

IASL Pre-Conference Session Paper/Presentation

Building our social landscape in cyberspace Fostering student engagement in online professional communities in library media education

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Abstract

Developing a community of learners and leaders in school librarianship is fundamental to effective practice in professional preparation programs. As more and more school librarian preparation programs go online, staying focused on community building and collaboration becomes the key challenge to the best practices ideal. The Internet provides excellent tools and resources for developing online professional communities, as well as opportunities for academic programs to create social landscapes that students will engage in after they finish their academic program.

Introduction

Effective library media programs are creative, dynamic, enthusiastic, and committed to the development of a community of learners that is centered on the student. Library media specialists provide the essential link in this program connecting students, teachers, and others with the information resources they need. The effective library media specialist draws upon a vision for the student-centered library media program that is based on three central ideas: collaboration, leadership, and technology (Reynolds, cited in Johnson, 2008).

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The Western Kentucky University Master of Science Program in Library Media Education is an AASL recognized program that has been delivered in an online format for over ten years. The Internet provides excellent tools and resources for developing online professional communities and opportunities for preparation programs to create social landscapes that students will engage in after they finish their coursework. As online tools for communication and information sharing have improved, the LME program has increased its presence in cyberspace by creating an online community for graduate students to engage in professional activities.

Strategies for Effective Practice

The importance of developing cyber communities where students can engage in rich discussions on professional topics and issues is essential for the future of the profession. These communities provide the means and resources for school librarians to gain the skills and knowledge to work with 21st century learners and resources. Research studies indicate that when students are engaged in relevant and authentic learning activities through online communication they increase their professional competencies, develop critical thinking abilities, and

experience increased satisfaction with learning (Chiu, 2009; McLoughlin & Mynard, 2009; Solimeno, Mebane, Tomai & Francescato, 2008; Yang, 2008). Furthermore, using social media for authentic student engagement increases student motivation to participate in content related activities (Case and Hentges, 2011). As the school library evolves into a learning and information commons model, in which students use the library as a common area for accessing information resources to meet personal and academic needs, electronic resources and online social networking will play an important role in instruction. Under the learning and information commons model, students will need assistance with locating, accessing, and evaluating electronic information, and collaborating online with teachers and other students. (Harland, 2011). It is for these reasons that the WKU LME program has developed a number of online resources for creating, accessing, and sharing information between faculty, students and alumni.

This paper will discuss how social networking tools are used in a strategic manner to create a professional social landscape in cyberspace and describe how the program integrates online social media and communication tools into different student engagement activities to foster an online professional community of students and alumni. Because all of these tools are freely available on the web, they can also be used by school librarians as part of online engagement activities they can create for their students.

Implementing Best Practices in Cyberspace

In the continuing effort to integrate best practices into the library media education into the professional program at WKU, the social networking tools of the Internet are being employed to develop and apply skills in collaboration, leadership, and technology. Currently the program is implementing the following four strategies for developing an online professional community for student engagement in cyberspace:

- 1) Collaboration using Facebook: to develop a virtual community of students and alumni for communication and information sharing
- 2) Leadership using Advocacy Toolkits: using the online Advocacy Toolkits from professional librarian and technology organizations to engage students in professional advocacy and leadership activities
- 3) Collaboration and Technology using Wordpress: to engage students in the development of an online professional resource for 21st century school libraries
- 4) Collaboration and Leadership using Blogger: to engage students in academic program improvement initiatives

Collaboration on Facebook



The screenshot shows a Facebook group page for the 'WKU Library Media Education Program'. The page is titled 'WKU Library Media Education Program' and is an 'Open Group'. The left sidebar shows the user's profile, Cynthia Houston, and navigation options like News Feed, Messages, Events, and Friends. The main content area displays a post by Hona Martin Batchelor about the 42nd Annual Summer Refresher next week. The post includes a photo of a group of people and text stating: 'Anyone attending the 42nd Annual Summer Refresher next week? July 15 at 9:13am · Like · Comment · Subscribe'. Below the post, there are several comments from other users, including Hona Martin Batchelor, Angie Powell Hawkins, and Renee Diamond Hale. The right sidebar shows the group's members (74), options to add friends, chat with the group, create documents, events, and albums, and profile pictures of group members. At the bottom, there is a sponsored advertisement for 'Dr Oz - Lose 9lbs Week'.

