

The right value of technical books

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I have discovered that I used to over estimate the value that books bring to the table, whenever I have tried to learn a new skill or a new tool.

I think that could be because in reality I would learn something new to not just learn it, but to apply it somewhere. Such (valid) applications of any skill or tool are potentially infinite. As no book can cover all potential applications or usage of a skill or a tool, I would come unstuck when applying the knowledge gained. With experience, I have now changed my method of using books.

The first part I use a book for is to gain a conceptual understanding of the skill or the tool and for such an understanding, I have found it is unnecessary to deep

dive [1] into the book working my way systematically through it. [2]

The second and most important part is I then choose to work upon an application of the skill or tool I have selected to learn, while using a book as one of the tools in the process. By doing that I am more focused on producing things which is what matters finally as opposed to the false expectations and satisfaction gained by working through a book.

I now treat a book as an aid, a tool, a mentor, a navigator that I refer to when I am stuck instead of the earlier feeling of being stuck despite having worked through a book.

The only care I have to take in this process is to pick a good useful application to work upon, which is possible if I am willing to think through it enough and then there is this.

The other minor advantage I have gained by following this process is that I do not suffer from the pressure of having to complete a book cover to cover. In fact, I now do not even have to care if I will ever complete the book, as long as it provides me value as a tool.

To cite just one example, recently I wanted to learn about algorithms and data structures. So instead of working my way through books; I picked up this book, and understood the concepts. Just the first 2 chapters sufficed. Next I chose to actually find applications where algorithms are important part of the solution. I chose to work on those applications, while using the books as a tool. Not only did this process work, but it also taught me how to actually use algorithms in the real world instead of working on some descoped abstract problems in a textbook.

Overall, I have repeated this process more than once and I have found it to be more productive in learning a skill or a tool than just working through a book. And I plan to stick to it as of now.

[1] A purely systemtatic theoretical perusal could be useful, but I fail to realize what is the point of theory if it does not lead to something useful? May be I am missing something here!

[2] Anyways, just reading through books is useless.