

Giving Thanks to...

A Sentipensante Assignment

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ABSTRACT

Giving Thanks to... is a novel assignment for students of Library and Information Science (LIS). It was recently implemented for the first time in a course on information behavior, but could potentially enhance learning in any domain. Inspired by contemplative pedagogy (Zajonc, 2013), the assignment encourages “*sentipensante*” (Rendón, 2011), that is, a balance of mind and heart. In a nutshell, students write an informed and heartfelt thank you message to a scholar of information behavior whose work is not yet canonical, affirming their contribution to the literature. Once placed into the mail, these bespoke missives are microaffections (Burklo, 2016) that socially construct a more appreciative and inclusive space within our field. This paper presents the educational context, the assignment’s main components, example outcomes, student feedback, and the instructor’s reflections. To conclude, links are provided to an online exhibition about the project and to detailed assignment guidelines that other educators may borrow.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

pedagogy; students.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

library and information science education; contemplative pedagogy; assignment design; innovation; gratitude; *sentipensante*

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Across the globe, 2020 was a year of social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals. There was a devastating and lingering pandemic; whole industries and professions faced uncertain futures; and a climate crisis approached its zenith. Educators had to pivot to new online delivery channels and academic research agendas were interrupted. At the same time, Library

and Information Science (LIS), alongside other disciplines and institutions, faced the need for greater diversity at all levels, from the composition of student bodies and faculties to the design of curriculums, courses, and literatures.

Contemplative pedagogy is an approach that helps to establish a refuge in this storm. It entails educational methods that quiet the mind and cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insights (Hart, 2004; Zajonc, 2013). Education scholar and social justice activist Laura Rendón's vision of contemplative pedagogy draws from her Mexican-American heritage and teaches students to be "una persona educada" that is "a new kind of leader for functioning within a complex world...a sage in the community, wise, experienced, respectful, friendly, controlled, considerate of others, personally and social responsible, and open to diverse perspectives" (Rendón, 2011, p. 2). Further, in Rendón's view, such individuals are capable of "*sentipensante*" [sensing/thinking]; that is, a balance of reasoned thinking and emotional intelligence. A course instructor can enact *sentipensante* by setting up, "...a validating, relationship-centered classroom context based on caring and community" and by creating opportunities for students to develop "deep, reflective inner processes...to act responsibly in service to the community at large" (Rendón, 2011, pp. 5-6).

MAIN COMPONENTS OF THE ASSIGNMENT

The assignment *Giving Thanks to...* was inspired by Rendón's *sentipensante* vision, for it upholds a balance of mind and heart and extends that sensibility across a community of practice. To begin, students select a scholar of information behavior who is not yet canonical and whose work stirs in them genuine feelings of interest and gratitude. Next, they compose a well-informed and sincere letter of appreciation, drawing from ideas in the course and background research on the scholar of choice. The message is hand-written onto a conventional paper thank you card. Scans of the card serve as its deliverable and are submitted for a pass/fail grade. A final and optional element is to actually mail the card, and most students of the course did so. (It was not required to mail the card, since preferences vary concerning such personal gestures.) The objectives of the assignment were to:

- Discover and engage an information behavior scholar whose work is personally meaningful;
- Recognize information behavior contributors and topics that are worthy of more attention;
- Practice writing a letter of thanks in an academic context;
- Uplift the information behavior scholar whose work is featured;
- Experience the individual and social benefits of gratitude.

All this unfolded in INF1323 – The Information Experience, a required course (designed and taught by the author) at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. By way of content, the course combines foundations of LIS with fundamentals of information behavior. For Fall 2020 it was delivered in a synchronous online format to 120 students. Contemplative pedagogy (Hart, 2004; Zajonc, 2013,) helped create an oasis in turbulent times, and class

sessions included breaks for breathing, stretching, and other forms of self-care. *Giving Thanks to...* was a minor assignment worth 10% of the final course grade; however, it became a student favorite and had an outsized positive impact on the tenor of the semester.

Selecting a recipient.

When choosing a target scholar and topic, students were advised to avoid long-standing chestnuts of information behavior as well as canonical individuals that were covered elsewhere in the course (e.g. Marcia J. Bates, Carol Kuhlthau, Brenda Dervin), since their contributions are already recognized. Rather, the assignment directed student's attention to what might be seen as margins, interstices, or frontiers in the literature; especially noticing voices that bring greater diversity, balance, breadth, depth, and holism (Polkinghore & Given, 2021) to the information behavior conversation.

