

A state of evolution: The changing nature of school library services

By Camilla Elliott

The role of school libraries within K-12 schools has changed. It's a realisation that comes as no surprise, having been forecast since the introduction of the Internet into schools in the mid 1990s. The surprise is that even now, ten years into the 21st century, it is a situation that is often spoken about in a future context rather than the reality of the present – a reality that can be very quickly verified with some reflective discussion and the comparison of past and current library usage statistics. The future is NOW. As diminishing library services testify, the change has already occurred.

In these discussions of the nature of today's school library services, however, there is a need for consciousness of the language used, for while the role has 'changed', it should not have 'diminished'. As the Australian government conducts the 'Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools', it's worth exploring the advice of change agent [Seth Godin](#) who, in commenting on the future of libraries generally, urged library staff to take the "intellectual initiative". As he explains:

... information is free now. No need to pool tax money to buy reference books. What we need to spend the money on are leaders, sherpas and teachers who will push everyone from kids to seniors to get very aggressive in finding and using information and in connecting with and leading others (2010).

This is a major gauntlet throw from Godin. It accompanies gauntlets thrown to the entire education community by professionals such as [Bernie Trilling](#), [Alan November](#), [Will Richardson](#), and [Stephen Heppell](#), to mention just a few. They are delivering the message of school change and the dramatically changed nature of information access in today's networked world. Within this setting, information literacy expert [Mike Eisenberg](#) (2010), in speaking of teacher-librarians as information specialists, stresses the obligation to ensure that "every student is super-skilled in information seeking, use, production, and evaluation". Furthermore, he says, they must be "at the centre of making sure that all students have access to resources, services, technologies, and networks".

Taking the intellectual advantage

This year, as the School Library Association of Victoria celebrates its 50th anniversary, there has been opportunity to reflect on the leadership it has provided over that time. It is a role that has constantly evolved to adapt to the times and it can be said that SLAV has regularly taken the 'intellectual advantage' to urge, train and lead school library staff. The 'intellectual advantage' has been constantly articulated through professional learning and conferences such as the recent [Celebrate Change: Let's make the whole school a library!](#) This conference was used as an opportunity to demonstrate the use of Web 2.0 tools through the use of [microblogging](#) and [liveblogging](#) to lead by example and show Web 2.0 tools in action.

SLAV, in association with the [State Library of Victoria](#), is also supporting educators and library staff through the [Victorian Personal Learning Network](#) professional learning initiative, a twelve week course using the new digital literacy tools of the web. These initiatives and others are supporting teacher-librarians in their role as information literacy specialists, as learning evolves to embrace new interactive and collaborative experiences.

With this support available at an association level, what is the impact in Victorian school libraries? An examination of the SLAV [Bright Ideas](#) blog shows ample evidence of best practice in Victorian school libraries. The blog, by its very nature, is a space for the sharing of ideas and best practice is within the reach of library professionals worldwide.

The critical and complex role of school libraries and teacher-librarians was the subject of SLAV's submission to the recent 'Inquiry into school libraries and teacher-librarians in Australian schools'. At a time when the value of libraries within some schools is being questioned, and in others is succumbing to the pressure of reduced budgets, this submission provides a succinct summary of the role. Change is a process that requires constant reflection and critical assessment of current practice. Perceptions and beliefs about the role of school libraries held by school administrators also influence the viability of the library service, often limiting the ability to innovate through lack of staffing and funding support. While text-based activities and cultivation of a love of reading continue to be important, the complexity of today's information landscape places other demands on teacher-librarians as information literacy specialists. As stated in the submission:

Teacher-librarians identify and provide access to this range of information sources and work with students to develop the skills to critically evaluate and interpret them. At the same time, they teach students how to acknowledge the sources of their information and the skills to safely use the social networking tools available so that they can publish their own ideas and researched work (SLAV, 2010 p. 14).

It's not about the technology

At the recent [Australian Council for Educational Computing \(ACEC\) conference - Digital Diversity](#) held in Melbourne, numerous conversations could be overheard commenting on the fact that conference delegates were, by and large, those who understood how learning in the classroom of 2010 has changed. [The conference was hosted by the information technology subject associations; however, the message from the very beginning of the four days clearly broadcast it as a conference about 'learning' not 'technology'.](#) Information technology conferences are no longer the domain solely of ICT teachers. Technology has permeated our lives to the extent that, within today's education landscape, ICT must be seamlessly integrated across the curriculum. [It was encouraging to see teacher-librarians well represented at this particular conference.](#) held in Melbourne, numerous conversations could be overheard commenting on the fact that conference delegates were, by and large, those who understood how learning in the classroom of 2010 has changed.

