How to do it better next time through Experience, Evidence, and Reflection

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We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from reflecting on experience. **John Dewey**

Experience interacting with ideas, art, sports, or each other has become a major preoccupation of everyday life. We are constantly interacting with each other as we text, email, phone or post to our chosen audiences. Even going to a museum, according to the *New York Times*, is a quest for experience. Hands on exhibits allow us to touch and explore. An exhibit in the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio, U.S., tries to make invisible air visible as museum patrons fight their way through a room full of purple balloons. The exhibit has been described as an epic sculpture/installation/happening but it is really an experience – you 'see' it by participating in it.

Experiences, however, do not guarantee learning. (Can we learn about air from purple balloons?) It is thinking about the experience that helps us to determine what works, and what doesn't. Reflection puts the experience in perspective as we compare it to other experiences to build on what we have already learned.

Teaching is an experience and we talk about gaining 'teaching experience' but experience alone does not guarantee that we will teach better. Only when we reflect on our teaching can we really think about it, revise it, and do it better next time. Reflective teaching, when done consistently, can guarantee continuous improvement of out teaching. The secret ingredient in the reflection is evidence. Unless we harvest evidence of our teaching it will disappear into thin air. Like the purple balloons in the museum exhibit, when evidence is visible, we can think about it.

The school library is an ideal environment for reflective teaching. When classroom teachers partner with their school's teacher-librarians everyone wins. Students learn information skills in the context of their academic tasks as they engage in critical thinking, problem solving,

and creative content creation. Teachers learn how to use the Information Search Process (Kuhlthau, 1983) to help students successfully complete complex information and research tasks. Teacher-librarians learn how to resource their libraries to support standards-based teaching while using the disciplines as a springboard for creating meaningful inquiry units that incorporate authentic research (Gordon, 1999). The school's academic mission, articulated through national standards, drives the teacher-librarian's skills-centered teaching, generating excitement for learning through the serendipity and spontaneity of inquiry- and resource-based teaching. Students, for example, become historians as they ponder who 'discovered' Australia, or scientists as they gather evidence to refute climate change deniers. In such a discipline-based, inquiry learning context teaching information literacy through the school library is becoming more complex as teacher-librarians integrate literacy support with critical thinking and digital competency.

Perhaps the best thing about the learning environment in the school library is that it is collaborative. Teachers and teacher-librarians work together to plan, implement, and assess their performance and teaching outcomes, as well as the performance and learning outcomes of their students. While such a learning environment is ideal, it is not perfect. With an emphasis on responding to the teaching needs of classroom teachers, teacher-librarians have historically put their own teaching agendas aside for just-enough-just-in time teaching that focuses on the information skills students need to complete their assignments. Often the mechanics of the information search dominates lessons. For example, older students who have learned how to construct a list of references for their presentation, report, or digital object may not learn how to cast an evaluative eye on the authority, currency, and accuracy of their sources. After learning parenthetical, or in-text citation, students may not learn how to use the citation as evidence to explain, elaborate, develop an argument, or defend a position. Younger learners certainly benefit from reading in the school library, or listening to stories read to them, but it is less common for these learners to apply comprehension strategies to print and digital content.

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In addition, high expectations add weight to the teacher-librarian's instructional role at a time when educators are beginning to connect the dots between information and learning to create a portrait of self-directing learning that ultimately puts the learner in charge. However, classroom teachers still need help with information- and resource-based inquiry learning, raising questions about how teacher-librarians handle their responsibility to prepare students to live, learn, and work in an information-rich, high tech world and train teachers to partner with them in this effort. Two major issues that arise from teaching through the school library are equity and accountability, regardless of whether school libraries teach on fixed or flexible schedules.

Equity issues address who teacher-librarians teach. Have you wondered:

> *How can my information literacy teaching be inclusive, ensuring equity across grade levels and school subjects so that every child has multiple opportunities to develop 21st century skills?'*

Equity of instruction is a growing concern for teacher librarians as information literacy takes on a broader definition that goes beyond the mechanics of information processing.

