A season of starting out: thoughts for new teacher librarians

By Marika Simon

> *Snapshot*
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> Marika Simon, a recent CSU teacher librarianship graduate, outlines her tips and hints for new teacher librarians. Marika's reflections contain words of wisdom for anyone in school libraries.

Have you ever wanted to turn back the clock or find a time machine and go back to give yourself a second chance or at least some good advice? Two and a bit years ago, halfway through my Masters of Education in Teacher Librarianship, I started a new phase in my journey by embarking on a new job as Teacher Librarian (TL) at a small primary school. It was far from the start of my overall professional journey – I already had 17 years of experience, on-and-off, in classroom teaching. At the beginning of my career, I had also worked in academic libraries as well as in various administrative roles in both not-for-profit and corporate organisations.

However, despite my wealth of general work experience, I was definitely a beginner TL. Diving in to this new role in the middle of my process of qualifying for it was exciting but also somewhat daunting.

At the present time, I would still count myself in the novice ranks of the profession but I can still summon the wide-eyed idealism of the postgraduate student immersed in her university course. Therefore, this seemed the perfect time to reflect on what worked and what didn't as I set out on my TL journey. In that spirit, and with these experiences still fresh in my mind, I offer some reflective advice to that fresh-minted TL in 2019 and to anyone else who might care to listen.

Learn your context

While there is something inspiring and seemingly noble about the idea that your reach should exceed your grasp (Browning, 1855) - it can get frustrating, tiring, and ultimately demotivating to keep reaching far beyond what you can realistically accomplish. To that end, I recommend spending your initial energy in familiarising yourself with the context of your school, your school library collection, and the current expectations for the role of the TL in your school before jumping in with any major changes.

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Local context is an area that I feel is touched on but not really fleshed out in the academic process. While there was always a place for reflecting school context in the various assignments, it felt to be a kind of lip service. There is a feeling of – tell us where you are, but, really, show us how you are going to do what we have established as an ideal. After a bit over two years in the trenches, I have a few reactions to that:

- There is not one ideal. Do not expect to implement every facet of every role and ideal put forward in the academic course because:

  - Different contexts will support different ideals – you would not expect the ideal collection or library services model of a 1200-student, Kindergarten to Year 12 government central school in rural NSW to be the same as that of a 250-student independent primary school in the Melbourne CBD. Remember that when you read articles or social media posts that do not reflect your experience.

  - Academic research papers that describe the role or study various aspects of the role of TLs look at a wide cross-section of TL positions. As an example, Margaret Merga's (2020, pp 894 - 899) recent paper focussing on the literacy educator role of the teacher librarian separated out 34 aspects of the TL role from 40 recent Australian job application role statements; only one of which appeared on all 40 statements. No one person in one position can be expected to fulfil all the various aspects of the role found throughout the research and certainly not all within their first year!

- The real world comes with many constraints that cannot be wished away and that it can be soul-destroying to keep fighting against – sometimes you need to be able to accept your given circumstances and decide to take what you have and make it as close to your ideal as possible.

- You can only do so much. You have a limited amount of time and resources. You must set your own priorities that are appropriate for your context.

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In my opinion, a good part of your first year will be needed to familiarise yourself with the staff, students, school structures and collection. I certainly could have avoided some conflict and misunderstandings had I taken the time to really 'read the room' of my context and seek to understand the reasons behind the way things were before challenging them – or appearing to.

This leads to my next recommendation against jumping in with massive changes at first. Even if you feel that something is not right, it is hard to determine the best course to take to create the change you desire until you understand the context that you are creating the change in and for.

Hurry up and wait

Due to a variety of circumstances, I was the first fully qualified Teacher Librarian to work at my school in recent history. Fresh from the centre of academic idealism and starry-eyed with enthusiasm, it was easy to walk into my new situation and see all of the things that didn't seem to match up with my ideals of best practice. I suspect that no matter the history of a school library, there will always be places for improvement that new staff will see and it is understandable to want to make a mark on a new position and to turn your ideals and theories into reality immediately if not sooner.

My suggestion is to ride that wave and **hurry up** and make a list. Start a notebook or computer file with your wish-list of projects and changes. One of the things I noticed when I entered was the fact that certain high-demand picture books were in the Dewey Decimal section of the library rather than in Junior Fiction with the bulk of the picture books. This came to my attention when finding *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson for one of the Stage 1 Teachers. He mentioned the frustration he felt when looking for books because they were not where he expected them to be and I enthusiastically said that I would look into it and see what I could do to remedy it – and that project went onto my wish list, along with many others.

My follow up suggestion is to try to make the LEAST number of major changes possible in the short term. If there are issues that prevent you from running a safe and effective library program – certainly attend to them immediately. But if you have identified major re-organisation tasks or want to genrefy the collection or create a new collection – **wait** if you can. Take time to familiarise yourself with the school and community (if you are completely new to them), and the library itself and try to understand why things are the way they are before you start to make significant changes.

> **Take time to familiarise yourself with the school and community...**

In my case, as I took time to familiarise myself with the processes of my school library and with my larger context of being part of the NSW Department of Education (DoE) school libraries I found out why that picture book section was located in the Dewey Decimal section. Certain examples of rhyming picture books are classified by the Schools Cataloguing Information Service (SCIS) as poetry rather than as fiction and assigned a Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC). Due to difficulties encountered in the last changeover in Library Management Systems (LMS) across the NSW Department of Education, caused by widely divergent cataloguing and collection-assignment practices across individual schools, schools are now encouraged to minimise differences in cataloguing and collection-assignment on the online LMS.

I still have a goal to make that rhyming picture book collection more accessible to students and staff, but by taking the time to find out why that seeming anomaly existed, I will be able to craft a

solution that is more efficient and effective in the long run. My current plan is to create a separate space in my Junior Fiction section that maintains the DDC but houses the rhyming picture books in a similar space to those classified as fiction to make them more visible to patrons.

Breaking the ice

So, you've familiarised yourself with your context and made yourself a list of things you want to do to bring your school library to create the ideal library that you have envisioned. How do you get started?

Building relationships, trust and expectations takes time. My suggestion is to look at the long view and take steps that are relevant to your context but that don't step on too many toes. Look at ways that you can add value without encroaching on areas that existing staff or faculties see as their traditional territories. Those small steps can then be built upon to create changes that challenge traditional structures and expectations.

Building trust has given me a path into greater collaboration in programming.

For instance, I began building relationships between the teaching staff and the library by showcasing new or relevant resources at our weekly organisational meeting. I also took advantage of any requests for materials from staff – I prioritised requests from staff for quick turnaround time, so that teachers would think of me as a first port-of-call for locating resources rather than their last option. This service has expanded to me offering some consultation to teachers regarding resources at the planning stage of programs as well as once the planning has been done. Building trust has given me a path into greater collaboration in programming.

Networking – A time to step in, a time to step forward and a time to step away

Being a TL can be a lonely role. Many of us are the only TL in our school and our position is often not understood by other staff and therefore can be less supported than more traditional classroom teaching or specialist subject positions. Luckily there is a vibrant community of teacher librarians across Australia and there are a variety of ways to plug into this network, including :

- In person events (on hold in many places in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19)
- Via official workplace social media (like Yammer or Slack)
- Via personal social media (like Facebook groups)
- Through membership in professional associations (like SLAV or SLANSW or ALIA)

Getting connected with others who are in training or working in the field can be invaluable. I do not think I would have made it through my MEd (Teach Lib) course without the personal learning networks that I built and joined during that time. I also have found it valuable to participate in various practitioner networks since becoming a practising TL. But, as the song (Seeger, 1962) says 'To every thing… there is a season…' You need to watch your own reactions and circumstances to determine what level of participation is best for you at any given time.

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Stepping In:

This level might be characterised on computer discussion boards as 'lurking'. It looks like plugging yourself in to networks by showing up to in-person meetings or conferences or joining and monitoring digital media networks; but just standing on the sidelines taking in the information offered. It is a great low-risk way to be connected.

Stepping forward:

This level would be characterised by offering comments and responses on social media sites, sharing resources on collaborative sites, speaking out or even leading workshops or talks at conferences and in-person meetings. As I have commented regarding the Med course – 'the more you put into it, the more you get out of it'. This holds true in professional networks as well. Putting yourself out there does take some level of personal risk, but can also reap great rewards.

Stepping away:

This level is characterised by taking time out to focus on your own space. Perhaps a social media conversation took a controversial tone and left you feeling a bit bruised. Maybe you scrolled through a series of posts showing other TLs' preparations for the start of the school year and instead of feeling inspired and motivated, you felt overwhelmed and underprepared and like you had missed a train that you hadn't even known was scheduled to stop at your station. It is perfectly fine to take a rest from one or all of your networks if you find yourself in a place where they are not feeling helpful to you and you are not feeling helpful to them. The key thing to remember is that when you step away for a time, you are always welcome to step back when you are ready.

