



2010-1011 Common Reading Experience : An Uncommon Tale of Life and Death

In "Join the Conversation: Teaching Students to 'Cook': Promoting Reading in the First Year Experience Course," Patsy A. Trand and Charlene Eberly note that one of the most emphasized skills during the First Year Experience is critical thinking, as it is perfected through reading and writing, and that current research suggests this design improves retention rates (7). To that end, the Student Engagement committee, under chair Allen Alexander, has chosen an engaging non-fiction text, *Into the Wild*, by Jon Krakauer, as the 2010-2011 Nicholls' common reader.¹

Published in 1996, the account of the 112 day fatal wilderness trek of Christopher McCandless is an expansion of Krakauer's article "Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless Lost His Way in the Wilds," which appeared in *Outside Online*. Beginning with the discovery of McCandless's body inside an abandoned bus in Alaska, *Into the Wild* retraces his journey in the Alaskan wilderness under the moniker Alexander Supertramp. The charm of Krakauer's text is his recognition of McCandless's motivations as being similar to his own as a young man, when he also attempted various wilderness adventures. He also compares McCandless's adventures to those of other young men, and considers the effects that such impulsive decisions have on parents. The book was adapted into a 2007 movie of the same name, directed by Sean Penn and starring Emile Hirsch as McCandless.

This idea of choosing a text which offers multimedia—and multifaceted approaches—will prove important. According to Jodi Levine Laufgraben in *Common Reading Programs Going Beyond the Book* (2006), common reading programs, though designed to introduce the intellectual expectations of college in an often-informal gathering of peers, work best when they are dynamic, meaning that they move beyond book discussion groups (45-61, 95-96). More specifically, Laufgraben lobbies for common reader experiences that engage not just students and faculty, but staff and the larger university community, in a wide range of social and intellectual activities (95-96). Laufgraben's assessment mirrors the five objectives of common reading programs identified by Laura Liljequist and Staci Stone. Citing the example of the Murray State University program, the two found that they work best when they provide a common academic experience; introduce students to intellectual life at the university; create a sense of community; emphasizing the value of reading; and establish the connection between reading and other cultural events on campus (87). Krakauer's account of McCandless's tragic death offers those possibilities, since it has been reformatted into multimedia, and since the author himself is considered a big name of the book lecture circuit.

Of course, the ultimate predictor of success for a common reading experience is the nature of the text itself—whether it is the type of book which will resonate with young adults because of its subject matter and writing style. Liljequist and Stone also cite that texts chosen for the common reader work best when they are fairly brief and when the reading style is appropriate for young adults (87). At 207 pages, *Into the Wild*, written in a journalistic style, will not force students to choose between reading the text and completing assignments for their other classes.

¹Everyone in the campus community—students, faculty, and staff—had an opportunity to be involved in the process. The Student Engagement Committee, a subcommittee of the QEP, called for nominations from the campus community in Fall 2009 and received nominations for 78 titles. The committee then narrowed that list down to five titles, and those five titles were presented to the campus community for a vote. As a result of that vote, *Into the Wild* was named the Common Book for the academic year 2010-11.

Krakauer, Jon. "Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless Lost His Way in the Wilds." *Outside Online* (January, 1993). Retrieved July 27, 2010. <http://outside.away.com/outside/features/1993/1993_into_the_wild_1.html>

Laufgraben, Jodi Levine. *Common Reading Programs Going beyond the Book*. The First-Year Experience Monograph Series No. 44. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2006.

Liljequist, Laura, and Staci Stone. "Measuring the Success of a Summer Reading Program: A Five-Year Study." *Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* 21.2 (2009): 87-105.

Trand, Patsy A., and Charlene Eberly. "Join the Conversation: Teaching Students to 'Cook': Promoting Reading in the First Year Experience Course." *Learning Assistance Review* 14.2 (Fall 2009): 7-20.

