

Academically Informed Creative Writing in LIS Programs and the Freedom to be Creative

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This article makes a case for the inclusion of creative writing in Library & Information Science (LIS) courses. Using an example of the course on reading practices and audiences, it shows how creative writing can contribute to the development of creativity, critical thinking, ability for self-direction and independent learning—all the necessary skills for future leaders in the field of LIS. It presents a unique professor–student perspective on creative writing assignments and focuses on two case studies: the role of creative writing in validating students’ personal experiences and previous educational background; and the importance of creative writing in fostering a skill of meaningful and engaging storytelling. It also analyzes several possible concerns related to the incorporation of creative writing in LIS courses, with a particular emphasis on the rigorous but flexible evaluation methods of students’ creative work. The article will be of interest to LIS educators and LIS students, who, it is hoped, would become more involved in the direction of their graduate education.

Keywords: creative writing; curriculum; evaluation; LIS education; reading; self-directed learning

The Rhetoric of Self-Direction and Creativity and the Challenge of the Contemporary University

At the university level, all teaching faculty members are facing numerous dilemmas. The rhetoric of valuing a learning process clashes with the necessity to assign a numeric grade to the final product, be it a written paper or a presentation. The usefulness of self-directed learning is curbed by meticulously structured guidelines for group activities or step-by-step handouts, both of which support information transfer but leave little room for the declared student self-direction. Grade quotas prevent professors from encouraging students’ experimentation and risk-taking. The ideal of

diversity in teaching methods is subdued by the unconditional reign of PowerPoint, applied indiscriminately to subjects that do not lend themselves to bullet points and business-style rendition. Worse still, students learn to expect detailed guidelines and internalize a simple truth: the better that they follow instructions and the more accurately that they guess the professor’s intent, the higher their grade will be. Students are groomed to consider carefully structured, standardized PowerPoint slides to be an indicator of exemplary teaching; by extension, professors are likely to get higher evaluations on the grounds of “clarity” and “teaching effectiveness.” Students become unreceptive to and deconditioned from alternative modes of

learning, teaching, and assignments and from alternative modes of thinking, if you will. They become less comfortable with independent choices, and fearful of potential grade-related penalties. Hence, the rhetoric of pedagogical diversity crashes and burns over instructional practices that bring about the opposite: uniformity. This uniformity limits students' creativity and self-direction but allows for fact accumulation, easy grading, quick comparisons and, ultimately, straightforward performance measures, all valorized by the university audit culture, to use the words of Cris Shore (2008).

In a situation where evaluations reign, quantitative indicators abound, comparative baselines are a must, and efficiency in teaching is sometimes mistaken for effectiveness, can we find a place for unorthodox pedagogical approaches that allow for students' creative expression? Can we truly facilitate "learning to learn," i.e., learning beyond the mastery of specific concepts or the accumulation of facts and information; learning that stimulates critical thinking and tough questions rather than an unconditional acceptance of the professor's opinion (Rogers, 1959)? Can we "prevent standardized testing from draining creativity out of our classroom" at the time when "assign[ing] more non-fiction 'informational' texts and text-based academic writing" (Dafoe, 2013, p. 8) is privileged in academic circles? More specifically, is there a place for creative writing in Library & Information Science (LIS) programs?

Focusing on the assignment used in an elective course on reading practices and audiences, we present¹ a unique professor–student insight into the merit of *academically informed creative writing* and its significance in helping future professionals to make a leap from the theoretical "knowing that" to the experiential "know-

ing how" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, as cited in Kvale, 1996, p. 106). We explore the role of creative writing in the facilitation of self-directed learning, which capitalizes on students' interests and ability to relate to and invest in their work (Dafoe, 2013; Rogers, 1959, 1969). It highlights the importance of creative writing in fostering the "habit of reflection" and observation (Cain, 2002, p. 118), which is paramount for user- and community-centered LIS practices, as opposed to material- and resource-oriented ones. In particular, we advocate for creative writing as a vehicle for promoting a contextual and holistic understanding of human experiences, of which reading practices are a chosen example (Dali, 2013). It situates creative writing as an instrument for liberating students from patterned thinking, template solutions, and excessive dependence on secondary sources and authoritative opinions, and posits creative writing as an instrument that strengthens the bond between the theoretical material learned in the course and its practical applications. It also demonstrates how creative writing assignments can save professors from the tedium of reading uninspiring and predictable papers, replete with inane arguments and platitudinous expressions. The discussion is informed by the work of Nancy Dafoe (2013) about the place and importance of creative writing in academia.

In terms of practical applications, we review two specific case studies: the role of creative writing in validating students' personal life experience and previous educational background; and the role of creative writing in developing storytelling skills that may become a staple of future professional activities. We also accompany our article with the full text of two short stories produced in the course of the creative writing assignment.

We contend that creative writing assignments are not a pedagogical technique; they are a manifestation of the professor's steadfast belief in the capacity of students for self-direction and creativity, which

¹A film-based presentation of this paper took place at the 2015 Annual Conference of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), SIG for Innovative Pedagogies: Chicago, January 26–30, 2015.

ultimately results in improved learning, better quality work, and higher academic achievements. We give particular attention to the pros and cons of creative writing assignments in the context of contemporary LIS departments. We argue that, the difficulties of implementation notwithstanding, the inclusion of creative writing and other less structured assignments is indispensable if we are to set our students on the path of lifelong learning, and if we see them as true leaders with holistic vision and original ideas. Additionally, we draw attention to more flexible evaluation approaches that privilege experimentation, risk-taking, creativity, and the evolutionary process undergone by students.

Our article will be of interest to LIS educators irrespective of the area and subject they teach. While those who teach reading- and literacy- related courses will benefit from specific suggestions, creative assignments—not only creative writing—can enrich any course. Moreover, our article makes an appeal to current LIS students to take charge of their education, and to seek innovative and exciting opportunities to develop their talents and to use their previous educational capital while still in the program.

Creative Writing as a Vehicle for Creativity and Self-Direction

Creativity has become a centripetal concept in the realm of academia and professional practices. In 2014, “‘creative’ [was] the most used buzzword in LinkedIn profiles two years running” (Pappano, 2014, para. 7). Creativity is no longer “considered the product of genius or divine inspiration” (Pappano, 2014, para. 4); it has become “a practical skill that can be learned and applied in daily life” (Pappano, 2014, para. 25).

It is therefore not surprising that numerous policy documents in the field of higher education highlight the need for developing creativity and the ability for imaginative problem solving and original thinking

in the future generation of professionals and scholars. Creativity is invariably mentioned in the Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) established by departments, accreditation bodies, professional associations, or quality assurance organizations; in the objectives of individual courses; or in the descriptions of specific assignments and activities. Implicit in the ubiquitous mentions of creativity is the assumption that “everyone is creative, and can learn to be more so” (Pappano, 2014, para. 12).

Paradoxically, in the context of these documents creativity is invoked alongside very specific standards (e.g., standards for academic achievements, performance measures, grading criteria, skills, and competencies to master); detailed guidelines that students have to follow in order to complete their projects; and restrictive criteria related to the formatting of student work (e.g., a strictly enforced page limit in papers, the size of margins and font, the type of a title page). Failure to meet these criteria results in grade reduction. The irony, of course, is that we fail to notice how all these numerous, overwhelming conditions, limiters, and restrictions may defeat originality and independence and how “learning ‘correct’ skills and procedures might inhibit creativity” (Jarvis, 2010, p. 121).

In her *Breaking Open the Box* (2013), Nancy Dafoe presents a discourse on the place and importance of creative writing, and shares her practical experience in the implementation and evaluation of creative writing assignments in university settings. She looks back to “[e]lementary educators [favoring] creativity in the classroom [and] encouraging students to practice creative writing without teaching techniques” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 29). She also observes how the “politicization” of education, or audit culture as Shore (2008) would have it, “has nearly everyone focused on testing and data collection—not the best environment for experiments in writing in which ‘failure’ is an important part of the process and necessary for real improvements” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 18). Privileging the bottom

line and the end product results in inflexible pedagogical practices (i.e., the exact opposite of what can encourage self-direction and creativity and make use of the student's life and professional experience). It creates the context which, among others, "produc[es] reluctant, apathetic readers and bored, disengaged writers" who "simply regurgitate the information they find in their reading sources, and [...] attempt to mimic stodgy prose that is devoid of style and voice" (Dafoe, 2013, p. 8). It builds an environment in which students "have no control, no interest, and no stake in their own education" (Dafoe, 2013, p. 17). This environment is largely teacher-centered and, depending on the teaching philosophy, experience, and personality of individual professors, has the potential to introduce restrictive and grade-punitive practices. These practices are "purportedly taught to instill academic discipline" in general and "the look of academic writing" in particular; in reality, however, they push students to "fit their writing into the frameworks of shapes and boxes," all the while facilitating "the ease and speed with which student product can be assessed and scored" (Dafoe, 2013, p. 29).

