

# Towards a better online life – reflections on the March conference

By Sue Osborne

## Snapshot

Sue Osborne, inspired by the 2019 SLAV March conference, and the work of Dr Ross Todd and Julie Lindsay, considers student wellbeing and their online lives and what this discussion suggests for our work in school libraries.

The new school year started as a blur for me – a new job in a new part of the education sector and a new online Uni subject (Editing). Before I knew it, it was time to attend the first SLAV conference for the year. On March 29th we gathered to hear special guests, Dr Ross Todd and Julie Lindsay, and a great line-up of fellow SLAV members talk about “Inspiring Learners, Building Minds - Global and Digital”. Julie Lindsay shared her experiences as a global educator; connecting students with each other across the globe in meaningful ways. Julie spoke about the collaborator mindset and gave advice on how to find and create opportunities to connect and collaborate with educators and students. Julie talked about taking risks and grabbing opportunities to develop one’s collaborator mindset. All inspiring stuff. But the speaker who really captured my imagination, and inspired this issue’s column, was Ross Todd.

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Ross’s opening address centred around the concept of digital wellbeing. How do we as educators create an environment for students to explore the digital world in safe way? Ross argued that while schools can put up firewalls and protocols to filter out unwanted content, it is not necessarily the best thing for students

to do so. As school library professionals we accept that this is how it is, that parents expect their children to be “protected” when they are online at school – but should we? Should our role be to police what is accessed or to guide our students in responsible and resilient use of the internet? Personal, cultural and social agency were the touchstones of Ross’s presentation. Giving students power over their existence in the world - online or otherwise - by being informed and supported, is key. Accepting that the online world IS the real world now. Children exist in and interact with the whole world online. They watch shows online, they read online articles and follow online blogs and podcasts, they play online, and they socialise online. ‘Real life’ is online life. They are part of the same big picture.

The keys to helping our students and children exist safely and happily in that world lie in staying connected and giving kids human agency. Changing children from passive consumers of online

content to active, thinking, critical creators and participants. Connecting them to their peers, exchanging ideas and forming positive and collaborative relationships with each other. Of course, this is the ideal. Ross quoted the EU Kids Online report **Children, risk and safety on the internet** which studied children's engagement with the internet in 25 EU countries. The sample size was huge: over twenty-five thousand children were surveyed, and the results revealed four main risks for children:

1. Porn
2. Bullying,
3. Sexting,
4. Meeting online acquaintances offline.

Regarding porn, Ross touched on the word "harm" and how harm is not a definite article. Children will react differently to encountering porn inadvertently on the internet. For most, it's just something they didn't like or understand, and they make a more conscious effort to avoid it – without any lasting effect. For others, it can be distressing and upsetting; and for a few it can be deeply disturbing. Ross's point, and point of the report, is that, for most children, taking a risk online and trying to connect with others in that environment is no more dangerous than learning to jump puddles or ride a skateboard.

In 2001 academic Marc Prensky, in his article 'Digital natives, digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2001), used the term 'digital native' to describe children who were growing up and being educated in the age of rapidly developing information technology. Teachers and parents who were trying to keep up with these 'digital natives' he called 'digital immigrants'.

Ross Todd urged all the delegates to reject the myth of the 'digital native'. This term is overrated and does a disservice to education and research, limiting their scope. Instead, Ross asked us to look past the anxiety and moral panic that dominates the narrative around children's interaction with the internet. You know, the kind of stuff commercial media churn out about "how to reduce your child's screen time" or advocating the latest monitoring software so you can see on your own device what your child is getting up to. Ross urged us to move beyond mere digital literacy or citizenship and consider a more holistic approach, focusing on a child's digital wellbeing. School libraries are, according to Ross, well-placed to drive a more holistic approach.

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It is clear many children enjoy, and benefit from, connecting to others online. They also like experimenting with personality and identity online by creating fake IDs and profiles Ross reminded us that kids play pretend all the time – for most, this is just an extension of that. Perhaps instead of putting barriers in the way of this school library professionals can help students find a safe path to where they want to go, allowing them to take risks; to try jumping those online puddles, and helping them work out strategies and develop resilience to draw on when their shoes get wet. Let kids experiment online, help them when mistakes are made, educate them on how not to make some of those mistakes, foster a sense of curiosity about the world and what can be

achieved through connectedness rather than making them constantly afraid of the internet and, by extension, the world.

There was some very big thinking going on in the room during this presentation, and the rest of the conference continued to build on these ideas, with Julie's presentation about global collaboration and then Ross's final presentation. He reminded us that libraries are not the subject. They are the object, and student learning and life outcomes are the subject. That is where we, as school library professionals, add value to the school and the library.

**The cult of bibliobabble should die. We need to speak a common language.**

This is by no means the end of the discussion. In fact, for me, it's merely the beginning. I will soon present to my school's Strategic Learning Leadership Group about the concept of digital wellbeing. I hope to start a conversation about how we can achieve more positive outcomes for our students' wellbeing and online engagement. I cannot recommend the EU report highly enough, and below I include details of other publications mentioned by Ross during his presentation.

The cult of bibliobabble should die. We need to speak a common language. Build your own critical constructive capacity to self-evaluate and move forward away from pessimism. Stamina, shameless courage, stubbornness, passion, telling a compelling story. This is our mission. This is MY mission.

## References

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**Sue Osborne** has more than 30 years' experience of working with young people in libraries. After working in the public and tertiary education sectors, Sue started working in school libraries at Coatesville Primary School in 2006. After stints at Bialik College and Haileybury Brighton (where she was Head of Library for more than 6 years), Sue was recently appointed Learning Resource Centres Leader at St Francis Xavier College, the largest Catholic secondary school in Australia, managing their three campus libraries.

Sue is passionate about Australian children's lit, especially YA, and was a founding member of the #LoveOzYA movement. She is a past Metro South Branch Convenor for SLAV and recently served on the Committee of Management as a co-opted SLAV member, a former VPRC

Reference Group member, and serves on the shortlist and voting sub-committee for YABBA. She is also currently studying for a Graduate Diploma of Children's Literature through Deakin online, with a view to undertake a Masters in 2020. Sue's hobbies include watching and appearing on quiz shows, DSLR photography, reading YA and writing reviews, knitting and crochet, blogging, and walking around Phillip Island where she has a holiday home.