ADVANCING A CULTURE OF
CREATIVITY
IN LIBRARIES

Programming and Engagement

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CONTENTS

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CONTENTS

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PREFACE

WHEN I STARTED COLLEGE AT SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVER-sity at Carbondale (SIUC) in 1992, I never dreamed I would become a librarian. In fact, on my sole visit to the Morris Library at SIUC, I left discouraged and intimidated, sure that libraries were not for me. I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to stay up late drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and painting, all while figuring out the meaning of life. Looking back now, it's clear I had no idea what being an artist, or even going to college, meant. I just knew that I wanted to create something, that I needed to find others like me, and that I wanted to find a way to "change the world." I had no way of knowing that I would eventually do all of these things through my work in libraries.

I dropped out of SIUC and ended up at Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois, where I got a job at the Parkland College Library (PCL). There, while shelving books for less than three dollars an hour, I fell in love with libraries. Since then, it has been my mission to spread the message that libraries are a place that can bring the arts, creativity, and community into our lives. In 2008 I found myself back at SIUC, once again confronting the Morris Library, but this time because that was where I'd landed my first tenure-track position, as the fine arts librarian. Fortunately, this second go-round went more smoothly, setting me on the path to sharing the joy of bringing together libraries and creativity, as I hope to do in this book.

When I started my first library job at PCL twenty-five years ago, librarians were information gatekeepers; now we are connectors, collaborators, and storytellers and we do it all while budgets shrink and staff and resources dwindle. Facing these challenges means that libraries today need flexible, creative staff who can communicate, think outside the box, and work effectively in teams. Bringing creativity into library work can seem daunting, but by defining what we mean by creativity, addressing some common obstacles, and looking at examples of library creativity in action, this book aims to open the doors to creative library practice to anyone who wants to reinvigorate their library and their work.

Bringing together the "why" and the "how" can have powerful results. For example, visual artists are not always known as frequent library users, but while working in the library at PCL, I discovered books and ideas that allowed me to learn art theory while I learned artistic practice in my coursework. This balance of theory and practice, or "praxis," helped shape the rest of my creative life. I began to learn what scholars in other fields were reading and writing, and I applied these ideas to my work as a visual artist. The library, I discovered, was a place to cross disciplinary boundaries and collaborate with people whose work and experiences were very different from my own. I learned to see the world differently and work more creatively. As I met people from all over campus, I shared the benefits of libraries far and wide.

As an academic librarian, I regularly look at how public libraries, museums, corporations, and even shopping malls educate and engage their communities and employees. I follow pop culture and do my best to stay connected to current events to help me engage with new generations on our campuses. I also listen to students, faculty, and staff to hear how libraries might make their lives better, as I regularly assess and reimagine my work as a librarian. To continue to advance libraries we must embrace a culture of creativity, look outward, and engage with our communities, both inside and outside our organizations.

This book is for people looking for new, low-cost, high-impact ways to creatively reinvigorate their libraries and engage their communities. It doesn't matter if you don't think of yourself as a creative or artistic person; if you want to bring new life to your library, this book is for you. Even if an idea or case study in the book doesn't seem like it would work for you or your organization, I encourage you to look closely at the possibilities and challenge yourself. You'd be surprised what you can accomplish when you're willing to take some risks and try things that might initially seem like they're out of reach. It is time for libraries to embrace creativity and rethink who we are and how we engage the world around us. This book offers support and a road map to guide us as we all work together to make these changes happen.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WRITING AN ENTIRE BOOK WAS A NEW PROJECT FOR ME, and I had my doubts at first. But thanks to Sarah VanGundy, first-year experience librarian at the University of Idaho, writing isn't so scary anymore. With her advice, Sarah helped me become a better writer and storyteller, and also encouraged me to reflect and think about my work in creative new ways. I could not have done this without Sarah and am beyond thankful that she stood by me as I took this terrifying leap into authorship.

Thank you, Tami Back, Cathryn Copper, Lisa Nickel, and Trent Miller for virtually spending time with me discussing creativity and sharing more about your own work in libraries. It has been my conversations with others that have made this book project rich.

