

# Assessing Access in School Libraries: Developing Meaningful Use of Library Resources and Services

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## The Digital Equity Challenge

*A problem well put is half solved.* John Dewey

The digital equity issue has been called the 'civil right' issue of our time. A recent Australian report considers lack of internet access is a socioeconomic factor, along with unemployment, lack of social engagement of young adults, low Year 9 reading levels, disability support, prison admissions, and domestic violence (Newman & Gurstein, 2016). This report raises the issue of 'the myth of choice'. "Do those proposing that everything move online genuinely believe that there are no longer people who aren't online?" (Newman & Gurstein, 2016). The authors advocate going the 'extra mile' to bridge a digital divide characterised by variation of internet use along lines of educational level, reading and writing ability, rural-urban location, ethnic group, and gender.

Rather than measuring access, Newman and Gurstein advocate "meaningful use" of technology as an indicator of digital inclusion. For example, are rural residents using e-health services? Are unemployed youth finding jobs on websites, Facebook and Twitter? This article addresses what meaningful use looks like in a school library.

**The digital equity issue has been called the 'civil right' issue of our time.**

In order to achieve inclusive meaningful use of technology it is important that equitable access is not equated with digital access. The National Collaborative for Digital Equity (NCDE) recognises that digital equity is 'not just cheap boxes and wires' (2016). For this reason NCDE's Model for Systemic Digital Equity at Home includes, ". . . equitable access to librarians and educators who guide safe, successful use (cyber-safety and information literacy)" (NDCE 2016). While information technology can deliver access to the school library's resources, teacher-librarians, and instruction, equitable access to the school library's facility and the teacher-librarian is critical to supporting print literacy, information literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

Equitable access to school libraries can facilitate digital equity just as digital equity results in equitable access and meaningful use in school libraries. The synergistic relationship of digital equity, inclusive access, and meaningful use of information and technology is unique to libraries. In the case of school libraries, teacher-librarians have the opportunity, means and expertise to improve access to digital information and technology that will lead to a culture of meaningful use in their school community, and eventually in their greater community.

## Meaningful Use in School Libraries

*The goal of education is to enable individuals to continue their education.* John Dewey

As teacher-librarians who subscribe to access as a traditional value of our profession, we are positioned to identify opportunities for intervention and innovation – the actions that will result in outcomes that demonstrate 'meaningful use' of information and technology by those who are presently digitally excluded. Situated in the fast-paced world of education, teacher-librarians are at the heart of teaching information

literacy as well as digital literacy in the context of teaching academic content. The teacher-librarian's role focuses on instruction for students and professional development for teachers.

As new models of instruction such as blended learning and personalised learning are implemented, teacher-librarians are prepared to engage in collaborative ventures with classroom teachers. Research shows that initially teachers 'manage' blended learning but eventually release more responsibility to their students to determine their own direction through the curriculum and even their own pace. A strong trend in personalised learning is changing school culture to be innovative and collaborative.

The Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2012) published *Blended Learning: A Synthesis of Research Findings in Victorian Education 2006-2011* that identifies blended learning pedagogy, challenges in implementation of blended learning strategies, teacher support and professional development, technological challenges, student preparation, support and transition, assessment, and culture/innovation. This is good news for teacher-librarians as they work with classroom teachers oriented to using blended learning. It is in this pedagogical context that teacher-librarians can raise awareness of the importance of equitable and meaningful access to the information and technology their school libraries provide.

## The Massachusetts Study on Equitable Access\*

*We only think when confronted with a problem.* John Dewey

How is meaningful use demonstrated in our school libraries? Measurement and assessment of the school library's capacity to deliver equitable access and use of information and technology is the first step toward demonstrating meaningful use. Formal research can be a source of questions that teacher-librarians can use to establish a baseline of their resources and services. Research on digital equity in school libraries can shape our thinking about how we identify policies, pedagogy, and other actions to improve access and meaningful use.

In the United States the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Senate established a Special Commission on School Library Services in July 2013. The charge of the Commission was to conduct a study of the public school library programs in the Commonwealth. To accomplish this charge the Commission established *The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth*. The goal of the study was twofold: 1) Produce a baseline of the status of school libraries and 2) Determine whether the baseline provided equitable access across urban, rural, and suburban school districts in Massachusetts. These data consisted of quantifying the status of student access to print and digital information resources, library collections, staffing, information technology, funding and free or subsidised resources, and instruction and help.

### How is meaningful use demonstrated in our school libraries?

Data were collected from an online survey that included questions that yielded baseline data as well as data on access across urban, rural, and suburban school districts. Descriptive analysis, or percentages, and analytical statistical analyses compared access across school districts. In the next section, survey questions from this study inform an inventory instrument teacher-librarians can use to assess their libraries' capacity to deliver equitable access of instruction for students.

