GOING SLOW

LEADING THE SLOW BOOKS MOVEMENT IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

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WHAT IS THE SLOW BOOKS MOVEMENT?

In a March 23, 2012 blog post on *The Atlantic* website, author Maura Kelly argues for a new "slow" movement, the "Slow Books Movement." Not unlike the Slow Foods' call for a more healthful, substantive diet, the Slow Books Movement challenges readers to choose more substantive reading material—serious literature that encourages quiet contemplation and that broadens self-awareness. Slow Books is neither an alarmist reaction to technology nor a nostalgic longing for the past—meaningful works of literature exist whether in electronic or print formats. Rather, the point of slow reading is simply to challenge minds and stimulate reflection—developing readers' ability to think critically and to form new ideas.

WHY PROMOTE RECREATIONAL READING ON CAMPUS?

Contrary to the dismal findings reported in the often-cited NEA survey *Reading at Risk* (2004), students are actually extremely engaged in reading (Jolliffe & Harl, 2008, Salter & Brook, 2007). However, students interact with, and are the most motivated by, texts that are technologically based: email, instant messaging, Facebook, etc. Reading experiences that were thoughtful and contemplative—as in book-length, "studious reading" (Jolliffe & Harl, 2008, p. 611)—are relatively scarce. This is a problem since one of the negative tendencies associated with digital media activities is multitasking, which fragments students' attention (Davis, 2011). On the other hand, reading books requires reflection and sustained concentration—skills that help to develop students' crucial capacities to think critically and form new ideas. As Miedema (2009) explains, "While digital technology lends itself to discovering and remixing ideas in novel ways, slow reading of books is still essential for nurturing literacy and the capacity for extended linear thought" (p. 20).

WHY SHOULD ACADEMIC LIBRARIES LEAD THIS MOVEMENT?

Recreational Reading promotion in U.S. academic libraries is no new thing. It has, in fact, a historical precedent stretching as far back as the early twentieth century. Between the 1920s and 1940s, academic libraries routinely promoted recreational reading through book lists, book talks, articles in student newspapers, and displays. Some academic libraries even hired readers' advisers—librarians whose specific job was to promote pleasure reading on campus. However, in the 1940s—coinciding with the publication of Harvie Branscomb *Teaching With Books* (1940)—this role began to fade. In his book, Branscomb criticizes academic librarians for dedicating too much effort to recreational reading activities and not enough to their traditional roles. Since the forties, supporting student and faculty research has been the primary focus of academic libraries in the US, suggesting that Branscomb's vision has prevailed.

My argument, however, is that the promotion of recreational reading is a part of the library's educational and instructional mission—not counter to it—and can be used to teach reading and information literacy skills. This argument is based on three key themes that have emerged from my research: 1) Literacy as a collaborative, social practice needs more emphasis (Keller-Cohen 1993); 2) Students like to read for pleasure (Gilbert & Fister 2011); and 3) Students who like to read for pleasure tend to be more creative and successful in school (Kelly & Kneipp, 2009; Gallik, 1999).

HOW TO BE A LEADER ...

1. BE A READER'S ADVISOR IN THE CLASSROOM. Give book talks in your first year seminars. Better yet, work with your faculty to ***assign*** pleasure reading in your first year seminars. Obviously, such a course would depend on students recognizing themselves as readers—as people who ***want*** to read. Instructors can facilitate this recognition by acknowledging students' reading preferences—Facebook, email, chat, etc.—as ***pleasure reading***. By helping students articulate what they like about their reading, instructors can then help them identify criteria to use to select other kinds of pleasure reading. Integrating pleasure reading into the FYS is also an excellent way to embed information literacy competencies into the curriculum. Barbara Fister's "Reading Workshop" syllabus (Fister, 2013) provides a helpful model.

MEASURING SUCCESS: The Association of College & Research Libraries' ***Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*** (ALA, 2006) provide a framework for assessing the information literate individual. Use this framework to identify student learning outcomes, and use these outcomes to determine appropriate teaching methods and assessment tools for measuring them.

