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Schools, Scholars and Cybraries – Meeting the Challenge

Liz Blumson, Deborah Turnbull
The UQL Cyberschool, The University of Queensland Library
Brisbane, Queensland

“Libraries can make a positive difference to students’ self-esteem, confidence, independence and sense of responsibility in regard to their own learning”

Lonsdale, Michele (2003)

Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement: a Review of the Research
Melbourne, Australian Council for Educational Research accessed 19/07/04
<http://www.asla.org.au/research/summary.htm>

Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which the provision of quality, evaluated and affordable online content can cater to individual student’s learning styles and needs and assist them in their preparation for university studies and lifelong learning. It shows how a Cybrary programme successfully channels student learning into more efficient, skilful and productive methods of accessing and synthesising information. The UQL Cyberschool www.cybrary.uq.edu.au/schools is a powerful learning and teaching resource for secondary school communities.

The UQL Cyberschool is an award winning outreach programme from the University of Queensland Cybrary to schools in Queensland which facilitates access to quality, evaluated material through subscriptions to full text databases. 178 schools, mainly from Queensland, have taken out subscriptions to online resources such as *Expanded Academic ASAP*. UQL Cyberschool staff, qualified teacher-librarians, work with school staff and database vendors to provide cost-effective access, training and technical support.

The website, available to *all* schools, provides access to a free fully searchable database of selected quality web sites organized by key learning areas, and links to a Virtual Reference Collection and subject gateways. Every year, over 200,000 hits are recorded on the site.

The programme provides training in information literacy for school students and tours of the UQ Cybrary and its facilities. In 2004 138 tours and training sessions were conducted for over 3200 students. This is a powerful learning experience for school students to ease their transition from school to University. In addition, leadership for schools in information service delivery are addressed in an update session and a major seminar each year.

This paper explores the ways in which the provision of quality, evaluated and affordable online content can cater to individual student’s learning styles and needs and assist them in their preparation for university studies and lifelong learning. It shows how a Cybrary programme successfully channels student learning into more efficient, skilful and productive methods of accessing and synthesising information. The UQL Cyberschool www.cybrary.uq.edu.au/schools is a powerful learning and teaching resource for secondary school communities.

The UQL Cyberschool provides its services for all schools in Queensland, whether they are state, independent or of a religious denomination and the online database discounts, technical support and training are available to all schools everywhere. The online component

of the UQL Cyberschool means that its services can be utilized by schools in all areas of Queensland, not just in high- density population areas. Cyberschool team members have visited areas as far north as Cairns, west to Mount Isa and many areas in between, to bring online resources to distant schools. Local schools in Brisbane and its environs are similarly supported.

The UQL Cyberschool facilitates access to quality, evaluated material through subscriptions to online full text databases. The material in these databases is peer reviewed, academic information specifically catering for students, both at school and university. Many of the databases contain full text journal articles, book chapters, conference proceeding and newspaper articles, much of which is suitable for the Queensland secondary school curriculum. The selection of full text databases has been an important issue for schools who often have few print resources in their own libraries and limited access to others. Using information from these products means that teachers and students are assured that the information is reliable and authoritative – a concern that can not always be addressed when the information is garnered from the Internet through a search engine. The UQL Cyberschool provides a web page at www.library.uq.edu.au/schools/cyberdbasestrial.html where teacher librarians and teachers can access free trials of electronic databases to evaluate them and consider their relevance for the school curriculum and students' needs before purchasing a subscription.

UQL Cyberschool staff, qualified teacher-librarians, work with school staff and database vendors to provide cost-effective access to online databases. The UQL Cyberschool acts as a conduit through which schools can subscribe to a number of databases by using the one agent, and on behalf of schools they negotiate discounts to commercial products to bring them within reach of school library budgets. Cyberschool staff also act as an advocate for schools and regularly liaise with vendors of full text online databases to make them aware of the financial constraints under which schools operate.

The UQL Cyberschool has been very successful in its ability to attract and retain schools and currently 178 schools, mainly from Queensland, have taken out subscriptions to online resources such as *Expanded Academic ASAP* (a multidisciplinary database with full text articles), and other full text databases such as *Australia and New Zealand Reference Centre* or *Electric Library Australasia*. The increased uptake by schools of online databases is occurring as the IT infrastructure in schools is becoming more able to cope with demands of Internet access and computers become more readily available to school students, both at school and at home. As school communities become more at ease with accessing commercial online information they take out subscriptions to Reference databases such as *Britannica Online for Schools*, *World Book Online* and *Webster World*, as well as subject databases such as *Grove Music Online* and *Grove Art Online*.

UQL Cyberschool staff, who are qualified teacher-librarians, work with school staff and database vendors to provide cost-effective access, and also provide training in the use of these databases. They visit schools that have subscribed to databases and through a hands-on workshop instruct teachers in the best ways of searching these databases. The training sessions explore the most appropriate ways to incorporate these searching techniques into the school curriculum and also demonstrate the application of information literacy in online learning.

As well as supporting information literacy in schools UQL Cyberschool staff also provide technical support for schools that need assistance in setting up and maintaining their access to online resources. The UQL Cyberschool offers quick and immediate solutions to access problems, saves schools the costs and time involved with contacting different customer support services in other states, and provides feedback to database vendors about more complex access issues.

