

Help wanted: Reinventing school libraries in the digital age

By Dr Carol A. Gordon

Time changes all things; there is no reason why language should escape this universal law.

Ferdinand de Saussure

As we move from the printed page to the digital screen the way we read, think, and act is changing. The role of librarians and the work that they do dramatically reflects this transition. School librarians are particularly affected as they reinvent their vision and practice to be relevant to digital youth and their educational needs. It is no longer enough to teach skills limited to searching and finding information. Complex infrastructures and easy access complicate the competencies that are needed for 21st century learners to make the information to knowledge connection. What are the competencies that teacher-librarians need to meet this challenge? A job description might look like this:

Vision Valley K-12 Day School Information Specialist

Primary Responsibilities: To develop all students as clear and effective communicators, self-directed and lifelong learners, creative and practical problem solvers, responsible and involved citizens, collaborative and quality workers, and integrative and informed thinkers through an environment that is a dynamic agent of learning.

Required Qualifications:

- Expertise in design of instructional interventions for learning through information at class, group and individual levels;
- Expertise in mutually negotiating, planning and implementing instructional interventions in a: partner-leader role with school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the greater community;
- Expertise in negotiating, planning, implementing, and continuously improving a whole-school program that articulates the integrated nature of transforming information to knowledge;
- Expertise as partner-teacher in the provision of learning-oriented professional development targeted to whole school success with learning outcomes;
- Experience as literacy specialist particularly in area of reading comprehension;
- Experience in integrating information technology in curricular areas.

Desirable Qualifications:

Teaching experience, information management, technology integration, school library administration, leadership training, interpersonal skills.

Vision Valley Information 2 Knowledge Space is a physical and digital learning space that fosters effective connection, interaction and utilization of information for achieving stated learning outcomes by providing:

- Learning environments that are physical and digital space structured to accommodate multiple learning styles and teaching styles;
- Learning materials in print and digital formats that facilitate multiple pathways to information;
- Professional, para-professional, and volunteer personnel that facilitate the learning;
- Instructional intervention, collaborative learning support, and help that guide learners to content and process rich learning outcomes.

Status/Benefits:

This is a leading faculty position; salary and rank will be commensurate with qualifications and demonstrated performance

To apply: Consideration of applications will begin immediately and the search will continue until position is filled.

Vision Valley is committed to accountable, equitable and inclusive learning and continuous learning for all.

Implicit in the job functions for the new age teacher-librarian are paradigm shifts that change the way our libraries, collections, and staffing looks like. What are the challenges that lie ahead?

Two critical paradigm shifts

The new age role of teacher-librarians embodies major shifts in priorities. Instruction has become central as administrative functions serve to support teaching and learning in the 21st century school library as traditional library paradigms are no longer relevant. We no longer think of the teacher-librarian as the guardian of the library collection who strictly enforces silence. Cataloguing as we know it may become obsolete as information is packaged in subscription databases and e-book collections. Reading is no longer limited to the printed page; it now encompasses literacy across multi-modal media platforms. Many librarians are already addressing new modes of thinking about their role in instruction, which poses two major challenges as we make the leap from the 20th to the 21st century. Firstly, we are changing how we teach. The key focus for action is intervention. Kuhlthau's Information Search Process (ISP), researched in longitudinal studies in public, school, and academic libraries, is a predicative model that enables librarians to anticipate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral problems of finding and using information and provide interventions that support the learner's progress through the ISP stages. Whether teaching takes place in physical, hybrid or digital environments, there are multiple zones and multiple modes of intervention that guide students through the ISP to help them use a variety of diverse media to create learning outcomes that represent what they have learned. The interventions, as well as the targeted learning objectives that they support, are linked to learning outcomes that are the physical or digital objects that students create. This kind of teaching does not abandon students to struggle with complex processes. Instead it ensures that learners engage in mediated instructional interventions that are contextualised in information processes at the point of need. Collaboration between teacher-librarians and teachers is the cement that holds the building blocks of interventionist teaching together. It is the key to equitable intervention that offers help and support to all students. Collaboration, however, is not the outcome, but a teaching strategy that enables and enhances intervention on the level of individual and collaborative student learning and high quality learning outcomes.

