

The Role of the Contemporary Library in Nurturing 21st Century Literacy Skills

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Much has changed in education in recent years and as schools adjust to meet the learning needs of students so does the role of the teacher librarian. This article offers insight into how the teacher librarian can value add to the literacy development and learning across the school through targeted support of both student and teacher. This article investigates the role a school library can play in supporting learning and reading skills for contemporary learners. In turn, how the skills learned through a proactive library environment can help to prepare our students for the world they will enter for employment. This article brings to light research from the US, UK and Australia to elaborate on the role of school libraries and the future of these entities.

Introduction

Along with the entire landscape of schools and education in recent decades, the role of the teacher librarian has changed. The stereotypical image of the bespectacled, middle-aged librarian who spends the bulk of her time asking people to be quiet, has evolved. Libraries were seen as dust covered, ‘nerd’ hideouts tucked away in dark corners of a school and as a depository of books, journals, maps and other printed matter that held the limited information available to the learner. In any school library espousing contemporary goals, that image is long gone.

Increasingly, debate rages around the pertinence and role of the school library. In the current economic trend of government tightening spending in areas such as education, health and aged care, library funding, and the people that manage and support these resources, are increasingly under fire (Busby, 2016).

Waving the library banner are the teacher librarian and library technicians themselves. Usually passionate and dedicated women and, on occasion, men who increasingly see the role of the library being most important in the education of our future citizens of the world. Navigating the contemporary world requires an ability to unravel the web of information surrounding individuals every minute of every day, creating the solutions to the problems that invade our contemporary lives, and working collaboratively with experts and peers to create new understanding of the world around us. Library staff hold these skills most highly and promote these undertakings in support of our students.

Research champions of school libraries are adamant in their belief that Teacher librarians are the key to building the above-mentioned essential skills (Todd, 2012). Research has shown

over and over that school libraries are, indeed, the centre of information gathering, synthesis of said information, as well as providers of opportunity to fuse this discovered knowledge with personal experiences and worldview which, in turn, creates new understandings of the world (Chu, 2009; Lonsdale, 2003). All of this supported by information experts, our teacher librarians, who support the learner in whatever stage of navigating this process they are at.

Understanding how students learn and build new knowledge from information is the focus of many researchers within the area of school libraries. In particular, Dr Ross Todd from Rutgers University, USA, has influenced many teacher librarians in his research that showcases the impact that school libraries and Teacher Librarians have on students (Todd, 2012). Todd and his research partner Carol Kuhlthau are renown in the school library world. For decades, they have undertaken research to understand more fully the process students experience when working on Inquiry and the implications this has on their actions and new knowledge synthesis (Kuhlthau, Heinström & Todd, 2008).

Contemporary school libraries build on this research to develop an environment and provide resources that suit the needs of the school culture and individual learners. In addition to this, school libraries provide opportunities for students to build understanding through processes that help to manipulate the pieces of the puzzle together to create their own new understandings and applications.

Changing Educational Landscape

In recent years, it has become apparent worldwide that the needs of our students have changed and the demand of educators to adapt to these changes is of great urgency. Student skills have had to change from simple note-taking from others' information books, to inquiry skills where students learn to make new understanding and knowledge from the facts and opinions they have discovered from others, wading through the plethora of information at their, literal, fingertips. All the while showing critical thinking and discernment of the information in front of them.

In this world of an unbounded stream of information via the internet, learning facts is no longer the end point to learning. Any information required is available at the touch of a computer button. Creating new, deep understanding from this information is the creative means required to move forward in the current world and, increasingly, employees are looking for traits in their employees that reflect skills of the contemporary learner (Skills You Need, 2017). Collaboration, initiative, and communication skills are paramount in the current workplace forum. Information is easy to find, but the skills of using and communicating this information is at the forefront of employee preferred skills.

In addition to these demands, the needs of our students are increasingly wide and varied. Personalising learning opportunities that tap into the interests and curiosity of a learner is the key to developing students to their greatest capacity. This means, even though a particular topic may be in the curriculum map of a school, permitting students to pursue this topic in a manner they find engaging and inspirational is what drives the student forward. An exceptional inquiry teacher, Georgia Mathis, states:

“Most often, if their curiosity takes us in a completely different direction, I let them run with it. However, I also let them find the connection between what I need them to learn and what they want to learn. Everything connects. Having students discover that takes ownership to a new level.” (Mathis, 2015).

Such is the challenge of a teacher librarian to support the personal engagement of each student inquiring in any particular field.

As demonstrated by Mathis, Inquiry Learning is becoming increasingly known as an empowering philosophy for students to pursue their learning and to create deeper understanding of the world around them, (Student Achievement Division, 2013); all the while, incorporating the skills and knowledge needed to complete curriculum expectations (Mathis, 2015).

