CREATIVE READING

The Antidote to Readicide
Reading is often thought of as a skill, something to be learned and practiced. But reading can also be considered a creative art, capturing the imagination of the reader in ways that result in creative thought and expression.

Think of this as **creative reading.**

**Reading as Both Skill and Art**

Learning to read requires students to acquire a basic skill set that includes such things as recognizing sight words, decoding, vocabulary building exercises, finding the main idea, and summarizing. Classroom teachers and school librarians take major responsibility for teaching reading as a skill. Reading activities in the classroom are mainly comprised of textbook or basal reading, vocabulary drills, and comprehension tests. While teachers help students lay the foundation for reading competence, they lack the time and, often, the mandate to move students from skilled readers to creative, lifelong readers.

School librarians have a unique opportunity not only to support classroom-based reading skill building but also to serve as reading advocates and role models to foster students’ creative, lifelong reading habits. Through the school librarian’s enthusiasm for and joy of reading as a creative activity, students learn that reading is a pleasurable activity, one to cherish and continue throughout their lives.

**Creative Reading in the Library**

What does creative reading look like? Imagine a child who picks up a book on a topic of personal interest, finds a cozy place to read in the school library, and digs in. As she reads, she becomes more and more engrossed, picturing in her mind the characters as they act out the storyline, even imagining herself as the heroine, and never even hearing the end-of-day school bell.

How can school librarians create a library in which creative reading activities, like the example above, thrive? Fostering curiosity and imagination, providing a safe and friendly environment for pleasure reading, and assuring confidence and a sense of competence are all potential paths to this goal.

**Fostering Curiosity and Imagination**

"Mrs. O’Connell, do you have any books on skyscrapers? I want to know how they are built and how they manage to stay tall and straight—and who built the first skyscraper?" This is an example of an opportunity to transform a student’s curiosity about a topic into an ongoing reading interest.

**Readicide** is defined by Kelly Gallagher as "the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools" (Gallagher 2009, 2).

Curiosity has been associated with a need for competence over one’s environment (Arnone and Reynolds 2009) that results in exploration to resolve the question or conflict that aroused the curiosity. Tapping into students’ natural curiosity is a powerful way to encourage reading for enjoyment.

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**To motivate and support their creative reading, students must have open access to a wide range and variety of reading materials both at school and at home.**
A number of strategies can foster curiosity for learning (Arnone 2003), and many of those strategies can be tailored to reading. For example, create a "book hook" that arouses curiosity or stimulates a conceptual conflict. One school librarian starts with a box of books carefully selected for the age group and purpose. In quick succession, she picks up each book, shows the cover, and hooks the students with a question. She then offers one or two sentences about the book with just enough information about the characters or situation to pique curiosity. Not a book talk—just a book hook. She does this with several books on a theme and immediately twenty little hands of fourth-graders visiting the library wave frantically in the air. "I want to see that book!" "Can I look at that one next?" Stimulating reading curiosity and interest, while providing self-selecting reading experiences, helps nurture independent, motivated reading.

Creative reading experiences may be enhanced through technologies that expand the potential variety of reading formats and allow students to share their creative reading experiences with their classmates or with students across the world. For example, a sixth-grader creates a blog for her favorite storybook character—a teenage Apache girl living in the 1840s—assumes the role of that character, and responds to postings from students in a class of e-pals in Arizona, while a high school senior creates a video trailer about his favorite author's books and presents it to his English class. Creating a sense of wonder and adventure in the library can help trigger students' imaginations and "What do you suppose...?" questions. Such triggers can lead to exploration using a variety of reading resources to investigate possible answers to those questions. One middle school librarian turned her library into a creative reading destination by transforming the ordinary walls of her library into a jungle setting with a small, treehouse-like loft filled with large stuffed animals, creating a quiet, safe, and friendly place for students to read.

Assuring Confidence and Competence

Helping students become competent readers while encouraging their disposition to read for enjoyment also contributes to both information and digital literacy skill proficiency (Reynolds, Arnone, and Marshall 2009). The link between these essential 21st-century literacies and reading demonstrates the important role the library plays in fostering creative reading.

Creative reading activities can provide enrichment opportunities for motivated readers, affording ways for them to read more or read higher-level materials about a topic of interest. For example, the student curious about skyscrapers who has already finished reading his first book on the topic may be a prime candidate to move from curiosity-based reading to a more enduring interest in reading about architecture and engineering.

While creative reading is often thought of as an individual activity, it can also thrive in non-judgmental, peer-supportive, group-learning environments.

Providing Access and Choice

Acquiring skills requires practice. The more students read, the more competent and skilled readers they become. Furthermore, the more types of reading materials they have to choose from, the more likely they are to become not only more skilled but also more creative readers.

To motivate and support their creative reading, students must have open access to a wide range and variety of reading materials both at school and at home. School libraries can offer the full range of reading materials, from novels to graphic novels to comic books, from magazines to videos to blogs, and students can access them from the library, their classroom, or their home. Finding ways to provide access to reading materials at home not only increases the time and opportunity for students to practice and use their reading skills, but may also encourage parents to become more engaged in their children's creative reading activities.

These creative activities will flourish in an environment that encourages selection autonomy, i.e., students can choose reading materials that are both interesting and meaningful to them. These materials can be too easy or too hard, too long or too short, and on topics that may or may not be relevant to the curriculum. If reading is a skill that must be practiced to achieve competency, then all reading materials are valuable regardless of format, length, or topic. Of course, the school librarian can seek to influence those choices through various reading selection guidance activities that pique curiosity and stimulate interest in reading.
Some Examples of Creative Reading Group Activities

While creative reading is often thought of as an individual activity, it can also thrive in non-judgmental, peer-supportive group-learning environments. Here are some examples.

**Kids as Reading Partners.**
Pairing a struggling reader with a student who has attained reading competence to read together in some quiet corner of the library can be a win-win activity. The student who is competent can demonstrate proficiency, while the struggling reader can practice reading skills within a non-threatening learning environment.

**Reading through Writing.**
In one of our recent projects, older students (fifth- and sixth-graders) became subject-matter experts on environmental topics (e.g., endangered species). Using their imaginations, combined with their knowledge gained from reading, these students created original stories for first graders. Once their stories were "published" online (at <curiositycreek.org>), these student authors read their stories to their younger counterparts. The benefits were that the older students developed a sense of confidence and pride in their accomplishments and, in some cases, were motivated to read more, while the younger students were delighted by the stories and having "authors" (role models) read to them.

**Reading Relay.** A group of both competent and struggling readers comes to the library to read a play. A certain subset is assigned the various parts in the play and begins to act out their roles while sitting around a table in the library. Those without parts stand around the perimeter, listening to the others read, knowing they may be selected at any moment to assume one of the roles. This continues until everyone has had a chance to be both a creative reader and a listener. When someone is stuck on a word or encounters other reading difficulties—no big deal. Another student just shouts it out and the process continues. This is a fast-paced, fun-filled creative reading activity in which everyone is equally valued for his or her participation.

**Reading as Its Own Reward**
Creative reading should ultimately lead to creative expressions of learning. Critical to the avoidance of readicide is encouraging the notion that the pleasure of reading in and of itself is its own reward—not stickers, unrelated incentives, or forced reading. This article has provided some suggestions for ways the library can promote students' creative reading based on the intrinsic joy of the activity itself.

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**Works Cited:**


