The Creative Deliverable: A Short Communication

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This paper encourages educators in library and information science (LIS) to adopt the "creative deliverable," that is, an assignment that gives students the freedom to display their understanding of course material in an almost unrestricted range of alternative formats and genres, while retaining some key features of traditional scholarship. Using the traditional essay as a point of comparison, we define the creative deliverable; profile its application in a library and information science course; display three examples; detail important practical considerations for its use; and share the student perspective.

Keywords: Assignment design; multimedia learning; creative pedagogy; LIS Education

Introduction

Students enrolled in programs of Library and Information Science are often given assignments that prompt them to respond with an *essay*, that is, a scholarly work in writing that provides the author's personal argument. In this article, we take the position that the essay is over-represented as an assignment in the LIS curriculum and we propose an alternative: the *creative deliverable*.

The essay emerged as a popular genre of academic dissemination in 16th century Europe, with exemplars written by renowned scholars such as Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon. Today, the essay exists alongside many other genres and modes of communication. In this Information Age, arguments and ideas are more often conveyed in multimedia formats, rich with images and sound, that stimulate the receiver in myriad ways. Information tends to be packaged in smaller units that require less time and sustained attention to absorb. Also, ideas are often interactive, participatory, or dialogic. Nowadays, to make a compelling point or impression, it is unlikely that an information professional will do so only through the medium of the essay. Rather, they would utilize a website, instructional video, FAQ, PowerPoint presentation, or poster, among innumerable contemporary expressions.

To keep pace with this development, we propose that LIS educators encourage students toward fluency in a wider range of genres, under the umbrella of what we have coined the "creative deliverable." That way, during their coursework, information professionals in-training gain experience in the production of contemporary formats. In this paper, we explain what we mean by the creative deliverable; report a case study of its application in a graduate library and information science course; showcase three examples; outline important practical considerations for its use; and share the student perspective.

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The Creative Deliverable

Here, by "creative deliverable" we mean that students be allowed the freedom to display their understanding of course material in an almost unrestricted range of alternative formats and genres, while retaining some key features of traditional scholarship. For instance, instead of authoring an essay, students may opt to write a short story, poem, or screenplay. Employing mediums in traditional visual arts, they can create a painting, sculpture, collage, or drawing. Learners may choose to explore the combination of text and image through an illustrated children's book, a comic strip, or a graphic novel. Other students, drawing inspiration from the domain of graphic design, may decide to borrow visual elements from our culture and present their findings and reflections in the form of a magazine cover, an advertisement, or a billboard mock-up. They may choose non-material manifestations, and develop performances such as dance or music composition. Given the proliferation of new digital arts, novice information professionals should especially be encouraged to explore and distill their ideas and reflections as an animation, video, podcast, or digital print. Social media, too, can be used to creatively display and curate students' work through existing platforms such as Instagram or Tumblr.

A Case Study from the Course *Foundations* of Library and Information Science

In the Fall semester of 2015 and 2016, an assignment featuring a creative deliverable was included in the course *Foundations of Library and Information Science* at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. *Foundations*, for short, is a twelve-week required course that introduces major theories and concepts of library and information science. It is staffed by an instructor and two doctoral student teaching assistants, and it typically has an enrollment of 100 first-year graduate students from diverse academic and professional backgrounds.

A major assignment with a creative deliverable forms 30% of the final grade in the course. In *Foundations*, students were asked to generate original insights into one of three concepts that are central to our Information Age: information, Internet, or librarian. For background, they were supplied a bibliography of landmark writings on these topics.

As we see it, a key aspect of the creative deliverable is that while learning to communicate in novel mediums, students must engage the academic and professional literature. The work cannot be a flight of fancy fueled by imagination and inspiration, alone. Hence, the creative deliverable does not abandon, wholesale, traditional conventions of university education. The assignment guidelines stressed, ". . . the artwork must speak to substantive issues about the concept that appear in the scholarly literature." Further, each creative deliverable includes a 250-word "Artist's Statement" wherein the links to the literature are made perfectly clear. The Artist's Statement also provides an opportunity for reflexivity, which is considered increasingly important in learning. The features of the creative deliverable are best seen in actual examples from the *Foundations* course, presented below with permission from the creators.

