

Teacher librarianship in the twenty-first century



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Adapted from a keynote presentation at *7th Biennial ISASA School Librarians' Conference*, Johannesburg, 8-10 August 2006.

Teacher librarianship in Australia is currently under siege. Education administrators at both the systemic and the local (school level) are cutting professional staffing and funding levels in the mistaken belief that the Internet and technology can and will provide access to resources for learning. We have a past Commonwealth Minister telling students to 'just Google it' and a new federal government ready to make sure every child in schools across Australia have access to a computer. This mistaken belief that the provision of technology will somehow solve ongoing issues with lowering literacy levels and disenchantment with learning in schools is not based on research findings. In fact the research tells us that unless the teacher is fully engaged, has acquired a level of skill, is fully supported and the learning takes place in context (in the classroom), then the provision of technology makes no difference to student learning outcomes (Combes, 2005). However, there is a plethora of research available, conducted over a long period of time that tells us that the presence of a pro-active Teacher Librarian (TL) in a school makes a significant difference to student learning outcomes (Lance, 2001; Lau Whelan, 2004; Prestebak, 1999; Research Foundation, 2004, Todd, 2003; Williams, et al 2001). Canada, where Teacher Librarianship was in a similar state several years ago, now appears to be undergoing a resurgence, as recent reports from Ontario suggest (Thomas, 2008). So why is Teacher Librarianship in Australia under siege?

There are several reasons for this current state of affairs and none of them sit comfortably or bode well for the profession as a whole. Politically the TLs of Australia are in a divisive state, with several state bodies either permanently divorced from the national body or threatening to become so. There appears to be a general disgruntlement amongst members (Australia-wide) who criticise the national body for what they perceive to be a lack initiative in the area of advocacy, but few members are prepared to step forward and participate on State and National boards, conference organising committees or even attend the national conference and few appear to be

interested in finding out exactly what the National body is trying to do in this area. During the recent Australian School Libraries Research Project (ALIA/ASLA/Edith Cowan University, 2007.) data gathering exercise where the ALIA/ASLA Policy Advisory Group (PAG) tried to collect some extensive data on the state of school libraries across Australia, the response rate of 600+ school library personnel suggests a certain amount of apathy on the part of the profession, which has been compounded by a number of issues endemic throughout teacher librarianship in Australia.

So what are these challenges/issues for Teacher Librarianship as we head into the twenty-first century? It is important to label these so we know exactly what we are dealing with, before seeking out solutions and strategies. Attached to these challenges are personal and professional issues that may be confronting and uncomfortable, and require us to re-evaluate ourselves and our performance. Our challenges are:

- Technology
- Time and workload
- Status and role

Challenge 1 – Technology and the changing nature of information

The information environment has changed radically during the last twenty years and technology is now a significant factor in how we work, play and learn. For young people especially, technology is an integral part of their everyday landscape. Many young people have never known a world without instantaneous access to vast quantities of information using a multitude of formats, text types, graphics and multimedia. They are the ultimate consumers and for them, technology is transparent and a part of their social, economic and educational landscape. They have no fear of technology. Adults observe and marvel at their seemingly effortless and sometimes simultaneous use of a wide range of technologies, often without referring to instruction manuals.

The speed of technological development and the convergence of technologies are often quite frightening. We have information being produced in an ever-expanding range of formats such as electronic, print, photographs, maps, architectural plans and models, databases, CDs, CD-ROMs, DVDs, videos and web-based materials. Other formats include streaming video; podcasts; teleconferencing; videoconferencing; multimedia; interactive, multi sensory, haptics; 3-D stereo-sensory visualisation systems; email, chat; mp3s and PDFs. We can now access information via webcams, mobile phones, ipods, palm pads, PDAs/Dopods, Blackberries or laptop computers that fit into your top pocket as a laser device the size of a pen. Using Bluetooth wireless technology, this device produces both a virtual monitor as well as a keyboard on flat surfaces from where you can carry out the normal operations you do on your desktop. Of course there are still the traditional media such as books, big books, kits, realia, audiocassettes, charts, pamphlets, brochures, displays, newspapers, magazines, journals, TV and radio. Just because we have the Internet and digital media, doesn't mean that these traditional media formats have disappeared. In fact we are now publishing more in print than we have at any time in our history. A major result of

developments in technology has been the increased depth and breadth of our library collections and this facet is likely to proliferate in the future.