Find your voice and the platform that suits you

There are many voices clamouring for our attention and much zeal in the school library community for advocacy. I think that it is great to join campaigns like #StudentsNeedSchoolLibraries and to

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listen to voices like Joyce Valenza (2008) and others urging us to create our brands and prepare our elevator pitches. I also know that my reaction when I started encountering those ideas in the literature and movements on social media was 'but that is just not me.' I think it is key to find your own voice and the platforms that you can use to authentically promote your ideas and the work you do in the library.

For me, the following four factors served to promote my work as teacher librarian and the role of the library to the main stakeholders in the community:

1. Putting library events and resources on the map in staff meetings. I am lucky that in my school the weekly organisational meeting is run on a sort of round table sharing model – everyone is given an opportunity to share anything they think is relevant to the entire staff. This meant I just had to seize that opportunity, rather than having to take the extra step of putting my items on the agenda.

The most popular sharing item I do is showcasing new arrivals of library resources or highlighting relevant topical holdings from the library to staff. My best advice on this type of sharing – keep it small (no more than 5 books at a time, a brief synopsis and flipping through pages), keep it targeted, and keep it relevant. Several staff have told me this segment is the highlight of organisational meetings for them. It is a fantastic opportunity to advocate for and promote the library to staff.

> **...keep it targeted, and keep it relevant.**

2. Play to your strengths and passions in class activities. Students are captured by your enthusiasm and passion – make your best effort to carve out at least some of your teaching time with classes to showcase something you are excited about. Even if there are expectations of your role that run contrary to your passions, do what you can to negotiate an opportunity to do that thing that really lights your fire: reading aloud, performing and leading dramatic responses to literature, integrating technology, facilitating inquiry and research. Your excitement and passion will promote the library to the students.

3. Participate in and organise whole school events. Unlike classroom teachers, the teacher librarian does not have easy, regular access to communicate with the parents of students. Making an effort to attend whole school events and taking the opportunity to be the visible coordinator of one or two during the year can raise your profile and make it easier for parents to relate to you and to the library. Some events that have worked particularly well for me:

a. School year kick-off event: my school holds a bbq and bush dance picnic evening early in the year. Even though it is usually held on a day when I am not scheduled to work, I make a point of attending as it is a perfect way to meet and talk with parents in a laid-back setting.

b. Meet the teacher meetings: I try to make it to every stage or class's meet the teacher meeting for a brief in-person 'hello and welcome to the library'. It takes a bit of coordination and time, but just a few minutes of introduction lays the foundation for future communication and for students remembering their library bags!

c. Easter Hat Parade: I have taken the responsibility of arranging the school's annual Easter Hat Parade (to be honest it was handed down to me initially, but I am taking it on board now.) It is a fun event and one that a lot of parents, especially Kindergarten parents, attend and is fairly early in the year. Harmony Day is another great community event opportunity in the first term. Once again, being the visible coordinator for such events helps parents get to know you and form a positive, friendly impression. This makes life easier when discussing overdues and lost books further down the track.

d. Book Week: This is my favourite whole school initiative! I love book week and my school had a standing tradition of a different event for each of the three days that we are staffed with a TL when I started. I have continued this tradition and I absolutely love the Book Week Character Costume Parade and book fair that is our crowning event. It is a great way to promote reading and the library with a fun, feel-good event. The book fair has generated a generous stream of book donations for the library as well – what a win/win situation!

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4. Use your voice in official channels of communication. Whatever the official channels of communication between school and parents are in your school – use them! Find a place in the school newsletter, website news updates, or social media accounts to regularly update the parent community on library-related items. I started a regular 'Library Corner' article stream in our school newsletter. This year, we have switched to focus our communication stream to the school website, and I have volunteered to be on the communications team to contribute regularly via that medium. This keeps the library's profile fresh and current in the eyes of the school community.

I also urge you to start within your school community and move outwards. Once you feel comfortable engaging within your context it becomes easier to find your voice in conferences, in wider social media platforms and even in practitioner journals. Just be sure that you know and abide by any guidelines set by your employer when you venture out to share your voice in the wider world.

Have fun

The last thing I would tell myself and other beginning TLs is to remember why we chose to pursue this career. My love of teaching and of librarianship are what brought me to this place. Don't get so caught up in the challenges and the demands of the job that you forget to enjoy it!

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