To open student's eyes to potential recipients, a list of more than 100 articles was provided. It included, for instance, information behavior of butterfly farmers in Tanzania (Ndumbaro & Mutula, 2017), information needs of LGBTQAI+ young adults (Escobar, 2019), information seeking related to breastfeeding (Duchsherer, 2020), information behavior among parents with autistic children (Gibson & Hanson-Baldauf, 2019), information behavior of Black diasporic immigrants in the US (Ndumu, 2020), information practices when grocery shopping (Ocepek, 2018), and information practices associated with conversion to Islam (Guzik, 2018). Many students selected a target from the list. Alternatively, students were encouraged to discover a recipient that aligned with their own interests and concerns. To this end, instructions were provided for searching LIS databases, a sub-task which strengthened students' information searching skills.

The materials.

During a semester in which everything felt surreal and was experienced virtually, the assignment featured embodied and material elements, by design. Students were required to obtain a paper thank you card and matching envelope, of an old-fashioned or "Hallmark" variety, or to make a card from scratch if so inclined, since crafts can be soothing and healing (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Though text, email, or other forms of online greetings are popular nowadays for giving thanks, students were instructed to utilize a pen and their own hand-writing. Creative synchronicity was encouraged in selecting a card that resonated with the target scholar's research, and many students fulfilled that aim triumphantly, as reflected in forthcoming examples.

Writing the thank you message.

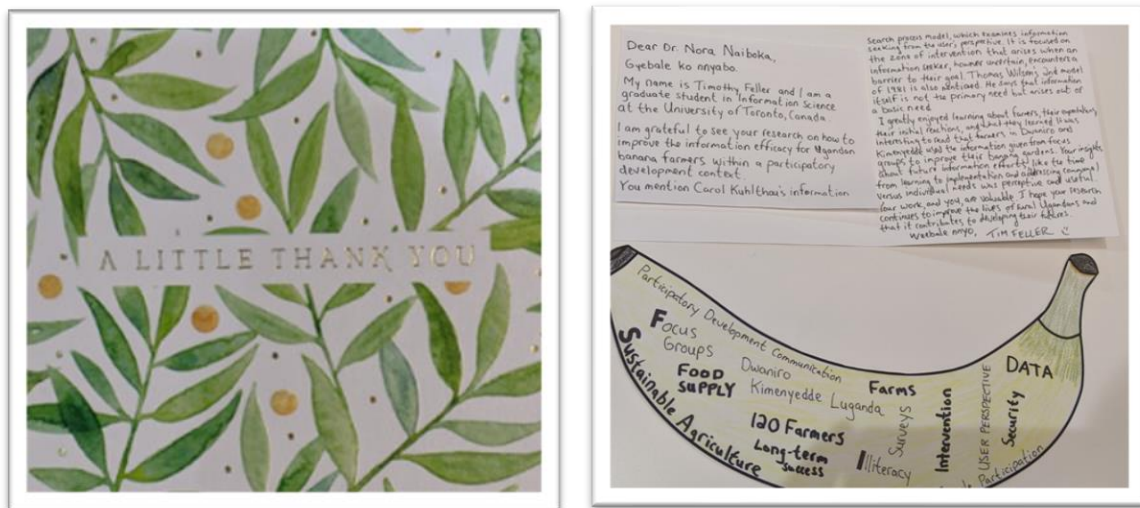
Before writing the thank you message, students engaged in independent secondary research to gain an understanding of their chosen scholar's identity, career history, and contribution(s) to information behavior. They were advised to consult personal websites, biographies, CVs, Google Scholar profiles, and to draw from the intellectual history of information behavior taught in the course. The instructor stressed that it was not enough to say, "thanks for the great research!" It was important to state the specific aspects of the work that were appreciated, using terms and concepts from the course lectures and readings. A thank you letter template was provided; however, unique expressions were encouraged.

Example outcomes.