Example #1: Graphic Novel

Written and illustrated in black ink and colored pencils by Tessie Riggs, "Yuri: The Lonely Wanderings and Self-discovery Mission of the Thing We Know as 'The Internet'" is a coming-of-age graphic novel featuring an anthropomorphized version of the Internet who sets off to discover its identity. In the tale, Yuri (the Internet), befriends and takes a road trip with a bartender Max (shown on the next page). Riggs explains, "the Internet does not exist in a vacuum and is arguably most in-

teresting in how it informs and affects our lives as human beings" (T. Riggs, personal communication, December 1, 2015). The artist's engagement with the information science literature is seen in the appearance of Paul Otlet (shown in the right quadrant of the page) and in the footnotes, that expand the story. Explaining her choice of the graphic novel genre and its style in the Artist's Statement, Riggs writes, "The narrative device of a quest for self-discovery provides a rationale for the art piece's investigations into not only popular opinion but the history and academic discourse surrounding the Internet." In summing up her project, she continues, "With this art piece I reflected analytically on the topic of the Internet, its scope and history as well as its cultural perception and how these inform its uses and development."

Example #2: Video Montage

The video montage by Karl Nicolas features the voices of three students in discussion about the nature of information. Throughout its five-minute run time, memorable images from the Information Age are flashed and run together (e. g. The Simpsons, a television interview with Brad Pitt); chatter and industrial noise continue in the background. In his Artist's Statement, Nicolas explains that he was inspired by the perspective on information advanced through the metatheory of social constructionism and sought, "to highlight

the importance of talk, interaction, and language" in "constructing versions of the social world" (K. Nicolas, personal communication, December 1, 2015). Nicolas felt that the unfolding medium of digital video reflected a social constructionist view of information, since it "is not about rigidity, but rather intrinsically implies a more flexible version of reality, one that is shaped through discourse."

Example #3: Sculpture

To examine the stereotypes associated with librarians, Ronit Barenbaum made a mixed media sculpture (shown below). Her "The Modern Librarian: A Shusher, Shelver, and Computer Wiz" brings to life three predominant activities portrayed by media representations of librarians, that is, shushing noisy patrons, shelving books, and using computers. The sculpture also had a very personal angle; reflecting on the motivation for the design in her Artist's Statement, she says, "Whenever I tell people that I am studying to be a librarian, the response I consistently receive has to do with the "sexy librarian glasses." Hence,

Table 1.

Examples of creative deliverables submitted to the course *Foundations* of Library and Information Science during Fall 2015 and Fall 2016.

Quilt; card game; sculpture; painting; drawing; comic book; dance; video; curated Instagram account; music composition; board game; map; poem; story; photo series; science fiction; installation kit; puzzle; stop-motion animation; visual montage; magnetic poetry set; fashion portfolio; parody magazine cover; zine; instructional poster; mix-media sculpture; layered drawing; flip book; 3D drawing; watercolour series; digital collage; wall hanging; collection of poems; musical composition; conceptual diagram/cognitive map

representations of wire-rimmed glasses appear as a central visual motif, as well as the book, which continues to be associated with librarianship.

The graphic novel, video montage, and sculpture profiled above are three of many formats employed by students to complete the assignment; additional examples are listed in Table 1.

Implementing the Creative Deliverable Assignment

Having experimented with the creative deliverable over two consecutive years, we have outlined key lessons learned, below, so that other educators may adopt the approach more readily while side-stepping potential problems.

Providing Guidance and Structure

It is important to provide appropriate direction and well-defined parameters that nurture and harness the creative process. Students will be coming from diverse backgrounds and may be interested in, but unfamiliar, with artistic production. We have found that an experienced creative consultant or "Artist-in-Residence" is a crucial role among the team that oversees the assignment. The Artist-in-Residence may be a teaching assistant or volunteer from an Arts-related program; ideally, he or she has experience with materials and genres in the arts and is a supportive presence not involved in the evaluation process.

The assignment guidelines should state that students must have their plan vetted by the Artist-in-Residence. They then discuss their proposed idea with the counselling artist, allowing a chance to expand or reduce its scale; articulate how form relates to content; or select and find materials—among many possible issues. In *Foundations*, consultation has occurred in email exchanges and in-person meetings, and both have benefits. In-person meetings enable organic development of ideas through conversation; email requires students to thoroughly outline their idea for a reader, a careful process important to any creative project.

The Artist-in-Residence for the *Foundations* course, Rebecca Noone (a practicing artist and doctoral student of information studies in the same iSchool) has noted that many students approach the consultation session as a chance to work through their anxieties about venturing into unfamiliar territory, and they emerge with newfound confidence in novel modes of personal expression and arts practices.