EXAMPLE: This fall, I will teach a FYS course in which students will learn how to be their own readers' advisors. Students will be asked to select a book using evaluative criteria based on their own preferences. Then they will use this work to create a read-alike—demonstrating their ability to identify titles for further reading and locate them in the library. By selecting and locating their independent reading, students will demonstrate ACRL Standards 1.1,1.2, 2.2, 3.2, and 3.6; by participating in class discussions, they will demonstrate Standard 3.2 and 3.6; and, finally, by creating a read-alike, they will demonstrate Standards 3.2, 3.6, 4.1, 4.3, and 5.3.

EXAMPLE: In another FYS, comprised of students living in on-campus housing, students will be asked to create a book swap for their residence hall (see Bosman, Glover, & Prince's 2009 article for more information about book swaps). Students will collect book donations based on an assigned genre (e.g. romance, horror, adventure, literary fiction, etc.). In small groups, they will research their genre and develop a list of criteria identifying the genre's typical characters, plots, settings, and writing style and apply this criteria to select books. Next, having created the collection and explored different genres, students will then write an annotation based on their favorite book – identifying subject headings, similar authors, the book's appeal, and library location – and display it in the book swap space. ACRL competency standards that these assignments address include: 2.2, 2.3, 2.5, 3.4, 3.6, and 4.3.

2. START A BOOK CLUB. In Keller-Cohen's (1993), "Rethinking Literacy," she observes that literacy today no longer resembles the collaborative practices of the 17th and 18th centuries. It never occurred to me that reading ***had*** been a collaborative practice. This revelation further confirmed her point, that reading is overly portrayed in media (including library promotional materials) as an independent activity. I concluded that this perception might account for reading's unpopularity and why it is "at risk" (NFAH 2004) and, furthermore, that shaking it would require tapping into literacy's social side—or, as Keller-Cohen explains, "by creating opportunities for literacy activities that are meaningful to students" (p. 301). Book group discussions, by nature, are social and provide a meaningful literacy activity outside of the formal classroom—helping to build a culture of reading and a community of readers on campus.

MEASURING SUCCESS: Gather information about your book club participants. Whenever students sign up for my book club, I ask them to participate in a short, online survey that gathers information about their recreational reading habits and probes for how their recreational reading relates to their coursework. This qualitative data provides useful evidence for articulating the value and need for a book club at the library. See my survey here: **https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/readingculture**

EXAMPLE: The University Library's book club began in the Spring of 2013. Every other month, 10-15 students, staff, and faculty meet for 1.5 hours on a weekday over lunch, which the library provides. I advertise these meetings through our campus' email newsletter, department listservs, and the library's Facebook page—providing a link to the book club website. Before the discussion, I compose about five questions, but I tend to use them only to break the ice—I like to let the participants lead the discussion as much as possible.

Initially, I borrowed book club books from the Indiana Humanities' Novel Conversations, a free statewide lending library. However, now, thanks to the support of my Dean, I am able to buy additional copies of selected titles and put them on reserve for checkout. Previous book club titles include Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Betty MacDonald's *The Egg and I*. See my book club site here: **http://iupui.campusguides.com/bookclub**

3. BLOG (OR BE A VIRTUAL READER'S ADVISOR). Blogs and other social media (including goodreads, Twitter, etc.) provide an alternative means for readers' advisory service, and they are particularly useful for librarians who do not have regular, direct access to their students. Librarians at VCU Libraries, for example, use their blog ***Book ReMarks***, **http://www.library.vcu.edu/blog/remarks/**, to highlight their collection of recreational reading materials.

MEASURING SUCCESS: Most blogging platforms (such as Wordpress) automatically provide stats so you can see how many visitors come to your site. If you don't blog, collect links to blogs on a LibGuide (or webpage) and use analytics (such as Google Analytics) to collect this data.

EXAMPLE: In my blog, **www.letsgetclassical.com**, I recommend classic works of literature that are in the public domain. By promoting this blog to my students I not only encourage recreational reading, but also introduce the ethical and social issues surrounding the use of information (ACRL Competency Standard 5) including intellectual property and the Open Access movement.

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