Students who are information literate are expected to become self-directed learners who can use information as the raw material for building their new knowledge.

Accountability issues arise as teacher-librarians ponder what they teach as information literacy becomes a more complex concept. Have you wondered:

> *How can I scaffold my delivery of information skills in a way that is sequential yet relevant to academic tasks at hand?'*

> *How can I deliver my skills-based teaching to offer students sufficient time on task and reinforcement so they can advance to higher levels of competency?'*

How can I identify gaps in my information literacy instruction, and how do I eliminate redundancies?'

In addition to questions that address the content of teacher-librarians' teaching, accountability raises questions about how they teach. Have you wondered:

How can my teaching be differentiated so that all students benefit from instruction that is appropriate to their cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics as well as their age and skills levels'?

How can I ensure continuous improvement of my teaching?'

While accountability addresses reflective practice that helps teacher-librarians to teach better next time, it also raises questions about the effectiveness of the school library and its contribution to teaching and learning. Have you wondered:

How do I know I make a difference in student learning?'

How can I communicate evidence of student learning to my colleagues and administrators?'

How do I determine the effectiveness of my teaching through the school library?'

The answers to these questions are embedded in the evidence generated by instruction, enabling teacher-librarians to analyse what they are doing and reflect upon how they can do it better. The first step in the process is documentation.

Documenting what you do

What if teacher-librarians collect evidence of their instruction to inform their decisions about who, what, and how they teach? Figure 1 shows what the tracking process looks like when teacher-librarians engage in participatory, or action research, which is a tool of evidence-based practice (Todd, 2001). The process is recursive and ongoing from one year to the next. Within this structure educators gather evidence during the first year by documenting what they do. In the second year they analyse the evidence and think about how they can revise their teaching schedules, their lessons and units, or the ways they assess students. The second year follows the same pattern as Year 1, using the revised instruction as the subject for scrutiny. This cycle of reflection results in improved action and is ongoing from one year to the next to ensure continuous improvement.
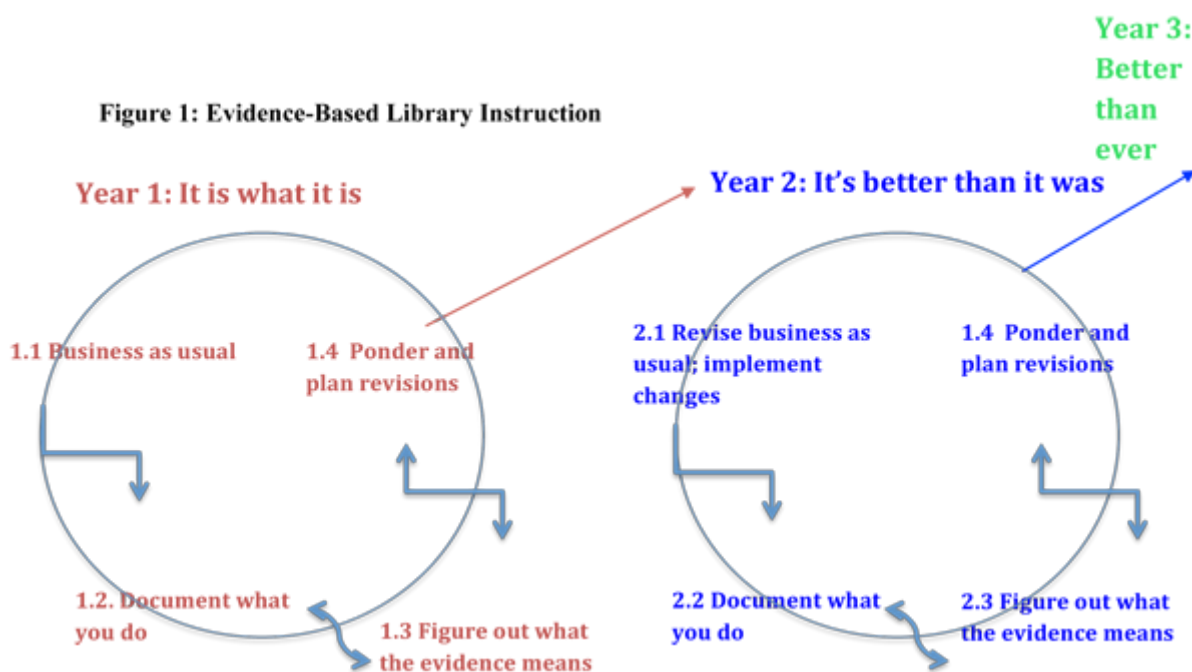
The current year, or Year 1 (Fig. 1) of the process establishes the status quo as it evolves naturally from your teaching, which may or may not be collaborative teaching that integrates information literacy skills with content area teaching, as indicated by (1.1, Fig. 1) in the diagram. The idea is to conduct business as usual, such as taking a proactive stand to initiate work with a teacher, or providing an assured experience, such as library orientation for an incoming grade level. There is no right or wrong way to conduct instruction during Year 1. It simply is what it is. This is important because Year 1 provides a baseline: It is a true picture of what your instructional program looks like in terms of what you teach and who you teach, and this evidence will provide a basis for comparison with subsequent years. How evidence is collected is important. If the teacher-librarian decides to tackle the equity issue, s/he may look at the schedule of lessons or library class calendar to determine whether lessons are fairly distributed among grade levels or subject areas.