I would like to acknowledge Tara Maharjan, processing archivist from Special Collections & University Archives at Rutgers-New Brunswick. Thank you for the time spent in brainstorming ideas that didn't always have legs, and for being there when morale was low and we questioned why we cared. We have made a difference together, and I smile thinking about what might come next.

I would like to acknowledge all of the coworkers, family, friends, and loved ones who have supported me over the years. I am thankful for all of you.

To my mom, thanks for always believing in me. To my dad, I wish you were here to read this, I know you would be proud.

To Brady Smith, I never dreamed you would finish graduate school and I would finish this book during a pandemic. It was only with creativity and love that we kept ourselves fed, entertained, and healthy.

Lastly, thank you Patrick Hogan, senior editor at ALA Editions, for your support, and thanks to the team of people who have made this book a reality!

PART I

CREATIVE LIBRARY CULTURE

CREATIVITY IS NOT A SUPERPOWER

BEING AN ARTIST IS NOT A SUPERPOWER. SOMETIMES, WHEN people learn that I am an artist, they assume that I was born with some kind of mystical talent and that they could never hope to make art themselves. This couldn't be farther from the truth. I am an artist because I dedicated time to learning and practicing the *skills* that art requires. In my formal art(s) education, I learned to observe and analyze the world around me and handle criticism and feedback about my work. I practiced producing complex metaphors, working collaboratively, and perhaps most importantly, clearly communicating new ideas to people. Since becoming a librarian, I have discovered that in addition to being the skills of an artist, these abilities help anyone doing creative work, including library work.

People often imagine that all artists are skilled in realistic reproductions of life, but anyone familiar with my artwork can see that I have no interest in making realistic paintings or drawings and I am not an expert when it comes to perspective drawing. Instead, I love putting things together, using bits of "stuff" and recycling things that other people might throw out. Similarly, people assume that all librarians must "love to read," but I will readily admit that isn't the case for me. As a visual learner and lateral thinker, I often find reading time-consuming and difficult, especially when it comes to reading scholarly writing. Like other visual learners, I prefer pictures and stories. Just as my passion as an artist is for collage, my passion as a

librarian is for finding ways to use creative problem-solving skills to bring together disparate and even chaotic elements to make something unexpected or magical happen. For example, in the LEGO case study that appears later in this book, by thinking outside the box and bringing together unexpected elements like an arts library and "children's toys," I was able to use these techniques to create a high-impact outreach intervention using very few economic resources.

While creativity is by no means a superpower, it does involve cultivating the ability to engage multiple concepts simultaneously and make unusual connections between seemingly unrelated things. Creativity is complex and has a unique manifestation in every individual. Being creative means seeing, thinking, and acting in unconventional ways. "Creatives" are boundary crossers, inventors, and metaphor makers. They reject binaries and see multiple solutions to any given problem.

DEFINING CREATIVITY

In the dictionary, *creativity* is usually defined as a noun, indicating a state of being or mind-set, often tied to imagination or the arts. In his book *Out of Our Minds: The Power of Being Creative,* Ken Robinson describes creativity as "applied imagination." He writes: "Imagination is the source of our creativity, but imagination and creativity are not the same. Imagination is the ability to bring to mind things that are not present to our senses. Creativity is putting your imagination to work."[1] In other words, imagination is the idea, and creativity is the action.

As a process, creativity requires dynamic generative and evaluative skills. In a 2014 article in *LOEX Quarterly*, Anthony Stamatoplos suggests demystifying the idea of creativity by thinking of it as a behavior. This definition is especially useful to people who are "do-ers" because it resonates with their desire to deliberately produce outcomes. In Stamatoplos's understanding, the act of creativity means "pushing the boundaries of what we know to explore new possibilities; we draw on skills we have . . . often stretching them and evolving them as the work demands."[2] Creativity starts with brainstorming, doodling, or playing with ideas, but the point is to *do* something and connect ideas in novel ways. It is important to recognize, however, that sometimes creativity runs into constraints. Most creative

individuals and organizations occasionally have ideas that aren't possible to execute, but the process of flexing the skill of creativity is still essential to innovation.

