

Teacher-librarians, Teachers and the 21st Century Library: Relationships Matter

By Dr Rosemary Abbott

Moving in to a new library has the effect of focussing the mind on what should be going on within its walls. The ideas for this article emerged from doing just this and considering the ways in which the members of the library team would now develop and deliver library programs. While those of us who work in school libraries aspire to working in a new space, my experiences since the library opened two years ago suggest that the dynamic is likely to change when the library team is operating in that new space. Certainly, immediately after the opening of the new building in which the library is situated, the focus was on the architectural design, and the light open spaces. It was all very different to the 1970s building in which the library had previously been located.

In the first week, every student from Prep to year 12 was given a guided tour to see the new library. Parents and other members of the school community were also provided the opportunity to tour the building. Naturally, the school was keen to share news of this beautiful new building with the wider community through social media and the print press. The building was nominated for, and won, architectural awards.

The emphasis on the physical space caused us to contemplate exactly how we would work in these new surrounds and what changes in the delivery of our programs might be required. We felt it was time to refocus on what was most important. A beautiful new library is much more than the physical space; the learning occurring within its walls is critical to its role as a hub of learning within the school (Gordon, 2014, 2017).

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Selling Our Story

To get a message out, it is essential to be clear about what the message is. Marketing appeared to be what we needed to undertake, but sometimes the term itself can be problematic. Bonanno (2005) suggests that “teacher-librarians have used the terms of promotion, public relations, marketing and advocacy interchangeably but there are some distinct differences attached to each of the terms”. I realised I had intermingled the terms in my own thinking. In order to establish greater clarity, I present the following definitions devised after Bonanno’s synthesis of the literature:

- Promotion – the who, what, when and how of the library
- Marketing – assessing the needs of the learning community and then working to meet those needs
- Advocacy uses promotion, marketing and public relations to demonstrate how the library impacts positively on student learning. It is about ‘influencing perceptions’, and works towards building partnerships and relationships.

According to Bonanno, promotion is generally what occurs in school libraries, while marketing can be neglected because of “the busyness of a teacher-librarian’s day”. Rather than contemplating how to ‘sell’ what we do, I decided to focus on the factors critical to positive perceptions of the library and library staff as the heart of 21st century learning in a school (Gordon, 2014).

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But what is it that we are selling? Gordon (2017) describes school libraries as “typically the best resourced classrooms in schools” which have the capacity to ensure the following outcomes:

*Curious learners who participate in information-based inquiry
Literate learners who use information systems and read multimedia with comprehension;
Collaborative learners who demonstrate information-technology skills and content knowledge; and
Equitable school library experiences for ALL learners that meet their personalised needs.*

It could be said that we are selling outcomes, as well as “the physical and virtual environment” (Gordon, 2017). For such outcomes to emerge, it is necessary to acquire and promote quality resources in print and digital format, and to have well-planned and executed library programs and expert staff.

Library as Learning Environment

The physicality of the library is certainly part of our story. A new library may engender a focus on the aesthetic, add good design which “uplifts the patron and enhances the unique experiences of sensing past, present and future simultaneously” (Demas and Sherer, 2002, in Elmborg 2011, p. 340).

Elmborg (2011) sees the library as a third space, and describes it as “the inbetween space that carried the burden of the meaning of a culture”. This could also be described as liminal space, betwixt and between, which can be a place of becoming and reflection

(Alsup, 2006). The library, when defined as a third space, sits between the classroom and home (Elmborg, 2011), and the day-to-day life of the school overflows into that space (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011).

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In this guise, it can provide security and comfort (Elmborg, 2011), and a safe haven (Markus-Sandgren 2016) particularly for those who might be perceived as “borderland students”.

The library as a physical entity provides experiences, both cultural and social, for library users, but it is the library as a learning space that focuses on the critical area of student learning. If a school library is seen as successful, it will be because “The learning environment of the school becomes indistinguishable from the learning environment that is the school library” (Gordon, 2014). Todd, Gordon et al, (2011), citing data from their New Jersey School Library Survey, describe the capacity of the school library to cater for a wide range of learning styles, curriculum resources and students’ own interests. The library creates productive connections with home and beyond the school (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2011). In this environment, it may be about the one-on-one experience of library users (Shannon, 2009), and the provision of personalised learning at the point of need (Gordon, 2017). Priestner (2011) sees an individualised approach as preferable and advocates for the adoption of the “boutique library’ model to ensure such personalisation and individualisation of experience.