Dafoe (2013) proposes a different approach:

Allowing choice and encouraging creativity actually causes students to take greater ownership and discourages pat or superficial responses. In addition, creative technique applications often launch divergent thinking, leading to innovations in areas beyond writing. Creative writers become creative thinkers and better readers. (p. 29–30)

Yet improvement in writing and reading skills is not a goal in itself; it is a means to something bigger, even if we focus on the humanities students, as Dafoe does, and especially if we apply these notions to higher professional education, such as LIS. Dafoe (2013) notes, "the application of creative techniques [...] generates critical thinking. In order to use the

techniques, students must revisit the texts and their own writing, and it is through this recursive process that new ways of examining ideas or analyzing texts are born" (p. 34).

Dafoe (2013) is convinced that nothing is more paramount for the improved quality of student work than freedom of choice; choice, she contends, "is the key word here if we want our students to become more engaged" (p. 49). She deliberates how well-organized professors who go above and beyond to supply their students with clear guidelines, detailed outlines, and carefully designed handouts lament extremely "poor quality work" in their classes (p. 42), which seems to nullify their efforts. Paradoxically, all that is needed is exactly the opposite of excessive structuring and micromanagement: relaxing the rules, introducing flexibility, and facilitating choice, which "will lead to both higher levels of performance and more time spent on writing tasks, resulting in better editing, fewer errors, and improved products" (p. 31). In this case, "[i]nstead of following a given template, the students [will be] reading, self-selecting, and thinking deeply about the choices they make and how those decisions will affect their writing" (p. 35).

As a result, they will "become more invested in the work" (Dafoe, 2013, p. 33). Professors may be apprehensive "about challenging students to do more when too often they choose to do less than the required reading and writing"; the trick, however, is to give students "the kind of choices that are often annexed by instructors" and let them "surprise us by beginning to seek out opportunities even without the prompting of educators" (Dafoe, 2013, p. 30).

Setting the Stage: The Course on Reading Practices and Audiences

Introducing a creative writing assignment into a graduate course for non-humanities students is not an easy task,

even if this course is about reading. Avid readers are not creative writers by default. Making students not only more receptive to the idea, but also able to enjoy the creative writing experience requires a relaxed and supportive atmosphere in class, one where students can tap into their creative abilities without being afraid to fail, make a mistake or to look silly or pathetic. We believe that creativity resides in every individual. Whether or not they let it out without reservation or fear of embarrassment depends on how comfortable and secure they feel in the classroom.

In our example, the context for the creative writing assignment was an elective course on reading practices and audiences offered at an ALA-accredited master's program at a North American university. The course focused on the geopolitical, cultural, social, and personal factors that shaped reading behaviors, habits, and preferences. It addressed individual readers and the change in reading habits across the lifespan, and it also dedicated substantial attention to reading and readership in various countries outside of North America. It was developed for a broad interdisciplinary student community and attracted not only LIS students, but also students in information policy studies, information systems, archives and records management, among others. The theoretical and practical foundations taught in this course were of particular relevance in contemporary multicultural society regardless of a specific work environment, social setting, or community. The course was built to benefit students' future personal and professional development irrespective of their specific chosen career path.

Academically Informed Creative Writing: The Reader History Assignment

Assignment Description

The assignment we present in this article offered students the option of pro-

ducing a piece of so-called *academically informed creative writing*, in other words, a short story that would read like fiction while touching upon the essential issues involved in dissecting and understanding the experience of reading. Simply put, the goals and the content were the same as they would be if students wrote a traditional essay; however, the format was much more engaging, accessible, and interesting. It was based on the belief that the "division between" fun creative writing and "the rigors of academic writing . . . is an artificial one and does not benefit students" (Dafoe, 2013, p. 12). It was also based on the conviction that "*creative academic writing* [emphasis in original]," as Dafoe (2013) calls it, or academically informed creative writing, has an honorable place in the process of graduate education and helps to establish "a respectful environment in which students are willing to take risks" (p. 10).

This assignment, worth 25% of the course, presented students with the opportunity to analyze reading practices and habits of an individual reader whom they imagined for the purposes of this exercise. This reader could have been completely fictitious, derived from real life or an amalgam of both. Students were asked to analyze a link between the reader's life circumstances and personality and his/her reading behaviors and choices, i.e., to understand reading behavior in the reading context of this individual (Dali, 2013). Students were expected to create a whole and believable person, to describe the reader's demographic characteristics (e.g., his/her family, health and employment situation, as relevant), and to narrate this person's "reading history," focusing on such questions as the reading habit formation, the age of the first independent reading experience, people who introduced him/her to reading, books or types of reading that he/she liked in the past and likes at present, reasons for favoring certain genres/authors/titles, and so on.

Then students were expected to spot-

light the reader at a decisive or unusual moment of his/her life and analyze the life circumstances surrounding it. Students would then focus on what was happening with the reader's reading behavior at this stage (e.g., Is the reader temporarily unable to read because . . . ? Does the reader switch to a very uncharacteristic type of reading or try some new reading materials that he/she has never tried before? Does the reader withdraw from real life into the world of books?) Based on the reader's evaluation, students were requested to make a reading suggestion that could be suitable for their reader. Their suggestions may have also addressed the types of reading that the reader may avoid or may not like at this stage of his/her life. Students were strongly encouraged not to stay in a "descriptive" mode but to go deeper into the analysis of "why" certain habits and preferences had been formed.

By the time this assignment was due, students had covered the history of reading; sociological approaches to reading and socio-cultural factors contributing to the formation of reading habits; the reading experience and psychological approaches to reading; the quantitative and qualitative approaches to determining reading trends; high, low and omnivorous reading; readers' typologies; the selected models of reading; and reading in childhood and adolescence. Moreover, students had read a wide array of case studies, both recent and historical, related to individual readers and selected reading audiences (e.g., Becker, 1929; Beha, 2009; Burke, 1999; Castagna, 1982; Gekoski, 2009; Martel, 2009; Rosenthal, 1995; Sabine & Sabine, 1983; Sacks, 2010; Silvey, 2009; Sweetney, 2010; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002).

The Freedom to Choose and to Write Creatively

Students were presented with two optional formats for this assignment: either a traditional essay or a piece of academically informed creative writing. Those who

opted for creative writing were not supposed to use direct quotes from secondary sources and were not required to provide in-text citations. However, students were expected to provide a bibliography of sources that informed their writing at the end of the paper. It was expressly stated in the syllabus that there was neither a page limit for lengthier writers nor a grade deduction for well-written papers, irrespective of the number of pages. The assignment description ended with the statement that all assignment instructions were suggestions and guidelines only. The final choice of what to include/exclude and how to structure the papers was left to the students' discretion. Students were urged not to write or talk about anything that made them anxious or uncomfortable and invited to make their stories interesting and fun. They were also reminded that life crises were not the only situations in which reading and books played an important role. They were encouraged to create believable stories without over-dramatization. Any prose style was considered suitable for this assignment as long as the story was well written.

Students were not allowed to interview anyone for the purposes of this paper, and if they based their paper on real-life people and their circumstances and/or on their personal situation, they were strongly urged to make sure that proper measures to protect their own identity and the confidentiality of other people were implemented. They were not allowed to include real names or any revealing details that could make them or the person identifiable.

When giving reading advice, students could wear different hats—a librarian, a close friend, a family member, a colleague, a fellow reader, a stranger who has encountered the reader by accident—as the course was intended to accommodate students from various specializations who were interested in reading, not only future librarians. Students had to consider how their chosen perspective and position vis-à-vis the reader (e.g., formal—librarian,

informal—friend) enabled or restricted them in offering reading suggestions. The suggestions could be limited to one title/author/genre or include a number of them.

Assignment Goals

The goals of this assignment can be divided into two categories: specific or immediate goals, relevant to this particular assignment and the course in question; and general or transcending goals, related to the students' educational process in graduate school and/or their future professional practice and/or their own daily social interactions.

Specific or immediate goals:

1. Fostering a contextualized and holistic understanding of reading habits and behaviors;
2. Increasing self-awareness of personal biases in interpreting another individual's reading preferences and habits;
3. Making connections between theory and practice, between personal and social, and among various fields of knowledge;
4. Enjoying writing; writing without superfluous anxiety.

General or transcending goals:

1. Stimulating critical thinking;
2. Tapping into students' creativity and liberating them from patterned thinking;
3. Fostering the habit of observation and reflection;
4. Facilitating "learning to learn" beyond the mastery of specific concepts or fact accumulation;
5. Validating previous personal and educational experience;
6. Developing storytelling skills.

Examples of how the final two general goals can translate into real-life applications are relayed by former students in the case studies (see Appendix). In addition, there was something we can call the lucky

perks and by-products of the process: creative writing papers saved the professor from the tedium of reading uninspiring and predictable student papers.

