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Literacy, learning and libraries: Common issues and common concerns

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Literacy, Learning and Libraries: Common Issues and Common Concerns

Ken Haycock

Librarians are highly effective in enabling customers and clients to make informed decisions based on the best evidence available. We seem less successful in applying those same standards and approaches to our own professional practice, particularly with regard to literacy and learning programs. The result is programs that do not have the effect for the dollar that would otherwise be possible.

Consider these recent examples reported in the professional and scholarly literature.

Role clarification

What is the role of libraries and librarians in literacy? We have never been very clear or consistent about this. Are we in the library business? The information business? Or the community development business? Are we advocates talking "library, library, library" or players at the table, talking "literacy, learning, student achievement"?

The teaching role of librarians is becoming more apparent and more sophisticated, whether we are working with students in classes and other groups or providing staff development and training programs for support staff. Teaching students and staff is a highly skilled occupation; indeed, graduate degrees are given in these areas. Can we really expect to master these skills and strategies in one-day workshops? How can we ensure that our staff are well trained if we have only sporadic staff development programs that are not aligned to organizational goals and have a low priority in budget deliberations? Too often, recent graduates in librarianship are hired for their technological expertise rather than for their ability to fill the overall and long-term needs of the system, due to the absence of a well-coordinated and well-supported staff training program.

And what of the role of our staff?

If youth literacy is a priority, are we better served by children's librarians serving children directly or by reorienting their role to train others – daycare supervisors, community centre leaders, and preschool and primary school teachers – in selecting literature, telling stories and programming around quality books? The former leads to a quality library-based program, while the latter increases our influence and position in the community. Each has its points, but we can rarely afford both. We often leave these choices to individual preference rather than focusing on organizational priorities and community outcomes.

Partnerships

Many public libraries are developing highly focused and professional family literacy programs in response to community needs. Many school districts are simultaneously doing the same thing. Rarely are the two agencies aware of the plans and programs of the other; rarely do the two agencies collaborate as equal partners (and with other community groups) to ensure that all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. How odd that our history leads us to think that "partnerships 'r' us," yet we seem unable to bridge the gap between these two education and learning institutions. Of course there are exceptions, but the exception merely spotlights the norm.

Homework centres are common public library services in the United Kingdom and United States, although not so common here, and they do make a difference to students. Rarely, however, is the school district involved in promoting the service, referring specific students or participating in studies of effect on attendance and performance. We even let the district off the hook

for training tutors, their area of expertise. We are oriented to providing service, which is certainly laudable, but we are less oriented to assessing outcomes and impact beyond the anecdotal "I enjoyed myself and it made a difference."

Similarly, one might argue that the only difference between a high school senior and a university freshman is two months, and yet high school and academic librarians know little of each other's worlds, let alone the issues and priorities that preoccupy them.

Collaboration

More than 40 years' research in teacher-librarianship makes clear that student achievement is affected by teacher-librarians only when they collaborate with classroom teachers to integrate information skills and strategies. Recent research in academic librarianship is drawing the same conclusions. Nevertheless, we proceed with our own interests and at our own comfort levels. We offer more stand-alone classes and courses in information literacy (or bibliographic instruction or even library skills) rather than working to integrate our work with that of faculty, which would be more difficult but also more successful.

What are our measures of success? Librarians prefer stand-alone classes and seminars in the library and are generally happy with them. Although attendance at these sessions tends to be low, students seem

pleased with the program. However, studies tell us that improved student achievement results more from collaboration with faculty. In fact, students do better when there is collaboration between two partners, librarian and instructor, for a more integrated instructional approach.

… student **achievement** results **more** from **collaboration** with **faculty**.

Students also do better in critical thinking when the instruction is embedded in an articulated information process model.

The information process

Libraries are moving from providing "physical" access to information and ideas (the book in hand, the text or video on the screen) to "intellectual" access (the ability to assess the information, derive meaning from it and synthesize it to share with others). While these labels and figures of speech are useful, they need to be translated into practice.

If libraries and librarians are serious about information literacy, then the entire information cycle needs to be incorporated into our

programs. Any good reference librarian knows this. What is the sense of searching for information if the task is not articulated and understood? What is the sense of evaluating information from several sources if the student is unable to synthesize and present the results?

Research from the U.K. dating from the 1970s and from the U.S. more recently provides guidance on creating effective programs through analysis of students' feelings, abilities and needs from the initiation of the project to completion and evaluation. Ample opportunity is typically provided for students to locate and evaluate information. But there is often insufficient time to determine the parameters of the problem or task. And there is relatively little guidance or time to think – to analyse and synthesize and to assess one's own effectiveness in the process and the product.

Literacy, Learning and Libraries

serves on the CASLIS Ottawa Chapter Executive. She writes to say that "being a CACUL grant recipient in 1991 enabled me to meet a lot of people I would not have met otherwise…and helped me feel like I was a part of CLA, more so than had I simply attended the conference. It…may have con-tributed to subsequent requests to speak and convene sessions, and to be involved as CACUL convenor at CLA'97."

Joanne Heritz, CLA 1996, Halifax
Joanne is currently employed at the St. Catharines Public Library and is working on a master's degree in political science at Brock University.

Dianne Cmor, CLA 1997, Ottawa
Dianne has been working as an infor-mation services librarian at Memorial University of Newfoundland since 1998, and is currently the Instruction Coordinator for the main library. She loves the job and the city and might not be there today if she "hadn't talked to someone raving about Memorial at the 1997 CLA confer-ence!" Dianne states that "early involvement with CLA has led me to significant involvement in professional associations over the years. I am involved with provincial and regional library associations, and am currently the convenor of CLA's Standing Committee on Research and Development."

CTCL Communiqué – Online!

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Literacy, Learning and Libraries

A consistent model for developing the information process incorporated into faculty assignments would better support student learning. If our challenge is the assignment given by the faculty member, it makes intuitive sense to integrate information process instruc-tion and the research bears this out.

Are any of these easy? Of course not. Do they make a difference? Yes they do. Libraries are effective in building community, and librarians are catalysts for adding value to services and programs. By using our own research and by making a commitment to evidence-based practice, we can not only be more effective in our practice, but we will also demonstrate clearly our alignment with the overall goals of the institution, whether school, university or government agency. We know children benefit from our literacy programs, but their effect would be enhanced through formal partnerships with other community players. We know students benefit from our information literacy programs, but their effect would be enhanced through formal partnerships with faculty. If we wish to add value, prove our worth and be rewarded for it in return, then we must embrace evidence-based practice and insist on evidence for decision making. These stances can only make us stronger and more effective as a profession.

Ken Haycock is a professor in the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia.