

School libraries and the VELs: Great minds at work

Dr Ross J. Todd

It was a real privilege for me to be present with Dr Carol Gordon at the recent SLAV professional development program in August 2006. My visits to Australia are always cherished times, and the opportunity to continue to work with SLAV and with *Synergy* provides a basis for keeping in touch with many school library developments in Australia, and more importantly, to engage with energetic and thoughtful teacher-librarians who are committed to creating a preferred future for school libraries in Victoria.

Ahead of you are exciting and challenging times as you address the implementation of the VELs (Victorian Essential Learning Standards). From an international perspective, the VELs are a timely local response to educational research worldwide that highlights the complexity and diversity of student learning, the role of student engagement and ownership in learning as a key connector to knowledge growth, and the role of the educator as the most important influence on student learning.

As I see them, the VELs represent a shift away from transmissive modes of instruction, to ones that foster meaningful and relevant inquiry. In July I spoke at the International Association of School Librarianship annual conference in Lisbon, Portugal. Very clearly, the international focus on learning, of which the school library asserts a central role, centres on certain dimensions: constructivist learning, inquiry, learning outcomes, and evidence of impact. These are at the heart of continuous improvement.

The VELs' emphasis on intellectual inquiry, personal agency, and social and cultural agency clearly invite teacher-librarians to focus on learning outcomes and intellectual quality. The VELs emphasis on the integratedness of disciplinary knowledge and skills, and student engagement with and ownership of learning clearly invite teacher-librarians to carefully reflect on the climate and environment of learning, and the quality of pedagogy. The VELs point to students creating their future: one that is sustainable, is innovative, and builds strong communities. For teacher-librarians, the immediate implication of this is

the development of learning environments and learning processes that are evidence-based and sustainable, creative and flexible, and where leadership is truly learning-centred, rather than role or authority-centered.

The VELs provide rich opportunities for teacher-librarians to lead in learning through the school library. The focus for each teacher-librarian must be excellence in learning, and through it will come excellence in teacher-librarianship. The VELs provides a clear opportunity for teacher-librarians to reflect on and perhaps rethink traditional practices. These centre on constructivist learning, inquiry, instructional interventions, and evidence. As I read the VELs, they are clearly underpinned by a constructivist learning framework, and it is essential that teacher-librarians have a clear grasp of the philosophy and principles of constructivist learning, for understanding this impacts on every aspect of the provision of school library services: from the instructional interventions, to collection development, and to the design of the school library both as an information place and knowledge space.

Critical to understanding what constructivist learning is is understanding how knowledge is constructed in each of the disciplines. As I examine the requirements for each VELs, it is clear that students are expected to think, to reflect, and to develop deep knowledge and skills as historians do, as scientists do, as mathematicians do, as artists do. These thinking and knowledge development processes are uniquely specified for each discipline; they come with their own meta-language, modes of expression, and modes of inquiry, and do not mesh easily or conveniently with traditional models/approaches to information literacy.

Essentially the disciplinary-based VELs frame information-to-knowledge processes in ways that show how disciplinary-based knowledge is constructed. For example, the Mathematics VELs has the development of mathematical inquiry as one of its aims, and this involves the students in problem posing, problem solving, mathematical modelling and investigation. As I investigate

In the first of Dr Ross J. Todd's regular section contributions to *Synergy* he explores the opportunities offered to teacher-librarians by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

CISSL

[sizz'li] (noun)

The Centre for International Scholarship in School Libraries where leading researchers and professionals work together to create school libraries that spark learning in information age schools around the world. ²Global hotspot for school library action, where the synergies of school libraries, inquiry learning, literacies and information technology, spark ideas, research, innovation and scholarship.

this, I do see a model of information literacy presented – no, not the standard model of define, locate, select, organise, present, assess – but a model built on mathematical inquiry: conjecture, formulation, solution, communication.

Here is an information literacy process, by another name, and an explication of a language that can enable teacher-librarians to communicate more effectively with mathematics teachers, and to engage them in a common goal of fostering mathematical inquiry through the library.

Also in the Mathematics VELs are indicators of what might form the basis of instructional interventions: find ideas, examples, counter examples; explore patterns; develop conjectures; test simple conjectures; explain propositions; analyse reasonableness of points of view; develop generalisations by abstracting features; test truth statements and generalisations; develop models.

The challenge for teacher-librarians is to know and to work comfortably within disciplinary-based conceptions of information literacy rather than promulgating a library-defined information literacy framework, and from scope-and-sequence frameworks of teaching information literacy. There is not a one-size-fits-all framework for information literacy instruction in the VELs, rather a challenge to work with multiple conceptions of information literacy.

Another challenge for teacher-librarians to understand is that the starting point of their instructional role is not some prescribed set of information literacy competencies. The starting point is identifying a critical zone of intervention in the VELs. Carol Kuhlthau's work on zones of intervention is important here. She defines zone of intervention as those areas in which an information user can do with advice and assistance what he or she cannot do alone or can do only with great difficulty. This requires careful analysis of the VELs to identify those areas or points that lend themselves to student inquiry through the school library, and one where the pedagogical expertise of the teacher-librarian in relation to the transformation of say, historical information to historical knowledge can be enabled to ensure that students reach the standards. These become

the points at which teacher-librarians and classroom teachers can work together to develop an authentic research agenda through the school library to meet the desired outcomes as specified in the VELs. The VELs clearly give emphasis to the development of new knowledge – knowledge that conveys depth and richness of understanding, rather than an accumulation of descriptive facts. What this indicates to me is the importance of instructional interventions that develop knowledge construction processes, rather than merely information finding processes.

There is a challenge for teacher-librarians to develop and share exemplars of knowledge construction interventions as they relate to the various disciplinary-based VELs.

Yes, there is much work to do! Continuous improvement of schooling is not a static process, nor does it happen by chance. George Bernard Shaw once said: "We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility of our future" (<<http://quotations.about.com/cs/inspirationquotes/a/Destiny4htm>>). The VELs are about school libraries and their future. They are about the development of knowledgeable and knowing young people; young people who have the ability to read the word and the world, and who can live their lives as thinking, informed, knowledgeable and productive citizens of an increasingly inter-connected and intense information world.

Designing learning for a knowledge-based society is complex, and school libraries can and should have a central role. Will they? That is up to you. The VELs challenge you to embrace a powerful vision of knowledge centeredness rather than information centeredness, and to align your leadership, pedagogy and resources to create that vision. The VELs challenge you to ask deeper questions about how your school libraries contribute to the development of knowledge, and how your instructional interventions enable this. A focus on knowledge construction and knowledge outcomes may collide with some of your traditional practices, and you must have the courage to listen and to learn, to reshape our goals, and to take action.

Dr Ross J Todd is the Director of Research at the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, USA. Dr Todd is also a member of the Synergy Board.