Assignment Discussion and Evaluation

Benefits Resulting from Specific or Immediate Assignment Goals

The major issue in today's understanding of reading practices in the context of LIS is the identification of reading needs with information needs and the resulting perception of reading interactions as equivalent to information exchange (Dali, 2015a, 2015b). This issue has disadvantaged library reading practices and education for reading in LIS, transforming work with readers into mechanical searching for fiction and nonfiction using decontextualized keywords (Dali, 2013). Unlike an information need, however, a reading need may have a much more complex background, a more significant engagement of the emotional faculty and roots lurking in the reader's personal history as far back as the reader's childhood. This assignment was specifically designed to foster a contextualized and holistic understanding of reading habits and behaviors by helping students to trace the reader's history and to allow them to see reading practices and choices as an organic extension of the reader's entire world, something that we refer to as the *reading context* (Dali, 2013). Moreover, writing and thinking about another reader in the context of his/her life was intended to increase students' self-awareness of their personal biases in interpreting other individuals' reading preferences and habits.

Reading is a social institution, filled with expectations, conventions, silent codes of conduct and taboos; the reading space is highly interpretive and fluid, and we influence one another's reading behaviors and choices (Bayard, 2007). The ability to understand our role as social actors

in the social theater of reading is crucial not only for individuals who engage with readers professionally (e.g., librarians, educators), but also for those who actively partake of the social practice of reading through online forums, social networking websites, personal blogs, and book clubs. It is also important for those who guide the reading practices of others informally, for example, parents who guide the reading practices of their children or other younger family members; or those who advise ESL [English-as-a-Second-Language] readers on reading material selection. This assignment also presented students with an opportunity to trace connections between theory and practice, and between personal experiences and empirical observations of other people's reading behaviors. By extension, they could clearly see the reflection of their own and other people's lives in scholarly writings and vice versa.

However, one of the most important goals of this assignment was to bring the joy and satisfaction resulting from the process of writing back to the learning environment. It is impossible to completely eliminate anxiety resulting from assignment preparation, but it is possible to reduce the superfluous anxiety generated by the debilitating fear of grade penalty and failure. Students will still worry—or, more specifically, care—about the quality of the final project. They will care about making it interesting, heartfelt, and believable. This is a manifestation of positive anxiety—*anxiety as excitement*.

Students would have to trust their professor implicitly not only to assign a fair grade but also to appreciate their effort and the experimental nature of the paper, which is certainly a leap of faith and not anxiety-free. However, students would be given a chance to write about a topic that they can personally relate to: something in which they have a vested interest. They would write without worrying about the size of margins and fonts or the number of pages. The flow of thought and expressive language—the narrative flow—will not be

broken by parenthetical citations and concerns about relating each and every idea to the statements previously documented by other authors. They would write without twisting their sentences into a formula of academe-speak, and without worrying about sounding scholarly. They would still care about the lucidity, logic, power and magic that is the written word.

Benefits Resulting from General or Transcending Goals

Creative writing has implications for the entire learning process far beyond a specific assignment or course. Students cannot complete this project without a substantial capacity for *critical thinking*: they have to invoke their independent evaluative and decision-making skills. Only a set of guidelines and suggestions is provided: it is at their discretion how to structure and navigate this assignment, and how much and with what literature to support it. Students are given an end-goal and evaluation criteria; the rest—from content to length to style—is up to them. The journey they take through writing is entirely their own, unaltered by the professor's interference or close watch.

Creativity and critical thinking are not separate entities; they are mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing. For inspiration that would help students release creativity and improve critical thinking, they were referred to the story of Archimedes as narrated by Amanda Cain (2002). It is a rendition of the classical tale in which Archimedes, after the many days of fruitless labor in his lab and futile attempts at solving his king's problem, finally had the "eureka" moment when he submerged in the bath tub and attained "the condition of leisure" (Cain, 2002, p. 115). At the moment of complete tranquility and relaxation, he was able to put together his diligently acquired scholastic knowledge with the results of immediate observations in order to achieve a breakthrough and scientific greatness.

The reading aloud of the story in class

was followed by a guided imagination exercise, which allowed students to walk through the process of preparation and get in the mood for writing a story. Just like Archimedes, students were expected to have done their homework by following up on the course readings; it was suggested that this was their scientific knowledge base, which, by the time of the exercise, should have become integral to their mindset. It was also suggested that students leave their books and articles at home and go out to do people watching and practice observation. Students were advised to unobtrusively and respectfully observe people reading—on public transit, in bookstores, in libraries, in cafeterias, in hallways, and at home—paying attention to how they looked, how old they were, what they were wearing, what kind of book (or other material) they were reading, and what their faces and body language expressed. Students were asked to imagine these readers' stories and to find inspiration and ideas for their own creations. This was followed by the suggestion to practice introspection and reflection by staying alone, in a quiet and peaceful place, thinking of their friends, family, readers in the library, and other people they knew in the context of reading, and remembering meaningful encounters related to reading.

Students were invited to write their paper without looking at secondary sources and notes. Only when they were done writing and happy with the story would they look through their course material and find a match between studies and theories and their own creations. The ability to move effortlessly between theory and practice, to easily link reading with observed, and to marry the past with the present as a matter of habit is incredibly important for future professionals who intend to engage in user-centered (rather than material-, technology- or information-oriented) professional practices. This ability is a mark of professionals who are perceptive, sharp, and observant and who have a great skill of paying attention to people with whom

they work and communicate; this usually translates into higher empathy and respect for others.

Together, critical thinking, released creativity, and self-direction, enhanced by a genuine connection to one's prior personal experience and education, will facilitate students' learning to learn; this empowering pedagogical amalgam supports not the mere acquisition and mastery of specific concepts and factual information but an independent approach to learning, just as Dafoe's (2013) experience also confirmed.

Forestalling Possible Concerns

Several issues deserve special attention: avoiding plagiarism, students' willingness to trust their professor's approach to grading and to undertake the experiment, and the dilemmas that faculty members have in evaluating any creative assignments.

A Different Way of Referencing

The lack of in-text citations may cause objections and misunderstanding on the part of some educators, mostly those who do not deal with creative writing. However, the requirement of a bibliography at the end of the paper should offset these concerns. In fact, this type of sourcing is no less sensible and useful and fulfills the two goals of referencing: (1) students give due credit to scholarly work that inspired and informed their stories; and (2) students make it possible to track down these sources based on full citations. In addition, students take an unhurried, close, careful, and retrospective look at their work and walk through it, matching what they created with the sources of theory, facts, and information discovered in the course. Figures 1(a) and 1(b) demonstrate the excerpts from two student stories with relevant academic topics superimposed over the text². The Appendix, which contains

²These figures have been created for the purposes of this paper to illustrate our point; they were not part of the actual assignment.

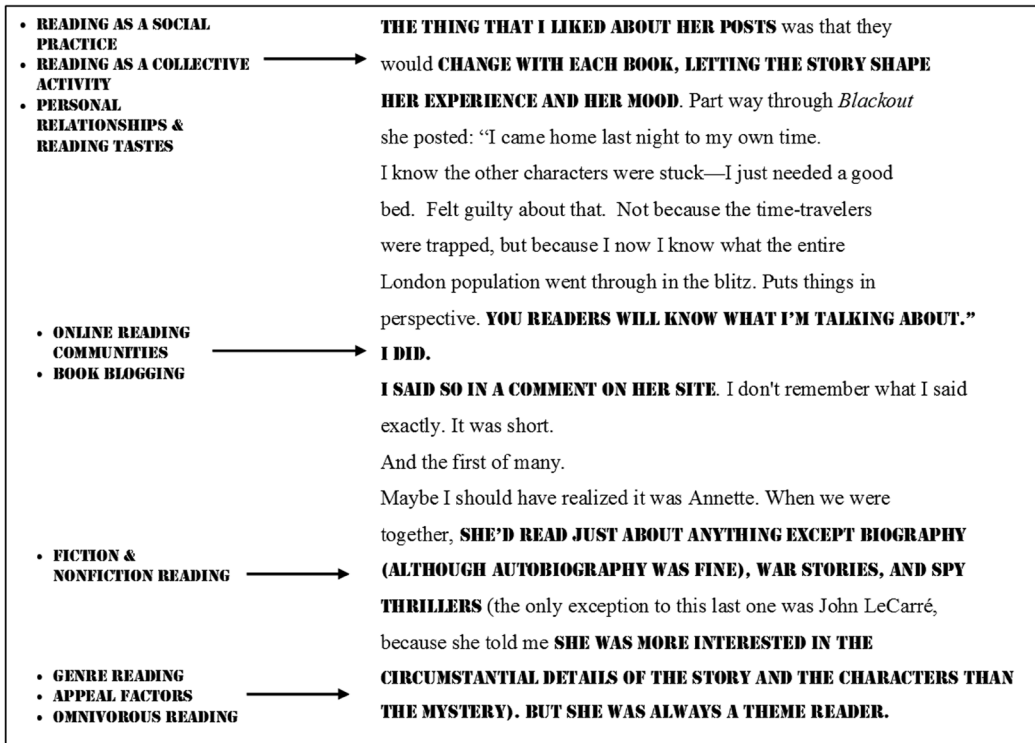


Figure 1(a). Excerpts from Two Stories with Corresponding Themes. Story 1.

