

From realism to abstraction: The teaching role of teacher-librarians

By Carol A. Gordon

Nothing is less real than realism . . . Details are confusing. It is only by elimination, by emphasis, that we get to the real meaning of things. Georgia O'Keefe, 1922

During my recent visit to the Georgia O'Keefe Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I viewed the exhibit, *Abstraction*, which replaced the familiar Georgia O'Keefe paintings that millions have come to know and love (illustrated in Figure 1) with her abstract paintings (illustrated in Figure 2).



Figure one: Realism



Figure two: Abstraction

It is in her abstractions, rather than in her realism, that O'Keefe finds meaning, which she describes as painting things as she 'sees' them, not as they are. The artist is not a camera, but a filter for human experience as it comes through the senses. It is not the observed, undisturbed object that abstract artists wish to depict, but its lines, and textures, and colours. The discovery of the parts, rather than the whole, as depicted in the abstraction reveals motion, emotion, associations, and connections that are not apparent in the realistic version. The abstraction represents what has been eliminated, and what has been emphasised, in order to get to the real meaning. It is from interpretation of what is observed that personalised meaning emerges for the artist.

When the intellectual experience of abstraction translates from the medium of paint to the medium of language, the work of the teacher-librarian as art becomes obvious. For both the teacher-librarian and the

learner who is mentored by her, it is the learning outcome that paints a picture of what has been learned and what has been taught. If we think of our students as apprentice artists who are learning how to find meaning through their work, a realistic representation of the learning in the form of a litany of facts and details is only a snapshot of what has been experienced through the found information. Figure 3 displays excerpts from a report written by a middle school student about Walt Whitman that reveals why Whitman is honoured by the New Jersey Hall of Fame. The report is a learning outcome that is literal, shallow, and robotic. Like a camera, the mind's eye has captured what is already there. For the snapshot to become a photographic work of art, the learner makes intellectual decisions comparable to the position of the camera and its settings, the light, the perspective, and the focus of the picture. He determines what is emphasised and what is eliminated from the found information in order to get to the essence of Walt Whitman as poet. The report on Walt Whitman reflects none of these decisions: there is no evidence of interaction between the learner and the object of study. On the other hand, the report on Ella Fitzgerald excerpted in Figure 4 reflects a deep understanding of the details that emerged from analysis, or the pulling apart of the observed to reveal the meaning beneath the surface. The student has engaged with the object of study and interpreted the facts encountered from found information that have become part of his new knowledge.

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Walter Whitman died on March 26, 1897 in Camden
Walt Whitman lived in Camden, New Jersey
Walt Whitman was born in Long Island, New York
Walt Whitman was a kind person who was extremely smart
Walt Whitman is remembered for his poetry.

Lonely, Lonely, Brave, Determined, Sassy
Daughter of parents who filled their house with music
Music must have filled her loneliness when her father died...
She was 'The First Lady Of Song';
She was 'Sassy' and a Legend of Jazz
Born in Virginia, grew up in New York, adopted by the world.

Figure three: Realism in Student Work

Figure four: Abstraction in Student Work

We can also think of the teacher-librarian's work in terms of realism and abstraction. The teacher-librarian is a master teacher who knows the craft of bringing her objects of study, the learners, to a level of performance that transcends realism and enters into the realm of abstraction and meaning. In order to achieve this level of learning outcome, she uses the tools of her art to help her apprentices engage in higher levels of thinking, which we call critical thinking. Examples of these tools include: the Information Search Process (Kuhlthau, 1986), Guided Inquiry (Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2007), authentic learning and assessment (Wiggins, 1990), evidence-based practice (Todd, 2001), action research (Gordon, 2006), as well as graphic organisers, K-W-L charts, journaling, portfolios, rubrics, and social networking sites. Learning outcomes created by the learners that reflect abstraction, such as the excerpt presented in figure four, represent the skills of the master teacher, as well as the apprentice.

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Environment and inspiration, as well as talent and training, are also factors in the quality of the work produced by teacher-librarians and learners. Georgia O'Keefe moved to New Mexico, where she found her inspiration in orange and lavender sunsets, sagebrush

rippling across the desert, and the majestic posture of mountains marching along the horizon. For teacher-librarians, the working environment is the school ethos, and inspiration comes from a climate of inquiry, discovery, and creativity. For decades, teacher-librarians have worked to raise the quality of instruction from a simplistic, realistic domain to one of rich abstraction and depth. The challenges that teacher-librarians face when they work to integrate the school library into the structure of traditional schooling are often

underestimated. A rich school library collection of primary and secondary sources, both print and digital, challenges learners to evaluate and select information, rather than consume it from a textbook-based curriculum.

