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School Library Topics in Two's

Kerena Burns

It is apparent by now that technology and the financial climate in the United States have made it impossible for libraries to simply be book repositories. For the school library in a K-12 environment, this is especially true. The school librarian is responsible for an overwhelming amount of work. They teach, maintain the library collections, serve as a liaisons for technology services, create and present programs to students, and more. It can be incredibly difficult to also keep up-to-date on trends in the profession and create fresh programs and materials for students. Yes, there are plenty of tools available to help keep school librarians current, from social media to professional publications, but looking through all of the information available can quickly turn into a massive sorting task that costs the librarian precious time to sift through. The goal of this paper is to quickly address a variety of school library topics.

To accomplish this goal, this paper utilizes the power of two. First, the entire paper has been divided into two sections, one focusing on theories relevant to school librarians and one section focusing on practical applications for school libraries. Within each section, pairs of topics are introduced. In theories, two literacy theories, information literacy and critical literacy, are discussed as well as the paired combination of teaching and learning theories. For practical applications, each topic discussed has two real-life examples that illustrate how other libraries have addressed the issue at hand, so that you, the reader, can apply them in your library. Topics discussed in the practical application section are collaborating with other teachers, library programs, library goals, collection management, and evaluating effectiveness. Limiting the examples and topics to two should allow for a broad discussion without the entire paper becoming unruly or monolithic.

Part One: Theories

Literacy

Traditional literacy, that is, the ability to read, plays a highly important role in libraries; it would be a very nontraditional school library devoid of the written word. Equally important for the school library is the idea of multi-literacies. Inclusive of these literacies is information literacy and critical literacy.

The literature on information literacy theory alone is extensive, incredibly complex, and full of hair-splitting definitions. In an analysis of the literature defining what information literacy is, Secker and Coonan (2011) argue that information literacy should be viewed not only as a set of skills but behaviors that the educated exhibit as they seek, interpret, and question information. This can be a helpful way to frame the concept of information literacy for the school librarian. Being able to teach specific skills like identifying the types of information available from different databases, labeling primary and secondary sources, or knowing how to

use the internet to find information are practical and achievable goals in the classroom. The addition of the concept that there are behaviors that become habitual is a way to keep the school librarian stretching the boundaries of teaching, keeping instruction fluid and individualized.

Critical literacy layers cultural, economic, and political considerations onto information literacy theory. Students may frequently use technology to obtain information, but may not consistently question the political and cultural implications of that information (Asselin, 2013). Critical literacy theory explains that it is vitally important for a politically responsible society to understand bias, question cultural assumptions and the validity of information sources (Smith, 2013). In some countries these relationships have institutional merit; for example, in Denmark, the education of librarians emphasizes connections between information and knowledge as well as knowledge and culture (Martens, 2015). If it is believed, as Smith (2013) posits, that the librarian should work to help citizens be socially engaged and independent thinking adults, then critical literacy can be an important theoretical frame with which the school librarian can plan instruction sessions.

Literacy, in all of its incantations, is the backbone of librarianship and is tightly woven into the daily work of the school librarian. Additionally, the role of the school library has always been to provide information resources and to add value to the learning environment of the school. This learning environment is influenced, sometimes dictated, by the Common Core Standards for K-12 education. Today, among others, these standards strongly emphasize the need for students to be able to: 1) determine the validity of web based sources 2) navigate new information sources and 3) critically evaluate their sources of information. When all of these considerations are factored together, what the library stands for, the role of the library, and the standards, strong support can be found for the idea that the school librarian is in a position to contribute more to schools and education than ever before.

Teaching and Learning

It could be argued that all librarians are teachers, but for those in K-12 schools it is part of the job description. As a result, no discussion of the role of the school librarian would be complete without touching on teaching and learning theories. Teaching and learning are inextricably linked and it has been suggested that what is to be learned should inform the decisions made regarding the way that it is taught (Brooks, 2015; Booth, 2011). The spectrum of learning theories usually starts with behaviorism, which uses rewards and punishments to either increase the likelihood of a behavior or decrease the likelihood of a behavior. Behaviorism in early grade school can help set the stage for future learning by helping to create habits, and to support literacy and word recognition (Booth, 2011). As students move through the education system, different theories can better frame the ways that learning occurs and what the librarian needs to consider when teaching. Well established learning theories of social constructivism and cognitive constructivism stress the importance of social engagement and theorize that previous learning informs new learning (Booth, 2011). Designing lessons that foster social interactions like Think-Pair-Share or Carousel can help put these learning theories in action and provide a transition out of the behaviorist model. Continuing through the grades, the connectivism theory may be a beneficial source of inspiration when teaching complex research lessons or when encouraging students to think critically about the information they obtain. Main tenets of

connectivism include the following: technology impacts the way information is discovered, decision making influences the information that is transmitted and accessed, and learning occurs when connections between sources and knowledge are made (Siemens, 2011). These models, behaviorism, cognitive constructivism, social constructivism, and connectivism, each have a large body of literature written about them, and this brief overview is far from a complete examination of any of them. However, the intended take-away here, is that by considering the complexities of student learning, the school librarian can create effective lessons that address the goals of teaching information and critical literacy.