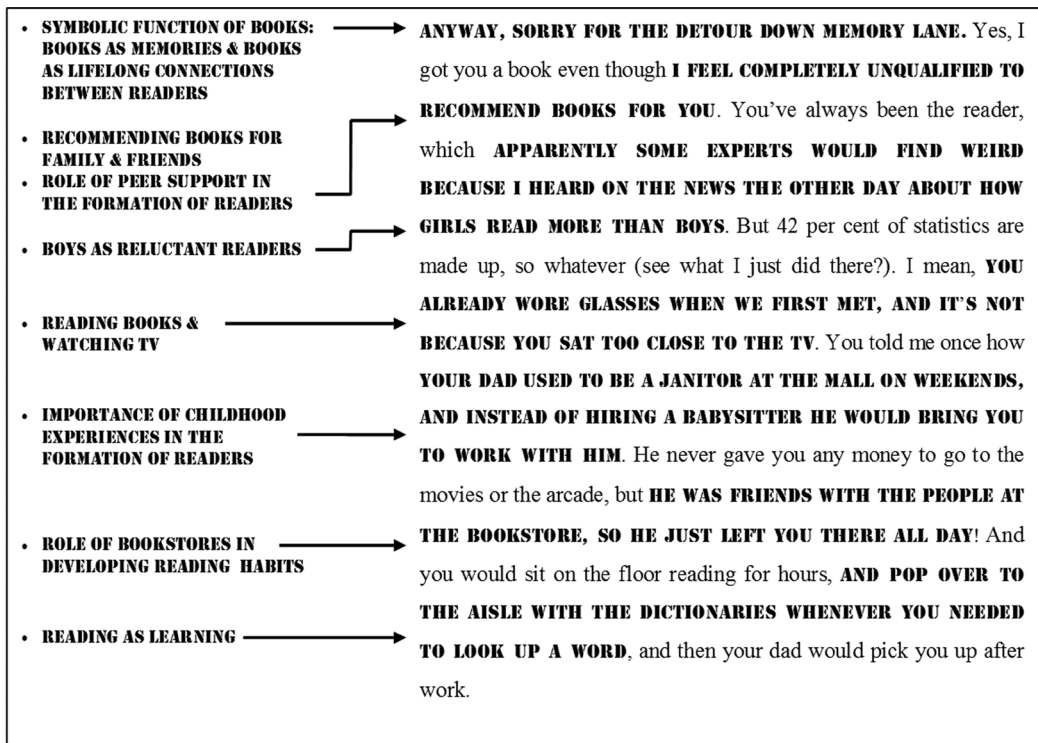


Figure 1(b). Excerpts from Two Stories with Corresponding Themes. Story 2.

a full text of the stories, includes a complete list of course topics integrated into the story and a list of secondary sources that informed the stories. This assignment emulated the creative process undergone by a fiction writer who writes his/her story having done extensive factual background research. It is rare that any work of fiction is not research-based—be it a mainstream novel, a psychological thriller, science fiction, historical fiction, or a fictionalized biography. The background material collected by the writer is processed, digested, reworked, and seamlessly integrated into a wholesome narrative framed by the author's imagination.

For future professionals, this assignment is also a simulation of the transition that they will experience at the workplace. At first, they will remember that certain concepts and theories about reading, reading practices, and reading audiences were taught and learned in class and they will look back at those theories (and even their class notes and lectures) before implementing a project or developing a service or policy at work. However, as they begin practicing professionally on a regular basis, this theoretical knowledge will become an integral part of their professional persona, of what they do, and of how they do it. A few years forward, they will not remember that certain concepts were taught at school for they will have made the leap from the theoretical “knowing that” to the practical, expert and experience-based “knowing how,” to rephrase Kvale (1996).

Students' trust in their professor's sensible and fair grading approach is another matter. Two things can help develop this trust: (1) fostering a generally open and collegial relationship between a professor and his/her students, which will extrapolate on the administration of assignments; and (2) making grading criteria clear and explicit from the start. The fact that creative writing is in the focus does not mean that specific evaluation criteria cannot be established. Dafoe (2013) also believes that although “we are preoccupied with

assessment and [...] standards” and, as a result, “some of us may be jittery about devoting class time to creativity, . . . creative efforts can easily and effectively be evaluated” (p. 9). For instance, the grading grid in Figure 2 was integrated in the syllabus for the course in question.

In subsequent class discussions, it was also explained that the professor would be looking for many of the same features in student papers as readers seek in the works of fiction: an entertaining content, an original and unpredictable plot with twists and turns, well-developed and exciting characters, a conflict, a dynamic story progression, a satisfactory resolution (or an open ending to ponder), and the quality of imagery. It was remarked that reading the student papers, the professor would be asking herself: “Do I want to keep reading or am I bored?”

That is to say, in the case of creative writing assignments, there is one additional special condition: students have to trust their professor as a reader capable of appreciating the craft of storytelling. This kind of relationship has the potential to change the “old equation of student-writer equals teacher-grader” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 17) and to introduce a new one whereby student-creative-writer equals teacher-avid-reader.

There was no targeted assessment of how students felt about this assignment, but frequent praise for this exercise in students' course evaluations and a string of delightful stories, accompanied by relatively high grades could attest to the fact that students enjoyed it, especially because they had a choice of doing a more conventional paper with no effect on the grade.

Making a Choice to Evaluate Personal and Professional Growth and Risk-taking and to Defend your Choice in the Face of Grade Quotas

Grades for this assignment were consistently higher than for assignments in more traditional formats, and not because stu-

	Excellent			Good		
	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-
Reader's personal and socio-demographic context						
Reader's reading history						
Plausibility of the chosen life/reading situation						
Quality and suitability of reading advice						
Quality of writing; style						
Accuracy of the chosen citation format (bibliography)						

Figure 2. Assignment 1. Reader's History Paper (25%). Grading Grid.

dents scored some nebulous bonus points as compensation or as appreciation for trying out something new. Simply put, based on the aforementioned evaluation criteria, most students performed on a much higher level and delivered a superior quality of work compared with other assignments. This is very consistent with what Dafoe (2013) observed as well, noting that “[c]reative approaches and unusual frameworks for written arguments necessitate spending more time with both reading and writing, resulting in a higher level of scholarship” (p. 29). The labored, awkward and often grammatically jumbled language was mostly gone from creatively written stories, as were strenuous citations and contrived arguments. Genuine care for the subject matter and the final product were felt, and even students with a background in science, accounting, and commerce, accustomed to a different style of academic writing, were able to relate to this assignment and tell a story. Students also did a thorough job of presenting a list of secondary sources that informed their writing, drawing the connection between theory and practice.

Although there was not any formal or latent pressure to achieve a certain grade distribution in this course (grades in graduate school were protected from quotas by the formal statement from the university governing body), it is likely that faculty in other departments may face such pressure. It takes not only scholarly determination,

pedagogical confidence, and character to resist it and to stand up for one's pedagogical choices, but also a convincing argument that leans on evidence-based merit rather than on emotional appeal. While emotional appeal stems from the professor's desire to provide positive reinforcement and praise to students for their willingness to take the risk, evidence-based merit is rooted in students' improved performance in the context of clearly defined evaluation criteria, as was done in the course in question. Evidentiary support for the effectiveness of creative methodologies can also be found in various pedagogical theories, such as Carl Rogers's (1959, 1969) humanistic pedagogy, the philosophy of John Dewey (1938, 1961), the andragogical approach by Malcolm S. Knowles (1970, 1975; also, Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) or the work of Peter Jarvis (2010), which amalgamates and critically analyzes many relevant theories at once.

In creative writing assignments, “the element of ‘rigor’ is inherent in the process rather than supplemental” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 15). As a result, these assignments are not inferior to more standard types of tests and written papers. The problem here is, of course, that many regular and adjunct faculty teaching in academia have no background in education, pedagogy, and evaluation methods in higher education. As a result, they are not closely familiar with the aforementioned adult learning theories

and different philosophical frameworks that can support and justify alternative, more flexible methods of evaluation. That is to say, faculty who seek to push the envelope and integrate unorthodox methods of teaching into their courses will do well to investigate several alternative grading approaches and their underlying theoretical bases in order to make a convincing case that creative methods can be just as rigorous and evidence-based as the standardized ones.

Case Studies

Below we present three different takes on the same writing assignment: two by former students, now librarians, and one by the professor. Analytical reflections are accompanied by the full text of the short stories, which appear in the Appendix for the *JELIS* audience to review—and to enjoy. We have chosen to relate these case studies in the first person whereby “I” stands for each one of us.

Case 1. The Role of Creative Writing in Validating Previous Personal and Educational Experience: The Student’s Perspective

The field of LIS is growing increasingly interdisciplinary not only on account of diverse areas of research and faculty expertise, but also owing to diverse educational and professional backgrounds of master’s students who enter respective programs (e.g., Ard *et al.*, 2006; Weech & Pluzhenskaia, 2005). While LIS research is flourishing tremendously due to interdisciplinary cross-pollination, it is less clear how LIS education makes most out of the vast and rich intellectual and professional capital that students bring with them to the program. It feels, at times, that this potential is un- or under-utilized and, as some would contend, it should probably be left at the threshold as students enter the program. One study, for example, suggests that many students entering LIS

programs do “not have a clear understanding of the process of getting an LIS education” and that “[a]cademically oriented” students experience the greatest culture shock adjusting to the program (Dow, 2011, p. 38). It is proposed that “newly admitted students with previous graduate work in the humanities and pure social sciences” be educated about the culture of LIS programs so they are not unpleasantly surprised (Dow, 2011, p. 38). Noticeable in this study are the desire to change students’ perceptions and responses to the program without “changing [program] objectives”; the dichotomy of academic and skill-based fields of study, with LIS seemingly falling into the latter category; and a concern that unhappy and “disaffected” students will “contaminate the experience for those around” them (Dow, 2011, p. 38). The root of the problem is identified as a gap between student expectations and the supposed “realities” of LIS education, if we choose to see an LIS degree primarily as skill-based training.

