

Readers' Advisory in the College Classroom

Barbara Fister

The decline and fall of reading, particularly among the always-on born-digital generation, is a common lament, encouraged by two influential reports from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2004¹ and again in 2007². The second report, in particular, was framed with a “what about the children?” rhetorical move, sounding the alarm about the risks society faces when young people turn away from reading. “There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans,” poet and then-NEA chairman Daniel Gioia wrote in the introduction. “Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates.” He concluded by calling it “a serious national problem. If, at the current pace, America continues to lose the habit of regular reading, the nation will suffer substantial economic, social, and civic setbacks.”³

The methodology and presentation of this study was criticized by Nancy Kaplan, then Executive Director of the School of Information Arts and Technology at the University of Baltimore, who claimed it relied on insufficient time series data and distorted it graphically to dramatize its findings.⁴ Dan Cohen, then director of the Roy Rosezweig Center for History and New Media and currently Director of the Digital Public Library of America, contested the report’s supposed inclusion of data about reading digital texts while drawing conclusions that appeared to entirely overlook them.⁵ Matthew Kirschenbaum, Associate Professor of English at the University of Maryland and the Associate Director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, published an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* pointing out that both online reading and writing were thriving, arguing that these activities were no less immersive, involving, and valuable than reading books for pleasure – while also challenging the strict distinction the NEA drew between voluntary and more purposeful school- or career-related reading.⁶

In an era when more books are published than ever in history, a wider variety of reading choices is available to readers than ever before, book-centered social media platforms have attracted millions of members, and more people are engaged in creating and sharing texts than in any past generation, it seems curious that people routinely write obituaries for reading (not unlike predictions of the death of books and libraries) in predictable modes: lachrymose, activist, or techno-determinist: It’s tragic that reading is dead. We must do something about it before it’s too late. There’s nothing to be done because the march of technological progress is an inevitable social disruption.

Librarians at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota were curious about these frequent claims about young people and reading that often feature, at best, cherry-picked evidence and wanted to learn more from college students about their attitudes toward reading for pleasure. We had heard anecdotally from our students that they are fond of books and enjoy reading (though the number and prolixity of assigned readings are not always included in that warm glow). We have a small browsing collection of popular novels and non-fiction that circulates well and had so routinely fielded questions about where the “fiction section” is (or whether we even had any fiction) from students who were in search of pleasure reading material that we put up signs about how to find fiction in the Library of Congress classification system. Since our anecdotal evidence contradicted the dire warnings of the NEA reports, we had to wonder whether the death of reading among young people was greatly exaggerated.

We took two approaches to finding out. In the fall of 2008, we announced a funded opportunity for a student to collaborate on a research project with a librarian to study undergraduates' attitudes toward reading for pleasure.⁷ At the same time, I designed a new course, Books and Culture, a 100-level offering which carried the following catalog description:

To read the news, you'd think books are on the brink of extinction. The National Endowment for the Arts warns that reading books is in precipitous decline, Apple CEO Steve Jobs has announced that nobody reads anymore, and numerous "experts" tell us members of Gen Y aren't interested in anything that isn't high-tech. Yet nearly 300,000 books are published annually and the number of people using public libraries has doubled in the past ten years. This course will explore books in contemporary culture, the book industry from writers to readers, the intellectual history of reading, and the future of the book.

This course was designed for our one-month interim session, a time when both students and faculty are encouraged to explore ideas that fall outside the constraints of the regular curriculum. These courses must have an experiential component and have an intensive and immersive schedule. Though students take only one course during the interim session, it meets five days a week for several hours each day. Students must take two of these courses as part of their general education requirements, though many students fulfill the requirement off campus, with career explorations or international travel courses. This interim session is both a break from the usual academic pressures and a chance to explore new subjects and unconventional pedagogies.

It is also a bit of a bore for librarians. The mood during the January term is relatively relaxed and the library, which is bustling during the fall and spring terms, becomes unusually quiet, partly because students are enjoying a departure from their usual study habitats and partly because so many of our students are off campus. It's a particularly opportune time for librarians to contribute to the general education curriculum, and we have offered a number of different courses over the years. I decided to create this course to support students who had expressed interest in books and reading (particularly those who were not majoring in the humanities) and partly to explore whether our anecdotal reports about enthusiasm for reading were widely shared or anomalies. Early indications were positive. This was the first of our interim courses with an enrollment cap of 25 to fill during the first day of registration – and once it was full, emails poured in requesting permission to join the course, some from students who had already fulfilled the two-course requirement but wanted to take the course regardless. Ultimately, 29 students completed the course. As of this writing, the course has been offered two more times, enrolling 32 and 36 students.⁸

