

Constructing Knowledge in the 21st Century: A Teacher-Librarian's Perspective

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In the 21st century, literacy is regularly redefined by the fast and continuous changes in technology and their effects on our concepts of information and communication. Educators used to be able to predict with some confidence the skills that students would need to be successful in the workplace. The concept of literacy and all its applications has expanded to the extent that it is now almost impossible to predict exactly what skills workers will need in the workplace of the future.

Learning how to learn

In such unpredictable times, when the only certainty may be change itself, Leu (2000) suggests that “the ability to learn continuously changing technologies and new envisionments for literacy may be a better target than literacy itself” (p. 763).

The forthcoming national standards document, *Achieving Information Literacy through Quality School Library Programs*, the result of a collaboration by the Canadian School Library Association (CSLA) and the Association for Teacher-Librarianship in Canada (ATLC), provides a blueprint for producing individuals who are skilled at

learning how to learn. Information literacy is defined as consisting of “skills, strategies, and ways of thinking that are essential to success in a knowledge-based economy” (CSLA/ATLC, p. v). In schools today, many educators are concerned with teaching toward discrete curricular goals, which may have limited application to the larger goal of producing lifelong learners. The CSLA/ATLC document provides key information literacy outcomes and indicators that cut across discrete curricular goals to provide an overall framework for the education of future citizens.

The role of the teacher-librarian has been directly affected by rapid technological advancement and the evolving visions for literacy. Research shows that skilled teacher-librarians demonstrate strengths in the areas of collaboration and leadership, curriculum and instruction, information resources, and access to technology. The qualified teacher-librarian is well equipped to provide leadership and collaborative planning in the implementation of a much-needed information literacy framework in individual schools and across the country.

It is ironic that while information technology is embedded in the very fabric of our personal, professional and social lives, our schools are not providing adequate access or consistent instruction in its use. Students are online frequently at home. Yet in spite of this familiarity, they still need assistance executing Boolean searches and evaluating web sites, and they lack the requisite skills to be critical learners of new information. Teacher-librarians can be effective collaborators with classroom teachers to bring technology into the curriculum as part of inquiry-based research.

We must also be mindful of the continued need to build a solid base of traditional literacy as a precursor to the introduction of information technology skills. Luke and Elkins (1998) point out that communications technologies do not themselves determine social, economic and cultural change. These changes are dependent on how we use technologies. Constructivist, inquiry-based learning, where “students are engaged in extensive problem-driven research incorporating their thoughts, actions and feelings in a holistic learning process” (Kuhlthau, 1993, p. 11), encourages

students to use the most effective resources and tools for solving information problems.

Re-examining traditional relationships

Many educators are struggling to keep up with the demands of emerging technologies, while many students are able to manipulate these tools so expertly that it makes sense to re-examine the traditional teacher-student relationship. Teacher-librarians, in collaboration with public librarians, technology staff, and classroom and specialist teachers can work together to plan, co-teach and evaluate inquiry-based units. These inquiry-based units will maximize resource-based learning, the expertise of the planning team and the abilities of the students. Technology needs to be fully utilized to provide an authentic individualized curriculum that meets each student's needs.


A particularly effective method of ensuring that a constructivist perspective frames teaching practice is to partner teacher-librarians with pre-service teachers. A project at the University of British Columbia (Asselin and Lee, 2002) demonstrates the need for education of our teachers in the area of information literacy.

Raising the profile of school libraries and teacher-librarians

The past several years have seen a steady decline in Canada's school libraries due primarily to a lack of

funding. Roch Carrier, our National Librarian, is appalled at the deterioration he has witnessed during recent visits to a variety of school libraries across the country. This deterioration has profound ramifications for literacy achievement.

Decades of research show the influence of school libraries on learning. Teacher-librarians must respond to Roch Carrier's concerns by demonstrating that they are key players in improving student achievement. They must petition for national and provincial assessments, such as British Columbia's Foundation Skills Assessment, to include tasks requiring information literacy skills. Critically evaluating information from web sites, and knowing how to effectively use keywords when researching, are examples of skills that should be taught and assessed in schools. Such assessments would raise the profile of information literacy and teacher-librarians. They would also ensure the collection of needed statistical data regarding student learning in this area.

Public librarians, academic librarians and teacher-librarians should join forces and lead new initiatives in a unified vision that directly influences literacy learning. In our present global society, where prevailing belief systems are breaking down in the political, economic and social spheres (Brown, 1999), there is an unprecedented opportunity for this educational team to provide a vision and a pathway to the future. 

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