

Editor's Column: Pressure + Potential = Passion

Dr. Megan Lowe, Northwestern State University of Louisiana



Despite my long and consistent career of work within various publishing ecosystems (newspaper, popular, and scholarly) – as editor, author, peer reviewer, and proofreader – I am not immune to the danger of the blank page: the challenge of putting ideas into words and works onto paper in a way that is meaningful, valuable, and hopefully entertaining in some way (even if it's just an opportunity for y'all to groan and roll your collective eyes at my terrible jokes). A graduate degree in English (creative writing specifically) offers no immunity against writer's block either, though it equipped me with strategies to battle the block.

I find myself battling such a block at this time, especially as I am rusty in the writing of scholarly or professional material that isn't assessment of some sort (hello, SACSCOC; hello, peer review) or documentation of some sort (hello, safety meetings; hello, Title III grant). That latter thing, the Title III grant of which I am the Principal Investigator (PI), consumes a lot of time these days and has taken me away from scholarship and research, which I consistently lament to my husband. But there is simply no room. Being the PI and the Director of University Libraries is two full-time jobs crammed into the space meant for one person. I know we all wear many hats these days, so I am preaching to the choir, but realistically...I'm just one person, wearing many hats in my capacity as the library director, and then I have a whole 'nother set of hats I have to wear as the PI. I am not complaining,

as it were; I am simply observing the logistics of there not being enough hours in the day.

So, between the block and the lack of personal resources (the rock and the hard place), I found myself frustrated with the blank page, in spite of its potential. Sometimes reframing the blank page as *potential* rather than *pressure* helps – but it failed me this time. I sat at my desk staring at the blank page, willing the muse to come to me and deliver me, to no avail. I keep lists of research article/study ideas, but there’s something about this editor’s column that defeated me this time around. And because this time only comes once a year, and I prefer to write something that is timely and relevant, it seems inadvisable and counterproductive to keep a list of topics for the column.

I put this column away for a while, until closer to time of publication, hopeful that inspiration would come like a bolt out of the blue. **Spoiler alert: it never came.**

But as I sat at my desktop lamenting, I recalled that the working title for this column was “Pressure + Potential = Passion.” I don’t remember WHY I used that working title. I don’t remember what prompted me to use that title. But I decided to sit with that title for a while to see if it could save this column (and me). **Spoiler alert: not exactly.**

While the original motivation is lost to time, what did emerge from reading that title and sitting with it was an emphasis on *passion* and the idea of *gratitude*. I realized that I have a problem one might want to have: a job that one loves that provides fertile ground for topics, phenomena, and challenges to explore, discuss, and research – the *passion*. I am grateful that this is my job, that this is my passion. That I get to do this work, including having writer’s block about my editor’s column, every day, and *I love that so much*.

But something else emerged, particularly around passion. I recently did instruction

for a graduate music education class about plagiarism, academic integrity, and genAI tools. Vis-à-vis genAI tools, I described what I felt were responsible uses of genAI in research contexts – things like outlining, brainstorming, and real-time feedback on one’s in-progress work. I talked about the need to distinguish the *process* from the *product*. I explained that we want them to focus on the process because that’s where the learning happens – the product is just the culmination of the learning, but it’s the process that’s *most* important for learning. And if they can’t show us the process, we question the learning, and we question the product.

I realized that I’d gotten hyper-focused on the *product* in this case. I think we all get overly focused on products these days – trying to show value, demonstrating ROI, aggregating usage statistics to show how relevant and helpful library services are, etc. etc. etc. We focus on assessments, running reports in Workflows, showing the circulation statistics, sharing the financial impact of OER work, etc. etc. etc.

Don’t get me wrong; these things are all important. It’s important to quantitatively demonstrate our work. It’s critical to empirically show how what we do is effective.

But that’s not why any of us are in librarianship.

I seriously doubt any of us went to library school or obtained jobs in libraries thinking “Oh boy, I want to manage user statistics and demonstrate ROI!” (If that’s you, please don’t take this as an attack – your values are valid. It takes all kinds to make our libraries work.) I think many of us went into libraries *wanting to help people in these contexts*. I think many of us went into library work *wanting to be part of institutions that help people in some way*. I think many of us went into this work *because we have a passion*

for literacy, for helping others, for education, for helping others become self-sufficient.

These things are *passions*, and that's what likely motivated most of us to pursue working in this profession. The end – the product – *matters*, but the work that we do that matters the most happens in the *process*. In the process is where the pressure occurs, where the potential exists, and that's where many of us thrive in this profession.

My ranting brain, grasping on the flow that came from the emergences, wanted to seize on the genAI thing. I am mostly resisting this, because I think there are a lot of us who are tired of talking about genAI. But I want to remind all of us that at the heart of what makes us better than genAI is ***our humanity, because that's where our passion comes from.*** GenAI can produce products – sometimes they produce *good* products. They can accomplish tasks and provide input and solve problems. *But there's no passion in it. There's no fire any it.* Just the cold completion of a task.

I know the burnout is real for all of us – not just in higher education in Louisiana, not just socially. Burnout is an unfortunate phenomenon of this work. *But some of that is because of how much we put into what we do, because it is our passion.* So, when the pressure seems too much (cue up “Under Pressure”) – when problems seems greater than the potential – when the solutions we are handed seem to be without value and beauty and meaning – *remember your passion.* It won't solve the problems; it won't alleviate the burnout. But it will remind you that your work has value – to yourself and others – and that you contain passion, you contain fire, and that's even more valuable than the reports, the evaluations, and the products.