British educator [Tom Barrett](#) summed up the change discussion well on his return from this year's United Kingdom [BECTA Conference](#), in saying that he had "stood in a room with hundreds of people whispering. It is very loud". The whispering to which he refers is the conversation taking place: the discussions of frustration at the snail's pace of education reform; the discussions about the de-tooling of students as they leave their technology at the school gate; the excited sharing of ideas and innovation that is working for some educators and the plans for adoption by others seeking to seamlessly integrate technology into their classrooms. In his [blog post](#), Barrett (2010) encourages the whisperers to persist in writing, sharing, communicating to bring about change. Teacher-librarians need to involve themselves in this discussion.

In the early days of the Internet revolution, the issue was money - whether or not schools could afford the hardware, licensing, professional support and other 'cost of ownership' factors. And how families were to afford computers, mobile phones and other gadgetry. Today, the situation has changed. Through massive cost reductions, the use of digital technology has become ubiquitous in society, and with it, the growing realisation that the digital divide is not between the rich and poor in our society but, as articulated in the [Horizon Report 2010 K-12](#) when reporting on educational trends, "the digital divide, once seen as a factor of wealth, is now seen as a factor of education" (Horizon, 2010, p. 4). [Howard Rheingold](#) (2010) sums it up in saying that, "increasingly, the [digital divide](#) is less about access to technology and more about the difference between those who know how and those who do not know how...". Herein lies a major issue for schools and a challenge for teacher-librarians and staff employed in school libraries to take the intellectual initiative and provide a support base for teachers and students.

Students as content creators and producers

[The Pew Internet and American Life Project](#) (2010), in the survey '[Social media and young adults](#)', found that of the average individual owns 3.5 of the five most common gadgets, namely: cell phones, mp3 players, computers, game consoles and portable gaming devices. Today's youth are maturing in an era of citizen

journalism when any person equipped with a camera or mobile phone can record and post to the web in moments. Referred to as the 'net generation', they have grown up surrounded by digital technology, and have an expectation that it will be used in their classrooms, Pew (2010) found that 38% of internet-using teens say they shared self-created content such as photos, videos, artwork or stories online in 2009.

The reality is that, in their time away from school, many students will spend a good deal of time creating videos, building websites and collaborating online through Facebook, My Space and other social media. YouTube and Facebook are the fastest growing websites on the Internet, with YouTube the primary information source chosen by many adolescents, even before Wikipedia.

To date, Facebook (2010) has 400 million active users, with the average user creating 70 pieces of content each month. These figures indicate that our students are moving into a future where they will be sharing increasing amounts of data online. It's activity that brings with it the need for schools to incorporate a new range of learning and skills if they are to continue to be a positive influence in moulding citizens of the future. My Space and other social media. YouTube and Facebook are the fastest growing websites on the Internet, with YouTube the primary information source chosen by many adolescents, even before Wikipedia.

The 'whisperings' referred to by Barrett earlier relate to addressing the learning needs of these students who are operating, in most cases, in very different environments inside and outside school. Outside school, many are collaborating and sharing content online, building a digital profile that will stay with them for life and doing it all with negligible support except from peers. Learning within school, on the other hand, is still predominantly a text-based one-size-fits-all model with some modification for specifically identified students.

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New ways of learning

Trilling and Fadel, as members of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, are amongst leaders who insist that "new ways to make learning interactive, personalised, collaborative, creative, and innovative are needed to engage and keep netgeners actively learning in schools everywhere" (2009, p.10).

Outside of school, students are interacting with an authentic audience online, expressing opinions that will be challenged, and receiving immediate feedback. Within school, where much of their writing and creative activity has a limited audience – often only the teacher and class members – it is easy to understand a student's perception that this work lacks value. With so much opportunity to collaborate, create and share, the perception of 'value' is influenced by audience.

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It has to be acknowledged, however, that adapting to digital literacies and accepting their legitimacy is an incredible learning curve for some teachers, particularly at a time when they are under increasing pressure to respond to test results, accountability to parents and curriculum reform. Over the past twelve months, as a result of the Rudd government's Digital Revolution, Australian classrooms are being transformed with the introduction of netbooks and 1:1 computing. It is an initiative that is forcing school

reform and causing concern for teachers who are struggling to adopt the digital learning environment.

Nevertheless, the real work for educators, according to Alan November is not learning how to use the technology, but "redesigning assignments we give students to be more rigorous and motivating and, when possible more global" (2008, p. 32). He speaks of empowering students with technology and suggests that "the planning challenge is to imagine doing things that we have never been able to do in education, not

simply improving upon what we are doing today". The future students look forward to requires them to function well in a globally-connected economy, managing massive amounts of information and learning how to work with people all over the world.

Technology - ubiquitous and transparent

The technological transformation of education is not going away. [The Horizon Report K-12](#), produced by the [New Media Consortium](#), is an annual publication introducing "six emerging technologies or practices that are likely to enter mainstream use in the education within the next one to five years" (2010, p. 3). While this is a forecast based on research and will not be uniform across all schools globally, the 2010 edition identifies technology as a ubiquitous, transparent component in the lives of students; a means of empowerment and a means of communicating and socialising. We are clearly at a place in time where our K-12 students, who have grown up in the technological era, do not recognise digital technology as an extra but rather within the standard array of life's tools.