Other structures associated with the creative deliverable increase the likelihood of its success. A well-defined timeline for the steps of the process (including consultation and a firm date to begin production) deters last minute struggles. Furthermore, size and weight restrictions advantageously constrain the scale and mitigate the problem of transport and storage during the submission and evaluation stages, discussed shortly. After receiving many large objects in 2015 that proved a challenge to

handle, in 2016 we limited artworks to 18″ (h) by 18″ (l) by 18″ (d) in dimensions and 3 pounds in weight. We also recommend providing students with an estimate of how many hours they are expected to invest in the project, analogous to an essay's word count. Here, we suggested 6–8 hours of active labor on the artwork, however, more time for brainstorming and consideration may be required. Ultimately, these guidelines underline the fact that the assignment is not a creative free-for-all, but a legitimate exercise in strategic communication and professional project management.

Handling Artworks

Logistically speaking, it is relatively easy for an instructor to receive student essays in print or digital formats. Creative deliverables, however, come in all shapes and sizes and raise new challenges in terms of their submission, storage, and return to students. Guidelines should state that creative deliverables with multiple pieces are to be submitted in boxes or bagged so that no components are lost, and artworks in digital formats must be submitted on a memory stick inside a sealed envelope. In all cases the Artist's Statement must be attached to the artwork, with the student's name included on both elements.

On the day that the assignment is due, we feel it is best to collect the creative deliverables at the start of a class. Otherwise, the classroom can become a distracting gallery environment in which it is difficult to focus on the lesson at hand. Ideally, one or two teaching assistants are ready with book carts, which are available for loan from most academic libraries. In small groups (to prevent any jostling), students are asked to bring their artwork to the front of the room to be placed onto a book cart. Keep in mind that some objects are fragile or wobbly and the process should not be rushed.

When all creative deliverables have been turned in, the teaching assistants transport everything to a secure storage space, such as the instructor's locked office, to await evaluation. In the storage environment, the teaching assistants can enact rudimentary organization, by placing similar formats together, which reduces sprawl and facilitates the evaluation process. At this point, the collection should be inventoried, to be certain that everyone has submitted the assignment complete and on time.

After the creative deliverable has been graded, the aforementioned process is performed with the same care, in reverse, until each artwork is returned into its owner's hands. An exception to the above concerns any creative deliverable that is immaterial and submitted as a performance (e. g. a dance) which will be addressed shortly.

Evaluating the Creative Deliverable

All instructors know how to evaluate essays or supervise their teaching assistants to grade papers fairly. As an alternative to the essay that may take myriad formats and tap different student abilities, the creative deliverable requires a new approach to evaluation. The judgement of art is a complex and contested topic in the humanities and philosophy (aesthetics), which we did not attempt to master; instead, we designed a grading strategy for the creative deliverable that was generous and pragmatic. The instructor of the course (the lead author of this paper, Hartel) performed all the grading, which was deemed too experimental at this point to delegate to the teaching assistants. Of note, the artwork and the Artist's Statement were considered equally weighted elements of the project.

First, we decided to honor the courage and creativity that is inherent in tackling an assignment of this kind by committing to a high grade range from B+ to A+. In many graduate programs a "B" is considered barely passable, which would be a harsh outcome for such a personal expression. Second, we applied a flexible and wide-ranging evaluation strategy that

gave students many ways to succeed. The assignment guidelines declared the following criteria: "penetrating and novel insights into the concept (of information, Internet, or librarian); effective use of the scholarly literature; well-supported insights and analyses; artistic technique; creativity and originality; and evidence of time invested." In all cases the student artworks were successful in at least one of the criteria and typically they excelled at many.

During the first iteration, we came to recognize the importance of the Artist's Statement in complementing the artwork and capturing the student's complete idea. Sometimes an artwork would make an underwhelming first impression, as a "B+". Then, the Artist's Statement revealed brilliant insights, rich symbolism, or novel connections to the scholarly literature--catapulting the project to an "A." The opposite scenario was possible: a technically stunning artwork at first seemed deserving of an A+; but upon consideration of the Artist's Statement, the original insights were modest and suggested a final grade of A–.

The grade and comments were delivered to each student in a 3–5 minute personal voice message, using the free online service, *Vocaroo* (www.vocaroo.com). This enabled the instructor to give detailed feedback on each project in a time-saving manner, when compared to a written alternative. The instructor also felt it was easier to convey positive sentiments by modulating her voice to be warm, gentle, and enthusiastic. Each message overwhelmingly focused on the strengths of the submission, based upon the rubric outlined above; however, candid constructive criticism was included on any shortcomings or factors that lowered the grade.

Sharing and Celebrating Student Creativity

With the traditional essay, it is rare for students to share the work they submit with their classmates. Even when an essay is accompanied by an oral presentation it is usually limited to the central ideas, and the work overall remains a private exploration for the eyes of only the evaluator.