THE PROCESS OF CREATIVE THINKING

In 1926, Graham Wallas described the process of creative thinking in four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification.[3] In the preparation stage, we draw on our education and personal experiences; we start with what we know and begin reaching outside our existing knowledge base through research. In the incubation stage, brainstorming starts. This stage is about looking for unexpected patterns or connections and "thinking outside the box." Next comes illumination, which is also known as the "eureka moment." During this stage, ideas start to come together, and we begin to see a plan for completing the work. In the final stage, verification, we do the actual work of creating and the product of our work is tested, critically analyzed, and prepared for release. The four stages of creative thinking Wallas identified, while not a "one size fits all" prescription, can help us see that creativity does not "just happen." It takes work. This work requires us to explore and use imagination to see things in new ways, coming up with new ideas and applying them to the real world.

The work of creativity requires us to draw on lateral thinking rather than the vertical thinking we may be accustomed to using in our work. Vertical thinking is based on logic and convention, while lateral thinking is about solving problems in unusual ways. Lateral thinking is often referred to as generative thinking, or "thinking outside the box." When thinking laterally, we become completely absorbed in what we are doing, which is also known as being "in the zone." When we are in this state our brains relax, allowing our imaginations to run wild as we look for patterns and unusual connections. Metaphors, which can be considered "imagination's reality," are often an important aspect of creative work. For example, we might think of an academic library as the "central nervous system of the university" because it is a place where connections are made and new "signals" are created, to be sent across campus and beyond. Metaphorical thinking helps us gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and others, which can boost creativity, innovation, and empathy.

LISTENING WITH EMPATHY

In the article "Innovating with Creativity and Empathy," Terra Dankowski discusses the "three C's": creativity, compassion, and community. Dankowski believes that creativity is not about what we create, but how we create it. Creative work requires spaces that are safe for exploration. When we are brainstorming and thinking laterally, anything goes. We have to avoid judging ourselves and others in this stage of the process. Working creatively is about learning and thinking together. It relies on empathy, understanding, and nonjudgmental listening.

In the summer of 2018, the Rutgers University Libraries-New Brunswick (hereafter "the Libraries") collaborated with its Undergraduate Academic Affairs office and the Students with Children organization to create a series of "busy bags" for children which included coloring implements, a Rutgers-themed activity book created by Megan Lotts and Tara Maharjan, and a library-related button or zine. These educational kits are available at all the Rutgers University Libraries on the New Brunswick campuses. The kits are themed for preschool, elementary, and preteen children and were inspired by the Students with Children community, which often expresses concerns about being marginalized on the Rutgers campuses. This project was a perfect collaboration for the Libraries because it provides children, who are potentially future Rutgers students, with a unique educational experience while their parents, current Rutgers students, focus on their coursework. However, roughly two weeks prior to printing the materials and in the project's final stages, a financial crisis hit the office of Undergraduate Academic Affairs, and the Libraries' main contact and connection to the project was laid off. As imagined, this left the Libraries with a half-cooked project and uncertainty on how to proceed. Because the Libraries had planned to support the printing of this project, we knew that the creative time and energy put into designing the activity books would still be usable, but perhaps just not as originally planned. Although the project plans went through multiple iterations and were delayed for four months, in the end we proceeded with close to the original plan because the Libraries were able to adapt, respond, and listen to the community. Instead of eliminating the project because we hit a major roadblock, we readjusted, and the Libraries have had a meaningful impact on many K–12 students who have visited one of the libraries on campus.