Timothy Feller expressed gratitude to Dr. Nora Naiboka Odoi, an information scientist at Kampala International University in Kampala, Uganda. Befittingly, the card opened with a vibrant splash of green leaves and fruit, since Dr. Odoi conducted research on the information behavior of banana farmers in Uganda. In his message, Timothy tapped ideas from the course to applaud Dr. Odoi's application of concepts by Carol Kuhlthau and Tom Wilson, and noted the fine balance struck in the study between individual and collective information needs. In addition to contextualizing Dr. Odoi's research in the information behavior literature, this particular missive had a lot of heart. It opened with the Ugandan greeting, "Gyebale do nnyabo" (Hello Madame) and closed with "Weebale nnyo" (Thank You Very Much) as well as the encouragement, "Your work, and you, are valuable." In a playful stroke that shows how students went above and beyond the assignment's requirements, Timothy included a banana artwork with key terms of the study, shown in Figure 1 (right) which in all likelihood made Dr. Odoi smile.

Figure 1

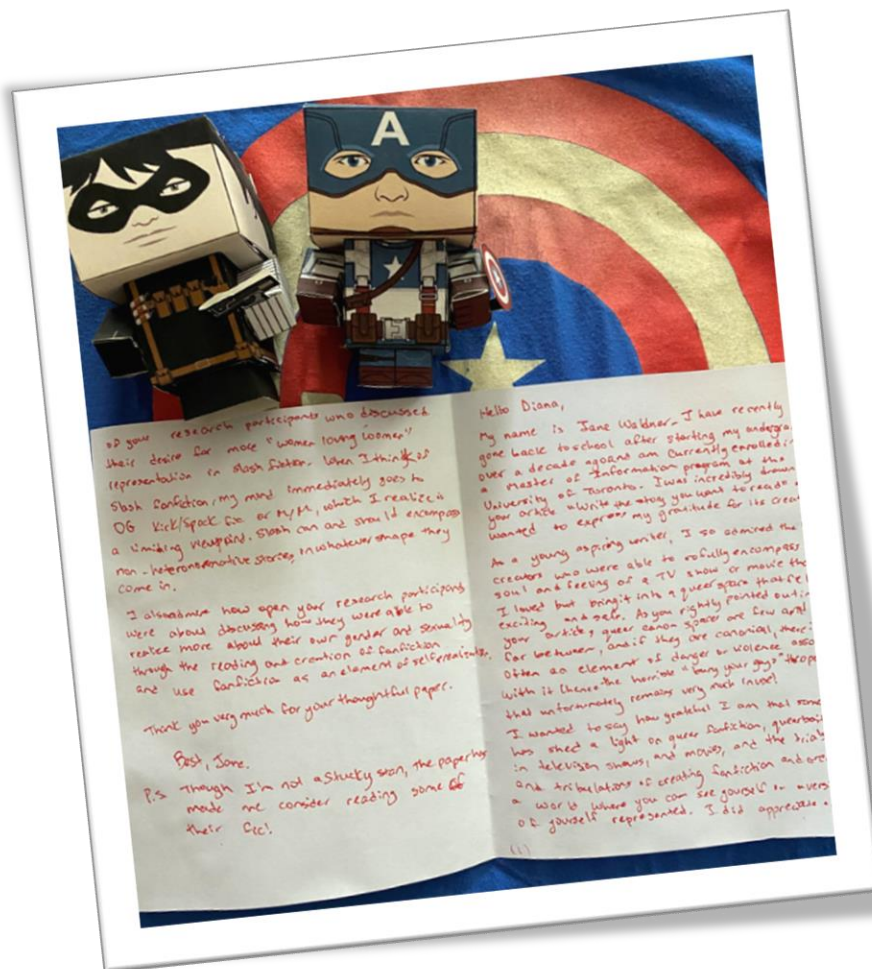
Timothy Feller's Thank You Card to Dr. Nora Naiboka Odoi.



Jane Waldner's message expressed that she was "incredibly drawn to" an article by doctoral candidate Diana Floegel in the Department of Library and Information Science at the Rutgers School of Communication and Information. The choice of a doctoral candidate as a recipient shows how this assignment sought to uplift emerging, rather than established, scholars. Diana's research examines people's information creation practices and their sociotechnical assemblages, and has a social justice orientation. Moved by Diana's Journal of Documentation paper entitled, "Write the Story You Want to Read: World-queering Through Slash Fanfiction Creation" (Floegel, 2018), Jane wrote sincerely, "I wanted to say how grateful I am that someone has shed light on queer fanfiction, queerbaiting in televisions shows and movies, and the trials

and tribulations of creating fanfiction and creating a world where you can see a version of yourself represented.” Jane also extended appreciation to the research participants who so honestly shared about their gender and sexuality. Like Timothy’s work, above, Jane included a gift within the card, two folded paper action figures from the fanfiction series mentioned in the research, seen at the top of Figure 2.

