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Curriculum Specialist

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CHAPTER 20

Curriculum Specialist

ANN BROWNSON

Curriculum specialists, curriculum materials center coordinators, or teaching materials center managers provide assistance to students planning to enter the teaching or school library profession and to college or university faculty. They do this through the collection of textbooks, juvenile trade books, and other materials and through instruction in the use of those materials. People in this position may also provide materials and services to local schoolteachers and library media specialists as well as to the general public. Sometimes they have other responsibilities in the academic library, and sometimes they are not even associated with the institution's library but with the school or college of education.

TYPICAL ACTIVITIES

Rather than focusing on a typical day at work, let me describe the variety of activities that are part of the daily life of a curriculum specialist.

Because my curriculum materials center has an extensive collection of children's books (and that is where my primary interest lies), I spend a significant amount of time developing that collection. I read reviews, search best books lists, write grant applications, and talk to faculty members teaching children's literature courses, all in the name of developing the best collection possible. Students come with requests for juvenile trade books about specific subjects for specific grade levels, so developing the collection based on those curricular needs is also important.

In addition to the juvenile trade book collection, I collect a wide variety of textbooks and other items for the teaching materials collection. Besides pre-K through twelfth-grade textbooks, I select curriculum guides, activity books, and many nonbook materials. Our collection includes puppets, educational games, math manipulatives, books on tape/CD, models, and even a percussion band! Because most of these items are unique, I work on a daily basis with a cataloger to discuss the best way to provide both bibliographic and physical access to the collection.

Developing the teaching materials collection is not simply a matter of looking at reviews and selecting materials. Most teaching materials are not reviewed, and a significant amount of time

is spent tracking down materials. Catalogs are not usually sent automatically, so there is a certain amount of detective work that goes into finding what is even available. Part of my search for textbooks has little to do with catalogs and vendors and more to do with talking to education faculty and area teachers, finding out what they are using in their classrooms, what textbook adoptions they are doing in a particular year, and then contacting sales representatives directly. When you think about it, salespeople have little incentive for talking with me. At the most, I will probably purchase one teacher's edition, one set of supporting materials, and one student edition for each grade level, as opposed to a school district that might be buying textbooks for thousands of students. But I keep trying!

There is a somewhat different story for institutions in textbook adoption states. In some cases, curriculum centers are the location of examination collections for a state or part of a state. Those curriculum centers receive examination copies more or less automatically from the textbook publishers.

A big part of my job is direct public service. I work with users both in a reference and in a reader's advisory capacity, helping them find appropriate materials as they work to develop lesson plans and teaching activities for classes and as they work in area schools. Because my library is part of a public institution, we are also open and provide services to local citizens not affiliated with the university. This means that I also work with parents who are homeschooling their children, local teachers looking for specialized materials for their classes, and anyone who calls or contacts me for assistance. I consider myself first and foremost a teacher, providing instruction to individuals or groups in the use of online and print sources. I also work to develop local finding aids, bibliographies, and book lists useful to the center's patrons, and I maintain the curriculum center's Web site. Because I am the education librarian in addition to being the curriculum specialist at my institution, I assist students as they research all kinds of educational issues and topics.

Throughout the semester, many faculty members ask to bring their classes to the curriculum center for instruction in the use of the center and the resources it contains. I am fortunate to have access to an electronic classroom in the building for instruction and to a seminar room where I can demonstrate both online and print resources.

Depending on the size of the curriculum center, the job may involve supervision of support staff and student workers. Because our collection is large, members of the support staff and I must devote a significant amount of time to the maintenance of the collection through constant shelf reading, repairing of damaged items, and processing of new items. Curriculum centers may also have a public service desk to provide circulation and reference services, staffed by both support and professional staff.

Promotion of the curriculum materials center takes place in many ways. For example, I recently wrote a grant that brought 125 fifth graders in from an area school to learn to do research on nonfiction topics. This resulted in the creation of 125 books that the students took home and the addition of several thousand dollars of nonfiction trade titles to the juvenile collection. Promotion of the curriculum center's collection and services also involves networking—making cold calls to busy administrators in local school districts, asking them to encourage teachers' use of the collection and, incidentally, to help me expand the collection. I meet occasionally with local school library media specialists and public children's librarians to discover how we can assist each other. I also provide a weekly story time to local children and their parents and occasional special story times and tours for area day care centers. Within the center, we develop displays highlighting topics of curricular interest as well as new books in the collection.

Because the curriculum center is a part of the larger library at my institution, I have job duties in other parts of the library as well. For example, most of the professional librarians are

scheduled at the reference desk for several hours each week and also work an occasional weekend. I participate in a variety of library-wide activities and projects.