Of course, LIS has an “occupational element” to it (Dow, 2011, p. 38); it is a professional degree, after all. But it is also a graduate university degree, not a workshop or certification from a vocational school. As such, this education should have the appropriate gravitas, with the goal of educating future creative, analytical informational professionals capable of effective leadership and original thought. Rather than focusing on the “sharpest contrast” (Dow, 2011, p. 38) between LIS pedagogical approaches and those of other disciplines, perhaps it is worth seeking potential similarities and opportunities for cross-pollination. Maybe it is LIS programs that need to change and reinvent themselves. Maybe, instead of truncating students’ experiences at the program’s doorstep, in an attempt to ‘convert’ them into LIS culture, LIS departments should carefully explore what these students have to offer to enrich their respective curricula. Maybe LIS departments should reconsider the definition of graduate professional ed-

ucation and the image of LIS they project. Do we want to believe that LIS is a field that lacks creativity and ability for growth and is full of tedium and monotony? I do not believe that this is what LIS is.

During my LIS program, I was lucky to take several courses, including the course on reading practices, which changed my perception of the work that could be done in the field. Before I enrolled in my LIS program, I had already earned a BFA in Theatre, an MA in Drama and a certificate to teach non-credit English to newcomers and international students. My previous MA was quite closely aligned with the culture of my LIS program, and my teaching experience could be directly applied to LIS courses, such as information literacy. In a sense, I had what it took to be satisfied and happy with the program. But the artistic education, skills and training that I received as part of my undergraduate studies in Theatre, as well as my related professional experience outside of university, were rendered irrelevant. This experience included playwriting, directing, designing, performing, participating in stage crews, and more. It represented thousands of hours of my life, which, once I transitioned into librarianship, had to be put in a box and filed away. Although I anticipated and accepted it, it was still disheartening.

My experience with the creative writing assignment remedied my feeling of disheartenment and allowed me to put my previous artistic background to good use. The assignment encouraged students to communicate research through a creative form, and the exact format was for the students to choose. I chose a short story because of my recently developed interest in the form, and I was ecstatic to discover that long hours I spent considering character, story, and action in a theatrical context could inform my work for this project. Being able to draw on this experience yielded unexpectedly pleasant and surprising results in terms of both my understanding of research and my level of personal engagement. Neil Gaiman (2013) once said that

Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you, and you alone, using your imagination, create a world and people [in] it and look out through other eyes. You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well. You're being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you're going to be slightly changed. (para. 16)

The described process of empathy is used as an analytical tool by storytellers of every stripe. In theatre, it is used to see through the characters' eyes so that meaning of their action can be interpreted and the play can maintain a sense of internal logic. For this assignment, I did not read research materials from an objective distance. Instead, I stepped into the shoes of my characters and began my analysis with empathy. I imagined how the characters saw their world and experienced the world as they did. In Gaiman's words, I was changed. Research articles and book chapters stopped being abstract entities divorced from life. In fact, they became fragments of undiscovered fictional histories. It was up to me to draw the connections between these fragments and to determine what the research meant in the context of my characters' lives. In the context of a human life, more broadly.

As the characters developed, my attachment to them grew, and I was motivated to return to them often. I could relate to Gibbons' (2004) assertion that self-motivation feeds students' drive to achieve their goals. I spent far more time on the pre-writing, drafting, and revising stages than usual. I tried out ideas, deleted whole pages, and started over. It was like traveling along an upward spiral whereby my writing and the final product became better at every turn.

As the experimentation continued, the form of academically informed fiction began to fascinate me. How could a fictional character channel research findings? How much exposition could the narrative sus-

tain before the forward momentum would grind to a halt? Self-directed creative learning opened up opportunities to pursue the goals about which I was passionate. It also allowed my long-term interests to evolve in new ways. If I had not had the latitude to use my “unrelated,” non-LIS education, I would not have discovered that the intersection of story, character, and LIS research can be a very illuminating one.

Several notable benefits of this exercise were immediately obvious. One was a more lucid writing style and the ability to communicate complex concepts in a simple, accessible language. Since characters and research were intertwined, the use of jargon, convoluted sentences, and awkward quotes would ruin the narrative flow, flatten the character, confuse the potential reader and stand in the way of clear research presentation. Another outcome was a higher than usual degree of retention. My writing had no in-text citations, but even months later I could remember the connection between specific parts of the story and the type of research that supported them. This was not typical of my work as an LIS student. In some other courses, I often had trouble remembering the content of 50–60% of my sources by the time a paper was graded and returned. Moreover, I had fun. This is a subjective reaction but one of immense personal value. Every student hopes to be highly invested in graduate studies. When it does not occur, it is disappointing; when it does occur, it is precious. Most importantly, my previous educational background and personal and professional experience were validated. I finally realized that every talent, every skill, every bit of knowledge that I have is applicable and can result in surprising and enlightening experiences, advancing my education, and opening up new opportunities.

Case 2. The Role of Creative Writing in Developing Storytelling Skills in Future Professionals: The Student’s Perspective

While in the LIS program, I seized ev-

ery opportunity to weave my own stories into homework assignments. The process of creative writing is meant to encourage students to develop personal narratives around their experiences (Rambe & Mlambo, 2014), and I felt the truth of that on a metatextual level as a librarian in training. My studies in a master’s program were akin to attending a magical school—I could construct a narrative about the mysterious art of information retrieval and organization, the meaning of information, information infrastructures, and the intricacies of classification schemes. I still wonder if we could tell these stories in a way that was different from a structured course paper. The predefined structure and very particular format of the paper presented the greatest challenge. As though it was not hard enough to formulate coherent thoughts from the information overload of consulted sources, I also had to make them fit into the syllabus-prescribed templates.

When professors were more flexible in their requirements and allowed for options and choices, things seemed easier. And when we were permitted the imaginative customization of papers and projects, my fellow students and I found ourselves enjoying graduate school immensely. This flexibility made the coursework less monotonous and mundane, and more personal and meaningful. One example was the creative writing assignment in the course on reading practices and audiences. The more freedom I was allowed in my work, the more invested I became in the assignment, and the more thought I put into my writing. Just as Dafoe (2013) claimed, “[w]riting is about discovery, learning, and, yes, identity. Yet it is readily apparent to most educators that the majority of students do not identify themselves as writers” (p. 13). In that class, I felt like a writer. A chance to express ideas in a natural, organic way was a pure joy, as was the opportunity to use not only scholarly sources but also works of fiction, TV shows, and poetry in my assignments. Somehow, having the flexibility to choose not only themes but

also formats of expression opened up limitless possibilities. Who knew that applying an inventive story structure to an academic paper could be so much fun? Preparing for a profession in the information field—a place of facts and non-fiction—by writing fiction felt both transgressive and transformative. I could relate to the claim that “[i]t is this willingness to break patterns, play with language in a variety of ways, and examine the various approaches to how we think about both writing and teaching writing that produces the most positive results” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 32). It also awakens the storyteller in all of us.

Currently employed as a public librarian and working mainly in children’s services, I am all the more convinced that creative thought and storytelling skills are vital to what I do. One of the chief components of my job is delivering storytime programs. I am relaying my passion for stories to children with whom I work, and I feel that “[b]y incorporating storytelling into the library experience, [I] not only tap into creativity but also foster a lifelong skill” (Cordell, 2012, p. 41). Preparing children for reading begins with the ability to communicate, and to forge that spark of connection with an audience. The dynamic quality of an interactive storytelling session—be it with a book or a felt board or a puppet show—can increase empathy and emotional intelligence in both the storyteller and the listener.

Imagination plays a crucial role in the middle childhood framework used to design this type of programming. The goal is to get children to embrace reading and learning while also promoting fun and play; the hope is to instill a lifelong appreciation for the arts as an integral part of literacy development and an incentive for learning (Pritchett, 2013). However, in order to ensure the authentic experience, librarians have to step into the children’s shoes and view the storytelling process from within, with empathy and insight. But what if librarians did not experience the transformative quality of storytell-

ing firsthand as children or—and this is a more likely scenario—forgot how it feels to enjoy storytelling as a listener? What if playfulness, spontaneity, and imaginativeness were lost “somewhere in the journey through twelve to thirteen years of schooling” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 29) and postsecondary education? If so, creative writing can help librarians, and librarians in training, to get back on track. Armed not only with the knowledge of books and child development but also with creative powers, librarians in my library have designed a variety of after-school programs for children, including book clubs, creative writing workshops, and classes on puppetry and kamishibai (a form of Japanese paper theater that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers by having the story illustrated on cards and combined with narration).