Secondly, instruction becomes central to the design and administration of school library facilities, collections, and staffing. Instruction based on intervention and collaboration also drives the administrative and management decisions of teacher-librarians. The library facility is viewed not as a place where materials are kept and access points are created, but physical and digital spaces that enable learning. The size and design of the library accommodates intervention and collaboration. Social networking and social learning converge as the library is viewed as a space where students and teachers want to be. There is a sense of ownership nurtured by the teacher-librarian who encourages input from her users to continuously improve the form and function of the facility as an enabling learning environment. With the inevitable decrease in the size of traditional print collections, technology becomes ubiquitous and mobile. Devices and equipment are not limited by the library budget, but include the personal devices students bring to the library space. New age library facilities are characterised by flexible rather than fixed design so that space can be configured to conform to teaching and learning needs. This conceptualisation of 21st century school libraries poses issues for teacher-librarians:

1. Should the library include a café, or is that going too far to create a welcoming ambience?
2. While the print collection is getting smaller, how can the teacher-librarian convince his principal that he actually needs more space for collaborative learning and technology that facilitate communication and creation of learning outcomes?
3. How does the teacher-librarian balance the need for quiet study, research, and formal group instruction with the need for creative noise when students work collaboratively and individually to create learning outcomes?

Collections are of course, multimedia, but like library facilities they are not limited to what the library can provide. Teacher-librarians purchase bundled e-products and rely on open source and free access internet programs and sites rather than purchasing acquisitions. They rely on external commercial companies for material selection and cataloging. Extensive cataloging is no longer needed. Such a new age collection poses interesting questions:

1. How do teacher-librarians control the quality and focus of a dynamic digital collection?
2. Is it possible to enforce selection and collection policies that guide the acquisition of library materials?
3. How do teacher-librarians ensure that the collection supports school curriculum and the particular recreational reading, viewing, and listening of the school community?
4. Are censorship and material challenges still relevant to a collection that is, even in part, fluid and unmediated?

Staffing needs change when instructional needs drive decisions about library personnel. Teacher-librarians who are teachers first and librarians second require instructional aides trained in inquiry and information based teaching. Media plays an important role in large group instruction in information mechanics and individual remediation, freeing teacher-librarians to collaborate with teachers in the design, implementation, assessment, and evaluation of Guided Inquiry units. Teachers are viewed not only as active users of the library, but as members of the library staff as they engage in deep collaboration with teacher-librarians. Each year teachers repeat a library based instructional unit, they assume more responsibility for it, freeing the teacher-librarian to do more on-the-job-training with less skilled teachers. The job descriptions of parents and community volunteers are revised and updated to be responsive to the new age library that requires them to provide instructional support and technical skills. The role of students is expanded to include more responsibility for digital technology with coordination between the technology department and the library. Issues surrounding staffing include:

1. How does the teacher-librarian ensure reliability and consistency from volunteer staff members?
2. How does the teacher-librarian convince her principal that she needs instructional aides in the library?
3. How can the teacher-librarian introduce and/or coordinate service learning requirements to create opportunities for library, information, and technology based experiences for students?

Making the shift from traditional to new age library practices brings with it the need for new language that communicates the teaching and learning centered job functions of teacher-librarian who facilitate the information-to-knowledge connection for learners.

A new lexicon for teacher-librarians

The language teacher-librarians use to talk about their practice is no longer relevant to the form and functions that shape their jobs. Here is a starter dictionary that can transform the way we are perceived in our schools.

Learning Aides. Formerly known as staff, volunteers, parent volunteers, community volunteers, and student help. This includes volunteer and paid workers who participate in all aspects of the Information-to-Knowledge Space, including maintaining the learning environment and learning materials and contributing to help and instruction.

Information-to-Knowledge Space. Formerly known as the school library, the school library media centre, media centre, and facility. Information in all formats is considered the raw material for the creation of new knowledge which is expressed as the learning outcome.

Information-to-Knowledge Specialist. Formerly known as the teacher-librarian, the school librarian, or the school library media specialist, media specialist. A trained generalist who applies inquiry and information based teaching to his or her role as teacher, manager, technologist, print and digital materials expert, and supporter of transliteracies, including traditional literacy and professional developer.

Learning environment. Formerly known as facility, or the school library. Also known as Learning-to-Knowledge Space which is a physical place as well as diverse digital spaces where students can find, interact and use information in multimedia formats, create print and digital content that reflects their learning, and receive help in making the information-to-knowledge connection.

Learning materials. Formerly known as the library collection or library materials. Includes books and periodicals in print and digital formats, subscription databases, internet sites, web 2.0 tools, social networking, CD-Roms, DVDs, streaming media.

Learning Outcome. Formerly known as a project, product, and student work. A creative event, physical object, media object, or digital objects that represent what students have learned in terms of academic content, information processing, critical reading, and critical thinking.

The new lexicon for new age school libraries, or the words that we use to talk and write about our work, signals the emergence of a new language that communicates how teacher-librarians have reinvented their jobs and their libraries. The next step in developing our new library language is to create a grammar, or system of rules, which makes it possible for us to form meaningful sentences that deliver the answers to the many questions teacher-librarian face in the digital age. It is the partnership of your daily practice and studies conducted by school library researchers that will generate this language, and in so doing create a new culture for school libraries that is inclusive, equitable, and indispensable for educating youth in the 21st century.

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