Students are growing up accepting, without question, the practice of exchanging ideas and opinions online with a largely unknown audience. Within just a few years, the barn doors have been thrown wide open and education systems worldwide are still equipping themselves with policy, skills, materials and support to build this new-found freedom into the model of schooling so it will continue to equip young people with the capability to function as successful members of society. Key challenges for education cited in the Horizon Report K-12 2010 edition are:

- Rising importance of digital media literacy as a key skill in every discipline and profession
- Faster adoption of educational practice and materials to cater for individual student differences
- Establishment of unified approaches to reform by policy makers and educators
- Restructure of traditional schooling as acknowledgment that learners have increasing opportunities to take their education into their own hands
- Acknowledgement of the value of the learning and education taking place outside the walls of the classroom.

Evidence of legitimate learning

So where are students learning? What are they doing online and is it activity that can be transferred back to school as evidence of legitimate learning? A recent random survey of Year 7-10 students in an Australian boys' college indicated that approximately 85% of students have Facebook accounts. A sampling of the students' perceptions of use reveals minimal correlation between school activity and recreational online activity at home. The use of literacy skills and the development of awareness of the world around them was not perceived by them as 'learning'. To the students it was just what they do online i.e. they engage in conversation, upload images, download music and videos, find resources and generally explore. All of this is usually done in an environment of multi-tasking, as they complete set work from teachers while simultaneously check on friends, chat and exchange information. They are moving outside traditional friendship groups and have the opportunity to follow up immediately on anything that may capture their interest.

These students, along with their peers worldwide, contribute to the 200,000 YouTube videos uploaded daily and can be included in YouTube statistics that calculate average of daily viewing as 200,000,000 videos. Trilling and Fadel (2008) in [21st Century Skills: learning for life in our times](#), introduce a framework for 21st century learning that covers the traditional skills of literacy and numeracy but also includes skills required in today's world of work. At a time when routine, manual tasks have largely been automated or sent offshore, schools must prepare students for jobs that require expertise and creativity. The two essential skills sets required, they say, for 21st century employment are:

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- The ability to quickly acquire and apply new knowledge
- The know-how to apply essential 21st century skills – problem solving, communication, teamwork, technology use, innovation and the rest – to each and every project (Trilling and Fadel, 2008, p.11).

Digital curriculum options

There is already greater emphasis by schools on students knowing how to learn and understanding their own learning styles. Part of the challenge of knowing how to learn is actually recognising learning and valuing the use of newer digital options that are being embraced by students who don't easily manage a text-based system. Stephen Heppel (2010) speaks of the possibilities open to us by viewing education through the skills and interests of the K-12 generation. He encourages teachers and education leaders to be 'ingenious'. Explaining 'being ingenious' within teaching as, "not just new for new's sake, but properly reflecting on what works better for our community, our culture, our context, our children and our needs" (Heppell 2010).

Therefore, if it suits a student to demonstrate his understanding of a piece of writing verbally, why do we persist in accepting only written reports from students when past experience tells us that this will be a means of failure with that student? Success builds success and we have a duty to empower our students with opportunities to experience success when the options are available. Similarly, teachers who are still coming to terms with digital curriculum options and experiencing the stress of managing with unfamiliar tools, should not suffer a loss of confidence and self-worth.

Conclusion

As stated in SLAV's submission to the Inquiry into school libraries and teacher-librarians in Australian schools, school libraries and their activities are a vital component of the management and organisation of the curriculum. The future potential of school libraries and librarians is closely linked to the future of students, teachers and learning. Teacher-librarians and library staff are in a unique position to support teaching staff integrate the new digital landscape into their classrooms, as they:

use the new technologies to make collaboration easy, to move seamlessly from individual learning projects to cross-curricular projects, to provide a positive model and an ideal learning space to exploit the potential of the new web 2.0 technologies for individual learning and for social, group or networked learning (SLAV, 2010, p. 21).

In Melbourne recently, Alan November spoke as an advocate of the teacher-librarians who have embraced change and are supporting their learning communities. Everybody is a learner in today's networked world. Stephen Heppel (2010) calls it an exciting time in learning. Exciting, networked, complex, collaborative, global – it is all of this, but our digitally-connected society is also a community of learners where, like never before, those willing to learn have such opportunities to achieve. Teacher-librarians, as information specialists, must heed Godin's demand to take the 'intellectual initiative' and be proactive in providing support for access to appropriate resources and skills for our communities of learners.

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Images

Effective Learners/Collaborators - source: <http://isb21.wikispaces.com/>

Networked teacher - source: <http://appelt.net>

Wordle: my own image

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