Part Two: Practical Topics and Practical Applications

Embed in the Curriculum

An embedded librarian is one who works alongside other staff, teachers, and administrators to support the goals of the institution at large. Moreillon (2015) writes, it is the responsibility of the school librarian to advocate for student-centered, inquiry based lessons. The keyword for becoming an effective embedded librarian is "collaboration." As a school librarian you already know you're an asset and with budget cuts being a top concern for many schools, embedding and collaborating make a lot of sense. With multiple experts working on a project, the stress of creating engaging learning opportunities for students can be diminished and having multiple perspectives on a topic can create innovative ways of thinking. All of this can positively impact student learning outcomes. The following stories illustrate ways that other librarians have been able to embed themselves into school curriculums and will hopefully offer inspiration for ideas you can put into practice in your library.

1. Virtual classroom tools can be effective means for making old lesson plans and teaching methods new and accessible to students today. Nailor (2013) details a personal experience where this technology was successfully utilized in a collaboration with an English teacher for a high school class. The English instructor was beginning a section on Emily Dickinson's poetry; the school librarian created a companion book list of contemporary young adult fiction that dealt with themes similar to the Dickinson poems and presented book talks to students; the idea was that by reading contemporary fiction of personal interest, students would have a better understanding of the Dickinson poetry. A web-based chat room was created for students to compare/contrast the books and poems and dialog was allowed to flow between students and between instructors, including the school media specialist. The book list that was offered included *Flight* by Sherman Alexie (2007), *The Christopher Killer* by Alane Ferguson (2006), *A Northern Light* by Jennifer Donnelly (2003), *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier (1999), and *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver (1998) and the poems were "Hope' is the thing with feathers" and "I dwell in Possibility."

2. Researchers in Hong Kong studied the learning outcomes for primary grade students participating in a collaborative teaching lesson among a school librarian and three other teachers (Chu, 2009). In this scenario, the librarian was working in collaboration with a general studies teacher, a technology teacher, and a language arts teacher. Students were placed in groups and assigned two general studies projects, the broad topics were the Earth and the history of Hong Kong and China; the role of the school librarian was to

teach and support the students' research skills. The results of this experiment were favorable across the board, with students enjoying the process and parents reporting things like an increase in their perception of their child's communication abilities. The benefit of this type of collaboration is that the school librarian has a context with which to guide the students' research. Additionally, this took place in the primary grades, a time that can be easily overlooked in discussions about information instruction.

Library Foundations

Two overarching goals of a school librarian are to create spaces for lifelong learning and to instill a love of reading. The American Association of School Librarians has written its own foundational outcome standards that includes goals such as fostering a population with attributes associated with lifelong learning, like curiosity and motivation to learn new things (Coatney, 2013). Additionally, McPherson (2007) offers an extensive review of the research regarding reading and the young person, with overwhelmingly positive results. There is a strong relationship between reading and achievement, reading and self-efficacy, and reading for pleasure increases reading comprehension, which creates "an upward spiral of achievement" (McPherson, 2007). Reading and lifelong learning go hand-in-hand, and reading typically has a beloved place in the librarian's heart. The following ideas can serve as a starting point for increasing literacy and encouraging lifelong learning in your school library.

1. Model lifelong learning. Engaging in your personal hobbies at work may be frowned upon in many settings, but it is a great way for school librarians to model the habit of studying for fun. It can be a more powerful lesson for students to see the adults in the school actually doing instead of presenting (Parsons, 2007; Coatney, 2013). As the school librarian you can create displays, write reports, or openly investigate topics that interest you and be seen reading for pleasure throughout the day. You can also encourage language and literature teachers to set aside a few minutes every class for independent reading, during which time they also actively participate in reading for pleasure.
2. Collections should be diverse. Diversity in the library has many facets. The format of materials, topics, and reading levels should all be considered when creating a collection. In addition to novels and texts, comic books, manga, internet Blogs, and even computer game instructions were all sighted as necessary for having a diverse and accessible school library collection by McPherson (2007). Patron (2013) notes that magazines in particular are a great resource to have in the library because students seem to be drawn to them, they can be very informational/educational, and they "fuel readers' interests." Having stories that students can see themselves in can give them a sense of belonging, and be the key to instilling a love of reading in the young; while pairing a student with a story at their reading level can instill confidence and encourage future reading