Figure 2
Jane Waldner’s Thank You Card to Doctoral Candidate Diana Floegel.



Student feedback.

In course evaluations and in response to a request for feedback on the assignment at the end of the semester, students had the following to say about the *Giving Thanks to...* assignment.

- “The assignment encouraged us to be researchers in ways I had never been before. I think I even better understood the place of courage, humility, and dignity in the academic endeavor. It's at the very core.”
- “I loved that the form of the assignment was more interesting than just doing essays. I put more effort into one thank you card than I would have into a written report and I have a much better understanding of the reasoning and learning behind the card than I would for a report.”
- “I found this [assignment] to be a rewarding experience, for it is not typical to make contact with researchers of articles you read. It led me to read a couple of additional, related articles written by them on the topic. I was able to see their research process as a result and this gave me a clearer picture of their work's evolution, as well as additional findings. As well, it was a creative assignment, which was a refreshing and fun alternative to more traditional assignments.”
- “It was unlike any other assignment I had ever done. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I appreciated the wide breadth of papers to choose from and the diverse topics. It made me realize how vast the field of information is and how much research takes place.”

REFLECTIONS

The *Giving Thanks to...* assignment generated a reciprocal free flow of gratitude. Several students were pleasantly surprised when their recipient scholars wrote back to them. For example, Anna Winkelaar had recognized Dr. Martijn Huisman, at the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies at Ghent University for his research into information sharing among older adults (Huisman, Biltereyst, & Jove, 2020). Dr. Huisman responded by email, “I just returned to work today after a 6-week leave after the birth of our son, and am pleasantly surprised to find your card and message. I am glad our work was of some help and inspiration to you.”

The assignment also evoked gratitude and affection between students of the course and the Teaching Assistant, Maya Hirschman. After marking 120 thank you cards, Maya posted an announcement on the course website:

Dear All, Reading your messages of gratitude has been quite unlike any previous grading I have ever done. Far from tedious or onerous, the act of reading your words and listening to your voices was unexpectedly moving as, again and again, you opened up and shared your own deeply personal anecdotes and experiences. Many of you chose to read multiple works by your scholars and researchers, or linked their work to another author, a handful of you suggested books or films you believed they would enjoy, and a few of you made your own incredible cards. You

chose recipients near and far--within the iSchool and on the other side of the world--you offered not only gratitude, but nuanced interpretations and spoke of how their works touched you, altered your viewpoints, and broadened your understandings of information behavior and information studies broadly. For my part, I discovered scholars I was unfamiliar with and papers that have become part of my own research. You have reminded me of past hobbies and activities I once took very seriously, prompted me to question my own behaviors, what I have come to take for granted, and to whom I should perhaps send my own note of thanks. I am sincerely grateful to you all for making this contribution. Sincerely, thank you. Maya

It is possible to place Giving Thanks to... alongside other *sentipensante* strategies at play in academia today. In contrast to a *microaggression* (a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or other nondominant group (Sue, 2010)), the cards sent from students to scholars can be seen as a *microaffection*, “a subtle but endearing or comforting comment or action directed at others that...affirms their worth and dignity, without any hint of condescension” (Burklo, 2015; Espinal, Sutherland & Roh, 2018). The assignment also resonates with a research program that proposes greater attention to love as a force that both explicitly and implicitly underpins practices and rhetoric within Library and Information Science (Greenshields & Polkinghorne, 2020). *Giving Thanks to...* also lends credence to mounting evidence of the positive impact of contemplative pedagogy (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011) and specifically to the benefit of gratitude practices in the classroom (Noland, et. al, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Since the *Giving Thanks to...* assignment has been implemented just once, it should be tested and refined through additional applications within and beyond LIS. After all, gratitude is a universal quality that cuts across all disciplines. Interested educators may peruse an online exhibition of thank you cards generated from the assignment, and they may download detailed assignment instructions for use in their own courses at <https://galleryofgratitude.weebly.com/>. To conclude, I am *Giving Thanks to...* YOU for reading this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Three cheers for the students of INF1323 – The Information Experience (Fall 2020) for their outstanding work on this assignment. Teaching Assistant Maya Hirschman’s great creativity and enthusiasm are duly noted and commended. Appreciation is also extended to Research Assistant Madison Stoner, who assembled the list of target scholars and papers, and provided instructions for students to search LIS databases for resonant information behavior scholarship.

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