So our first challenge as TLs is to come to terms with this changing information landscape. Our second challenge is to assist others to make sense of this sea of information that is growing exponentially. For many of us, these are fundamental challenges to overcome. We are members of a greying profession. Many librarians and TLs consider they have already had their major flirtation with technology in the form of automated catalogues, the introduction of (Web)OPACs and the convergence of information telecommunications technologies (ICTs) that were a feature of libraries in the 1990s. In many schools the integrated automated library system is the only example of a fully functioning database that has intranet and Internet facilities and is available for students to learn how to access information electronically in a relatively safe environment. Even a stand-alone automated catalogue requires students to use the same skills to be able to find information electronically as those used to search the Web – a salient fact rarely advertised by the TL, acknowledged by administration, teachers or students. Many TLs are reluctant to move out of their comfort zones again and accept the new challenges continuing advancements in technology pose for educational environments and school libraries.

In many cases TLs have become library managers, rather than teachers. While the day-to-day management of the library's systems is essential for the smooth running of the facility, it is one that can be left in the capable hands of a trained library technician (or a competent library officer depending on your staffing). The TL should be acting as a manager in this role, rather than a hands-on technician. The first step towards taking up the challenges posed by technology is to accept that your role is not the day-to-day management of the library – it is so much more. The second step is to get serious about gaining and updating your technology skills. This can be daunting, exhilarating and incredibly satisfying once you get started. It re-connects you to what is happening in the world of information, acts as intellectual stimulation when you re-engage with your peers and leads to lifelong learning – something educators, schools and teachers often preach about, but rarely model in actual practice. You can access formal short courses or self-initiated Web tutorials in how to use wordprocessing, PowerPoint and desktop publishing programs or you can learn how to create Web pages and use collaborative tools such as wikis, blogs, Moodle, social networking tools (Web 2.0) and chat. You can access tertiary certificates to upgrade your qualifications, or complete a Masters degree on evidence-based practice in your school (Todd, 2002).

The completion of formal courses is a commitment to personal professional development that goes beyond attending conferences and sharing best practice, although these are very important as well. Of course Rome wasn't built in a day and updating yourself will take time. You also want to avoid becoming the network technician – this is not your role either. If schools are serious about the provision of technology and the educational benefits that it can provide for students, then they will fund the appointment of a network technician. You do not want to suddenly become manager of the network as well, where you spend your days troubleshooting broken equipment, disciplining students/staff for inappropriate use or documenting missing mice, malfunctioning screens and broken connections. In your role as information specialist you do, however, want to have a say in policy development, the

implementation of learning technologies and how they are integrated in curriculum programs in the school and how the network is used for access to information, resource-based learning and curriculum development. To do this successfully you have to have some knowledge of what is happening in the world of information outside the school.

Challenge 2 – Time and workload

Two major challenges for TLs in schools are time and workload. A school presents a very complex working environment, where staff often spend more time dealing with crisis management, than actual teaching and learning. Dealing with students who bring to school social, economic and physical/health issues, means that teachers are not only educators, but instructors, surrogate parents, advocates and social workers. The library and the TL are often viewed by students as non-threatening or less intimidating and both have been viewed over the years as safe haven. The library has traditionally been the place where students go to escape the terrors of the school yard, an unsympathetic teacher or just to get out of the cold.

Coupled with this social role, the library should also be the centre of teaching and learning in the school. It is the place where students can find, learn to manage, evaluate and authenticate, and use information efficiently and effectively. It provides physical, human and virtual resources that both teachers and students can use to achieve teaching-learning outcomes. It is the place where students can develop, maintain and expand their literacy skills development in a non-threatening environment. The dual role of the TL as teacher and library manager is time consuming and usually consists of a workload that is neither understood nor recognised by administration and teachers alike. Finding ways to deal with these challenges, often means changing the focus of the TL and the library from a service orientation to a dynamic environment that encapsulates the core business of the school, ie. the achievement of quality teaching and student learning outcomes.