Lamb & Johnson (2013) recommend that it is better to “Focus on your philosophies rather than your centre as place’. Gordon (2017) articulates what might be considered an appropriate core philosophy, writing that school libraries “are working models for aligning educational practice with the needs of the 21st century learner”. The programs developed by school libraries are therefore critical to ensuring positive learning outcomes. The 21st century learner of which Gordon writes requires a set of skills well documented at this point (McCrinkle, 2009; Gardner, 2008; Kulthau, 2010), including information, digital and reading literacy. The Foundation for Young Australians (2016) has published a series of reports describing the new work order and what students will require to thrive in this changing world.

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Valenza (2012, cited in Luhtala, 2012) suggests an additional, more humanist, less pragmatic approach, where skills are intended to empower learners and which include:

- Curation of content and new learning,
- Citizenship and compassion, entailing the responsible building of a digital footprint, and developing and displaying empathy
- Creation – publishing content, especially multimedia.

Valenza (2012, cited in Luhtala, 2012), points to the need for recognising “youth driven social engagement” when designing skills programs.

Within the professional literature, much has been written on the topic of library skills programs. However I wish to move the focus to the people rather than the programs, as their role in student achievement is vital. Todd, Gordon and Lu’s (2011) research places teacher-librarians as central to student learning, because of their “unique role of seeing the big picture”. Gordon (2017) argues that the role of the library professional impacts upon school culture. They are teachers of other members of the school community not just students.

The range of the teacher-librarian’s knowledge and expertise is substantial. Curriculum knowledge includes not only national curriculum standards such as the Australian and Victorian curricula, but specific curriculum of their particular schools (Baker, 2016). Further, it is the teacher-librarian’s insight into the intersection of technology, pedagogy and content, as described by Mishra and Koehler (2006) that enables them to assist teachers so effectively (Baker, 2016).

Todd, Gordon and Lu (2011) identify the dispositions of the teacher-librarian that enhance his or her contributions to learning across the school community. These include being resilient, non-judgmental, accessible, “willing to go the extra mile”, flexible and having high expectations. The significance of these personal traits is highlighted in the research on principals’ perceptions of the teacher-librarian (Shannon, 2009; Hartzell, 2002; Lupton, 2016).

If one considers the expertise, knowledge and dispositions of the teacher-librarian, it is unsurprising that there is recognition that they have the capacity to provide “transformational leadership” in the key areas of curriculum knowledge and ICT integration (Baker, 2016; Kulthau, 2010). Teachers are expected to use ICT in their classrooms and they “need the help of specialists, like a teacher-librarian, to meet these growing expectations” (Doiron, 98, cited in Montiel-Overall, 2005)

Collaborative Connections

What is described above adds up to what is ‘marketable’ about teacher-librarians. The discussion now moves on to the ‘how’ of marketing teacher-librarians. “Rather than spend your time on marketing your program, focus on the collaborative relationships you’re building” (Lamb & Johnson, 2013).

Collaboration is cited by many as key to positive outcomes in schools (Gordon, 2017; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Lee & Finger, 2010). According to Gordon (2017), “It is important for educators to collaborate in an age when no one individual has all the expertise needed to implement 21st century teaching methods” (p. 9). In her view, this places the teacher-librarian in a strong position to focus the library as the “hub for collaboration”.

“When teacher-librarians and teachers collaborate, they grow professionally by learning from each other” (Gordon, 2017).

Collaboration is seen as most likely to have a positive impact on teacher learning (Montiel-Overall, 2005). Indeed, Darling Hammond (2014) argues that collaboration results in more skilful teaching and strong student achievement. But it requires time (Montiel-Overall, 2005) and this can create roadblocks for collaborative work between teacher-librarians and teachers.

The Challenges to Collaboration

One of the roadblocks to productive collaboration can be how the library and its staff and programs are perceived within a learning community. According to Todd, Gordon and Lu (2011), ensuring the existence of positive attitudes is vital. The perceptions of others have the potential for considerable impact on the success of a school library. Inaccurate or negative perceptions are problematic in the effective delivery of library programs. In particular, the perceptions of the principal should be factored in to marketing the library and its programs. It is the principal who sets the culture in a school (Shannon, 2009), through leadership and vision (Todd, Gordon, & Lu, 2011), and consequently the placement of the library at the heart of student learning.