A teacher librarian can be irreplaceable in supporting this learning environment when the role they play is supported by the school leadership and the learning community as a whole. Working collaboratively with the classroom teacher as an information and inquiry specialist, teacher librarians can provide the learner, and teacher, with a huge boost to what can be achieved (Lance, Schwartz & Rodney, 2014).

Also trending in recent years in education discussion is the importance of having flexible learning spaces within a school. To plan learning spaces that enhance the needs of the learner are an essential part of student learning and certainly support the outcomes of a modern learner (Holland, 2105). Adaptable furniture and spaces to enhance collaboration and communication are essential. A library can provide the place for these things to occur with the added bonus of specialist information staff available to the learner, as well. A well designed, flexible library space promotes the skills embedded in contemporary learning. A teacher librarian using this space to address immediate learning needs also increases the value of the library.

In addition to the changing needs of our students, apparent shifts in world-wide funding of school based facilities have meant school libraries, indeed libraries as a whole entity, are facing funding challenges and budget cuts (Australian Libraries Association, 2014). The school library has had no choice but to meet changed needs and to provide support to the school community to meet those current needs. This evolution creates a library that provides a vibrant, meaningful role in a modern school community.

The Role

The role of the teacher librarian as an information and curriculum specialist has shifted dramatically and dynamically to encompass the needs as discussed above. Traditionally, school libraries have been used as a ‘Release from Face-to-Face’ alternative as teachers take their non-contact time. The library was seen as a plausible alternative to the classroom where students were ‘engaged’ to something akin to an academic activity. The contradiction to this is that students did not see the value in their time in the library. Although skills taught and information imparted had a very valid basis, students did not generally see the connection, or validity, with what they were doing in the classroom. The skills were abstract and, therefore, seemed unnecessary. Already busy, teachers were not particularly concerned with what was going on

in the library and this, in turn, undermined the validity of what was carried out in the traditional 'library lesson'. The answer to this was to connect what was happening in the library to the learning in the classroom. This way the students could see the practical application and connect the skills they were learning in the library to actual learning in the classroom.

The teacher librarian, in this instance, needed to shift their skill set and tackle the students' very real needs. Working through the plethora of online resources, finding what was relevant, understanding 'cut and paste' plagiarism, critically judging the information at hand and creating new, personal understandings from an avalanche of information became the skills needed. Information expert, which has always been one of a librarian's monikers, now takes on a dramatic new meaning in the current digital world (Australian Libraries Association, 2014).

School X and its Context

Built in 2014, the new premises of School X offered an opportunity to provide a 21st century learning environment with a vision to empower learners to take risks in their learning in an effort to obtain the school vision. The school vision states:

School X is an inspirational, leading-edge international school dedicated to nurturing outstanding role models, responsible global citizens and informed leaders of the future.

For this vision to be fulfilled, it demands a functional, applicable library of the 21st century, providing skills and resources that promote and support developing our students toward obtaining this goal. School X Private School has undergone a wave of change in the role of the Library this past academic year and is only beginning to meet the demands of the vision and academic challenges of the school.

Given the previous role of the library within the school, the School X library have made great inroads in innovation this year and developing the role of the library in context of the contemporary learning landscape and the school vision. Developing an understanding of the authentic role the library can play in literacy, inquiry and skill development of our students has led to the profile and role of the library to change profoundly. The full potential of the library role as a resource provider and promoter of learning had not yet been identified at School X, but during the academic year the library has become more connected to learning, and has increased engagement of students with reading. Skill lessons are now always connected to what is happening in the classroom and in collaboration with the class teacher. This has been a huge revelation through the school community and the full potential of the library will need to be further investigated.

Library based activities such as Makerspaces, Research Zones, Homework Hub, Reading Challenges and Book Week events are but a small example of the opportunities the library has the potential of offering our students. At the core of this is also offering students and teachers support in many areas including resourcing, curriculum building, skill development, creativity and imagination as well as social and emotional growth opportunities (Australian Libraries Association, 2014).

The Challenge

Changing the understanding of roles is always a challenge in any school environment. Changing the practices of the school library and its profile within any given school environment is no different.

At the beginning of the 2016/2017 academic year, it became apparent the student population had not been a part of a regular library program nor seen as important to the work of the classroom teacher. The organisation of the non-contact time at the school had meant that no grade had been a part of regular library borrowing, skills instruction or research time. Each class group had had one term a year to be in the library environment, and only to borrow. Some classes utilised the library space but research varied widely as far as process and end-point. This meant that some students had not been in the library for nearly a year.

