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The Making of the Modern Librarian: The Value of School Libraries

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A virtual reality field trip. A lesson on how to create a podcast. A tutorial on how to create a paper circuit board that uses LED lights. For a new generation of educators, these pursuits have something in common: They’re all appropriate learning exercises that can take place in the school library. Makerspaces, or library media centers that encourage collaboration and support student invention, are on the rise across the United States.

This has always been the case, but in a prevailing learning culture that promotes outside-the-box problem solving, these activities are growing more common in the 21st-century school library. At the intersection of analog and digital learning opportunities, the value of school libraries has increased at all levels of education. And at the helm of these spaces, school librarians must negotiate how best to support students with library resources, adapt to new technological advancements in education and pass on the fundamental tenets of digital and information literacy to students.

As the U.S. public education system has evolved throughout its history, school libraries have also developed with a consistent central goal: to give students the best opportunity to succeed academically.
Before school libraries would begin to morph into multimedia digital information centers, they supported student literacy-building practices by providing access to their on-site book collections. From the first plans for a school library in the United States drafted in 1743 by Benjamin Franklin, school district libraries would continue to sprout across the nation during the next two centuries. By the mid-1950s, schools would adopt localized, attached libraries in which librarians are considered qualified teachers, educating both students and instructors.

The face of public education has fundamentally changed since then, through the nationwide integration of schools, the rapid progress of education technology and the academic opportunities offered to students, to name a few. Because of these dramatic changes to the world of education, the expectations and responsibilities of school library faculty have understandably seen a dramatic shift as well.

Today, school librarians are not only responsible for administering and collating their collections. Instead, librarians promote creativity and discovery in student learning by offering multimedia resources. With school libraries beginning to function as digital media centers, these tools enable students to explore new modes of thought and include:

- Planning, drafting and executing podcasts or audio essays
- Access to audiobooks and online tutorials
- Online or in-person tutorials on how to use video-, audio- or photo-editing software
- Workshops on internet and information literacy
Modern Librarian Roles and Responsibilities

With these new responsibilities, librarians now occupy a multitude of additional roles, too. The Association of College and Research Libraries, which is an organization of college educators and librarians and a division of the American Library Association, lays out the seven roles of librarians in school systems today. The goal of highlighting these different titles librarians must take on is “to conceptualize and describe the broad nature and variety of the work that teaching librarians undertake as well as the related characteristics which enable librarians to thrive within those roles.”

While these roles were drafted to appeal specifically to university and college librarians, they are universal enough to be relevant to school librarians working in primary and secondary school media centers, too.

- **Advocate** – As advocates, library teachers are responsible for encouraging and outwardly supporting the advancement of student learning and information and digital literacy in education. Moreover, school library faculty must partner with administrators and teachers to ensure students adopt effective critical thinking and research skills.

- **Coordinator** – In order for a library to run smoothly and enable students to engage with different literacies, school librarians must facilitate an inclusive and supportive learning environment. This means that coordinators need to make a point to stay on the same page as teachers, administrators and parents to serve students best.

- **Instructional Designer** – Library materials often carry the unfair stigma of being boring. And it makes sense — the image of the uptight librarian has persisted through the past century. In the current technological landscape, though, librarians are positioned to provide students engaging, dynamic library resources as instructional designers. As instructional designers, librarians collaborate with teachers to develop learning materials to reach students best.
- **Lifelong Learner** – Librarians as lifelong learners lead by example. Lifelong learning librarians can motivate students through an unrelenting pursuit of knowledge, which can inspire students to engage in independent research curiosities.

- **Leader** – School librarians must lead not only in their library spaces but, additionally, across an array of contexts. As leaders, librarians are prepared to guide students through reading and research processes at the same time that they offer necessary support to teachers.

- **Teacher-Librarian** – As teachers, librarians evaluate the best kind of learning practices for students, faculty and administrators. In other words, school librarians should be trained educators charged with providing information literacy opportunities to learners across an array of contexts. For example, while librarians help students understand how to navigate databases to collect research, they also provide support to teachers to educate their students on the best informational and digital literacy practices.

- **Teaching Partner** – To highlight the importance of collaboration, librarians should work as teaching partners with other educators in the school to build engaging learning materials for students. This collaboration can take place in the form of guiding a class discussion, creating assignments and responding to student work.

To this end, there are several capacities in which librarians excel in teaching. Because libraries are often the physical sites of research, reading, exploration and discovery, librarians occupy different positions to facilitate the learning process. Students can’t take advantage of the library without a basic understanding of the ways libraries function. The academic article “Librarians, Libraries and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” highlights how librarians intervene to help the learning process. By partnering with discipline-specific educators in school settings, school librarians can develop focused materials to help guide student research projects.
The article states that while “the library can be at the center of connections among all of the university’s academic units, it is well placed to create and support initiatives that develop cross-disciplinary pedagogical excellence.” In other words, as librarians work with faculty representing different subjects and age ranges, both students and teachers will engage with unfamiliar perspectives.

