



## Educator Q&A

### Free-Choice Reading in Generalist Courses

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#### **Why should students choose a book to read independently when a textbook has already been assigned?**

Many students come into social welfare courses focused on microlevel practice. Some even express concerns about doing well (or having interest) in a policy class, a generalist course required of all social work students. I imagine other instructors in macro-oriented courses also experience this and, besides assuaging worries about coursework and grades, have discovered ways of encouraging learners to shift their gaze upstream and grapple with structural factors that shape social welfare systems.

As part of my course, I ask students to read a memoir or ethnographic work of their choice along with the core policy textbook. With these intimate stories—of courage, struggle, marginalization, racism, achievement, solidarity, triumph, activism, setback, poverty, beauty, discovery, trauma, dignity, betrayal, illness, kindness, revolution, healing, justice, and more—students must reckon with how specific policies affect the lives of people and communities from their book choice: How might their lives be different with or without a particular policy? What do these stories tell us about our society? What is the emotional heart of the book? And, importantly, why should policymakers care about these stories?

Class assignments and activities throughout the semester help students forge connections between the experiences of people and communities chronicled in the books they choose, textbook material (e.g., historical events, policy frameworks, landmark legislation), and practice.

#### **Why not read the same memoir or ethnographic work as a class?**

Whole-class book reading also opens paths to experiences beyond our own—books as windows—or like our own experiences—books as mirrors (Style, 1988). But whole-class reading limits student choice. A primary aim of this project is to give students more autonomy and control over their learning.

The variety of books picked by students also yields an array of reader responses throughout the semester. As students get into their free-choice reading, mini book clubs spring up, some as class activities (see Padilla, 2018) and others on the fly outside the classroom. Students recommend books to peers. They share personal and wide-ranging responses to the stories, finding links between books and tangling with the differences. The diversity of reading experiences, each book its own emotional and cognitive trek, enhances our learning community.



### How do other class assignments and activities align with the free-choice book?

Social welfare classes that I've taught require the incorporation of assignments that help develop good writing skills. Based on their book choices, I ask students to write a review directed to policy professionals. This invites students to grapple with the personal stories they've read, textbook material, and what this means for securing social and economic justice. They also write an informal book blurb to help future students in the course choose a book. For the book review and other assignments, there is the expectation, time, and flexibility for students to get feedback on multiple drafts—a "policy of endless revision" (Lang, 2016, p. 207)—throughout the semester.

Like most writers (including me), students often doubt their writing abilities, and semester-long projects are especially fraught if they don't find their work meaningful. After years of five-paragraph essays, comprehension worksheets, and high-stakes standardized exams before college, it's no wonder that many undergraduates are anxious and/or apathetic about reading and writing (see Warner, 2018). To temper this, I've found that students appreciate "Shitty First Drafts" and "Perfectionism," two short chapters from Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (1995) as well as 200- to 400-word weekly reactions, structured any way students like. Monte Carlo quizzes can also be modified to help synthesize free-choice reading with assigned material (Fernald, 2004).

### Why dedicate time for weekly in-class reading?

I was initially leery about dedicating time for in-class reading. During our first session, I fidgeted as students read their books and thought, "I'm the instructor—I need to be doing something!" But patience and trust in our budding reading community won out, thankfully. Now I bring a book of my own to read with students.

Making space for quiet in-class reading jars with the ascendancy of power-pointing, lecturing, and testing as pillars of instruction in some classrooms. But free-choice book reading during class benefits students by increasing motivation, enjoyment, and engagement in learning (Bosley, 2008; Chong, 2016; Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Dabrowski & Marshall, 2018). I dedicate time in class (15–20 minutes once per week) for free-choice book reading because all students, including undergraduates, reap these benefits.

I also avoid facilitating discussions immediately after in-class reading sessions. As each session ends, students mark their places in their books, and we move on to a different activity. The reasoning is that reading in class should be devoted to learners and the stories, uncoupled from any kind of scheduled or performative responses. Students come to process, understand, and synthesize their book choices and assigned readings in their own time, most often outside the classroom. Online reaction notebooks, which blend journaling and freewriting, help with this; students use notebooks to connect ideas and formulate questions and impressions about their book choices and other course material. Making room for quiet free-choice book reading, as well



as reflection and contemplation (Hart, 2004; Nelson, 2017), deepens class discussions and engagement with writing projects.

### **How do students respond to in-class reading sessions?**

Students are sometimes taken aback during the first session; quiet group reading isn't common in university-level policy classes. It takes everyone a bit to settle in with their respective books. Rhythms in subsequent sessions feel easier as students become more invested in the stories and accustomed to quiet moments together with their books and classmates. At the end of the semester, students have highlighted these brief reading sessions as valuable, enjoyable, and enriching.

Note: Some students pick books and then find they don't like them. Well, don't we all! I encourage them to stick it out for 30 pages or so and, if they still have little interest or dislike the book, choose another (see Pennac's [2008] "ten inalienable rights of the reader" for details and inspiration).

### **How do you develop a free-choice booklist?**

I compiled the initial booklist, mostly memoir and ethnographic works, based on my own reading and what I found compelling, but the list grows longer and richer with recommendations from students and colleagues. As part of the course, I ask each student to recommend a reading to me. This can be anything—novels, blog posts, news reports, poems, lyrics, journal articles—as long as it's meaningful to the student. I hope this assignment will involve only books in the future. However, because many students aren't reading books voluntarily when they come into class, I've kept this recommendation broad. Apart from wanting to learn more from students' expertise and what they care about, recommending something to read, especially a book, is a small but powerful practice that can strengthen community, including social work communities.

### **What if students want to read a book that isn't on the list?**

I'm all for it! When this first happened, however, I admit that I felt pangs of disappointment and defensiveness, asking myself, "What about this amazing list of books that I've meticulously curated?" It only took a moment to remember that student choice and motivation should trump any instructor unease about curation, an activity often tied up in power and control. If instructors become overly concerned with curation and compliance to lists, free-choice book reading isn't free. When students find and recommend a new book, I try to read it too and add the book to our list.

### **What happens when students don't have their free-choice book in class?**

At the first in-class reading session, a few students might not have their book yet. Some are waiting for books to arrive; others, perhaps doubtful this was actually going to happen, look around with surprise to see their



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peers reading. I always bring extra books to lend students. By the second reading session, usually everyone has a book to read.

### **Free-choice book reading and accompanying activities should also honor inclusive instruction.**

Members of learning communities have shifting and intersecting identities, including different abilities and preferred modes of reading (e.g., audio books, enlarged or electronic texts, Braille materials).

### **What's the value of this resource in a nutshell?**

Mixing free-choice books—memoirs, ethnographic works, and other nonfiction, in this case—with a core policy textbook (and activities like frequent reflective writing and a book review intended for policy professionals) gives social work students more autonomy and space for deeper learning; students extend and apply concepts, skills, and experiences from one context to another, and in ways meaningful to their individual learning and practice.

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