As with any school area, an action plan was written to address the role the library was to play in the School X community. After discussion with school leaders, and time to understand the history of the school community, several areas of need became apparent. This includes, but is not limited to, raising literacy standards through encouraging a love of reading, and promoting inquiry and resources aimed at promoting a curiosity and love of learning. These needs became the focus of the library for the academic year. A Library Action plan was developed with key goals being:

- To plan regular Book Fairs at school by books shops and to organise visiting authors annually to encourage and celebrate a love of reading,
- To review and update both fiction and nonfiction books in the classrooms/library including more Arabic books, multicultural books and a good variety of 'boy-friendly' books,
- To improve literacy in students by increasing reading ability through use of library resources and increasing interest in reading,
- To increase provision of excellent resources to meet curriculum requirements,
- To maintain a well-stocked, quality collection to adequately support the needs of students, teachers and parents, and
- To support Inquiry learning across the school

From this plan, transferring the goals into positive action became the focus of the library staff. Assisting teachers to understand how the role of the library has changed was a priority, and incorporating the learning needs (for example: how to google search, locate the book you need, format a bibliography, critical analysis of a resource) of a K-8 school cohort was the most challenging aspect.

Building a Learning Culture

Building a learning culture around the library, and the richness it can offer learning within the school, meant that a change of attitude to the library and how it was used across the school became paramount. To change the culture and to move the focus to one of genuine literacy and learning, several innovations to the services the library offered, and changes to the use of the library space, were prioritised. The main initiatives that were developed during the 2016/2017 academic year include:

- Library Timetable: an expectation that every elementary class would visit the library on a weekly basis to increase availability of good quality reading material as well as promote the 'love of reading' and the positives of having good literacy skills. It is important class teachers accompany the class so the students see the teacher places a high regard to reading as well.
- Reading Challenge: in Term Two all students across the school were invited to participate in a Reading Challenge. From Grade Three onwards the challenge was completed independently with students who read 10 books across the term receiving acknowledgement for completing the challenge. Grades KG1 to Grade Two completed this challenge with their teachers as a class group.
- Homework Hub: after school supervision and support was made in the Senior Library on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons. This time enabled students to work on homework or reading projects in a safe, academic environment with teacher supervision and support and encouraged a culture of learning.
- Inquiry Space: the senior library has incorporated an area for individual students and teachers to work independently on inquiry research or assignments. This is under supervision and support of the library staff and enables independent work spaces to be utilised. This service can be in collaboration with a class teacher in class time, during lunch or Homework Hub.
- Book Week: to raise awareness of literacy and the value of books, a celebration of all things 'books' was held in School X Book Week with a Book Fair and a Book Character Day. Classes also supported Book Week by doing some specific work on a favourite book in class. This was a highlight of celebration and the students really enjoyed the excitement associated with the events.
- Makerspaces: the junior library undertook a trial of a Makerspace in the Elementary lunchtimes in the last four weeks of the academic year. Students were invited into the library to build, design, problem solve and create along various lines of inquiry using materials such as lego, paper and recycled materials.
- Parent Reference Library: A collection of (mostly) Arabic books for parents to access in regard to issues they may encounter with raising their families, for educational, social, physiological or emotional well-being. In this new academic year, parents will be invited to borrow these as a support to broadening the understanding of parenting issues.

Strategies to Develop Inquiry Based Skills

The awareness of the Library as a place to help develop important research and inquiry skills is also a culture to be further established. The Teacher Librarian, in conjunction with the class teacher, can incorporate research skills, writing skills, online search skills and resource management skills. This is being developed in many ways, including:

- Research Skill Lessons: in collaboration with class teachers, to work on skills such as note-taking, finding appropriate online and book resources, authentic information location, creating bibliographies and awareness of plagiarism and why it happens. These lessons are a growing area in the library and an increase, especially from late Term Two, has been apparent as teachers have identified the need for these skills.
- Nodebook: an online learning platform where students interact with students from other school communities across the world. This year the topic was 'Freedom of Speech'. Students were selected to be a part due to their commitment to their studies

and their interest in the world around them. School X School was, in fact, part of a trial program and represented the only Middle East school to be a part of the trial of this new platform, at this stage.

- **I-Pick**: students learn strategies to help them choose a ‘good fit’ book so reading and comprehension skills are strengthened and challenged through reading books that suit their own reading ability. Through personalising selections of reading material young readers are empowered to locate books that suit their reading ability which also improves enjoyment of reading.
- **Collaborative Planning With Teachers**: the teacher librarian works with the teachers to help plan and resource cross-curricula units that incorporate research and inquiry skills to engage students in deeper learning and independent learning skills.

Conclusion

The role of the teacher librarian is increasingly critical to the success of the individual students in our schools. Adapting resources and skills to match the needs of our contemporary learners expands the potential of these students to be active participants in a world that is constantly in a state of flux. The skills needed to be inquiring, collaborative and communicative students are the skills needed to thrive in the modern workplace. The School X School library will continue to work toward supporting our students in the endeavour to be productive members of the global community. By looking at current research and reports, it is clear that School X Private school is on the correct path to enabling the school vision to be realised. “Outstanding role models, responsible global citizens and informed leaders of the future” require certain literacy and critical thinking skills to enable this to occur. In the School X library, it is believed the teacher librarian and library technician are well on their way to supporting the entire school community to achieve these goals.

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