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Re-engaging in the practice of academic reading: the power of the pledge

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Main text

On March 31 2021, Professor Karen Fitzgibbon's keynote at *Becoming Well Read*, Keele University's Academic Reading Symposium inspired me to reconsider my own approach to academic reading, so much so, that it led me to make a pledge to commit more time to read. Here I reflect on the pledge, what happened next, and how the process made me re-evaluate the role reading plays in my professional life.

Friday 11 June 2021 08.35. An email appears in my inbox. Nothing out of the ordinary, you might think, except that this email includes a reminder of a pledge I made at the end of Keele University's Academic Reading Symposium. The pledge reads as follows:

I will devote two hours to academic reading mid-week and I will protect this time in my calendar and I will note all the articles and books I read so that I can reflect on them. I will reference readings in discussions, however informal, with colleagues.

Reading those words back to myself, I can almost hear the enthusiastic tap-tap of the keys on the keyboard; the lack of punctuation in that first sentence is telling. As I listened to Professor Karen Fitzgibbon talk of how she challenged her perceptions of reading 'as a treat, an indulgence in an otherwise busy role', resolving to set aside time to read on a weekly basis, I reflected on my own practice. For too long I had considered reading as a 'nice-to-have' or a 'luxury', something that was easily overshadowed by 'real work' - through no-one's fault but my own. Karen's keynote encouraged me to reconsider my own approach to academic reading; I wrote the pledge before I had time to think.

Following the symposium, I blocked out two hours a week on Wednesday afternoons to read and endeavoured to protect this time in my calendar. When I had a clash, I rescheduled the reading time to a different day, although I admit that there were a few times when I was unable to read for the full two hours, or at all. I created a folder of journal articles to dip into, along with a Word document containing a list of books and articles I had meant to look at for a long time; I needed to give myself plenty of choice about what I read during those precious two hours to maintain my focus. I jotted down some of the titles Karen mentioned in her keynote - Susan Cain's *Quiet: the power of the introvert in a world that can't stop talking* was my first stop. I started to take notes and record my thoughts about the things I read, and I joined an online reading group, yet to meet. So far so good, but...

This was not the first occasion I'd promised myself I would dedicate more time to reading and it certainly wouldn't be the last. Many times, I've started out with the best intentions, only for my plans to fall over very quickly with the reading time pushed further and further down the to-do-list. From Miller and Merdian's research (2020) I am reassured I am not alone in this, yet I can't help but question why someone like myself, for whom reading is so important, both in my personal and professional life, would struggle to make time to read?

I pondered on this question in the weeks following the symposium. What I kept coming back to was that I needed to justify the time I spent on reading; it had to have a purpose. Nowhere else did I feel that sense of purpose more acutely than as a student and teacher of English Literature, a world which revolved around reading. As I've moved away from the Arts into various management roles, that sense of purpose seems to have faded, or perhaps lost a little of its focus. Reading has tended to fall by the wayside unless it is 'linked to the production of an outcome', for example, a project which requires underpinning with relevant methodology, or scholarship which requires a greater depth of subject knowledge (Miller and Merdian, 2020, p. 8).

But there is still so much to read! And, when I am able to commit the time to reading for reading's sake, I get a great deal of satisfaction from it, especially in those moments when I move beyond 'reading as a way to support preconceived ideas' (Rhead, 2019, p. 2) to being challenged to think differently. Indeed, it is in that liminal 'learning space', when my reading transitions from that comfortable, complacent space of mutual agreement with the author, to being challenged to think about things in new ways that I find the energy and enthusiasm to keep reading (Meyer and Land, 2003; Morley, 2020). And with this comes the eagerness to share, which brings me to the final sentence of my pledge, *I will reference readings in discussions, however informal, with colleagues*. In the weeks after the symposium, I find opportunities to talk about what I've read with colleagues; I communicate new information and ideas and recommend articles and books, and the response is good.

In the keynote, Karen spoke of reading in a public space as a means of modelling good academic reading habits in others and I wonder whether my own practice is influencing those around me. In the current circumstances, I am unable to read publicly as Karen did; there is no library to sit outside or public room to sit in, so reading remains a solitary occupation for me. However, though opening up a dialogue and sharing with colleagues, reading has, in a sense, become a public activity for me too, albeit in a different way. And by being more public, it becomes more purposeful. I share more, and so I read more. Reading becomes a social practice and it feels good. I intend to keep going.

Thank you for the thought-provoking symposium, for the invitation to write a pledge, and the opportunity to contribute to this journal.

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