Traditional classroom learning emphasises print literacy, while school libraries embrace comprehension and interpretation of multi-media sources. The classroom model of education favours fixed schedules and short lessons rather than flexible scheduling that accommodates sustained inquiry learning. The target audience of a traditional teaching model is the individual learner, not learners as team members that is characteristic of constructivist teaching. A transmission model of learning, encouraged by excessive testing, leaves little time for exploration and discovery. Test scores, rather than student-generated learning outcomes that represent critical thinking and creativity, are the measure of successful teaching in the old paradigm of institutionalised learning. Mainstream education can be easily trapped in the mode of realism that confuses facts and details for insights and meaning. Teacher-librarians have been facing these challenges in order to bring instruction to the level of abstraction.

The classroom-school library gap (Gordon, 1996) is a consequence of the incompatibilities of behavioural classroom pedagogies, characterised by drill and rote memorisation, and constructivist approaches of the school library, characterised by student-centred, hands-on learning through information and technology. There has been some progress in introducing information- and technology-centred teaching methods into the classroom, partly as a result of the hard work of teacher-librarians. Despite these efforts, the tension between traditional and constructivist teaching is exploding into a classroom-internet battle for educating young minds.

The reluctance to change educational approaches is explained in part by the perception that they have worked successfully for centuries, a conclusion based on the endurance of institutionalised schooling and its perceived success in perpetrating national political, social, economic, and cultural values and beliefs.

Davidson and Goldberg (2009) argue that:

". . . our institutions of learning have changed far more slowly than the modes of inventive, collaborative, participatory learning offered by the Internet and an array of contemporary mobile technologies". The medieval concept of schooling still dominates education. Little has changed, yet implicit in new technologies are pedagogical principles that contradict long-standing paradigms of education. A glaring example of the tension between classroom and internet is the censorship of *Wikipedia*, which is viewed as a threat to authoritative and reliable information. In many instances social networking itself is banned in schools. Such decisions reflect an underestimation and misunderstanding of how these technologies are changing the way young people learn. School libraries, frustrated by firewalls and filters, are caught in the middle of the transition of education from an 19th century industrial model to a 21st century information model. This environment in flux presents new challenges to teacher-librarians as they ponder what their 21st century libraries should look like.

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Many questions are arising from the juxtaposition of old and new paradigms in education, and the resulting uneasiness about the place of school libraries in a digital world. Perhaps the most critical question is whether we are asking the right questions. One question that is dominating the library world is the future of the book. Digitised information, such as the invention of the discovery of writing and the invention of the printing press, is changing the way learners interact with information and the way they learn from it. New pedagogical needs are arising to address skimming and scanning information behaviours that are replacing deep, sustained reading. Rowlands and Nicholas (2008) report that young information searchers in digital environments skim, scan and squirrel, or hoard information, but do not read it. New 'forms' of reading are emerging, such as 'power browsing' horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts (Rowlands & Nicholas, 2008). The question of what it means to read is becoming more complex as the venue shifts from page to computer screen. Birkerts (2006, 74) notes that the aim is: "The knowing not of facts, but of truths about human nature and the processes of life". Carr (2008) writes: "Wisdom, or the understanding of human phenomena does not emerge from bits of information users collect from electronic impulses, but from the deep time it takes to understand text in a stable context where it resonates within us" (Carr, 2008). The future of reading, and

indeed learning itself, seem to be more of a concern than whether our library collections reside on screens or shelves. How do digital text and virtual environments affect the way we read and learn? Implicit in this question is the role of the teacher-librarian in a literacy that develops learners' reading comprehension skills across a variety of media.

There are also questions about the re-definition of information literacy. Firstly, new standards expand the boundaries of information management beyond searching, finding, and selecting information (AASL, 2007, VELS, 2009) to higher order, or critical thinking skills that address the use of information to build knowledge. The teaching of information literacy includes the cultivation of thinking skills that enable learners to understand, apply analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information. Synthesis is now defined by the new Bloom's Taxonomy as creativity and given the highest rank in the taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The more sophisticated, or fancy thinking skills of application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis enable learners to go beyond learning outcomes that are realistic to those that reach abstraction. The teaching of this kind of information literacy targets information use, aiming at the production of learning outcomes that are creative, i.e., that express the discovery of meaning. The basic critical thinking skills of knowing and understanding border on emerging literacy, which is characteristic of students who can read but need to develop their understanding of what they read.

Technological literacy, another facet of 21st century information literacy, cuts across multiple formats of information. This kind of 'reading' is captured by the concept of transliteracy (Liu, 2006). The Transliterations Project researches technological, social, and cultural practices. Transliteracy differs from the 20th century concept of multi-media education because it addresses online reading.