*\* A report of the findings of this study is in progress and will be released this fall. As the principal researcher I am applying what we learned about assessing equity to illustrate how those findings can be used to determine meaningful use. Look for a report of findings in this column in 2018.*

## Measuring for Access and Meaningful Use

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

How can the Massachusetts study inform the efforts of teacher-librarians to make instruction in their school libraries accessible to more students? Table 1 displays an inventory developed from the online survey used in the study. Teacher-librarians can use this inventory to collect their responses to questions, some of which

were adapted from the Massachusetts study. Four categories of questions (Column One) comprise the inventory: 1) Opportunities for Equitable Instruction; 2) Content of Instruction; 3) Use of Digital Technology to Improve Access to Instruction; and 4) Teacher-librarian’s Perception of Role. Column 2 of the inventory provides questions for teacher-librarians. Teacher-librarians can enter their responses to the questions in this column. Column 3 invites teacher-librarians to enter Reflections and Actions indicated by their responses to the questions in the inventory.

**Table 1: Inventory of Equitable Assess to Instruction for Teacher-librarians**

ASSESSMENT CATEGORIES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT ACCESS TO INSTRUCTION	QUESTIONS AND YOUR RESPONSES. Circle your chosen response to each question	REFLECTIONS AND ACTIONS How can you improve opportunities for instruction, the content of your instruction, your use of technology, and your perception of your role to improve student access to instruction?
Opportunities for equitable instruction	1. What percentage of students in your school have regular and consistent student access to the school library program and services?  a. 75-100% b. 51-75% c. 26-50% d. 0-25%	1. Reflection:    Action:
	2. Is your library open to students  a. Before school? Yes No b. During lunchtime? Yes No c. After school? Yes No d. During weekends or school breaks Yes No	2. Reflection:    Action:

3. What is the ratio of teacher librarian to students in your school?

- a. One TL for every 50-200 students
- b. One TL for every 201-400 students
- c. One TL for every 401-800 students
- d. One TL for every 801 or more students.

3.  
Reflection:

Action:

4. How many classes do you teach weekly?

- a. More than 25
- b. 15-25
- c. 5-14
- d. Less than 5

4.  
Reflection:

Action:

5. Do you keep a log or calendar of classes taught, including the classroom teachers' names, dates of visits, grade levels and subject areas of classes?

- a. Yes, but not all information listed is included.
- b. Yes, and all information listed is included.
- c. Never
- d. Sometimes

5.  
Reflection:

Action:

6. If you keep a log or calendar do you use the information collected to expand your opportunities to teach students who receive little or no instruction?

- a. Yes
- b. No

6.  
Reflection:

Action:

7. If you keep a log or calendar, does your website include remote access to the

7.  
Reflection:

<p>library catalog?</p> <p>a. Yes b. No c. No, but we are planning to implement</p>	<p>Action:</p>
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Content of Instruction

<p>8. Do you teach one “assured experience” (unit of instruction) to each grade level every year (e.g., orientation for the incoming grade)?</p> <p>a. Yes b. No, but I do have an orientation for the incoming grade c. No, but we are planning to implement d. No</p>	<p>8. Reflection:</p> <p>Action:</p>
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<p>9. Does your library have alternative reading materials (e.g., magazines, newspapers, graphic novels, easy reading) for struggling and reluctant readers?</p> <p>Yes No</p>	<p>9. Reflection:</p> <p>Action:</p>
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<p>10. Which types of instruction do you provide? Which types do you provide the most often? Which types do you never provide?</p> <p>a. Collaborative teaching b. Information skills c. Reading Improvement for print d. Reading motivation for print e. Inquiry learning skills f. Reading improvement for digital text g. Digital citizenship h. Critical thinking i. Technology skills j. Library basic skills</p>	<p>10. Types of instruction provided: Reflection:</p> <p>Action:</p> <p>Which types do you provide most often? Reflection:</p> <p>Action:</p>
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	Which types do you never provide? Reflection:
	Action:

Use of digital technology to increase access to instruction

11. Does your website include instructional materials? a. Yes b. No c. No, but we are planning to implement	11. Reflection:  Action:
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12. If you do provide a library website which types of support materials do you include?  a. Research guides; pathfinders b. Citation tutorials d. Database search tutorials e. Digital citizenship tutorials f. Internet search tutorials g. Other. Please specify	12. Reflection:  Action:
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13. Do you use digital technology (e.g., library website, remote access to resources) in your teaching to increase access of student to extended units of inquiry learning experiences?  a. Yes  b. No	13. Reflection:  Action:
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14. Does your library website provide remote access to the library collection and/or e-resources?  Yes	14. Reflection:
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No	Action:
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15. Do you provide adaptive technology for students with learning disabilities?	15. Reflection:
Yes	
No	Action:

16. What percentage of computers in your library are connected to the internet?	16. Reflection:
a. 100%	
b. 75%	Action:
c. 50%	
d. 25% or less	

17. How many computers are available for students in your library (include desktops, laptops, tablets, ChromeBooks)	17. Reflection:
	Action:

18. Does your library have adequate bandwidth to support the current demands of standards and technology requirements?	18. Reflection:
Yes	
No	Action:

Teacher  
librarian's  
perception of role

19. Rank the roles listed from most important (1) to least important (6)

- \_\_\_ Resource Provider
- \_\_\_ Information Specialist
- \_\_\_ Program Administrator
- \_\_\_ School Leader
- \_\_\_ Teacher
- \_\_\_ Instructional Partner

19.  
Reflection:

Action:

20. How often do you offer professional development for the teachers in your school?

- a. Every day
- b. Monthly
- c. Once a year
- d. Never

20.  
Reflection:

Action:

21. Do you use collaborative strategies with classroom teachers to increase opportunities for teaching sustained units of inquiry in the library and the classroom?

Yes

No

21.  
Reflection:

Action:

22. How often are you engaged in non-instructional activities in the library (e.g., library administration or activities outside the library)?

- a. Never
- b. Daily
- c. Weekly
- d. Monthly

22.  
Reflection:

Action:

23. Who performs non-instructional tasks in the library most of the time?

23.  
Reflection:



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Teacher librarian</li> <li>b. Library aides</li> <li>c. Volunteer parents/students</li> <li>d. Other</li> </ul>	<p>Action:</p>
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<p>24. How much time do you spend on faculty committees?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. 4+ hours per week</li> <li>b. 3-4 hours per week</li> <li>c. 1-2 hours per week</li> <li>d. None</li> </ul>	<p>24. Reflection:</p> <p>Action:</p>
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<p>25. How much time do you spend on extra-curricular activities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. 5+ hours per week</li> <li>b. 3-4 hours per week</li> <li>c. 1-2 hours per week</li> <li>d. None</li> </ul>	<p>25. Reflection:</p> <p>Action:</p>
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<p>26. Do you seek out partnerships within the school community (e.g., parents) or in the greater community (e.g., public library) to increase access to human or institutional resources?</p>	<p>26. How much time do you spend on extra-curricular activities? Reflection:</p> <p>Action:</p>
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There are no right and wrong answers to the inventory questions. In fact, you may want to edit the questions, eliminate questions, or add your own. You can customise the inventory to best assess equity of access to instruction in your school library.

The most efficient way to use the results of your inventory is to create a strategic plan for no more than a two-year period. The four categories in Column 1 are the grist for your goals. The Actions you enter in Column 3 become your objectives. The outcome or results you observe constitute your evidence of attainment of your objectives. You may want to take a case study approach and shadow a student who does not have good

access to instruction in your school library as defined by the objectives you create for that student during one or two years.

Each year of your strategic plan will yield the evidence you need to move forward in the next year, using what you have learned in Year 1 to inform how you will move forward in Year 2. You may need to change your objectives in Year 2 for example, depending on progress, or lack of it. It is critical that your objectives clearly describe the meaningful use outcome so that you can use the evidence you collect to claim that your students have attained meaningful use of instruction.

For example, you may collaborate with a teacher to use digital technology to teach a unit of inquiry (e.g., providing resources and instruction on their use on the library website). You can use the ideas suggested in the questions in Column 2 of the inventory to shape your objectives that will yield evidence of meaningful access. It is critical that the teacher-librarian clearly states what it looks like when students have attained meaningful access to school library instruction.

Reflection as well as Actions are a continuous part of the process. Your Actions may or may not produce the desired outcome of equitable access and meaningful use. If your efforts fall short of your goals, that is not failure – it is progress, if you are reflective. The process you are using is local action research. You are in control of your goals and objectives, timelines, how you work to attain your objectives, the evidence you collect that demonstrates the attainment of their objective, and how you decide to show that you have attained them.

## Using Your Findings

*Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another.* John Dewey

There are many ways to use this inventory. Here are some suggestions.

1. Focus on one of the four sections in Column One at a time.
2. Compare your responses, reflections, and actions with another teacher librarian.
3. Identify and publish the evidence that demonstrates that there are meaningful use outcomes as a result of the changes you have made in your library program (e.g., publish student work or student testimony on library website).
4. Use the evidence of meaningful use to advocate for your school library and its goals.
5. Share your inventory with your principal and teachers for planning purposes and get their input.
6. Identify the students in your school who do not have internet access at home and target them as the subjects of your study.
7. Use the evidence from your inventory to apply for grants and other funding to support meaningful use.
8. Advocate for equitable access and meaningful use among your faculty to heighten awareness and attract support.
9. Work with community members, state, and national entities, such as internet providers, who can help increase internet access to underserved families.
10. Remind yourself that the process you have undertaken to attain equitable access and meaningful use of digital technology for all of the youth you teach is difficult, but the struggle is worth it. There really is no alternative that will make a difference. If we teach today's student as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow (John Dewey, 1944, p. 167).

The stakes are high for students who do not have access to information and digital literacy instruction. The stakes are also high for teacher-librarians who raise awareness of the school library as essential to the education of all students.

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