The unanticipated enthusiasm with which this course was met spurred our interest in studying student attitudes toward reading for pleasure. In the spring of 2009, Amara Berthelsen, the student researcher selected to work with librarian Julie Gilbert, conducted a campus-wide study asking about student attitudes toward reading, reading practices, and perceived barriers to reading for pleasure. The survey population was recruited by targeting courses at all levels across the curriculum, securing the collaboration of a number of faculty who were willing to surrender class time for administration of the survey. This in-class distribution of the survey instrument ensured that results were representative of the student body, regardless of their reading attitudes and experiences, and captured a representative

cross section of majors and genders, with nearly a third of our students participating. Simultaneously, we conducted a survey of academic librarians and a very limited survey of faculty in other disciplines to gauge their impressions of undergraduates' reading habits and preferences.⁹

One surprising finding of the surveys was that our students expressed a much greater interest in reading for pleasure than the librarians or faculty we surveyed predicted. A vast majority of students – 93 percent – reported that they enjoy leisure reading, with general fiction the most popular reading choice. (This, of course, is the kind of reading the NEA claimed was particularly endangered.) A smaller majority of students also reported enjoying reading newspapers and magazines. The Internet was the least likely source for leisure reading material, though we suspect respondents may have failed to include their use of social media in their interpretation of this option. There were intriguing gender differences in expressed reading preferences, with women more likely than men expressing interest in general fiction, classics, mysteries, and romance and men expressing more interest than women in science fiction and Internet-based sources.

The academic librarians and faculty surveyed as part of the study were not as sanguine about student interest in reading. Around 40 percent of librarians and faculty reported that they felt students simply weren't very interested in reading for pleasure. This belief may have been influenced by the despairing reports in the popular press about the decline of reading among youth, or it may be based on accurate observation. Another finding of our student survey is that, though nearly all students said they enjoy reading for pleasure, nearly all also report they do very little of it during the school year, explaining in their comments "After homework, it's hard to read for fun," "NO TIME!" and "Not enough physical hours in the day to do much else but go to class, do homework and occasionally sleep." Paradoxically, though reading assigned in class may provide excellent training in critical reading strategies, it might also (because it is so relentless and voluminous) interfere with students' ability to develop a sense of what they personally enjoy reading and to acquire routine strategies for discovering reading material on their own. When they graduate, they may be skilled at reading but underprepared for making the individual choices that sustain a lifelong reading habit. They may also identify libraries as primarily a place to study and librarians as advisors for academic tasks rather than as allies in making choices that satisfy and develop their lifelong personal reading tastes.

This seems at the very least to be a lost opportunity. Institutions of higher education routinely make claims about preparation for lifelong learning and libraries frequently frame information literacy as essential preparation for lifetime engagement with ideas and self-directed learning, yet we do little to encourage our students to include public library membership in their post-graduation plans nor do we do much to prepare students to make use of information that isn't sought in response to a clearly-articulated academic need. Indeed the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education adopted in 2000 and under revision as of this writing seem based on the assumption that patterns of information use mimic the process of writing papers for college, assuming, for example, that the information literate individual begins the process of using information by first defining a need for it. Catherine Sheldrick Ross pointed out in the same year that the standards were adopted that much of the information people use in their daily lives, information that informs their view of the world and their sense of identity, is not sought, but rather is encountered, often through pleasure reading.¹⁰ Most information literacy instruction is (understandably) geared to the immediate and practical need that students have to complete tasks that they did not initiate themselves. Though this approach does much

to integrate learning into course goals and taps into student motivation, it does little to help students develop an instinct for encountering information through self-directed curiosity and enjoyment.

There is compelling evidence that reading for pleasure has benefits that align well with information literacy goals. Research on readers (particularly of fiction) has found that reading enhances empathy¹¹ and creativity,¹² provides more insight into social issues than scholarly research does¹³, is a vehicle for the acquisition of general knowledge¹⁴ and affirms identity while also providing readers with a greater appreciation of life experiences different than their own.¹⁵ Surely, these benefits should be nurtured as part of a college education.

To help students who profess a love of reading while claiming they have little time for it, we proposed a second book-focused credit-bearing course, one that would fit into the regular semester (and our workload) and would be attractive to busy students. It offers a small amount of credit and little risk as an incentive to students who want to read but who feel it competes with academic demands that have a higher priority. Basing our concept on partial-credit courses that promote lifelong fitness offered on campus, we proposed a single-credit pass/fail course to make it an attractive, yet low-stakes addition to busy schedules. Yet, to avoid it seeming too elementary, we gave it a 200 course designation, explaining in our course proposal “We want it to be open to all students through the senior year; the 200 level is intended to suggest it won't be too elementary for seniors or too hard for motivated first year students.” We also made sure that both the timing of the course (late afternoon in the first half of the spring semester) and the amount of credit offered would attract students without overloading their schedules during crunch time and without increasing their tuition bill, as most students would be able to add it to a full load without incurring additional fees.