Documenting what you do (1.2, Fig. 1) during the first year also involves gathering evidence about what you teach that could reveal the scope and depth of instruction: the information, critical thinking, research, technology, and literacy skills taught and assessed; the national standards that provide the context for skill-based teaching; the nature of learning outcomes, or products students create to represent their learning. Tracking can indicate students who do and do not receive information literacy instruction and teachers who are or are not library users. Using matrices and/or a database to collect data that includes title of lesson/unit, content area, teacher, grade level, and information skills. The evidence indicates trends across grade levels and academic disciplines, revealing the gaps in who and what you teach. More importantly, tracking reveals who and what you do not teach.

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Meaning of the evidence

Figuring out what the evidence means (1.3, Fig. 1) involves sharing the evidence with your principal and teachers in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of school library instruction. Criteria for this determination comes from what we know to be best practice so this is an opportunity to inform teachers who not library users about your work. Extracting the competencies implicit in the national standards, as well as in information literacy standards is a good way to establish criteria and even develop a "laundry list" of competencies that can ultimately become a set of benchmarks for your school.

Figure 1: Evidence-Based Library Instruction

Year 1: It is what it is

- 1.1 Business as usual
- 1.4 Ponder and plan revisions
- 1.2. Document what you do
- 1.3 Figure out what the evidence means

Year 2: It's better than it was

- 2.1 Revise business as usual; implement changes
- 1.4 Ponder and plan revisions
- 2.2 Document what you do
- 2.3 Figure out what the evidence means

Year 3: Better than ever

The guiding question in this phase of analysis of evidence (1.3, Fig. 1) is, "What is worth knowing?" What is the consensus among faculty? What are the priorities in terms of information competencies in their broadest sense, i.e., including literacy and technological competencies as well as research and critical thinking skills? There are several methods of analysis you can use to interpret your evidence. You can look at trends or patterns and contradictions or anomalies. Computing averages, such as the average number of times classes in each grade or department use the library generates quantitative evidence that can be displayed in charts, graphs, or info graphics and easily communicated to school staff. Analysis and reflection identify gaps and redundancies in instruction for the targeted grade level(s) to be studied for the given year.

Revising What You Do

Ponder and plan revisions (1.4, Fig. 1) is a critical phase as you work with teachers to stabilise inquiry units. Identify from the standards those topics that lend themselves best to sustained inquiry and eliminate lessons and units that teachers are not interested in repeating. Repeating the units each year has several advantages. It allows the teacher-librarian to focus her collection building around the inquiry units that are most effective. It helps in sequencing and scaffolding skills for one grade to the next. Repetition of the topics for inquiry from one year to the next also clarifies which learning objectives are taught at each grade level and how learning outcomes that address those objectives are assessed. Building your collection of resources, including digital capacity, to support stabilised inquiry units and developing abstracts new units to meet future needs allows the teacher-librarian to train teachers so that they can become independent library users. This creates new time for teacher-librarians to re-focus their teaching to ensure equity of information literacy instruction across the school community.