Design-Focused Teaching

There’s a prevailing misconception about how the path of the librarian is not a design-focused one. Instead, librarians follow deliberate, creative processes when planning lessons. And when librarians approach their lesson planning as an element of design, students ultimately become more engaged. While any instruction planning is a form of design, librarians for elementary school audiences, for example, must diligently design engaging storytime lessons to help prompt students to develop listening and literacy skills.

In the scholarly article “Learning by Design: Creating Knowledge through Library Storytime Production,” researchers state that librarians must “plan, deliver and reflect on storytimes in implicit ways that seem to align with design principles.” As a result, this new model of design focuses on two primary exchanges that influence each other significantly: from storytime planning to storytime delivery and from peer mentoring to self-reflection. Further, school librarians must plan for future library storytime sessions as they reflect on both the successes and drawbacks of past presentations. The researchers conclude by calling for greater attention to how storytime planning and execution are design-focused processes.
Another common misconception is that librarians are laser-focused on promoting reading — primarily of fiction. But this simply isn’t true in the modern educational climate. In addition to their focus on reading, library teachers are responsible for promoting information and digital literacies, which help democratize academic standards and provide students access to learning resources otherwise unavailable.

Overcoming Barriers Through Information Literacy Instruction

School library faculty don many hats to promote student learning, and modern librarians have demonstrated a firm commitment to centering diversity in libraries. According to an article in the academic journal American Society for Information Science and Technology, improved technological instruction on assignments through librarian intervention can help students with learning disabilities and barriers. Specifically, school librarians have found novel ways to connect with students of diverse achievement levels. In the article, researchers monitored the ways that 11th-grade students in a remedial education program navigated a major research project for an American Literature course. The goal of the study was to observe and offer solutions to areas that these students found challenging or inaccessible.

Notably, the researchers discovered that “technological and instructional mediation would motivate the students' interest in their information seeking and use.” In other words, as libraries continue to modernize and offer information literacy resources in technologically
inviting ways, students will be able to navigate research databases and library systems in totally digital capacities. These resources include digital archives, national library databases & collections, online databases of text, still images and audio, video and digital documents. As a result, they will be significantly better prepared to conduct independent research and think critically while they prepare to enter the next stage of their academic and professional lives.

As these technological innovations have begun to take hold in academic settings, libraries have played a monumentally important role in inviting college students to hone their information literacy. As an academic article published in the scholarly journal *Health Information and Libraries Journal* notes, librarians play a unique role in preparing students to grapple with scholarship across an array of disciplines. While researchers focus on the benefits and drawbacks of the ways librarians teach information literacy practices, they also unequivocally highlight that “library-based information literacy teaching is perhaps even more relevant and useful to graduates and practicing professionals than it was in the days where the focus was on the use of a particular bibliographic tool or index.”

Prior to the advent of the internet as a research tool, librarians in university settings and some high schools focused heavily on citation methods and formats. In today’s technological landscape, though, school librarians play a much more critical role in helping students to understand the validity and legitimacy of sources. Researchers argued in this article that some of the information literacy skills taught in universities have little real-world application. At the same time, though, they showcase the importance of critical thinking that school library faculty facilitate in their information literacy instruction.

Margaret K. Merga, a scholar featured in the academic journal *Literacy*, highlights that the value of school libraries can be seen in how their “most expected contribution relates to the fostering of literacy and literature learning through wide reading and reading engagement in students.” At the same time, there are
some different learning barriers that school librarians help students overcome based on Merga's study of 30 schools:

- Time management and task prioritization
- Packed and overwhelming curriculum
- Difficulty engaging students
- Demotivation
- Budgeting limitations

Merga concludes that “attention needs to be given to these barriers to support the important role that school [libraries] and their librarians can play in fostering the learning of contemporary students.” With this logic, it’s clear that library teachers today help with so much more than just issuing books or introducing students to navigating the shelves.

Language Learning in the Modern Library

Outside of basic literacy adoption practices, the value of school libraries can also be seen in the ways librarians help students learn new languages. An article recently published in *The Modern Language Journal* applies a linguistic, ethnographic approach to understand better how information assistants and librarians engage in “translanguaging.” Translanguaging is a novel concept that helps language learners understand better the “communicative practices in which people engage as they bring into contact different biographies, histories and linguistic backgrounds.”

While the researchers for this study focused on the benefits of the public library on language adoption, school librarians can also intervene in the learning process. As arbiters of information, librarians can help students locate reading materials and online resources that will ultimately give students a greater understanding and a deeper context of the language. Moreover, students will have access to these reading materials and digital resources — including talk-to-translate, virtual reality language learning, language learning apps and language learning software — offered in libraries that could otherwise be unavailable at home.
WHY ARE SCHOOL LIBRARIES IMPORTANT IN THE INFORMATION AGE?

Libraries across the country are modernizing in unexpected ways. As technology continues to advance, it becomes more accessible. Librarians have adapted, and outside of the digital archiving and expanded information literacy focuses they have taken on, they have also begun exploring other forms of media to offer educational support to students. For example, as the New York Times reported in April 2020, the Library of Congress has created a new digital tool to help aspiring DJs. The tool is called Citizen DJ:

“Users can access a pool of free-to-use sounds from the library’s audio and moving-image collections, including recordings from vaudeville acts, interviews with entertainers, speeches and rights-free music. They can select a sound to remix or download sounds in bulk, all while being encouraged to engage with the original source material.”

