How Learning Works: Seven Researched-Based Principles for Smart Teaching

By Susan A. Ambrose, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPrieto, Marsha C. Lovett & Marie K. Norman. San Francisco, CA: Jossey- Bass (2010), 301 pages, ISBN: 978-0-470-48410-4

Whether you are a newly minted librarian looking for a guide to teaching or an experienced librarian (like myself) looking for a fresh outlook to instruction … How Learning Works the go-to guide for you. This book was written with college professors and librarians in mind yet the concepts covered in this book are easily transferable to a law school setting.

This comprehensive guide centers on 7 learning principles of student learning that are derived from the authors' experiences consulting faculty about learning and teaching and their cognitive science research. Each chapter is dedicated to a principle and includes real-life scenarios, a discussion of each principle supported by studies, diagrams and tips for applying each principle to your class preparation.

As an experienced librarian, I encountered the most "Aha!" moments when reading the chapter devoted to the principle in Chapter 5 - "Goal-directed practice coupled with targeted feedback are critical to learning." The authors point out that the key in providing feedback is to not only think about the learning goals for our courses but those goals students set for themselves. These goals may be based in part on their own priorities – whether it is to learn or perform well. Thankfully, the authors give suggestions for conferring feedback that focuses on fulfilling both priorities.

If I could go back in time, I would give my "novice librarian self" this book and tag the appendices where you can find templates of various documents that help reinforce the techniques mentioned in each chapter.

How Learning Works provides an eye-opening look at the interconnectedness between the actual learning process of students and our teaching methods. My approach to teaching Legal Research has been enhanced by gaining insight on how learning works.

Reviewed by Gail Mathapo, Reference Librarian and Professor of Legal Research, University of Florida Legal Information Center, in 2017.