In some academic libraries, librarians are tenured or tenure-track faculty, and in others they are considered professional support staff. At my institution, librarians are faculty and participate in the life of the university the same way teaching faculty do. So how does this affect my job? It means we are evaluated based not only on our primary duties as librarians but also for our research and service to the library, campus, and profession. I am a member of several library and campus committees that may also take up part of my day. For example, I am on the library's Web Resources Committee, which determines the look and usability of the library Web site, and I am also a faculty senator involved in the governance of the university. I participate in my profession by serving on statewide and national committees of organizations including ALA, ACRL, and AASL.

My day does not necessarily end when I leave work, either. Because reader's advisory work is a part of my position, I read several children's and young adult books each week, and I do this mostly at home.

PROS AND CONS OF THE POSITION

The best thing about my job is that I work in an academic library, but I have the opportunity to interact with a variety of people—not just college students and faculty but local teachers, parents, and children as well. It's really the best of several worlds. Sometimes I feel like a children's librarian in a public library, sometimes a school library media specialist, and other times like an academic librarian. There is something to learn every day: using new technology, assisting a faculty member with her research project, or determining what new research guide would help students find the information and resources they need.

Within the constraints of the budget and the academic schedule, I have freedom to develop this position into what I think it should be. My time is somewhat flexible in that I am not always expected to be in the curriculum center or even in the library at all. What that sometimes means, however, is that the position becomes much more than an eight-to-five job. If a faculty member wants to bring an evening class in for instruction, I change my schedule to accommodate him. If a grant application is due, I may work additional hours to complete it. Research is often done on my own time, outside the normal workday, though it is expected for tenure and promotion.

I love to order books. When reviews of new books that will be an asset to the collection appear or when new textbook series are published in a subject area that gets lots of use, I can't wait to make them available. Even better is hearing from users that the collection contains "just what I need."

Of course, the downside to ordering books and other material for the curriculum center is that they all cost money. Though I would like to order everything for the collection, this is not realistic, and decisions must be made about the best use of the budget. Do we really need a life-size skeleton of the human body? (It turns out that we did.) How many copies of the latest Harry Potter book should I purchase? (At least three.)

Because many of the items purchased for the curriculum center are nonprint, they require special cataloging and processing. Sometimes this can be quite a trial. Many of the items in the curriculum center require original cataloging, and I must work well with the cataloger who does this for those items. We must determine whether a multipart item should be cataloged separately or as one item; we also must decide how those items should be processed to provide physical access. Should the material be housed on the bookshelves, in bags, in boxes, or some other way? The aforementioned skeleton is housed in a rolling garbage can!

HOW WOULD YOU GET A JOB LIKE MINE?

How do you get the best library job in the world? Because many academic institutions require librarians to hold a second master's degree in a subject specialty, it is a good idea to get a second master's degree, preferably in education. Ideally, you would also have an education degree at the undergraduate level. As part of your library degree, take as many children's and young adult literature and library media specialist-related courses as possible in addition to courses related to work in academic libraries. If you do not have a background in education, you may also want to take courses in the school of education, particularly dealing with reading instruction and educational methods.

If you are interested in becoming a curriculum specialist, one of the best things you can do is to join the Education and Behavioral Sciences Section (EBSS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). You could participate in the Curriculum Materials Committee of that section, and through that involvement you may hear of available positions. The section has an electronic list, EBSS-L, which you can join to hear about issues and opportunities related to education and the behavioral sciences, including curriculum materials centers.

Because some curriculum materials centers are associated with schools of education rather than academic libraries, you may also want to join education associations such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development or the International Reading Association.

The *Directory of Curriculum Materials Centers* published by ACRL is a resource you can use to find many of the academic institutions that have curriculum centers; you could then contact those institutions regarding possible positions.

Of course, there are a variety of online lists of library positions you should monitor, and be sure to fully use the resources offered by your library school and your institution's career center. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* continues to be an important source for library job listings as well.

RELATED RESOURCES

Carr, Jo Ann, ed. 2001. *A guide to the management of curriculum materials centers for the 21st century*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.

Guidelines for Curriculum Materials Centers. 2003. *College and Research Libraries News* 64 (7): 469-74. Also available online at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/guidelinescurriculum.htm (accessed August 21, 2006).

Lare, Gary. 2004. *Acquiring and organizing curriculum materials: A guide and directory of resources*, 2nd ed. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press.

Olive, Fred, ed. 2001. *Directory of curriculum materials centers*, 5th ed. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries. Available online at acrl.telusys.net/cmc/index.html (user name and password required) (accessed January 28, 2006).