Meaningful and imaginative storytelling underlies more than just literary-themed library activities, it also supports other types of programs, such as the creation of stop-motion Lego films and superhero role-playing. These after-school clubs offer librarians the opportunity to tell original stories through different means of expression, and it seems that engaging with creative writing is one of the best ways to prepare for this type of professional work. The act of creative writing turns storytelling from a latent passion into an active skill, and this process is replicated by librarians every time they run a storytelling program or simply converse with their readers, young and old, in a library environment. It is replicated when they compose blog posts and emails, speak at meetings and give interviews, conduct library tours, and present at conferences. It is all about telling a story that captivates the audience and delivers a message—effectively, creatively and powerfully at once. Those who emerge from LIS master’s programs without acquiring storytelling skills may find themselves at a disadvantage as not only the desire, but also the ability to narrate is integral to library practice.

Lucky Perks and By-products of the Creative Writing Process: The Professor's Perspective

Many of us (faculty members) are not immune to excessive yawning in the process of reading “boring, predictable” student “essays that put all of us to sleep” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 10). Apathy, carelessness, and boredom that students experience working on standardized, uninspiring assignments which have little relevance to their life and interests, backfire. We have to face the music and cannot escape self-punishment by reading low quality, wearily similar, and similarly dull essays. Our own uninventiveness, lack of creativity, and fear of risk-taking come back to haunt us. A slew of “repetitive, confusing, and superficial” papers land on our desks; what is even more “concerning, however, is the incoherency of [students’] written products” (Dafoe, 2013, p. 48). Luckily, it was not the case with the creative writing assignment. Grading became easy because the process was more akin to reading a collection of short stories than to academic evaluation. Not all the stories were equally successful but this would have also been the case with any anthology of short stories. The main advantage was that plots changed, voices changed, and styles changed as I moved on from one work to another. The pile of assignments melted very quickly, and at the outcome, there was a sense of satisfaction and time well spent.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have turned our attention to contemplating a topic that is not frequently discussed in LIS literature—the role and significance of creative writing in graduate professional education, using a graduate LIS course on reading practices and audiences as a case study. Presenting a combined professor–student perspective, we have built on *Breaking Open the Box* by Nancy Dafoe (2013).

One example that Dafoe cites in her book is the student’s experience with creative writing in class:

In addition, creative writing is so pleasantly out-of-the-box. There are no structure restrictions to hold my ideas back. While I often feel caged and blind in other classes, I am flowering with life in this class. There are no mind games (trying to understand the directions while fitting into a piece of a puzzle the teacher will mold). The well-needed release that comes from this class gives me hope that when I enter the real world, I will still have creativity left to share. (p. 31)

This experience bears a striking resemblance to those addressed in our article. What is even more striking is the fact that Dafoe’s student spontaneously notices and mentions something that can be considered a hallmark of freedom in learning—“no mind games.” When the relationship of trust is developed between students and professors, it forges the atmosphere whereby creativity flourishes. Doing creative writing, students come to realize that their personal intellectual capital is not irrelevant in an academic or professional setting but is, in fact, a valuable factor adding depth to scholarly insight and knowledge creation. To allow students to have this experience, we have to reconsider how we view graduate students in LIS. Rather than seeing students as novices, who need to change and absorb LIS culture, we would like them to be considered vital contributors to their own educational process.

Creative writing, along with some types of oral presentations, is unique in nurturing students’ skill of meaningful and powerful storytelling, especially in individuals whose future careers will entail storytelling (in libraries, educational institutions, health-care settings, not-for-profit organizations and elsewhere) or public speaking in general. The ability to narrate and captivate the audience is akin to the ability to make a convincing argument, do advo-

cacy, or deliver an inspirational speech, all of which are paramount for future professionals irrespective of the area of practice. Moreover, critical thinking boosted by creative forces can help students invoke their inner potential and the habit of observation and reflection (Cain, 2002), which in turn will bring about an unconventional approach to solving problems. The uniformity of required paper formats prevalent in academia, while usefully fostering writing structure and academic discipline (Dafoe, 2013), also imposes patterned thinking and curbs self-expression. We criticize researchers for letting the format of available applications (e.g., digital survey software) drive the survey design and the wording of questions. Why do we then expect that our students will squarely fit their diverse ideas on a wide range of topics into the rigid format of a social science paper? At the end of the day, if the goal is to educate future professionals who are capable of mindful and reflective professional practices, attentive to people, persuasive in public speaking, and skilled at making a compelling argument, creative writing and other less structured assignments are a must.

This fact notwithstanding, we do not promote incorporating creative assignments in LIS courses to the exclusion of other methods of evaluation, nor do we try to diminish the usefulness of other teaching choices. Information transfer and lectures have their merit, which has been proven by centuries of pedagogical practice. Most importantly, we do not promote our suggestions as the best. If our article marched into the world under the banner “This is how you do it,” which would be tantamount to describing the all-too-often praised and all-too-often irrelevant best practices, we would betray the very idea that motivated us to write it in the first place: advocating for diversity and flexibility in the curriculum—the diversity of educational methods, teaching approaches, forms of presentation, and grading schemes. Diversity in teaching methods is

something that can foster an atmosphere of freedom in the classroom—the freedom to create and be creative.

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Appendix. The Full Text of Two Samples of Creative Writing

Story One (Genre: short story):

There and Back Again: The Story of a Reader and a Reader-In-The-Making

1

I went into the bar—a cozy little place she knew—and I scanned the tabletops for a plush flower. She said she'd bring one so I knew who she was. This wasn't supposed to be a date; we were both very clear on that point. Still, my hands were getting sweaty and I couldn't help wonder what might happen if she were phenomenally beautiful and intelligent. What might happen?

I found the flower near the back of the room. It was draped halfway off a table . . . in front of my ex.

We stared at each other. Annette pointed at me and said, “NoPseudonym?”

I pointed back. “TheseBootsAreMade-ForWalkingBabe?”

She nodded blankly.

2

I had been a follower of *TheseBootsAreMadeForWalkingBabe* for about three months. I found her book blog one day at work. I was bored and googling for new walking boots. And I found her.

She read lots of books with a strong sense of place about them. Her gimmick was that she'd post entries in a postcard style—as though she were witnessing the events first hand, as though she had travelled to these places. At that time, she was halfway through *The Hobbit*. She wrote things like, “God, these trolls smell” or “I wonder if I should tell the hobbits about microwave dinners. Would they appreciate them? On the one hand, they're easy. On the other, they're not very good. Are hobbits lazy people who like to eat, or gluttonous people who like to be lazy? What's the driving instinct? I wonder.”

Sometimes a reader would comment on her site. I saw a guy who wrote, “How much did the plane cost ya?” Except this guy spelled plane P-L-A-I-N. But she wrote back, “I have magic boots that take me anywhere. Take a plane to Middle Earth? That's just silly.”

I started checking the site for fun.

I didn't read along with *The Hobbit*—I had read it when I was a kid, I didn't feel the need to pick it up again. I gave *Atonement* a pass. But when she read *Blackout* by Connie Willis, I read along.

The thing that I liked about her posts was that they would change with each book, letting the story shape her experience and her mood. Part way through *Blackout* she posted: “I came home last night to my own time. I know the other characters were stuck—I just needed a good bed. Felt guilty about that. Not because the time-travelers were trapped, but because now I know what the entire London population went through in the blitz. Puts things in perspective. You readers will know what I'm talking about.”

I did.

I said so in a comment on her site. I

don't remember what I said exactly. It was short.

And the first of many.

Maybe I should have realized it was Annette. When we were together, she'd read just about anything except biography (although autobiography was fine), war stories, and spy thrillers (the only exception to this last one was John LeCarré, because she told me she was more interested in the circumstantial details of the story and the characters than the mystery). But she was always a theme reader.

At the table, I put on my best polite smile. “Travel-type books, eh? That's fun.”

Annette nodded.

I started safely. “How've you been? And hey . . . how's Ellie?”

Ellie was her roommate and best friend. They were so close that I used to wonder how I'd propose to one without proposing to the other. As it turned out, that wasn't a bridge I ever had to cross.

“Oh, she moved.”

“Moved out?”

“To Australia.”

Apparently, Ellie had accepted a job in Australia shortly after I left the picture. So Annette got her own place. A nice, clean, new condo along the lakeshore that was the size of a matchbox. She smiled and shrugged. “But it's home, now.”

I nodded.

“So are you reading anything?” she asked.

3

Safe ground. I'm sure that's what she was looking for when she introduced the topic.

We should have talked about something else. I had heard this story before, I think. But truncated. As we sat there that night, talking, drinking, it had a completely different feel.

Carrie, she said. “That was one of the first ones that really . . .” She flexed her fingers as though someone tucked her toe into an electrical socket.

