

# The Next Generation of School Library

By Dr Carol A. Gordon

Teacher-librarians are facing critical questions about the increasingly important work they are doing to educate digital youth. Their instructional role is particularly relevant for identifying seminal questions that will define the mission of the emerging school library. This article addresses two questions: Where are we in the development of the school library concept? What are the trends that indicate where we are going?

These questions are important because school libraries have always been on the cutting edge of teaching and learning but have never realised their full potential in terms of equity of instruction and sustainability of services. While many schools enjoy dynamic libraries, constraints of time, place, and funding inhibit information and inquiry skills instruction to all students and collaborative professional development opportunities for all teachers. These constraints limit the instructional impact of the school library at a time when it is most relevant to a 21st century education. In addition, learning from information through inquiry methods and state-of-the-art technology is time-consuming and intense. What it means to be information literate has shifted from teaching the mechanics of searching, finding, and retrieving information to supporting critical reading/literacy and critical thinking skills that involve the use of knowledge gained from information processing. Youth need time to practice, revise, review, and repeat the types of learning tasks that challenge them to think. Shouldn't all children have these learning experiences? Shouldn't the school library be a stable, guaranteed, sustainable part of every child's education?

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## The school library concept: past, present, and future

The idea of a school library that supports teaching and learning for educators and students began as a curriculum library that provided teaching resources to support the school's instructional program. It soon grew to include reading materials for children and instruction for their use. Oriented to the print world, the school library was collection-centric for most of the 20th century, emphasising library habits and behaviors. Instruction was bibliographic, focusing on how to use resources. Even with the advent of analog technology that expanded library collections to include audio and visual equipment and materials the concept of information literacy was not yet fully formed.

It was not until the 1980's that school library instruction became learner-centric, with an emphasis on understanding the behaviors, feelings, and actions that were universally experienced when people interact with information. Our knowledge of information behavior in libraries comes from the most important piece of research in our field: Kuhlthau's (1983) Information Search Process. Since then Guided Inquiry (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari, 2007) has been defined and described so that educators can provide the help students need as they engage in challenging learning tasks where their learning is personalised rather than prescribed.

**Is today's schooling ready to deliver a 21st century education that can deliver these challenges to all students?**

With the onset of the digital age it has become apparent that the people we are teaching are different. Our students are comfortable in digital spaces although they do not intuitively have the skills needed for academic learning in print and digital formats. However, they are spending a lot of time learning on their own and collaborating with

each other through video gaming, social networking, and content creation. They are used to being active learners, and so they are ready for the challenges that school libraries provide through information-based learning. Is today's schooling ready to deliver a 21st century education that can deliver these challenges to all students?

The school library is the only place in today's schools that stands at the crossroad of traditional and 21st century teaching and learning. What do we observe when we walk into a school library that is positioned for 21st century learning? Library facilities and collections are designed to encourage collaborative work with mobile communication devices and multiple access points that deliver information in multimedia formats. New and emerging technologies are not just tools for finding and retrieving information. Instead, digital technology is part of the school library's learning environment that invites learners to create content and express their learning in a variety of ways. Initiatives that aim to re-invent the school library have described it as a learning center, a learning commons, and an innovation center. The 21st century school library is a unique learning environment that uses Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to promote deep understanding, the building of knowledge from information, and the creation of innovative solutions. Aren't these worthwhile goals for teaching and learning throughout the school?

## The vision

How can a mature school library concept embody elements of change that can guide schools through the transition from a classroom-centric model of education to a learner-centric model? One way to illustrate the direction in which school libraries are going is deconstruct 'school library' to calibrate its components, i.e., facility, collection, staffing, instruction, and funding. Looking at the traditional library terminology is foundational for re-inventing school libraries.

The library facility has evolved, this name no longer accurately describes the diverse formats and functions of today's school library that is not only place, but a learning environment that exists in physical and virtual space. While there are critical advantages to maintaining the school library as place, the physical library is no longer where key functions are confined. Should the emerging school library be a center that operates as if it has proprietary ownership of information at a time when information is well on the way to becoming ubiquitous? Is it helpful to cling to the library as a 'centre' when in fact it is peripheral to what is happening in the classrooms? The fixed centrality of the library is problematic. Like information itself, the school library can be ubiquitous inside and outside of the school, and it often is through digital technology. Its instructional services, supported by a multimedia collection in diverse formats, can be where the learner is. School libraries have made great strides in developing websites and using social networking to expand its services, but educators do not yet perceive the library beyond its four walls. What will it take for educators to see beyond the library as place to library as learning environment?

Collection in the traditional sense denotes what the library owns and places on its shelves. However, it is digital access, rather than reading materials, that define what library users are able to find, retrieve, and use. School librarians have worked hard to incorporate e-catalogs and indices, e-books and e-journals as well as state-of-the-art devices in their libraries' physical and virtual spaces. In fact, the school library in many schools is the best-equipped classroom. What will it take for educators to go beyond the textbook to embrace multimedia and alternative materials as valuable reading and viewing opportunities?

