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School Libraries: Empowering the 21st Century Learner

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Introduction

Matthew Barrett, writing in the *Globe and Mail*, states that, "just as success in the industrial age depended on a school system that taught us how to read and write, add and subtract; our success in the information age depends on a school system that teaches us how to manage information, utilize technologies, innovate, and above all – think".

At the core of thisinformation age school system is the school library. However, the roles and responsibilities of school libraries have grown exponentially especially in the last decade. One of the most significant factors contributing to this steep growth curve is the exponential growth of relevant technology. The school library,with the aid of relevant technology, has pushed itself into the realm of becoming a learning commons supporting a shift in the philosophy and approach to information and the student. White (2011) points out that,the shift has been from learning information to knowledge creation, collaboration, sharing, and publishing. In this new educational paradigm, the ambition is to grow lifelong learners who have a digital footprint on the interactive World Wide Web and information system. White (2011) also points out that students and teachers are creating knowledge and then publishing it for people anywhere in the world. "There is a whole new concept of developing or cultivating ourselves and our students as lifelong learners. We are all learners and it is more than just being a lifetime of learning" (White 2011).

It must be acknowledged that this growth of the school system and its libraries is not the international norm. There are a variety of scenarios in terms of the role and responsibilities and the integration of the school library system into the larger student curriculum and development. The pendulum ranges from school libraries being an integral part of the school curriculum or underpinning the curriculum to the total non-existence of school libraries. Therefore, one must accept that I cannot speak to all of the scenarios and would therefore try and keep to that which is espoused in the IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto. The Manifesto states that,

The school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens. The school library offers learning services, books and resources that enable all members of the school community to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats and media.

A core principle at this conference is that of empowerment. It is important to place in context the concept of empowerment within the current 21st century learning environment. The presentation will also address the issue of teaching the 21st century student, including the role of the teacher-librarian and the social networking tools being used. In this highly technological learning environment, there is a need for collaboration between and among teachers, teacher-librarians and students. This presentation will address the issue of collaboration. The presentation will also address the issue of multiple literacies and its role in the current school environment.

Definition of empowerment

The concept of empowerment covers a vast array of meanings, interpretations, definitions and disciplines ranging from psychology and philosophy to the highly commercialized self-help industry and motivational sciences. Paulo Freire locates empowerment in *conscientisation*centres which sees individuals becoming 'subjects' in their own lives and developing a 'critical consciousness', that is, an understanding of their circumstances and the social environment that leads to action.

However, I am going to take the more conventional interpretation of empowerment and that is to bring people who are outside the decision making process into it. In the context of school libraries, it must be related to access to information to enhance decision making and conflict resolution.

In this empowerment process, there has to be a realisation by librarians that authentic teaching implies creating awareness. It dismisses the concept of depositing information in the student. The focus is on making the student an active participant in learning and to instil the ethos that the student should be in control of his/her learning. This paradigm demands that the librarians surrender authority to grow empowerment. Essentially, empowering means relinquishing control and passing on a level of trust and responsibility to the learner for his/her own learning. Foote (2010) says that this (that is, the transferring of trust and responsibility) goes to the core of the definition of learner-centered education: teaching and learning in equal partnership, implying that the teacher and the learner also are in partnership. When it comes to the library, the contribution is to the learning experience and the proposal that libraries approach the learner on the learner's terms.

As indicated earlier, school library programs continue to undergo momentous changes that have heightened the importance of technology and evidence-based learning. The focus, as quoted by Frazier (2010), has moved from the library as a confined place to one with fluid boundaries that is layered by diverse needs and influenced by an interactive global community. Guiding principles for school library programs must focus on building a flexible learning environment with the goal of producing successful learners skilled in multiple literacies. Further, empowering students advances school library programs to meet the needs of the changing school library environment.

For many decades there was the view that information literacy was the tool for empowerment and liberation. With the explosion of information resources and sources available to learners

today with the concomitant political, social, and global trend at attempting to control information, information literacy has become an even more important concept and a greater requirement in life and in the workplace. This view is given greater credence as the ACRL has defined information literacy as the ability to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information". Against the backdrop of the explosion of resources and sources, information literacy has been expanded to include new literacies. In collusion, information literacy and the new literacies are fast becoming an integral part of twenty first century society.