She had read it when she was pretty

young. She wasn't like me at all. At that age, I read comics, I read song lyrics, I read video game magazines. But I didn't read what most adults told me was worth reading—books. Not until later. People who did baffled me. Annette was one of those baffling people. She once told me it was partly because she grew up in Woodstock and there wasn't a lot to do. Reading was a way to pass the time. It was a way to see new places without being able to leave. She'd get an armful of books from the library on Hunter Street and get lost in them. Then she'd return them and get more. It was a habit. "No. Not just a habit, I guess," she added. I wasn't sure what it meant, but even my dense, primate brain realized that it meant reading was a deeper activity than twiddling her thumbs.

"Most books were just sort of a nice way to spend the time. A few really got to me. Like *Carrie*. I remember being so excited when the librarian finally let me take home a Stephen King book. And it . . . it rang in my head like a bell. I guess because I always felt like a complete weirdo when I was a kid. And kind of alone. I had friends, you know? But I was the kind of person who could be with them and alone at the same time. And when I read *Carrie*, it hit a nerve I didn't know I had. I mean, nobody made fun of me the way they made fun of her, but for some reason, I imagined I could make things explode for weeks. And that was fun. Fun and comforting and . . . I don't know."

"That's what sucks about growing up. Everyone's awkward together and no one realizes it." I know I felt that way.

Annette and I smiled at each other.

Books don't make for good small talk. Books have roots that are buried in the past, in joys, in insecurities, in preoccupations, in secrets, in anything and everything that makes a person human. Books reveal things, make things spring from the shadows, intentionally or unintentionally. Looking back, I should have realized it was a relationship minefield.

And I had the distinct feeling I had just stepped on something that went "click."

4

Things became dim and fuzzy. I remember the music got turned up at some point. I remember empty glasses. And then more empty glasses. I remember a damp table. And then I remember the cool night air and some guy behind a big desk and walking down a narrow hallway and fumbling with a brass door handle and tumbling into crisp white sheets that I knew I did not own.

5

"I don't think I've ever gotten a hotel for that before," I said as I lay beside her the next morning. I knew it was dumb; I just didn't know what else to say.

She covered her face with her hands.

It was really unfair that we had been thrown together the night before, felt terrible, worked past it, had a great time, only to end up feeling terrible again.

I picked up the room service menu from the side table. "Breakfast?" I offered.

She shook her head, didn't remove her hands.

I didn't want any, either. That didn't stop me from reading the menu three times, anyway. Who said non-fiction isn't escapism?

"So . . ." I said, not very helpfully.

She took her hands away from her face and gasped. She got out of bed and began rummaging through her things.

"What is it?" I asked?

She threw down her clothes and checked through her purse. "Oh no!"

"What?"

"I left my book at the bar."

I nearly suggested we should go back and look for it, but the bar wasn't going to be open yet, and I wasn't sure she wanted to go with me. The bar felt like a crime scene—at least, to me.

"Forget it," she said. "I'll call them later." And she started getting dressed.

“Can I buy you coffee?” I asked. “We should probably, you know, talk.”

She nodded.

6

It was overcast but warm, so we took our coffees to go and walked along the street. Second Cup was packed and I didn’t want to feel as though we were being overheard.

“What was that?”

“You tell me,” she said.

Oh just man-up, I thought. We had cared about each other once, but that was ages ago. And just as we slipped back to the nice things, I could easily imagine us slipping back to the not-so-nice things.

“One time, right?”

“God, yes!”

“What happened?”

“We got drunk.”

“Yeah but . . . *what happened?*”

7

We wandered until we reached the end of that conversation. I say “end” not because it had a satisfying conclusion so much as a natural termination. We slipped. It was an accident. End of story. No point in dwelling. I suppose I could have said I was lonely. Technically, I had been in self-imposed dating exile since Natalie-the-nut. But I didn’t mention that.

We sat on a bench beside a parkette, holding on to our empty coffee cups, watching a flurry of kids swirl around the playground equipment.

Annette told me how difficult it was getting used to living alone. It was her first time. She had always lived with family or roommates, or, for that short while, a boyfriend who had a strange preoccupation with stroking inanimate objects. Living alone was quiet, she said. Living alone was boring. It was hard to ignore the press of the walls and the drone of her own voice. So she did what she always did to acclimate. She read. And because Ellie had moved so far away, her new theme would be foreign places—both actual and invented.

Except that wasn’t quite enough, either. What fun would going to all these places be if she couldn’t share it with people? So she started the blog. “Except it’s weird. I can talk about things, but I can’t look in anyone’s eye or even know who’s giving opinions and comments. Well, some of those idiots can stay anonymous for all I care. But ‘NoPseudonym’ seemed nice. So I thought, ‘Why not reach out?’” She scowled. “And I wind up . . .”

“With me.”

“No offense, Barry.”

“None taken.”

Maybe I was being a lousy actor. She rubbed my back and smiled. “It was good. The time that we had. But I’d rather not . . . I mean, would you? Really?”

“No.”

But I realized I did miss her. Not as a lover, though. She had a sense of fun and color and adventure that I found novel.

“I think I’m going to make a members section for the site,” she said absentmindedly. “Some people at work have started reading along. Maybe I can start a little book club out of it.”

Last time I spoke to her, she was doing fundraising for Harbourfront, and I know there were two or three people with whom she got on very well.

“With a book club I can actually know who’s saying what.”

She didn’t invite me to be part of this club. That was okay. After that night in the hotel, we needed time apart.

“So what is *TheseBootsAreMadeFor-WalkingBabe* going to read next?”

“Depends if I get my book back.”

“If you have to start something new?”

She shrugged. “Haven’t decided. There’s too much. Any recommendations?”

These days I mostly read news apps and whatever I find online that grabs my interest. So I was stumped for a second. Then, for some reason, one book popped into my head. “Ever read *The Memoirs of Wild Bill Hickok?*”

She made a face. “I’m not into westerns. Or historical memoirs.”

“It’s by Richard Matheson. And, yeah, it’s a western, but not a typical one. It’s bright. It’s fun. It’s easy to read. It’s just a good story. He’s invented this great version of Wild Bill who has all these faults and all these troubles, but you can’t help but like him anyway—partly because Bill is able to look at himself and laugh. Actually, it’s kind of sad at the end. He’s apart from his wife and he misses her terribly.” I held up my hands. “Not a concealed message, by the way. I guess I was thinking of Ellie.”

With a deadpan glare: “She’s not my wife.”

“No, I mean . . . he misses her. He’s lonely. But sometimes you read books about characters in these situations and you feel worse. This one puts a smile on your face. Besides, I figure it works with your current theme, doesn’t it?”

8

Tonight.

I’ve had some whiskey and I feel warm and cheerful.

And I log on to TheseBootsAreMade-ForWalkingBabe’s website. Haven’t been on it for over two months, not since Annette and I parted on that overcast Saturday.

She was true to her word: there’s a member’s section now. It says ‘for serious travelers only.’ I can imagine that she’s in there with her friends, all sending messages back and forth as if they’re some place completely different, all laughing about it together at work. She probably even invited Ellie to be a part of it from Australia. A borderless book club with stories about crossing borders. The next evolution in social reading. Good for her.

There’s still a public part of the site with a handful of posts and the occasional comment. It looks like she’s reading *The Cunning Man* now. I scroll down to the first entry. It says that she’s on a time-travel kick and felt like visiting an older version of Toronto.

I scroll down some more without read-

ing much of what’s written. But there’s a comment that catches my eye. It’s written by that same jerk. It says, “They have planes to Deadwood, too?” And again, he spelled plane P-L-A-I-N.

Deadwood?

I scroll down.

I notice she’s sent a postcard from a dusty place where Bill’s being a hell of a tour guide. And in the final post for that book, she says all the travelers enjoyed the trip immensely and she’s glad a friend told her to go.

The friend was glad to do it, I think.

I click on the member’s only link and request to join the group. Then I realize, stupidly, that I don’t have a copy of *The Cunning Man*. So I order one from Amazon and shut down the computer.

I stumble over to my bookshelf and fumble through the papers and magazines, trying to find *The Memoirs of Wild Bill Hickok*, hoping I wasn’t dumb enough to throw it out.

I find it.

Holding it in my hand, I feel like it has a subtle vibration, like it’s hardwired into a living network.

Well, I guess it is.

I take it back to the couch and flick on the lamp. I figure a little backtracking can’t be a bad thing while I wait for Amazon to ship the club’s current selection. And even though I rarely reread books, it seems like the best way in the world to finish off my night.

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Story Themes

- Appeal factors
- Book clubs
- Books: not better than life
- Book blogging
- Fiction and nonfiction reading
- Finding kindred spirits through reading
- Free-choice, voluntary reading
- Genre reading
- Identifying with book characters
- Living vicariously through books
- Matching moods and books
- Negative side-effects of reading
- Non-book leisure reading
- Omnivorous reading
- Online bookstores
- Online reading communities
- Personal relationships and reading tastes
- Reading and imagination; reading and dreams
- Reading as a collective activity
- Reading as a coping mechanism
- Reading as a social practice

- Reading in rural communities
- Reading online
- Reading: a replacement for human contact?
- Rereading
- The role of adults in forming children's reading habits
- The role of libraries and librarians in forming children's reading habits

Story Two (Genre: short epistolary fiction)

Happy Birthday, Henry Gale!