A recent survey of WKU graduate students in the Library Media Education program indicates that over 60

percent currently use Facebook regularly for accessing and creating information in their personal lives. The LME program has taken advantage of this popular social networking tool to create an online professional community of graduate students and alumni for communication and information sharing.

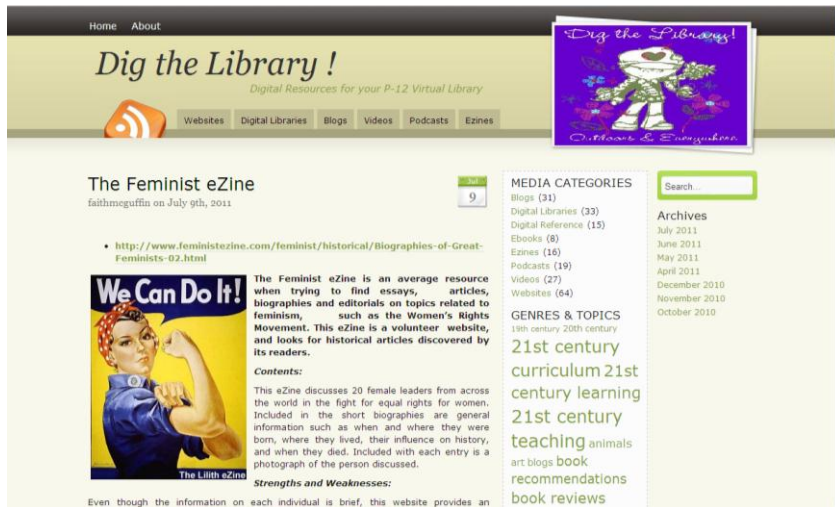
This group has grown to over 70 members and includes current students and program graduates from the 1970s to the present. The members use this site to post questions about the program, provide information about their professional activities and to share information about professional resources. As an additional benefit, each member of this group can be sent messages to their individual email accounts by the group administrator, which has been an effective marketing and advocacy tool for the graduate program. The example posted on this site shows how current students and alumni across different states are communicating about various professional topics, including an upcoming professional development conference sponsored by the state school media association and changes in professional assignments for the upcoming semester.

Leadership using Professional Advocacy Toolkits:



Leadership development and training play a key role in transforming a classroom teacher into a teacher-librarian. According to Toor and Weisburg (2011) advocacy and leadership are “two sides of the same coin” (p. 131). School librarians *must* be able to communicate a clear and consistent message about the value of the school library program to stakeholders in order to gain the support and resources to be effective in their job. As part of the LME program, students learn to be professional advocates through authentic student engagement activities. Students use the advocacy toolkits provided by the American Library Association, the American Association for School Librarians, the International Association of School Librarians, and the International Society for Technology Education to learn about the concerns of professional organizations and strategies for taking action on issues of critical importance to the profession. A current assignment in the Issues and Trends course in the LME program is to research a topical issue in the profession and develop an advocacy plan to bring the issue to the attention of selected stakeholders. Topics students choose range from library staffing issues at the local level to advocating for legislation at the national level. A recent advocacy plan implemented by students in this class was a letter writing campaign to members of a county school board who were in the process of changing a local policy allowing for a single certified librarian to oversee all the school libraries in the district and assigning library clerks to staff individual libraries. Although the policy change was approved, the students learned how important it was to keep up with local, state, national, and international issues in the school library profession and their own abilities to voice their opinions local and national policy decisions.