As well as facilitating access to commercial databases, the website at <http://www.library.uq.edu.au/schools> provides access to a free fully searchable database of selected quality web sites organized in Queensland senior secondary subject areas at <http://cyberschool.library.uq.edu.au/index.phtml> . These websites are selected by University of Queensland Cybrary librarians and by UQL Cyberschool Coordinators and are chosen for their relevance to the curriculum. There are also links to the Virtual Reference Collection, which provides answers to specific questions - addresses, facts, figures, statistics, definitions and dates at <http://www.library.uq.edu.au/internet/vref.php>. School communities also have free access to **Avel**, <http://avel.edu.au/> a portal to quality internet sites chosen by experts on Environmental, Engineering, and Computer Science; **Agrigate**, <http://www.agrigate.edu.au/> an agriculture Information gateway for Australian researchers; and **Weblaw**, <http://weblaw.edu.au/weblaw/index.phtml> a gateway to online Australian legal information which provides lawyers, students, researchers and lay professionals with annotated links to up-to-date, quality assessed Internet resources. Every year, over 200,000 hits are recorded on the website, and the following positive feedback from one of the Cyberschool members indicates the usefulness of the web page:

'I have just completed a series of lessons with students on how to establish the "authenticity" of websites and I have found the information on the Cyberschool homepage invaluable for this task. I have also been bringing to the students' attention all of the other good information available to them on that page - the list of reference materials, the list of authentic sites organised by KLAs (Key Learning Areas), the differences between subject directories and search engines etc...' *Head of Department - Resources, Large Brisbane State High School*

The UQL Cyberschool also provides training in information literacy for school students and tours of the UQ Cybrary and its facilities. This is a powerful learning experience for school students and helps to ease their transition from school to University. Schools from all over Queensland bring their students to visit the University of Queensland and to use the Cybrary to conduct research for assignments, which is usually directly linked to specific curriculum and

assessment needs. UQL Cyberschool staff run information literacy training sessions that assist students to identify and locate relevant information using online resources and University of Queensland Library resources; improve their research methods by utilizing increased access to appropriate, relevant and wide ranging resources both print and electronic; and gain skills in the information literacy process, as part of the student developmental continuum of skills. These training sessions are particularly important in fostering students' transition from senior secondary school to university, while also preparing them for study at university and their lifelong learning journeys. The students gain first hand experience of searching a university library catalogue and locating the resources required to find the information for actual assignments that are being researched at school. They become familiar with the University Cybrary web page which is accessed through the UQL Cyberschool page. The Cyberschool web page was specifically designed to reflect the Cybrary web page and minimise student orientation difficulties. The success of the Cyberschool training is reflected in the increasing number of students who have attended sessions. In 2004 nearly 1600 school students had tours of the University of Queensland Library, and over 1400 school students received training in using the Cybrary catalogue to locate resources for assignments that they were researching. The usefulness of the tours and training is summarized by the following comments:

'I commend the UQ Library staff for consistent high levels of professional and personal service to and support of Teacher Librarians and Teachers. Accessibility of resources....is a key issue which has been met. School personnel are being assisted in the skilling of staff and students which will undoubtedly have a beneficial effect on the quality of learning and confidence of the overall population of schools using the service.' *Teacher Librarian, Queensland Independent School*

In addition to database provision and training , leadership for schools in information service delivery is addressed by the UQL Cyberschool in a half-day update session and a major seminar each year. Free professional update update training sessions for teachers and teacher-librarians are also provided on a regular basis and address challenges associated with information technology and learning. Previous sessions have covered issues such as:

- integration of online electronic resources into teaching and learning;
- Information Skills at the University of Queensland;
- Information Literacy Planning Overview;
- advanced Information Retrieval using online electronic resources;
- full text electronic databases;
- plagiarism.

There have been two full day seminars held for teacher librarians, teachers and Principals during the last two years. The first seminar, held in 2002, considered the impact of technological change on student learning and the impact that this has on libraries, particularly school libraries. The second seminar in 2003 addressed the need for advocacy for school libraries, and the seminar to be held in 2005 will look at the way libraries need to utilize space to meet the needs of students and the way they use developing technologies.

The UQL Cyberschool also provides information to member schools by managing a discussion list for its members, where information about online resources is disseminated, and it produces a Newsletter each term with information about information literacy and online resources.

As a result of the activities and services outlined in this paper the UQL Cyberschool has become, in the seven years since it was launched, an award winning outreach programme from the University of Queensland Cybrary to schools in Queensland. The programme has been recognised both within Australia and internationally and was awarded the Australian Library and Information Association Award for Innovation in 2001, and in 2004 the International Association of School Librarianship/Softlink International Excellence Award. The UQL Cyberschool staff look forward to further developing links between schools and the University of Queensland and the fostering of information literacy and lifelong learning for both secondary and university students.

Further reading:

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Fleming, N. (2004). Beyond Google: The UQL Cyberschool enhances the search for information in the online electronic world. *Curriculum Leadership*, 2(26).