'Online reading' may be defined as the experience of 'text-plus' media by individuals and groups in digital, networked information environments. The 'plus' indicates the zone of negotiation – of mutation, adaptation, cooptation, hybridisation, etc. – by which the older dialogue among print, writing, orality, and audiovisual media commonly called 'text' enters into new relations with digital media and with networked communication technologies. (Transliterations Project, 2006, <<http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/category/research-project/definition-of-online-reading>>).

By 2010, the project will produce a:

framework of online reading that blueprints the research development plans, recommendations for best practices, and implementation and evaluation procedures for an integrated range of technological, social, and humanistic approaches to 'improving' online reading. (Transliterations Project, 2006, <<http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/category/research-project/current-research-highlights>>).

The project has four dimensions:

1. The negotiation between technology and usage to create a material practice of reading.
2. The negotiation between individual and social practices.
3. The negotiation between media.
4. The negotiation between historical and contemporary reading practices. (Transliterations Project, 2006, <http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/category/research-project/definition-of-online-reading>).

The Transliterations Project connects reading with technology, relating reading practices to broader contexts that are social, cultural, and historical.

The mosaic of 21st century skills (Figure five) captures the interdependencies among the skills implicit in information literacy: traditional information management skills, traditional reading competencies, critical thinking, and technological skills across diverse formats. These four skills sets depend on and complement each other. They form a palette that colours the teacher-librarians' craft with shades of literacy beyond the traditional black and white format of print. The synergism of the mosaic raises questions about the role of the teacher-librarian in 21st century education. A 20th century definition of information literacy which is confined to searching and finding information is complicated by information use that elicits higher order thinking across diverse formats that deliver information.

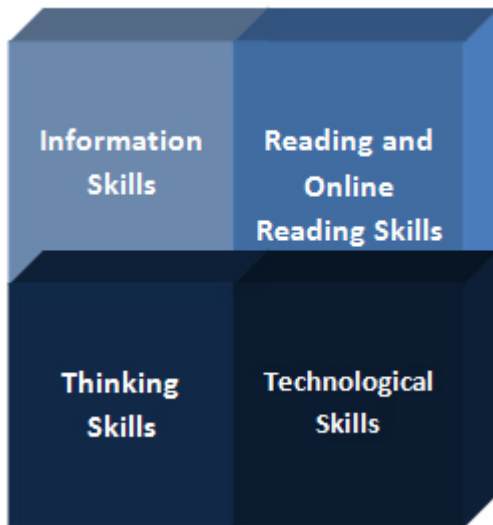


Figure five: 21st Century Mosaic of Information Skills

Such a pedagogical design assumes the primacy of the teaching role of the teacher-librarian. This may not be a universally accepted assumption, though one might think it is self-evident. Are we ready to say that collections and catalogues are secondary to user education? A recent study of the dispositions of school librarians uses a qualitative method to draw on expert opinions in the field through surveys of school library media educators. The first round of surveys reveals a consensus of 85 per cent of the sample (n=33) that best teaching practices include evidence-based practice, Guided Inquiry, student-centred and differentiated instruction (Bush & Jones, 2010). In rounds 2 and 3 of the survey the panel of experts (n=21) rated dispositions of school librarians from most to least important and reacted to the ratings. Teaching, which included collaborating and reading, was rated third. Originally reading was rated seventh, but it was subsequently included with teaching. Critical thinking and creative thinking were received first and second ratings (Bush & Jones, 2010). "Findings indicate *a vision for professional dispositions of school librarians recognised predominantly for their quality teaching but from a distinctly school library perspective*" (Bush & Jones, 2010). The researchers conclude:

Panelists identified dispositions that focus on change agency in the practice of teaching and learning. While the identification of teaching was both predominant and problematic, it spoke to the overwhelming response that in one way or another, it is all about teaching; if only we could get our ideas sorted out and identify the distinction that we have from our classroom-teacher counterparts. We engage with our learners in a holistic, communal, and societal context in which care and equity are symptoms of our respect for each student. We build intellectual character over time through modeling, guiding, and influencing learning through understanding. We share the journey with our young charges throughout their learning experiences in the school and throughout their authentic learning that reaches their local and global communities. We employ instructional strategies, techniques, skills, and applied best practices to bring focus to an inquiry stance that envelops both deep thinking and proven skill sets that create learners rather than the learned (Bush & Jones, 2010).

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Clearly, user education in all types of libraries is emerging as the most important service that libraries can provide. Indeed, it may be the role that is the future of libraries. School libraries are distinguished by their teaching role and have raised it to the level of an art.

They are clearly positioned to model how librarians can

help users of all ages to negotiate increasingly complex information structures. It is important that school libraries continue to develop the art of teacher-librarianship to meet the challenges posed by a digital age. Georgia O'Keefe reminds us that: "To create one's own world in any of the arts takes courage".

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