Creative projects require constant assessment and adjustment. At every stage, we have to think critically and evaluate our situation. Responding to challenges appropriately and creatively may require traversing unfamiliar territory. For example, we may have to engage with advocacy, collaboration, navigating diverse communication contexts, selling ideas, taking risks, being tolerant, leading, being flexible, marketing, and practicing self-efficacy. Working creatively can be liberating and exciting, especially in the early stages, but there are inevitably pitfalls and challenges to executing any project. The Libraries were frustrated when our partners dropped the ball two weeks prior to printing. But later, upon finding out it was because a Rutgers employee had been laid off, we were able to deploy additional compassion and understanding as the project moved forward. It is important to keep an open mind, play nice, and not get lost in assumptions. Get to know your colleagues and the communities you serve and don't assume you understand others' perspectives until you have investigated the needs, wants, and concerns of everyone involved.

CREATIVITY AND LISTENING

Creative work, alone or in a group, teaches us about ourselves and others. Empathy and collegiality are crucial, particularly in larger organizations where funding and politics can lead to territorial issues. In my own experiences facilitating LEGO workshops with academic library faculty and staff members, toys and play can help people have difficult conversations with less anger and frustration, allowing them to remember that they are all on the same team. Creativity and play are valuable tools for helping people from different areas of an organization understand what is possible, and encouraging them to say "yes" to new ideas instead of "we tried that before" or "this will never work." Creative interdisciplinary work generates new ways of thinking and facilitates workflows that are more efficient in terms of both time and money. Perhaps most importantly, however, this kind of collaboration encourages staff to better understand themselves and their organizations, while opening up the possibility of innovation. Moreover, creativity is contagious. When people are being creative, they are often lost in the moment and caught up in the flow. They may forget they are working because they are having fun. Being creative makes people happy, which in turn influences health and morale, helping an organization create a positive culture of community.

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CREATIVE SPACES

One of the greatest misconceptions about creativity is that it can only happen in a certain kind of space that is outfitted with technology or specialized equipment. This is simply not true. Creative learning and engagement can happen anywhere: in the shower, in the car, with a new hairstyle, while getting dressed, on public transportation, on your way to work, walking the dog, listening to music, solving a math problem, in an artist studio, in a laboratory, over a tasty meal, over a not-so-tasty meal, reading a book, at a museum, at a coffee shop . . . the list is infinite. Creative spaces need to be flexible and adaptable, but the rest emerges organically. If you provide people space to be creative, they will use it to achieve their goals, no matter what the space looks like or what technology it includes.

In 2017, the Rutgers Art Library (RAL) at New Brunswick decided to turn a small unused office space into a group study room. Unexpectedly, the associate university librarian offered the Art Library some end-of-the-year money that needed to be spent quickly, so we decided to purchase new, modern, movable chairs and tables, paint the walls, and install a large dry erase board. We were excited to have a new modern-looking space, but the upgrades required us to work with multiple outside organizations, meaning the project moved slowly and included a lot of e-mails and paperwork. It ended up taking eighteen months from start to finish. About eight months into the project, the Art Library staff got impatient and moved a few random tables and chairs into the empty space. Right away, the "unfinished" room filled up with patrons engaged in creative work. Although the finished space is aesthetically pleasing and everyone loves the dry erase board, I have never seen the movable tables get moved, and patrons rarely use the computer monitor that was later installed in the space. Students wanted a space where they could close the door, work in groups, be loud, and write on the dry erase board. Faculty and graduate students wanted a place where they could meet with their students privately outside of their offices. Neither of these activities relied on aesthetically pleasing modern mobile furniture. Meeting the needs of our patrons just required tables, chairs, and a space. Libraries want modern spaces, but we should be careful not to get too attached to a specific aesthetic. We need to examine how people are actually using our buildings, and even ask patrons what they want before designing new spaces. And now the RAL has a modern study space which

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does not match the rest of the library, and I'm left wondering if that money should have been spent in more impactful ways. . .

CREATIVITY IS EVERYWHERE

Creativity, which draws on feelings, ideas, playfulness, and practical skills, is at the heart of both the arts and the sciences. Artists and scientists both manipulate materials to create a result. The only real difference is in the products of their respective creative processes. You'll find both artists and scientists wearing protective clothing (smocks, goggles, lab coats, etc.) and working with measurements and figures to test a theory or idea. The arts are well known for engaging imagination, feelings, and self-expression, but from my experiences working with scientists, I know that that they also use these qualities in their work.