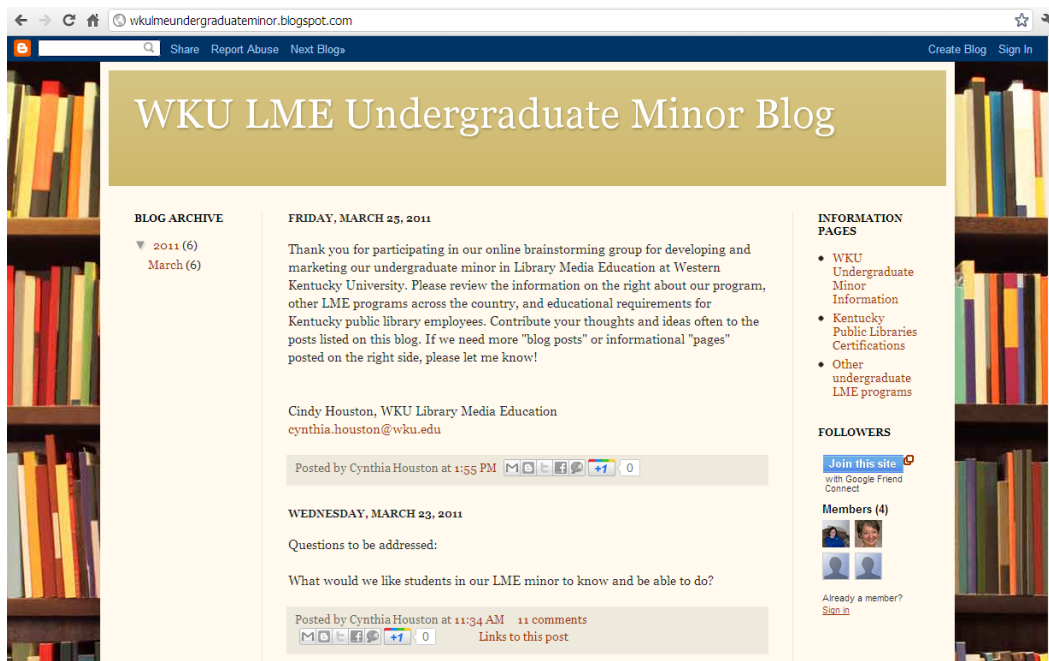
Collaboration and Technology using Wordpress



Another requirement of the LME program is student engagement in developing an authentic online information resource. As part of a course assignment in the Information Services class, students use word processing tools built into Wordpress to create entries for a blog covering K-12 digital resources. This assignment guides students in the use of criteria to evaluate digital information, create and edit blog entries, and participate in an online professional forum.

The Dig the Library blog (www.digthelibrary.com) now has over 200 entries describing websites, digital collections, podcasts and vodcasts, ezines, and online reference tools. After the class ends, students can contribute new information to the site and review the sources of others as members of this online community. Recently, a student review brought the DTL site to the attention of educational technologist, Kathy Schrock, who is now a subscriber—demonstrating to students that they can interact with professionals in the field on an equal footing in the virtual community.

Collaboration and Leadership using Blogger



Recently, the LME program has begun an initiative to develop an undergraduate minor in Library Media Education as part of a recruitment strategy for the library profession and as a source of coursework for para-professionals. Information contributed by students, alumni, and library professionals to this site will provide the program with preliminary data for developing program goals and also to identify future members for a professional task force.

In order to foster a continuing sense of community in cyberspace, it is important to provide students and alumni with opportunities to contribute their professional knowledge and experience to improving the profession. The LME program is currently using the Google social networking tool Blogger for an online discussion forum focused on developing goals and objectives for the program and for reviewing undergraduate programs at other universities. Using the Facebook messaging tool, students and alumni have been invited to contribute to the discussion which is now just getting underway.

Conclusion

Collaboration, leadership and technology are the key components of every library program. Effective e-learning practice in school librarianship must integrate collaboration, leadership and technology strategies into a student-centered approach to teaching and learning. Building a social landscape in cyberspace for past, present, and future students in library media education will play an increasing role in maintaining professional connections and providing school library professionals with important skills and tools for communication and sharing information in the 21st century. The Internet tools and applications discussed in this paper demonstrate how a vibrant online community can be developed using a combination of professional sites, blog templates, and social networking sites that can be used in any educational setting.

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