Teaching and the 21st learner

In a technological environment, students are comfortable working on assignments using multiple sources of information and adding their own personal touch using, among others, graphics, sounds and videos. In doing so, they are using different educational tools than were available to their parents and teachers when it comes to schoolwork.

However, as suggested by Loertscher(2009) the Google generation, the digital natives, or millennialsneed their tech savvy skills folded into their academic skills. For this to happen, teacher librarians need to build programmes that are client-centered rather than organization centered. The argument is that the students may be digital natives, but their usage of the tools issomewhat different to what might be assumed. There is proficiency in the technology but not in the areas of research.

It is pointed out by Foote (2010) that students have varying levels of proficiency with the internet, database research, and Web 2.0 tools. As librarians improve the student's research skill set and mindset, they are helped to become more independent of the librarian: knowing how to find and interpret information is a lifelong skill. Even though it is difficult to anticipate the devices or methods students will be using to find information 20 years from now, librarians are teaching more than just accessing databases, or how to deal with privacy on Facebook, or how to use Google effectively. Librarians are (or should be) teaching students how to think, evaluate, interpret, and question.

Further, students must be taughtabout Creative Commons and learn new ways at looking at copyright. Irrespective of whether the students are usinga wiki site, YouTube, or SlideShare they need to be aware of copyright issues. Students need to be helped with tagging and bookmarking in Delicious or Diigo, than helping them understand the Dewey system.

Foote (2010) also points out that the tools and/or skills should grow organically out of the process and project underway, fitting seamlessly into it and adding some transformative element. For example, when students collaborate on a research wiki, building their own "Wikipedia" of information, they become writers, producers, and editors of information, transforming their relationship with it and internalizing it more completely.

Role of the teacher-librarian

The roles of the teacher -librarian must go beyond just support and supply – they need to create knowledge paths for both students and teachers. Teacher-librarians must become curriculum leaders. Given the fact that they see the bigger picture, they must help other teachers make the connections. Teacher-librarians lead the way in teaching students and teachers how to access, evaluate, sort, organize, and record information and create summative assignments. They need to help teachers design learning experiences where students can create anything they want because the resources can be unlimited. Students can create a traditional report or be more creative and produce multimedia projects. Learning is not restricted to the classroom. Teachers are collaborating with other teachers and teacher-librarians within their regions and around the world. Teachers are learning along with the students.

Social tools being used

Students are using a range of social media tools such as blogs and wikis.The journal format associated with online Blogs encourages students to record their thinking online and facilitate critical feedback by letting teachers, students, peers and a wider audience if needed, to add comments and interact in discussions.Wikis let students and teachers connect, discuss, share and create online as a community. They can set the agenda for the course though a digital platform where everyone can participate in the process.

Further, powerful informal learning takes place through social networks, fan communities, multiplayer games, virtual worlds, YouTube, Live Journal, Flickr, and so forth. Students acquire important social skills and cultural competencies through their participation in such sites.

Learning, formal and informal, is significantly influenced by technology. However, one must accept that there will be stragglers in adapting to the rapidly transforming education system. To stimulate buy-in from the stragglers (both teachers and students) there has to be some level of collaboration especially by the protagonists.

Collaboration

The focus of school teachers is on curriculum outcomes of students. Teacher-librarians assist in this endeavor by collaborating with teachers and students in seeking appropriate resources and evaluating the quality of information they find. For students, this means acquiring the necessary literacy skills to use digital or print reference resources, access databases, the Internet, and all formats of multimedia.

Collaboration is also critical to ensure adoption of relevant technology in the education process. The introduction of the terms "learning commons" and "information commons" suggest a change to the approach to learning and information from a collaborative perspective. This perspective empowers the teacher-librarian to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of clients, that is, the students, teachers, and the community. The new directives encourage teacher-librarians to expand the library space from the physical into

virtual space. Many school libraries already have web sites to promote what they do. The new virtual spaces for libraries go beyond just a school web site. Digital libraries and resources are now launched from the school web sites. This is a responsive approach to learning collaboratively to help focus on the ever expanding and changing needs of students. It is fast becoming the norm for teacher-librarians to help students and educators learn and collaborate in virtual spaces beyond the walls of the classroom or school building. As indicated by Sydnye (2010), transforming the physical to the virtual is a step that teacher-librarians need to take in order to make their libraries relevant in the 21stcentury, and the physical space should not be all that different from the virtual knowledge building center. The students and teachers of today need to be able to learn how to learn on demand and absorb information from multiple sources to create or build knowledge collaboratively.