This specific process of introducing new technologies has become important for librarians, as it aligns with an overall ethos that focuses on discovery, exploration, understanding and appreciation to fuel a creative process. Technological progress is ultimately helping school library faculty become more versatile in the way they serve students.

Our technological climate has fundamentally changed how school library faculty help both students and fellow teachers. As a result, there’s beginning to be more room for collaboration between technology specialists and librarians, which could be the next breakthrough in
school libraries, according to Lois D. Wine in the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*.

Wine stated that as technological advancements have made educational resources more accessible, more positions for digital media librarians have been added to schools. These new librarians:

- Offer support to teachers as they introduce technology into their lesson plans.
- Train teachers and students on how to use new technology.
- Suggest new media technologies for schools to buy.
- Recommend policy and process procedures regarding technology.

School library faculty have begun to administer dynamic and new initiatives to get teachers and students on the same page with information literacy.

**The Modernized Learning Process in the Library**

Outside of the ways that librarians can help prepare students for different technological landscapes, libraries themselves can incorporate different technologies to help with learning process. Alison Marcotte of *American Libraries* wrote about the ways that some libraries are employing virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (MR) to build engaging learning materials. These features give students a unique opportunity to dive into “immersive virtual field trips, such as a walk through the solar system... or a walk around a refugee camp,” allowing students to grapple with natural phenomena or better empathize with marginalized perspectives in substantive ways. Additionally, this level of immersion will build truly memorable experiences for students, and as the technology becomes more accessible and widely used, school librarians will be able to create resonant, innovative lessons.
This interactive measure isn’t exclusive to VR, AR or MR measures, though. As technology has progressed and become more accessible, libraries are uniquely poised to act as makerspaces, as physical areas where collaboration among students is encouraged. For example, according to an academic article titled “Library as Collaboratory,” Miami University’s Business, Engineering, Science and Technology Library features a 3D printer that has “developed into a high demand service that promotes learning for a broad range of users.” The 3D printing opportunity has caused a swell of interdisciplinary interest among students at the university, and as a result, more students have begun to engage in “printing tasks, gaining technical skills and enabling the library to expand its services.”

This is a significant step for a number of reasons. For one, because this library has elected to progress technologically by hosting a 3D printer, students will gain real-world experience in fields they have already demonstrated an interest in joining. Second, the school library as a makerspace firmly and outwardly marks itself as a place that invites innovation. Students will be more inclined to try new designs, calculate new prints and even fail in their independent projects as they learn the capabilities of the machine. As a result, students will be much better prepared to engage with emerging technologies and pursue STEM careers later in life.
The Value of School Libraries on the Web

At the same time that some school libraries promote educational technologies, others have begun to tap into another trend of the 21st century: social media. Social media practices between public and school libraries have historically served as barriers for getting students interested in digital, informational and technological literacy adoption.

An article titled “Social Media Practices and Support in U.S. Public Libraries and School Library Media Centers” proposes that as libraries “harness the power of social networking tools,” they will experience a greater engagement with students, and specifically with teens. In a qualitative survey of 750 public libraries and 750 school libraries, the researchers discovered that public school policies often act as barriers to the ability for school libraries to engage with students on social media. Overwhelmingly, public school library policy would prohibit students from posting while at school.

Further, researchers found that after eliminating these obstacles and promoting responsible social media sharing, libraries are uniquely poised to use social media channels and interactions as learning moments. By sharing new information with students and faculty or by promoting a higher level of visibility in the library, library educators have a unique chance to introduce students to novel library resources. As a result, libraries may have an opportunity to provide teenage students a roadmap for appropriate internet etiquette, particularly through social media channels.
Schools resoundingly feature libraries and digital media centers. As the National Center for Education Statistics stated, as recently as 2016, “95% of elementary schools and 82% of secondary schools had a library or media center.” These facilities will continue to need administrators trained to serve students’ literacy needs and adapt to new technologies.

The value of school libraries is vital for the lifelong development of students. School librarians reinforce critical thinking, independent research and information literacy skills. According to School Library Journal, the number of traditional school librarians has decreased during the past 20 years, but these positions haven’t disappeared. Instead, their roles and responsibilities have evolved — the number of library instructional coordinators has more than doubled.

Because of this demand for modern librarians, it’s never been a better time to make an impact as a school librarian. To successfully secure a position on a school’s library faculty, it’s often necessary to have the appropriate certification. An online Master of Education in Library Media is an excellent way to gain the foundation to build an inviting, inclusive and productive library space.

At the University of West Alabama, you will become familiar with the ins and outs of instructional media and school library services as you engage with topics including information literacy, reference services and library technology. In one year, you can navigate the program’s online classroom while maintaining your personal and professional responsibilities. Learn more about the program today and begin your path to leading a school’s library media center.