Doing It Better Next Time

Revise business as usual (2.1, Fig. 1) is the implementation phase at the beginning of the second year. During this year the tracking process is the same. The teacher-librarian uses the instructional program that is the result of revision at the end of Year 1 to make improvements that ensure equity and integrity of instruction in terms of who is taught and what is taught. It is critical to involve teachers in planning sessions during this time. Teachers work with the teacher-librarian at the end of Year 1 to create an agenda of instruction that addresses the identified problems. During the second year of the cycle the teacher-librarian works with teachers to revise and/or create units of instruction to create a balanced program of information skills instruction. It is not necessary, or even desirable, for teacher-librarians to work with all teachers in all grades in Year 1 or Year 2, but to work on the most acute issues of equity and accountability. The work that evolves from these collaborations with teachers will serve as models that can be applied to entire grade levels or subject areas.

Implications for Your School Library

Evidence-based instruction in the school library rests on the premise that instruction is central to everything the teacher-librarian does, including facility and staffing management, resource/collection development, budget/funding allocation, and program advocacy and marketing. In fact, the rationale for school libraries lies in the contributions teacher-librarians make to teaching and learning in schools. Establishing equity and accountability moves school libraries from the margins of school life to the center, ensuring a sustainable future that is not set arbitrarily or left to chance, but that evolves from a growing body of evidence that school library work. Equity of school library instruction implies that teacher-librarians can guarantee that all students receive 21st century instruction. As society becomes more technologically complex, it is increasingly important that that every child has opportunities to learn these skills. Equitable teaching through school libraries implies an expanded professional development role of teacher-librarians so that classroom teachers are trained in collaborative 21st century teaching that is relevant to the needs and preferences of digital youth. It also implies an increase in the number of teacher-librarians in schools.

Accountability of school library instruction is critical . . .

Accountability of school library instruction is critical to maintaining the validity and effectiveness of self-directed learning through information- and resource-based inquiry learning. When teacher librarians collect evidence that drives their teaching they build a foundation for innovative practices to teach digital youth. This requires the identification of standards and topics that lend themselves to inquiry- and resource-based learning and the stabilisation of those teaching units to provide scaffolding, continuity, reinforcement of information literacy instruction in its broadest sense to include critical thinking, traditional and transliteracies, and technological competencies. A broad definition of information literacy has implications for assessment of students that is formative, providing the feedback needed for the revision of teaching at the point of need. It also has implications for inclusion of critical 21st century skills in standardised, summative assessment, and the application of student performance to the revision of instruction on the local school levels. In this scenario teacher-librarians model evidence-based practices that are reflective and revisionary.

Doing it better next time ensures that teacher-librarians are in charge of their own professional development. It enables them to show evidence of improvement through documentation and revision of their teaching. This is important because it raises the status of teaching and learning in the school library from optional and marginal to essential for a 21st century education. The cycle of continuous improvement not only raises the quality of teaching in the school library; it has a positive effect on the nature and quality of teaching in the classroom as well. When teacher-librarians assume the responsibility for collecting evidence and working with teachers to use the evidence to do it better next time, they are re-defining their role in schooling. Planned instruction, based on evidence of past instruction replaces a just-enough-just-in-time approach, offering opportunities for revision of instruction in the context of teaching, rather than in isolated professional development workshops or presentations.

When teaching in the school library is planned around participatory research, as described here, teacher-librarians build a sustainable future characterised by continuous improvement of their practice that can not only serve as a model for classroom teaching: It can change the way schools educate youth in this century.

Can you imagine your school library filled with the purple balloons of reflective teaching?

References

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