Lupton identifies the importance of the principal’s support for both the library and the teacher-librarian. This is critical to the success of the library program (Shannon, 2009; Church, 2008), as lack of support can reduce the impact of the teacher-librarian and the library program on student achievement (Hartzell, 2002).

Hartzell’s (2002) early research highlighted a problem as damaging as lack of support, the issue of “invisibility” (p. 95). Invisibility can be viewed in several ways. Firstly, the degrees of success with which teacher-librarians have integrated their work into a school’s teaching and learning program has the potential to render them invisible. Hartzell’s (2002) findings also indicated that not all principals saw teacher-librarians as teachers or leaders. If teacher-librarians are not seen as teachers first, but rather as administrators, problems arise because the focus is not on learning outcomes (Shannon, 2009).

Lupton (2016) argues that the research approach of some early studies in this field is problematic given the frequent use of questionnaires containing predetermined roles. Principals therefore ranked roles as listed rather than describing roles as they saw them. In Lupton’s view, attitudes are moving, as evidenced by the research undertaken for the School Library Association of Queensland by Hilary Hughes (2013, in Lupton, 2016). According to that research, teacher-librarians are increasingly seen as teachers, collaborators and managers. This positive development is encouraging, but for the teacher-librarian the perceptions and responses of teachers are equally important.

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Perceptions and Pressures

It is highly likely the pressures the teachers themselves feel under at times shape their perceptions of, and responses to, teacher-librarians. The role of the teacher is considerably more multi-dimensional than in previous generations. It seems that schools are expected to meet all of society’s changing needs (Yates, 2005). These expectations emanate from varying sources such as parents, school principals, curriculum authorities, the media and politicians (Yates, 2005). The metaphor of “teacher-as-juggler” (Adelman & Pantan Walking-Eagle, 1997, p. 92) seems appropriate in what Dyson (1998) describes as the “digital age” where the multiple roles that schools play may be defined as “custodial, behavioural, cognitive, screening and socialisation” (Miller, 2003, p. 11). As a consequence, teachers are expected to teach differently and do much more than merely teach (Kelly, 1996, cited in Groundwater-Smith, et al., 2001, p. 39; Kochanek, 2005, pp. 2-3; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003, p. 8) They must also deal with external forces: ‘economic and work’, ‘technological’, ‘social’, ‘environmental’ and ‘political’ (Stoll, et al., 2003, p. 12).

Time is a major pressure for all who work in schools, and as pointed out earlier, collaboration requires time. There is frequently ‘that rushed feeling’ where teachers feel the need to do things as quickly as possible (Beaudoin (2004); in these instances, working with the teacher-librarian may not seem possible. The day to day work of a school may limit opportunities for collaboration largely because of how time is allocated within that day (Gordon, 2017; Hargreaves, 1994). In addition, it is possible that some teachers perceive teacher-librarians as ‘support’ rather than as a partner (Hartzell, 2002).

The pressures on teacher-librarians are, perhaps unsurprisingly, largely similar to those on teachers. As stated previously, Bonanno (2005) points to the challenges of marketing the library given the day-to-day time pressures. Baker (2016) sees constraints of time as diminishing the leadership role a teacher-librarian is able to take and limiting the development of partnerships with teachers. According to Martin (2013, in Baker, 2016), “investing time in developing people relationships and focusing attention on stakeholders concerns is vital” (p. 151).

Collaborative trust relationships are enabled by recognising the varied roles served by individuals of the learning community (including the teacher-librarian), modelling desired practices, acting proactively, and providing personal experience and expertise (Lamb and Johnson, 2013).

Collaboration Through Trust

Support has been identified as critical to the work of the teacher-librarian (Lupton, 2016; Shannon, 2009; Hartzell, 2002)). As explicated by Hartzell (2002) “Solid relationships are based on understanding each other’s roles and functions and trusting in each

other's competence, expertise, dedication and honesty" (Shaw, 1997; Zand, 1997, in Hartzell, 2002, p.94). Relationships can be built and ongoing support provided. Users recognise and value care and concern (Witherell and Noddings, 1991). The building of strong foundations of relational trust and relationships based on that trust has the power to mitigate the impact and degree of roadblocks, because people exhibit good will and the desire to go the extra mile (Reina & Reina, 2006; Bryk & Schneider, 2003)

Many definitions of trust exist within the literature but the concept is "understood often in a very vague and systematic way" (O'Hara, 2004, p. 12). To present a single definition, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) distilled their examination of the literature and devised the following:

Trust is an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open' (p. 183).