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Instruction in the school library is traditionally associated with information skills, particularly the mechanics of information retrieval and access to reading materials. In fact, the teaching role of the librarian embraces a specific kind of inquiry that encompasses information processing and intervention through Guided Inquiry. The teacher-librarian's reading role has expanded from reading advisory, motivation, and free choice reading to applying reading strategies to improve comprehension in the context of inquiry learning. Instruction in the school library now includes technology literacies as well whereby learners become competent at using technology for a variety of purposes, including information finding and retrieval, integration of technology with traditional teaching methods, the use of technology for communication and collaborative work, and the application of technology to content creation. In short, the teacher-librarian's role is ICLT education – Information, Communication, Literacies across multimedia formats, and Technology. What will it take for educators to appreciate the wide scope and depth of school library pedagogy and its relevancy to a 21st century education?

Staffing can no longer mean paid employees who work in the library every day. Instead, students can contribute a great deal as volunteers, apprentices, interns, service agents, and aides. Teachers, as collaborative partners, can assume responsibilities for developing the collection and delivering instruction. The functions students and staff can perform are no longer restricted to checking out books, shelving, and tidying the library. They can serve as technicians who troubleshoot hardware and software problems and technology integrationists who help others to use library materials. They can create and/or maintain websites, wikis, databases, library guides, blogs, and assist others with content creation. They can serve as liaisons to members of the school and greater community who may be inaccessible to librarians. They can advocate for the school library and assist with public relations and school-wide initiatives. What will it take for educators to see the academic, social, and service value in engaging the school community in the operation and maintenance of the school library?

**What will it take to convince policy makers and legislators that school libraries are not an optional nicety but an indispensable learning environment for 21st century education?**

Adequate and consistent funding guarantees the sustainability of all school libraries in all schools. This is the most difficult aspect of transitioning the school library to an integral part of all children's education because it depends on the strength of our arguments for re-conceptualising not only the school library, but schooling itself. What will it take to convince policy makers and legislators that school libraries are not an optional nicety but an indispensable learning

environment for 21st century education?

It is evident that with a more participatory operational approach to the school library concept the role of teacher-librarians becomes that of coordinator, collaborator, and coach. Teachers become team members skilled in information education, including the learning materials, methods, and support system that sustain a disseminated version of school library. The learning environment of the school becomes indistinguishable from the learning environment that is the school library.

## Common ground

It is interesting that despite the heavy emphasis on standardised testing, educational reforms of the past two decades are moving toward teaching methods that are friendly to digital youth and the culture of the digital revolution. In fact, these trends strongly resemble the kind of teaching that happens in school libraries. Each of these reforms correlates with best practices that many teacher-librarians are already using in their instruction.

**Authentic Assessment** or performance-based assessment (Wiggins, 1990), offers an alternative to paper and pencil testing. As students engage in real life problem-solving they receive continuous and ongoing feedback from teachers. Tools for assessment include journals, rubrics, and portfolios as well as digital tools that support self-directed learning. In the context of Guided Inquiry in the school library teacher-librarians use the feedback from formative, rather than summative assessments to monitor student progress and intervene with help as students make their way through the Information Search Process.

**Concept-based Instruction** (Erickson, 2002) provides a conceptual schema for knowledge. Instead of teaching topics, educators use a hierarchy that describes the structure of a discipline that consists of theory generalisation, concepts, topic, and facts to understand discipline-based concepts, rather than an over-simplified topical approach to course content. In the school library teacher-librarians use a structuralist approach (Bruner, 1966; Wiggins, 1990) whereby students think like mathematicians and historians, for example, to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. The work of Phenix (1964) is helpful in providing the structure of a discipline as the questions the discipline poses and the research methods it uses to add new knowledge to the discipline. In the classroom and library scenario these approaches are intended to add rigor and deep understanding to the process of acquiring knowledge.

**Personalised Learning** (Sizer, 1999) or Competency-Based Learning in the classroom provides personalised learning opportunities that allow students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content regardless of time, place or pace of learning. In the school library the Information Search Process (Kuhlthau, 1983) provides a research-based model of information behavior that is predictive of the feelings, actions, and thoughts of information users. Personalised learning can happen when the teacher-librarian intervenes with help specific to each student's progress, or lack of progress, through the ISP model.

**Differentiated Instruction** (Tomlinson, 1999) accommodates differences among students in the classroom by providing different paths to learning. Differentiation is applied to learning with regard to content, processing, constructing, or making sense of **ideas**, and developing **teaching materials** and assessment measures so all students can **learn** effectively. Teacher-librarians use differentiated learning when they encourage students to choose their own inquiry topics and the formats for their learning outcomes, or projects, which represent what they have learned. A constructivist approach to inquiry in the school library recognises that each student constructs his or her own meaning from information to build knowledge based on what they already know.