I recently had an opportunity to experience the connections between the visual arts and the sciences at firsthand. In the summer of 2019, Dr. Vadim Levin spoke at a New Brunswick Libraries faculty meeting about the Rutgers Aresty Research Center's annual spring poster presentation event, which features 300 undergraduate research posters. Levin mentioned that the Libraries had helped the students with information literacy, but he was surprised when I asked what kind of visual literacy training the students had received; this revealed an opportunity for both the Libraries and the Aresty Center.

Visual literacy is the ability to comprehend information that is presented in the form of an image, thus extending the meaning of literacy, which signifies the comprehension of a written or printed text.[4] Although visual literacy is nothing new, many people are unfamiliar with the concept and the skills it requires. In my discussions with Levin, who is the Aresty Center's director, I learned that most of the students participating in the Aresty program are competitive undergraduate honors students in the sciences. Most of them will move on to graduate studies, where the ability to clearly articulate their research in both written and visual forms will be essential to their success. In serving as a judge for the Aresty Center's summer poster event, I saw clearly that the students' presentation skills varied widely, and there was an opportunity for the Libraries to engage with these students beyond providing traditional bibliographic help.

Following the summer poster session, Levin and I began exploring ways to incorporate visual literacy into the Aresty program curriculum. We

discussed the role of creativity, produced a visual literacy research guide, gave back-to-school presentations to Aresty peer mentors, and taught small-group visual literacy workshops throughout the fall 2019 semester. In one workshop I walked students through a scenario that I use to explain how to move from a topic sentence to a paper in seven steps. First, I ask the students to create a six-word sentence that describes their thesis statement. Second, I ask them to draw an image that represents their six-word sentence. Third, the students create a 140-character "tweet" about their thesis; and fourth, they transition this into a sixty-second elevator speech they might share with a grandparent, a younger sibling, or someone else who is not an expert on their topic. Fifth, I ask students to think about what a poster might look like and we begin to discuss the balance of image vs text. In the sixth step, students begin to think about expanding their ideas in a PowerPoint presentation, and lastly, we discuss moving from PowerPoint to the final project, a paper. Although we visualize some of this scenario, I regularly remind the students that creativity takes time, and one cannot assume that this process is "one size fits all." Like scholarly research, it is important to know one's audience and not present a loaf of bread to a group of judges who are gluten-free, without a reason. But also, I explain to the students, don't be afraid to get creative and step outside of the box, because sometimes it is the button or zine giveaway that keeps your audience engaged beyond a 300-person poster session.

It was exciting to watch these young scientists discover that the same creative processes they use in their research labs could be harnessed to help them share the results of their research in exciting and engaging ways. However, in spring 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted our plans. Instead of the in-person event originally planned for spring 2020, the Aresty posters became part of a larger Rutgers University Libraries-New Brunswick (RUL-NB) Seniors Posters event, which was a high-impact project we threw together overnight, fueled by a bit of pandemic panic and a lot of creativity. Although the visual literacy project did not go exactly as planned, the Libraries and the Aresty program were able to quickly adapt and listen to what graduating seniors wanted and needed as they worked to creatively share the results of their years of hard work. Partnerships and collaborations like these allow patrons to see the Libraries in new ways. When they see these kinds of projects, patrons are inspired to ask what else is possible in a twenty-first-century library. The RUL-NB Seniors Posters Project also allowed

me to meet many other people from all over campus, who also have visual literacy needs. Many more plans are now in the works for future projects, research guides, and creativity workshops.

NOTES

1. Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: The Power of Being Creative*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, UK: Capstone, 2017).
2. Anthony Stamatoplos, "Creativity in Information Literacy Teaching: Part One – Understanding Creativity," *LOEX Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (May 1, 2014), http://commons.emich.edu/loexquarterly/vol41/iss1/5.
3. Robinson, *Out of Our Minds*.
4. *Wikipedia*, "Visual Literacy," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_literacy#cite_note-1.

INDEX

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