In contrast, art and creative practices are often made to be viewed by wider publics. In this vein, it has been our experience that students are curious to know what their peers have created and learned. Hence, we have invited informal, ungraded, in-class presentations of the creative deliverables; essentially, we asked students to "share your artwork and experience with your peers." Some artworks are performative in nature, such as a dance, in which case the presentations were required and assessed.

It followed that a dynamic dance expressing the concept of "information overload" was performed to mesmerizing music; a children's story about a librarian was read with great feeling and charm; and the logic and aesthetic choices behind a beautiful quilt were explained, to reveal intriguing parallels between the information and the tradition of quilting. We felt the presentations, which always ended in riotous applause, generated wonderful moments of appreciation for the hidden talents that exist within the cohort and a collective joy at breaking through traditional conventions of professional education.

In a future iteration of *Foundations* we intend to have all students share their work in a more intimate and less intimidating manner. We plan to host a 1-hour in-class event that resembles a science fair or poster session. For 30 minutes, half the class will stand by their creative deliverable and provide informal explanation to the other half of the class that is mingling and touring from one to the next. During the next 30 minutes, roles will be reversed, allowing all students a non-threatening environment to share their own artworks and experience those made by their peers. The event will be staged in a celebratory spirit that encourages a scholarly community of sharing, appreciation, and openness--rather than of competition and secrecy.

Exhibiting Artworks to the Public

The life of the creative deliverable can extend beyond the assignment deadline and the *Foundations* course; it has potential to reach audiences both within and outside the Academy. In the 2015 iteration, some students expressed a desire to share their projects with the broader community. Thus, a student group implemented an exhibition of artworks at Robarts Library, the main research library of the University of Toronto. The Artist-in-Residence, a seasoned art curator, provided general guidance while students from the class fulfilled the core duties. The volunteer team curated the collection; wrote explanatory panels; collected and displayed Artist Statements; and installed the works in the glass cases of the library's atrium. The exhibition lasted one month and created a new venue to share student work with the university community and wider publics, and gave the class a satisfying feeling of accomplishment and closure.

The Student Perspective on the Creative Deliverable

Though the student perspective on the creative deliverable was not solicited directly, positive indicators appeared in the official course evaluations (which at the time of writing are available for the 2015 iteration, only). Overall, when asked if the "Course projects, assignments, tests and/ or exams improved my understanding of the course material," 91% responded "mostly" or "a great deal," the top two choices on the scale.

In the open-ended, qualitative section of course evaluations a student wrote, "… the assignments are unorthodox to say the least, but in such a way that we are required to challenge our assumptions and engage with academic issues in new ways." One student appreciated, "stepping outside of structured essays, for a more diverse learning experience." Vigorous support of the creative deliverable came across in the declaration, "I truly would love if every class had an artistic assignment like this. I found that it made me look at my research in a different way than I would have if I were just writing a paper." Another enthusiast proffered, "I ESPECIALLY [sic] appreciate the incorporation of an arts-informed deliverable. This might have been the first time that I was so excited about an assignment throughout my entire university career. The opportunity to convey an idea through a medium that leaves room for greater creativity and less rigidity than a paper, is definitely something I appreciated and would love to see continue."

There was a hint, though, that at least one person was dissatisfied with the approach, given the remark, "Although I enjoyed 'the creative deliverable' I would have also liked more concrete evaluation of the topics and issues covered in the class."

For both iterations of the creative deliverable in *Foundations*, students were also allowed to submit an essay as their preferred format. It did not seem enlightened to *force* all students to communicate in new mediums. About 50% of each cohort selected the essay option, revealing that this familiar format retains its appeal among the current generation of students.

At the Faculty of Information, we intend to continue to include the creative deliverable as a course assignment and to experiment further with its associated instructions, evaluation, dissemination, and impacts. Locally, the approach seems to be spreading, for a second required course in library and information science, *Knowledge Organization*, now features a creative deliverable, too.

Conclusion

In this short paper we have encouraged educators of library and information science to adopt the "creative deliverable." This alternative format for assignments gives students the opportunity to practice synthesizing and expressing information

and knowledge using a wide range of communication mediums beyond the tried and true essay. As a result, the next generation of information professionals can graduate with a broader repertoire for knowledge transfer that is synchronized with a multimedia and participatory Information Age. Our experience of the creative deliverable at the University of Toronto have suggested that it also fortifies an individual's creativity and confidence, and even gen-erates the opportunity to express concepts to a wider public. In their own words, students of our *Foundations* course appreci-ated the chance to "'think outside the box" and "engage with theory in non-traditional ways." Upon instituting the creative deliv-erable, instructors will need to adopt new means of defining, receiving, evaluating and sharing assignments—but the steps outlined here make the changes feasible and even exhilarating.