**Understanding by Design** (McTighe, J. and Wiggins, G., 1998) is sometimes called 'backward design'. Educators look at outcomes to design **curriculum** units, performance **assessments**, and classroom instruction. Working backwards helps educators to implement standards, align programs to assessments, and guide classroom teachers in implementing a standards-based curriculum that leads to student understanding and achievement. Teacher-librarians often use UbD by starting with the learning outcome, or what they want students to learn and create. Through collaboration with the classroom teacher, librarians choose the information/thinking skills to be taught while teachers focus on content area standards.

**Project-based Learning** (Dewey, 1897) is rooted in the work of John Dewey who advocated 'learning by doing'. This hands-on approach replaces rote memorisation in teacher-led classrooms. It resembles authentic learning in that students respond to a question, problem, or challenge. Inquiry learning in the school library is constructivist and project-based as students make meaning from the information that becomes their new knowledge and use that new knowledge to demonstrate what they know in a variety of multimedia formats.

**Collaborative Learning** (Vygotsky, 1980) is based on a theory about the inherent social nature of learning. Collaborative learning involves students working together toward a common goal. Collaboration in the classroom is based on the model that knowledge can be created within a population where members actively interact by sharing experiences. In the school library collaborative learning happens through online discussions, social networking, inquiry circles, and group problem solving. Students often work in small groups in each of the ISP stages as they brainstorm to activate prior knowledge, communicate through blogs to select topics, use wikis to explore their topics and edit their information as a group, use wallwisher/padlet to display their notes as they conduct their research, and create content together to construct a digital object that represents the learning of each group member.

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It is important that teacher-librarians are cognisant of educational trends that teachers are using in their classrooms. These are the threads of instruction that can be used to weave a connection between the classroom and the school library.

## Challenges

While there is a lot of common ground between teaching and learning in the classroom and in the library, there are also significant differences that present challenges to integrating school library pedagogy with classroom instruction. Awareness of these differences is a starting point for building common ground for the integration of school library and classroom pedagogy.

Classroom learning still clings to the textbook while learning in the library is resource-based, challenging learners to use primary and secondary sources in multimedia formats. In many instances the textbook drives the teaching agenda in the classroom. The library offers choice and accommodates different levels of reading ability and preferences. Digital transference of information presents the opportunity to disseminate the library 'collection' to every classroom in the school.

Literacy practices illustrate a significant rift between classroom and library approaches to reading and literacy development. Most notable are literacy classroom practices for young readers that treat reading as a school subject, rather than a vehicle for intellectual, social, and emotional growth. Limits on the quantity and quality of reading materials children can access and lack of free choice can stifle reading motivation. Alternative reading and viewing for struggling and reluctant readers such as periodicals, video, and digital text are often not validated as reading in school contexts. Lexile levels, teacher-selected reading materials, and reliance on limited classroom collections can inhibit reading comprehension. Teacher-librarians understand the value of reading engagement. When youth are interested in what they read they sustain their reading for the time required to develop comprehension. Without engagement reading motivation diminishes and comprehension does not improve since it requires sustained reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

The data-driven movement in education has centered on the use of standardised test results such as item analysis of particular test questions in order to tailor instruction to students' needs. Data has attained a high profile in education but has yet reached its full potential to identify and implement effective teaching methods school-wide. There are strong research findings that support project-based learning, collaborative learning, authentic education, and free choice reading yet these trends are not yet common practice in most schools. Another aspect of the use of evidence for the continuous improvement of teaching in classrooms is reflective practice. Teachers are encouraged to think about what they are doing and how it is working and revising their teaching based on what they observe. Schön (1983) advocates reflection on action and reflection in action as teachers look at the results on their teaching in order to improve their professional classroom practice. Reflective practice in the school library is similar, and both classroom teachers and teacher-librarians engage in revision of the teaching. In school libraries evidence-based practice (Todd, 2001) involves reflection as teacher-librarians find evidence in practice, evidence of practice, and evidence for practice. Action research (Lewin, 1946), a tool of evidence-based practice, was first adopted by the classroom and more recently by the school library. It focuses educators on observation, use of theory and best practices, and collection and analysis of evidence to make inferences about instruction to continuously improve teaching through the action research cycle.

## The missing link

How the school library is conceptualised and communicated by teacher-librarians and perceived by educators is critical to how effective school libraries will be in the 21st century. As commonalities between classroom and library pedagogies increases the integration of library methods and materials with classroom practice will grow. The teacher-librarian orchestrates the transition from school library as an add-on to a necessity by re-defining priorities to create a new vision for the school library, one school at a time. There is a lot of common ground between classroom and library to build upon, but there are also challenges. The most important challenge is to help practicing educators view the contributions of information science to understanding information behavior as a critical element in children's learning. This is the 21st century challenge for school libraries. Can the school library play a bigger role in educating youth? If so, how can schooling change to accommodate the school library as an indispensable part of every child's education and every teacher's pedagogy?

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