Mike Eisenberg calls it our martyr complex (Eisenberg, 2005), but I prefer Gary Green's term – humble functionary (Green, 2004). We need to resist the urge to become obsessed with minutiae and library management/housekeeping. TLs should be focussing on the bigger picture which centres on the provision of information and curriculum, specialist support for teachers and students in the areas of literacy and information literacy learning outcomes. Your job is not downloading catalogue records, shelving books or running after a teacher who suddenly appears at your door and wants a video because they don't have a lesson plan organised. Your job is not crawling under desks checking network cables or plugging in digital projectors for staff who refuse to become technologically literate. Your job is to support teachers in the:

- design of innovative curriculum that embeds information literacy and literacy skills development. It may include the integration of learning technologies and electronic resources; and
- provision of a range of resources (formats) and delivery modes to support resource-based, independent learning.

Challenge 3 – Status and role

A major challenge for TLs over the last ten years has been establishing our status in the school community and clearly communicating our role. After the heady days of the 1970s and 1980s when the importance of school libraries and their contribution was clearly recognised through centralised funding and professional staffing, we have now reached a stage where libraries of all kinds are under threat, even though the research that tells us that pro-active school libraries make a huge difference to student learning outcomes. Across the US, Canada, Australia, Europe and the United Kingdom, libraries and school libraries are under-funded and under-staffed. In some cases they have been closed or transformed into Internet cafes. There are several reasons for these changes.

1. There is a belief by politicians, systemic educators and senior administration, that technology can be used as a means of education delivery, and has the potential to provide a wide range of 'free' resources for schools (SOCCI, 2000). Underpinning this belief is a basic lack of understanding about information as a commodity, the public domain Internet, issues such as copyright and intellectual property, and the hidden costs of technology.
2. Apathy on the part of library professionals who have focused on the service and management aspects of their role, rather than teaching and learning, has been a major contributor to the library's poor image. We have not placed the library squarely at the centre of the school's core business, ie. teaching and learning outcomes for students. Many of us have looked on the teacher librarian's role as an opportunity to 'escape' from the classroom and an educational change process that demands major alterations to content, the way teachers teach and the assessment learning outcomes. Parents, industry stakeholders, administration and society are demanding a more professional attitude and accountability from teachers in schools. They want graduates who are flexible and adaptable, able to cope with a constantly changing workplace and who are able to learn new skills. The library, rather than being an escape option, should be the centre of teaching and learning for the whole school community. The TL should be leading and supporting educational change.
3. A lack of succession planning and the public perception that libraries are populated by grey-haired, middle-aged women and who are technological dinosaurs in a new information age, has only enhanced the stereotype of librarians. Instead of launching ourselves into this brave new world, many of us are still standing nervously at the water's edge, afraid to get our toes wet. Others, who have successfully begun swimming, are still caught up in the service ethic and fail to capitalise on their expertise. TLs and librarians are not perceived as leaders in their school communities, either in terms of curriculum or technology.

Clearly, if we are going to survive, this perception needs to change – we need to change. We need to accept that part of our role is educating administration, the staff and our school community as a whole about the new information landscape and our role.

Conclusion

For the rejuvenation Teacher Librarianship in Australia we have much to do and overcome as a profession. Some of these challenges and issues have been mentioned in this paper, but there are new challenges on the horizon as technology continues to influence the information landscape, funding becomes tighter and the expectations of society become greater. We need to meet the challenges head-on as a combined group, with common goals and a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to our profession. This is a big ask, I know, but the survival of our profession is hanging in the balance. Fortunately, I believe TLs are a resilient and determined bunch. Our most enduring characteristics are our capacity to move forward and change, and to support each other by sharing best practice – this summit being an excellent example.

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