The course proposal form requires a rationale for each new course, including how it fits into the long-range instructional goals of the department and the institution. This is how we made a case for the course, which we titled Reading Workshop:

Our Lindell Scholarship research project in Spring 2009 included a survey on students' attitudes toward reading. We learned that the majority of students (> 90%) say they enjoy reading and they would read more if they had the time. We see this course as a kind of intellectual fitness course, offering students a scheduled time and a small amount of academic credit to read and discuss books and other texts (newspapers, magazines such as *The New Yorker*); we also see it as a way to encourage lifelong reading by giving students an opportunity to think about their own reading and about literacy practices beyond required reading in college. This issue of how what we in the library contribute to student learning after college is one that we find particularly pressing, and we hope this course will help students build a bridge from pre-college reading to post-college literacy habits, including developing personal strategies for discovering books of interest (a skill that several studies indicate has a strong influence on whether or not people choose to read voluntarily). Our plan is to eventually offer two or more of these short courses each year with the books that each section will read publicized in advance so that students can choose a discussion they want to join. We will select books for spring 2011 in early fall and publicize choices before the registration period. Though we haven't selected books yet, we would consider books such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan, *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers, or *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot.

The proposal form also asks whether the course might duplicate offerings of another department. We responded:

We don't see this as competing in any way with literature courses offered by the English or MLLC [Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures] departments because we are not focusing as much on learning how to read or about a particular body of literature so much as helping students be reflective about their own reading practices and about the role of books and reading in society.

The course was approved by the Curriculum Committee in the fall of 2010 and was first offered in the spring semester of 2011. It has been offered every spring since then.

As every academic librarian who has offered a credit-bearing elective course knows, offering a course is one thing; getting students to enroll in it is another. Though Reading Workshop is listed in the course catalog, there is little reason a student planning their registration would discover it. It lives with a motley handful of courses in a non-departmental no-man's land. Though we market the course during spring registration through our website and with posters, we've found the best word of mouth comes from faculty advisors who encourage students to enroll either because they think it's a worthwhile experience or because some of their advisees need a small amount of additional credit to meet requirements for graduation – or both. We reach out to departments and to individual faculty who we think may recommend the course, particularly if the book chosen for discussion is relevant to their subject area. Faculty, once contacted, often continue to promote the course year after year.

The outcomes for students as stated in the syllabus are to learn:

- the value of reading and discussing books, even when they are not required
- how to analyze your own reading preferences
- some practical means of discovering books you are likely to enjoy
- a little bit about the role that books and reading play in society

These outcomes are encouraged by involving students in informal discussion of a common book (including asking them to take turns leading discussion), engaging them in free writing exercises that analyze their reading history and preferences, having them select a book of their own choosing to read and review, contributing their reviews to a “students recommend” catalog maintained on LibraryThing, and exploring various freely-available readers advisory tools (and practicing readers advisory amongst ourselves). At the end of the course, students compile a list of ten books they might want to read in future using the readers' advisory tools we have introduced and suggestions from fellow students. Students also experience reading as a social activity by contributing to discussion guides for the books we read together and by sharing their book reviews both in class and publicly.

The first time the course was offered, we wanted to choose a book that would appeal to science majors, who constitute a large portion of the student population and seemed least likely to have opportunities for pleasurable reading in their courses. We chose Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, which offered great potential for discussion and had appeal for students in all majors. In

addition to discussing the book, we watched Adam Curtis's 1997 documentary, *The Way of All Flesh*, which is mentioned in the book. We also invited faculty to join us for refreshments and conversation on the last day of discussion. Since then, we have discussed *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers and *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie. In the spring of 2014, the discussion book is Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which offers opportunities to discuss parenting, childhood, and contested cultural values that inform family dynamics.

Even though we have taken care to make the course accessible, it has not attracted the same level of interest as our interim term course. Enrollment is capped at 15 to promote discussion but, even so, it doesn't always fill. We originally planned to offer two sections annually, but found that there wasn't enough enrollment to justify librarians' time. It's not entirely clear why it isn't more popular, given that student feedback has been consistently positive. We can only speculate that, even though we were careful to make it possible to fit our reading assignments into busy schedules, it still is seen as time and effort that competes with the demands of courses in the major. Unlike the interim term course, it doesn't fulfill any general education requirement other than the need to accumulate a certain number of credits to graduate. It's somewhat hidden in the course catalog, whereas all of the interim experience courses are described in a single menu-style document. It may also be the case that students associate pleasure reading with a part of the annual academic calendar that they associate with fun and freedom, whereas the spring term is a time to be serious and focus on academics. There is also more competition in terms of social options. Student organizations and campus activities are livelier in the spring semester than in January.

