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Fun reads at an academic library: Encouraging college students to read for pleasure

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◆ Fun Reads◆ at an Academic Library: Encouraging College Students to Read for Pleasure

by Amy R. Hofer

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The Dreaded Requirement

As an instruction and reference intern at California State University, East Bay, I assisted Electronic Collections Librarian Lori Townsend's section of the required freshman information literacy course. Library faculty at CSUEB are given a free hand in designing their classes, and Lori's approach addresses the reality that many CSUEB students struggle with simple tasks on the computer -- contrary to the common perception that young people are technology experts. Lori and her colleague Korey Brunetti, Instructional and Research Services Librarian, developed a curriculum that helps students cross the digital divide: they use Web 2.0 technology to teach the information literacy content of the class. To give a few examples, students retrieve their assignments via RSS feed, submit their work on blogs, and contribute to a class wiki.

Yet in spite of the exciting approach and the students' positive response to Lori, this freshman requirement is still one that most students love to hate. Moreover, many had trouble following the directions to complete their

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assignments. Some of the writing that I saw from native English speakers was very poor. One attitude tied all these observations together: a significant portion of the class claimed to hate reading.

This reflects a recent study National Endowment for the Arts pointing to declining literacy rates among college graduates (for the full text of the study, see <http://www.nea.gov/research/ReadingAtRisk.pdf>). I see this trend as a challenge to our profession. Where does literacy fit into information literacy? Our students are taught about evaluating information and respecting intellectual property, and rightly so. However, participation in academic discourse also requires writing skills, and these are strengthened through reading.

That's What the Public Library Is For, Right?

After a conversation with some of the non-readers in the class, it occurred to me to put together a cart of books from the CSUEB collection that might appeal to reluctant readers. If we're teaching students how to use the library's resources, we could teach that one use is recreational reading. Students could check out a book as they left the library after class. I would even offer to bake cookies for anyone who actually read a book.

Lori, my supervisor, commented that this seemed like a public library idea. However, she supportively agreed to let me use some class time to try it out. We discussed whether I was subverting the intended purpose of the academic collection — these books were purchased to support research, and yet I was ferreting out the ones that were fun to read. We decided it was worth a try.

The book cart idea was inspired by the outreach work I was doing as an intern at Oakland Public Library's Children's Services department. At OPL, I created a family reading program for low-literacy adults, wrote an online library skills tutorial for the kids' web page, and learned how to encourage children's pre-literacy development with story time. So you could say that literacy, and fostering lifelong reading habits, were on my mind. I couldn't abandon that when I walked out the door of the public library.

The Real World

It can be an uphill battle trying to superimpose a public library-type marketing campaign onto an academic collection. Most books at CSUEB have their attractive, informative covers removed, although this practice is being phased out in some collection areas. Also, Library of Congress classification makes scanning the stacks for a good read impossible. Because literature is organized by period and region, while authors get collocated with their critics, there is no clear —Fiction— section to browse.

I enlisted an OPL teen librarian to help me brainstorm a

list of books in our collection that 18-year-olds would not find belittling. The CSUEB library actually has quite a few young adult novels, including ones that often appear on reluctant readers lists. Popular adult fiction has also found its way into the stacks, from Geek Love to Bridget Jones's Diary. I located plenty of genre fiction: romance, mystery, crime, sci-fi, and horror. I rounded out my cart with selections from the authors that are traditionally the subject of academic study but who are also enjoyable to read, such as J.D. Salinger, Gabriel Garcia Mquez, and Art Spiegelman.

My efforts in the winter quarter resulted in about half-a-dozen reader's advisory reference interactions. Some students who were already big readers wanted recommendations on what to read next, or suggestions for further reading in a favorite genre. One woman said that she reads 100 books a year for fun and did not have time to read my suggested extras. In just one case I felt that I really hit the mark with a suggestion to a student who would not otherwise have picked up any book at all.

Over spring break Lori attended the ACRL conference in Chicago. She reported back that there were several presentations on promoting pleasure reading at academic libraries. Other librarians are implementing programs to reverse the trend of declining literacy in college graduates; it will be exciting to follow these programs as they develop. Despite the ad hoc nature of my program, Lori asked me to recreate the book cart for spring quarter. By the time my internship ended, I had one measurable success: I finally had a taker for my cookies!

Author's Bio

Amy Hofer received her MLIS from [San Jose State University](#) in 2007 and now works as a Reference & Instruction Assistant Librarian at California State University, East Bay. Her students can get extra credit by reading a book from the library for fun. Visit her class blog at <http://liby1210hofer.wordpress.com>.

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