These five characteristics are worthy of briefly unpacking because their range gives some indication of the complexity of the notion of trust:

Benevolence concerns our expectations of the actions of others. It may be seen as 'caring' (Witherell & Noddings, 1991) or 'concern' (Louis, 2007, p. 4).

Reliability relates to consistency of behaviour. People expect that you what you do will meet their needs (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). This is critical if teachers are to commit to collaborative work with the teacher-librarian.

Competence means that people have the capacity to do what is required for someone else. It is not about intention, or well-meaning, but skills or knowledge (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Teacher-librarians must be knowledgeable about curriculum resource and be competent in using 21st tools for learning (Baker, 2016).

Honesty relates to doing as we say we will do (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

Openness is about sharing information despite the potential for vulnerability. It is about trusting those with whom we share.

Louis (2007), whose research focuses particularly on schools, writes of two different types of trust, institutional and relational. Institutional is about the norms of behaviour expected in a particular organisation. Relational trust develops through repeated interactions with others (Louis, 2007, p. 3). Institutional and relational trust each influence the other within a school. According to Kochanek (2005) it is the principal who establishes a culture of good relational trust, so this take us back to the perceptions of the principal and how he or she drives the culture of the school, including the positioning of the school library.

Trust matters because it is a vital component of social capital (Uslaner, 2002, Putnam) or human capital (Gordon, 2016), which can impact upon the capacity of an organisation (Lambert, 2007). Trust is necessary for people to work together and working together has the potential to build trust (Reina & Reina, 2006). Earl and Katz (2006) describe trust as the "key condition of productive relationships" (p. 5).

Those who write on trust generally believe it is not given sufficient attention in schools (Louis, 2007; Kochanek, 2005; Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Yet it is essential if change or improvement is required, and is part of school culture. Change cannot be successfully implemented if trust is absent so teachers are unlikely to change practice and collaborate with the teacher-librarian. Greater feelings of trust increase levels of self-efficacy where people believe they can successfully undertake a task (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), "relational trust facilitates the development of beliefs, values, organisational routines and individual behaviours that instrumentally affect student engagement and learning" (p. 115). Such relational trust relates to the "interpersonal social exchanges in school communities so it must exist if we are to effectively work with leaders, teachers and students" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p.12).

Trust is the foundation for collaboration and collaboration is what makes organisations excel (MODOONO, 2017). Tschannen-Moran (2001) points to levels of collaboration and the fact that they are linked directly to levels of trust within a school. Collaboration must be based on shared goals, a shared vision and a climate of trust and respect (Muronaga & Harada 99).

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Collaborative partnerships are formed through "developing trusting relationships between two or more colleagues". It is necessary to recognise each other's roles, model practice, being proactive and providing personal experience and expertise (Lamb & Johnson, 2013).

The presence of strong trust relationships should ensure clear expectations, positive and open communication (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The recognition of mutual vulnerability (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 41) is a result of strong trust and has the potential to provide a sound basis for collaborative work between teacher-librarians and teachers.

Making Connections

If teacher-librarians wish to encourage a culture of collaboration with teachers, there are a number of steps they can productively take. Collaboration requires the existence of trust, so teacher-librarians must be trustworthy in the eyes of those who are users of the library programs and resources. To be trusted we must do as we say we will, have the skills required and communicate

effectively. We must have strong trust relationships with the principal and others in leadership roles in our schools. Teacher-librarians should position themselves as transformational leaders (Gordon, 2016) through not just their knowledge and expertise, but by making connections with those in leadership.

As Small (2001) points out, successful collaboration can begin by the establishing of a trust relationship with just one teacher. It is vital to be proactive in making connections. These could be conversation or shared work or "listening across boundaries" (Lambert, 1998, in Brewster & Railsback, 2003) According to Baker (2016), "teachers in a sustained collaboration with the school librarian recognised the librarian's contribution to their teaching".

The message needs to go to the right people in our schools (Shannon, 2009). There is potential in marketing the extensive and positive dispositions of the teacher-librarian (Baker, 2016) and the personalised experiences provided for users of our libraries. It is all about people and their willingness to work together. Relationships matter!

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