields.

Retired teachers enjoy visiting the profession through journals and periodicals too. There might be someone in your family who isn't a teacher but enjoys keeping up with your professional adventures. These are often the grandparents or special friends and relatives who always cut out the articles from their hometown newspapers for you because they are about schools. Gift them with a subscription and enlighten their worlds. Plus, you will be able to have richer conversations with them when you visit.

If you are someone who is more interested in reading books than periodicals, there are great book lists all over the Internet related to teaching and schools. Scholars love to put these sorts of things together as a roadmap of what (in their view) a teacher should know. Occasionally questions arise about the ten "must-read" books for educators. In the College and Graduate School of Education at Kent State University, the question arises every semester. That is because this author has earned a reputation with her graduate students for requiring a visit through the "Great Books Lists" in every class she teaches. Students usually look at the list and groan at the beginning on the first day of class and reflect on what they learned with a certain sense of satisfaction when the course is over. Here are some of the best of my "Great Books" list. They are not in any order of importance. See the reference list at the end of this article for publication information about the books. Most should be available for check-out in college or university libraries.

*Why Johnny Can't Read*

*The Paideia Proposal*

*The Manufactured Crisis*

*The Prince*

*Dinosaur Brains*

*Talking from Nine to Five: Women and Men in the Workplace*

*Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Improvement*

*A Framework for Understanding Poverty*

*How We Think*

*To Kill a Mockingbird*

These books made my list because of their value to teachers in the day to day work environment. Some made my list because they have something powerful to say related to teaching and learning in the American education system. One made my list simply because Atticus Finch, like my father, wanted to teach his children the importance of responsibility.

The point of a great book list is the journey taken to digest a book and then decide if that work resonates within you. If you let it, the power of the written word can transcend through your professional life into your home life and calibrate your moral compass. A book that affects your view of professionalism does not need to always come from the education section in the library.

Do you feel like you need a kick-start to get back in the habit of reading about your profession? Stick a note by your bed. Tape a picture of one of your favorite teaching icons on the rear view mirror in your car. Find some symbol or personal object that will inspire you to remember the importance of continuing to learn about your profession. As for me, I have the contents of the magic drawer in a ten-quart pickle jar on my kitchen counter. The tiny plastic animals, empty lipstick tubes,

and key chain fobs remind me that the real magic in our library was not in a drawer, but in my father's prescription for professionalism.

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