There are significant benefits for both the educators and the students to collaborate

Benefits for educators

Meaningful collaborations between school library media specialists and classroom teachers occur when both parties unite to create lesson plans, facilitate engaging student activities, and develop authentic assessments for evaluating student progress.

It is suggested that collaborative partnerships between teacher-librarian and teachers may create a mutual awareness of learning standards across multiple disciplines. It is clear that there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the 21st century student display enthusiasm and renewed interest for learning because school librarians intentionally embed a myriad of digital tools into their collaborative activities.

Further, teacher-librarians can expose teachers to new technology as these teacher-librarians keep pace with the changing and can suggest a wide range of new learning tools and materials formats to the teachers. Partnerships between the teacher and the teacher-librarian facilitates a two-way flow of information supporting a knowledge-ally relations that supports inquiry-based learning with current, high quality materials and resources.

Collaboration brings with it a number of other benefits which include, *inter alia*, the strengthening the library media center's collection development plan. The teacher-librarian gains insight into the gaps in the collectionwhen collaborating teachers and studentspursue answers and are in need of resources to find answers. Such an insight provides the teacher-librarian with the necessary knowledge to express the need for additional resources on specific topics. Collaboration could inspire other teachers to participate in future partnerships as reluctant teachers witness colleagues and students demonstrate enthusiasm for the collaborative process.

Benefits for students

It must be accepted that the student is no any longer standing on the outside but is a significant cog in the 21st century process. The student derive a number of benefits from collaboration between him/her, the teacher and the teacher-librarian. Frazier (2010) argues

that this collaboration directs students' focus away from worry to genuine cognitive interest and provides a framework for successful lifelong knowledge seeking—the foundation of information literacy.

Given that the teacher-librarian is an integral part of the planning and teaching team, there will be a focus on information literacy skills. Sound information literacy skills will contribute to better academic performance by students. Frazier (2010) also states that "today's students demonstrate enthusiasm and renewed interest for learning because school librarians intentionally embed a myriad of digital tools into their collaborative activities".

There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that teacher-librarians have the capacity to elevate students' critical thinking skills with lessons on website evaluation and use of digital applications. Tech savvy students plan, design, and create digital products to showcase their learning. Frazier (2010) substantiates this with the example of publishing on the Web. Online Web publishing motivates students to work to the best of their ability, because there is a huge difference between writing a paper for the teacher and writing one for their peers. Even more gratifying is seeing their work being published and read by peers and reading works by their peers.

As indicated, students, teachers and teacher-librarians are active in this information literacy triangulation. Given the significant influence of technology on information literacy, there is an expansive growth of information literacy to include new literacies. In this era of multiple literacies, all three stakeholders contribute to the success of the process.

Multiple Literacies

Multiple literacies require students to have the ability to read, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of textual environments and multiple digital tools.The array of literacies range from reading literacies, viewing literacies, audio literacies, information literacies and such: all those literacies are or should be part of the armoury of the 21st century student. There are multiple skills that emanate from these multiple literacies. Some of these skills include:

Creative Presentation Skills: Students learn to go beyond the traditional project report to creative ways of preparing and sharing newly developed knowledge by using a combination of slide shows, multimedia tools, website design, CD and DVD productions.

Critical Literacy: Focuses on how and in whose interests the information found is used. Students need to know how to determine the authenticity and reliability of sources found in print and in digital format.

Ethics of Information Use: Students must understand the values associated with the fair and honest use of information they find in print and in digital format.

Technological Competencies: Students learn complex set of effective and efficient search skills for print and online resources. They must acquire word processing skills fully integrated

into the writing process. They must have communication skills using email, text messaging and on-line networks. They must also learn integrating traditional and new media formats into their writing and publishing activities.

These multiple literacies seek to add value to the educational experience and knowledge of students by preparing them for other levels of formal education and everyday life.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a quotation from White who says that "we have gone from being a grocery store where you go to shop for the supplies to create a report to one of a well-equipped and stocked kitchen that allows you to prepare and cook any dish".In this analogy, the new literacies that are being taught impart skills to the students that are essentially part of the transformation of the information communication landscape. The teaching of research skills and Web 2.0 skills is a long term investment in empowering students so that they can take the skills they have learned in classrooms and apply to everyday life and to their own creations. The tools have been shared and the students have been empowered to create any dish.

I thank you!

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