Dear Henry,

Happy birthday! I know I'm early, but I wanted to make sure your present arrived in time for your Sweet Seventeen! (Do they call it that? I don't even know. Don't worry though, I didn't get you a set of *Sweet Valley High* books. You can open the package now to check if you want. Go ahead, I'll wait.) Can you believe that you've literally known me for more than half your life? It's ridiculous how we met when we were eight, and you were so much smarter than me but we still became friends, and then I moved but we actually kept in touch. I remember your first day at school, how you walked in with your taped-up glasses looking like a nervous rabbit (sorry, but you did), and Mrs. Goodspeed announced, "Let's say hello to your new classmate, Henry Gale," and I thought to myself, "Annie, you better befriend that kid before someone beats him up."

Anyway, sorry for the detour down Memory Lane. Yes, I got you a book even though I feel completely unqualified to recommend books for you. You've always been the reader, which apparently some experts would find weird because I heard on the news the other day about how girls read more than boys. But 42 per cent of statistics are made up, so whatever (see what I just did there?). I mean, you already wore glasses when we first met, and it's not be-

cause you sat too close to the TV. You told me once how your dad used to be a janitor at the mall on weekends, and instead of hiring a babysitter he would bring you to work with him. He never gave you any money to go to the movies or the arcade, but he was friends with the people at the bookstore, so he just left you there all day! And you would sit on the floor reading for hours, and pop over to the aisle with the dictionaries whenever you needed to look up a word, and then your dad would pick you up after work.

I just had the most vivid flashback to our Mount Olympus games where we roped some of the other kids into our elaborate crossover myth-verse during recess and after school in my backyard. I think it started in the fourth grade, the day you found that book of Greek myths while wandering in the school library. I wonder if it's still there—you should go check! I can't remember the title but it was written in the "Who's Who" style of a role-playing guide, and it was our map to a world of gods and heroes and monsters. We had so much fun with our pantheon of playmates—we have to go back, Henry! I was a queen, a goddess; I slew my enemies in grotesque fashion and was in turn slain in spectacular shows of heroic sacrifice. And remember how we just randomly mixed in Norse, Celtic and Egyptian mythology at whim, casually melding storylines? I think I understand now when you say that you've always felt there was more to the world, more layers and depth, more angles and nooks and hidden passageways. Books are your keys, aren't they? They can open doors between all the worlds.

Now that I think about it, you did more to get me into reading than Mrs. Goodspeed or any teacher did. You were so on top of all the series because you were always at the bookstore. Kids would ask you when the latest *Choose Your Own Adventure* or *Goosebumps* book was coming out. And later, you made me so obsessed with *Animorphs* for the longest time (I am forever sorry that I spilled Kool-Aid on your

#23, I know that was from your *Animorphs* Allowance and I still feel bad about it). You were the first to show me how to flip the pages so the book itself could morph. I get why the characters meant so much to you—they were normal kids who suddenly became special, and had to save the world from an alien threat. They're also like old friends with whom you stop hanging out, but mention their names and it all comes rushing back. I wanted to be Rachel because she was beautiful and fearless, and you said you identified with Tobias, the shy outsider. Newsflash: you weren't an outsider, you became the de-facto leader of our Olympian crew! That's why you always played Zeus or Odin.

Imagining ourselves as immortals elevated us out of our very boring existence. It was like we were in control of our destinies, instead of just being helpless children growing up in a world where there are no dragons to slay, no prophecies to fulfill or disprove. In your letters you've mentioned the whole fate versus free will thing and how it relates to your mom's car accident, whether it was fated or her own fault (if it's uncool to bring it up, just tell me). I know you spend a lot of time thinking about it. Do you remember that *Monsters of Mythology* collection by Bernard Evslin? Those were pretty deep retellings. It was strange how they were essentially picture books, but with photographs of paintings and sculptures. The stories didn't come with a parent's advisory warning, and even if they did your dad didn't monitor what you read. You tried to explain to me the concepts of fickle gods who loved and hated and sought revenge, and I wondered if I would ever feel such powerful emotions. It's that idea of undiscovered worlds not just out there, but also within us, you know? I think that's why we like reading speculative fiction.

The first fantasy novel I read was, of course, the first you read: *Pawn of Prophecy* with its old-fashioned yellowish cover, Book 1 of *The Belgariad*. As I recall, you

actually read David Eddings before Tolkien—sacrilegious! It was because of *The Belgariad* that you picked up *The Lord of the Rings*, and then Robert Jordan, Terry Brooks, Weis and Hickman, Ursula K. Le Guin, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Guy Gavriel Kay and so on . . . all these worlds we wished we could go, and heroes we wished we could be. *The Belgariad*'s Garion was not the first or only farm boy destined to save the world, but he was the first one we met, so we should always remember him for that. Along with his millennia-old grandfather and aunt, and his fellowship of random companions, and their epic quest through made-up kingdoms to find an important magical artifact and defeat ultimate evil. You were so excited and proud when I finished reading the first book and asked, "What happens next?"

Wow, this letter has evolved beyond a mere trip down Memory Lane into an all-inclusive vacation. You've probably gone off to read your birthday gift: *Brief Lives* by Neil Gaiman, unless you're offended that I got you a graphic novel. I know you don't generally read comics and some people don't even count comics as books even though they're called comic books. So I just want to say some things about it, especially since you'll notice that it's not the first book in *The Sandman* series, it's the seventh. It flies in the face of everything you believe about continuity, I know, but trust me, you don't have to start at the beginning.

The Sandman is the anthropomorphic personification of dreams. Dream and his siblings Destiny, Death, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium are the Endless, a dysfunctional family despite being forces older than time and more powerful than gods. Dream is kind of a Byronic tragic hero—I think you'd like him. Both of you can be infuriatingly stubborn and proud. The full series is collected in 10 volumes, and the early issues have more horror elements, with many characters from the DC Comics universe making appearances. It's okay if the cameos don't mean anything to

you; that's why you can begin with *Brief Lives*. You can always go back.

In this volume, Delirium convinces Dream to go on a quest to find their prodigal brother, Destruction. Along the way, Dream must also come to terms with his relationship with his son, Orpheus (yes, that Orpheus!). A chain of events is set into motion, and nothing is the same again. I don't really know how to describe the plot anymore, so just read it! *The Sandman* is scary and funny and makes you think: everything we loved when we were kids. You get to meet Lucifer, Loki, Shakespeare, Robespierre, witches and serial killers and so many more weird and wonderful characters. It'll satisfy your intellect and it's also a compelling meditation on change.

I've been thinking about what you said in your last letter, about your plans for the future—saving up and moving out, getting an English degree. I bet you'd be an awesome teacher or librarian! Or you can write your own bestselling epic fantasy sagas—you can count on me to be your number one fan. Since I currently have no idea what I'll be doing with my life after graduation, I'm really not in a position to offer any sort of advice. I don't know what I can do to help you realize your dreams, so I thought I'd let Dream himself talk to you. There's a lot of stuff in *The Sandman* books about beginnings and endings, family, imagination, transformation, how dreams shape reality. Also: Daddy issues. You might hate me for saying this, but I've said blunter things in the past and we've managed to remain friends. Going away to university is a big decision and I think you should talk to your dad, keep him in the loop. He hasn't always been there for you but you don't want to end up like Orpheus . . . and look how Destruction's leaving affected his family . . .

So I hope you enjoy it! You've been complaining about how you're only reading university course calendars nowadays, so you'll probably appreciate more material of the magical variety (. . . and you're

welcome). If the library doesn't have the other nine volumes, don't worry because I'm going to get them for Christmas! I thought it was cool how a graphic novel could win a World Fantasy Award and I'm pretty sure you will too. And if you like Gaiman's work, you should check out *American Gods*. It's about myth and the modern world, exploring the idea that people brought their gods with them when they immigrated to America. With the passing of the centuries, worship waned as the believers began to place their faith in another pantheon. New gods were arising, gods of cars and computers, of drugs and plastics—and a battle was coming. I got chills just by writing that. It's like our childhood games come to life . . . literature. Just like old times!

Love,
Annie

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Story Themes

- Acting out fantasies through reading
- Annotating and reviewing books
- Blurring boundary between reality and fiction
- Book awards
- Books as cherished artifacts
- Books as lifelong connections between readers
- Books as lifelong friends
- Books as memories
- Boys as reluctant readers
- Free-choice voluntary reading
- Genre fiction
- Graphic novels
- International / World literature
- Leisure reading vs. mandatory reading
- Linear vs. non-linear reading
- Living vicariously through books
- Peer-support in the formation of readers
- Read-alikes
- Reading as corrective emotional experience
- Reading and readership statistics
- Reading as learning experience
- Reading books vs. watching TV
- Recommending books for friends and family
- Role models in books
- Series books
- Socializing and unifying qualities of books
- The importance of childhood experiences in the formation of readers
- The role of bookstores in developing reading habits
- The role of reading in developing imagination
- Young Adults books