Merging Freely Into the Fast Lane

The idea of the information society is at its essence one of egalitarianism, of tearing down the borders between important, essential, and often profitable data and end users—researchers and students—by creating malleable (and hopefully intuitive) access points which are made readily available via the Internet. Unfortunately, the end product of many information portals has proven that the opposite is often the rule—rather than creating an information highway where all are capable of cruising speed, the rule of information as a commodity has created a stock car race between the haves and the have-nots. Not surprisingly, those who have the finances to afford newer, more powerful vehicles quickly lap those who, due to lack of finances, possess inferior technology and technological expertise. Given the budget woes in Louisiana and the present climate towards (not) financing higher education, it is not only possible, but likely, that Louisiana universities will fall further behind nationally in research capabilities. On the home front, the effect will be exponential. The recent scare with the Louisiana Board of Regents' decision not to fund LOUIS (The Louisiana Library Network—an independent statewide agency that serves as the broker between libraries and large database vendors, arranging for individual libraries to buy as part of an equalized group) could in effect lead to Nicholls' losing between 60 to 90 percent of its online journal collection within the next few years.

Scholar librarians with some foresight have recently begun in earnest a conversation which has been held in the wings for some time—that the very nature of scholarly communications must change if universities are to continue to be viable in terms of research. How important are these conversations about retaining licensing rights during copyright, incorporating open access resources into a research collection, and making use of free versions of dissertations, theses, and working papers via institutional and networked repositories? Well, without research capabilities, Nicholls will fall behind in two important categories involved with faculty and student engagement: faculty development and research into best practices. One possible answer to the big questions which we as scholars and consumers of information will face in the next generation is education, or more specifically re-educating ourselves to no longer equate value with price when it comes to research. To this end, it will be in the best interest of all institutions of higher education to begin examining the possibilities offered by open access (in other words, FREE) sources of information such as The Library of Congress (www.loc.gov), The Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (www.ndltd.org), and The Directory of Open Access Journals (www.doaj.org).

The LOC hosts some excellent open access projects that offer quality resources that can be helpful to research in history, the arts, literature, and the sciences. NDLTD makes available, and through its two search engines, highly accessible, a large number of current international theses and dissertations. This international repository is available online, and it includes retrospective projects so that users may also find retroactively digitized copies older theses and dissertations. Obviously, for researchers, this is a boon—entire full text documents, including multimedia files, are searchable and are available for free. Moreover, academic institutions and individual thesis authors who participate in NDLTD are able to showcase their research and disseminate it more widely than authors (including authors of masters and honors theses) who have their works simply housed on library shelves at their respective institutions. And electronic theses and dissertations allow for the inclusion of audio, visual, interactive, and other multimedia applications, which enhance the quality of scholarship. Another free source, DOAJ, contains nearly 6000 peer reviewed titles—online journals published worldwide. The more these peer-reviewed publications are being deemed as A or A+ grade scholarly journals, the more likely they will be of interest to students, staff and faculty. The question is no longer whether these open access sources should be part of our research repertoire; it is how long can we wait before it is too late, when Nicholls has fallen hopelessly behind, reminiscent of the days of print only research resources.

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Expand Your Critical Thinking Terminology!

The Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique conducts advanced research and disseminates information on critical thinking. Each year it sponsors an annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform. It has worked with the College Board, the National Education Association, the U.S. Department of Education, as well as numerous colleges, universities, and school districts to facilitate the implementation of critical thinking instruction focused on intellectual standards. Its studies demonstrate the fact that, as a rule, critical thinking is not always being effectively taught at the high school, college and university level, and yet it is possible to do so.

---From www.criticalthinking.org

Newsletter staff: Tony Fonseca, Managing Editor; Melissa Goldsmith, Editor; Lori Soule, Editor. The statements and opinions included in these pages are those of the newsletter staff only. Any statements and opinions are not those of Nicholls State University or the University of Louisiana System.