Though enrollments have not been particularly strong, suggesting that even offering credit isn't sufficient incentive for students to make time to read for pleasure during the semester, the students who take the course have received it warmly. It has attracted a diverse group of students, some of whom are avid readers who have no trouble developing a "to be read" list and others who are just beginning to explore their taste in books. Course evaluations indicate that they appreciate the opportunity to discuss books in a relaxed and informal setting. They report that this experience is quite different than other course discussions, which emphasize close reading of challenging literature or critical analysis of scholarly research. Some of the students find the open-endedness of discussion a little too unstructured for their tastes, which is a question that bears further scrutiny. Though many courses at Gustavus emphasize discussion, it is often heavily guided, framed with pre-class writing assignments or pre-set discussion prompts. We feel the informality and relatively unstructured nature of our discussions is good practice for self-directed reading and discussion after college, but may need to find ways to ensure students have opportunities to develop a sense of ownership of the discussions.

Though the kind of learning that pleasure reading promotes doesn't fit neatly into the *Information Literacy Competency Standards* developed in 2000,¹⁶ which tend to emphasize information seeking performed in connection with producing academic work, we feel that the self-directed exploration readers experience is a valuable kind of learning. Helping students develop their personal taste in reading – and a taste *for* reading – is critical preparation for lifelong learning.

¹ National Endowment for the Arts, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (Washington, D. C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), <http://www.nea.gov/pub/ReadingAtRisk.pdf> (Accessed October 23, 2013).

² National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (Washington, D. C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2007) Available online at <http://arts.endow.gov/research/ToRead.pdf> (Accessed December 20, 2013)

³ National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read* pp. 5-6.

⁴ Nancy Kaplan, "Reading Responsibly: Nancy Kaplan on the NEA's Data Distortion." *If:book* Institute for the Future of the Book, November 30, 2007. Available online at http://futureofthebook.org/blog/2007/11/30/reading_responsibly_nancy_kaplan/

⁵ Dan Cohen, "The Digital Critique of 'To Read or Not to Read'," *Dan Cohen* [blog and website] January 10, 2008. Available online at <http://www.dancohen.org/2008/01/10/the-digital-critique-of-to-read-or-not-to-read/>

⁶ Matthew Kirschenbaum, "How Reading is Being Reimagined," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 54.15 . December 7, 2007, p. B20. Available online at <https://chronicle.com/article/How-Reading-Is-Being/17111>.

⁷ The survey research was funded by an endowment provided by Gustavus Library Associates, a friend-of-the-library group. Every other year they fund a generous stipend for a student to conduct research with a librarian. This program is called the Lindell Scholarship after Patricia Lindell, the founder of the fundraising group.

⁸ The most recent course syllabus, class notes, slide deck, and assignments prompts, all available for reuse and remixing under a Creative Commons NC-BY license, may be found at <http://booksandculture13.wordpress.com>.

⁹ The survey instruments and results can be found in Julie Gilbert and Barbara Fister, "Reading, Risk, and Reality: Undergraduates and Reading for Pleasure," *College & Research Libraries* 72.5 (September 2011): 474-495.

¹⁰ Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Finding without Seeking: What Readers Say about the Role of Pleasure Reading as a Source of Information," *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services* 13, no. 2 (June 2000): 72-80

¹¹ Mar, Raymond A., and Keith Oatley. "The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience." *Perspectives on psychological science* 3.3 (2008): 173-192.

¹² Kathryn E. Kelly and Lee B. Kneipp, "Reading for Pleasure and Creativity among College Students," *College Student Journal* 43, no. 4 (Dec. 2009): 1137-1144; Jessica Moyer, "Learning from Leisure Reading: A Study of Public Library Patrons," *Reference and Users Services Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (2007): 66-79.

¹³ David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers, and Michael Woolcock, "The Fiction of Development: Literary Representation as a Source of Authoritative Knowledge," *Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 44 no 2, (2008): 198-216.

¹⁴ Richard Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, (Boulder: Westview, 1998).

¹⁵ Research on the role of reading in identity formation is amply explored in *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community* ed. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Lynne (E. F.) McKechnie, and Paulette M Rothbauer, (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006).

¹⁶ Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards* 18 January, 2000, available online at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency> [accessed 13 December 2013] As of this writing, the Standards are being thoroughly revised.