Programs

The library is a special place in any school for a number of reasons. "Library" is not a class, there is no judgement or assessment of the student's abilities made at the library and the library is a communal place that belongs to everyone in the school (Evarts, 2007; Bush, 2007). Evarts

(2007) also notes that the cafeteria is the only other place that every student shares, but that the library is special because it lacks the social divisions that are exhibited in the lunch room. One way that the school librarian can foster positive feelings for the school library is through programming. Programming can draw students into the library, even those who normally don't engage with the library, and can encourage students to question their preconceived notions about what the library is. And programs are fun…does anything else really need to be said about fun? The following two program ideas can help you create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere in the library.

1. It's Your Story: Postcard Exhibit at the Millikin University, a promotional video posted on the blog Mr. Library Dude demonstrates one program idea that could be implemented in any library. Students were invited to submit postcards, these took the form of drawings, collages, or just written words, that revealed something about themselves. These revelations were anonymous and could be about any topic. After a collection period, the librarian created a visual display/art installation in the library that featured the postcards that were submitted. The idea behind a program like this is to create a community where solidarity could be found within a very personal and individual artistic expression.
2. Lunch in the library. Opening the library for lunch can benefit the entire school. It can offer an opportunity for interaction among students who don't normally interact. Faculty and staff can be invited to use this as a chance to socially engage with students and with each other. Games, puzzles, and crafting supplies can be set out as an additional layer of interest for those eating in the library. Events like this can help create the image of the library as a diverse place serving social as well as academic purposes.

Evaluate

Evaluate, assess, evidence-based practice…these words have made their way into the terminology of almost every profession, including school librarianship. What may have started as a way to promote positive changes based on results has become a primary method for validating the worth and cost associated with the library; something the librarian of the past may not be equipped to do (Evans and Alire, 2013). Much of the work done by the school librarian is qualitative in nature and difficult to quantify. How can you say that dramatically improving the reading ability of one child isn't enough? A school librarian may not be inclined to do so, yet that is what they are tasked with. The following two ideas can help kick start an evaluation and assessment strategy for a school librarian who doesn't know where to begin.

1. Find a research partner. Research is a way to collect and interpret the data necessary to display the value the library adds to a school environment. It is unlikely that the school media specialist has the time or maybe even the skills necessary for producing high quality, influential research. In a list of ways that the school librarian can be successful, Wools (2013) suggests that a school librarian could gather this kind of information by partnering with research professionals at a nearby university or college. Academic librarians are frequently held to the same publication and research criteria as university faculty and they may be willing, or even looking for, opportunities to investigate the same kinds of questions the school librarian needs to ask.

2. Hold a focus group. Perhaps the best way to find out if your library is effectively fulfilling patrons' needs is to ask them. A survey can accomplish this, but a focus group allows for a more open-ended discussion. The goal and purpose of a focus group is to discover group norms and to "elicit information about individual's thoughts and views about some topic or issue" (Evans and Alire, 2013). This can be an informal process, with groups of students being led in discussion by a moderator, probably the school librarian. Soliciting participation from students of out-going classes, like high school seniors or middle school 8th graders, could yield especially beneficial results because of their tenure; they may also be more forthcoming with negative comments than students who will have future interactions with the librarian. While it is possible that this could be an uncomfortable discussion, it could also be very informational for the librarian to see how the user views the library or library services.

Conclusion

Being a school librarian is a juggling act of priorities, tasks, and services. There are pressures from stakeholders, including parents, schoolboards, and students, in addition to the budget concerns, programming, and teaching required of the school librarian. Not only that, but the librarian is frequently doing all of this alone or with little support staff and with very few hours to do it in. It is a lot, to say the least. Hopefully, this brief discussion has provided some practical ideas that are easily implemented or that it has introduced the reader to something new and useful. The following references are works cited as well as a few publications and websites of potential use.

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Other Resources of Potential Interest

Read Write Think. (2016). http://www.readwritethink.org

Offers free materials, such as print resources, lesson plans, and activities for instructors and educators. Resources are especially geared toward language arts and reading.

The Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2016.) http://www.pz.harvard.edu/

The university's Project Zero is a long standing research program. The homepage offers links to practical tips, case studies, activities and checklists to help you create your own meaningful collaborations.

We Need Diverse Books. (2016). http://www.weneeddiversebooks.org

An organization lobbying for books that honor all types of characters so that every child can relate to the stories they read. The website has resource links that can help connect librarians to diverse selections.