

NOW IS

EMBRACE COMMUNICATI

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**"THE COMBINATION OF BUDGET CUTS, AFFORDABLE ELECTRONIC
WHETHER THESE "INTERESTING TIMES" WILL BE SEEN AS A CURSE**

In a world where the Florida Department of Education (2011) is in the process of committing to providing all K–12 content digitally by 2015, and where online education is increasing exponentially, schools are changing and so must school libraries and school librarians. Clearly, these are interesting times for all aspects of education. A variety of powerful forces are marshaling to change what K–12 education looks like. The combination of budget cuts, affordable electronic devices, and public pressures to modernize education are an irresistible tide. Whether these "interesting times" will be seen as a curse or an opportunity will be determined by what we do in the next few years.

I work in educational technology. I now lead a group of forty Instructional Technology Resource Teachers (ITRTs) who work with classroom teachers on how to use technology to improve learning. We are fortunate to have these ITRT positions in all of our secondary schools. In elementary, these positions are shared by three or four schools. This position gives us the ability to offer very powerful job-embedded professional development around 21st-century skills and technology integration. We have worked hard to maintain and increase our instructional focus as, too often, instructional technology positions end up being used for

tech support. The ITRT often partners with and reinforces many of the skills focused on by our school librarians.

All of this occurs in a large district of around 50,000 students in Virginia. We are unique in that our district is in the eleventh year of a 1:1 laptop initiative. This environment has given me a few insights into the future of districts as they begin to shift towards digital content and ubiquitous digital devices in the hands of all students.

We can expect the following themes to impact schools and subsequently to shape the future of school library programs and the role of the school librarian.

THE TIME

ON MEDIA AND DATA USE

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BOOKS WILL INCREASINGLY BECOME DIGITAL. It certainly won't happen overnight, but it will happen and happen at scale. Further divorcing the school librarian from the stereotypical "manager of physical books" will be even more important.

ONLINE EDUCATION WILL CONTINUE TO GROW. Florida Virtual School served over 122,000 students last year and has over 1,400 staff members but has, at this time, no virtual school librarian (Florida Virtual School 2011). The embedded librarianship model is uniquely qualified to provide value in these new environments.

RESEARCH AND INFORMATION FLUENCY WILL BE INTEGRATED INTO THE CORE CURRICULUM. As the bar to publishing and consuming information has dropped, the basic skills needed for students to be good citizens have risen. Outsourcing the teaching of these skills to the school librarian is no longer an option. The school librarian should play an increasing role in professional development for teachers integrating these skills into their curriculum.

BUDGETS WILL CONTINUE TO SHRINK AND TESTING PRESSURES WILL CONTINUE TO RISE. The foreseeable

economic future does not bode well for educators in general and seems even more ominous for those of us who do not work with content directly measured by high-stakes testing. Demonstrating the importance of school libraries in an ongoing and powerful way is going to become even more important.

I'm certainly not saying these things are going to occur overnight, but these pressures show no sign of weakening. Powerful social and economic pressures are bringing these changes to bear, and to dismiss them as fads is a serious mistake. Here are four places I'd focus my energy.

Work toward Obsolescence

It would be easy to grab onto what you have done, to focus entirely on the solid ways you've proven yourself over the years and to guard that turf. I believe that tactic would be a mistake. The advice I give my ITRT team is to work for obsolescence.

I'd encourage you to never give a basic-level research-paper "drop-off" lesson again. You know the one. The teacher walks in on the same week every year for the same lesson, and sits at the back of the school library and grades papers (or leaves) while you teach the lesson. This is not partnership; it is the offloading of a task. It's easy to have that default visit, to record that lesson in your data as a good thing. The research paper is seen by many as a school librarian's bread and butter, after all. This "drop-off" lesson isn't a good thing. Neither the teacher nor the school librarian is getting anything out of this. The teacher gains no skills and does not have to look at how his or her curriculum could and should scaffold up towards this project. The school librarian ends up stuck repeating an annual lesson for which students have little preparation and even less motivation. As a result the lessons often never get beyond the very lowest levels of organization and basic research.

Model the research lesson if you have to, but push for team teaching and move quickly into a facilitative role. The goal should be to elevate teachers, to ensure they have the skills, to

make sure they are looking at why the daily discovery and evaluation of information is an important part of their curriculum. School librarians' elevating the overall integration and quality of research at the school level matters. If you're doing this properly, you ought to see the demand for basic skills work decrease and the demand for next-level, interesting work increase. This model ought to make you happier. Props for basic skills can be removed, and people can be told to stand on their own. It's much harder to justify removing bridges that allow people to keep moving forward.

Embrace "Nearly Now" Communication

School libraries have always been a place for just-in-time learning and just-in-time conversations. School librarians have always been there to guide students and to offer suggestions. But the limited time students have in the school library has lessened the impact of these conversations on the student body as a whole. These valuable interactions will become even more infrequent as schools shift towards blended and entirely online environments.

School librarians need to harness the communication media that span synchronous and asynchronous conversations—the "nearly now" space—with students. These are tricky spaces in certain ways, but they provide the virtual equivalent of the just-in-time conversation in a way that e-mail never can. These are also the

spaces least supported in schools, and where our students are often most active in their own lives.

Microblogging, IM, and SMS are the most popular current methods. All of these can be purely broadcast media, but they are meant for conversations. Granted, putting something on Twitter or IM doesn't make it any more interesting than posting it on a bulletin board or engraving it on a stone tablet, for that matter. The medium only matters as much as it allows ready access to, and communication with, your desired audience. Facebook matters now, but could very well be irrelevant a few years from now (think MySpace). Likewise, if you aren't saying things that your audience values, then no trendy media platform will make people want to communicate with you. For this to work, you have to know your audience. Be active in the community. Look at what is popular. There are no surefire topics. Learn about the students you want to engage. Keep in mind that this environment allows you to analyze your communication in a formative way. Various services allow you to track how your message spreads and analyze the results across multiple social networks. The process will be trial and error, but you can make gains much faster if you use data to help guide you.

These simple-to-use technologies can provide students with access to school librarians when needed from wherever students are. The library at my own alma mater, the University of Richmond, offers to answer student questions via SMS, IM, e-mail, and phone, in addition to scheduled and walk-in visits. This range of options ought to be the norm in K–12 school libraries, and schools in general, for that matter, rather than the exception.

"IF YOU AREN'T SAYING THINGS THAT YOUR AUDIENCE VALUES, THEN NO TRENDY MEDIA PLATFORM WILL MAKE PEOPLE WANT TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOU."

THIS IS A TIME OF CHANGE, AND THE CHANGE WON'T BE OPTIONAL.

Do More with Data

Traditionally school librarians have tracked usage data—things like number of books checked out, walk-in visits, number of classes taught, that sort of thing. This data is usually reported to some committee as evidence that the school library is being used and that school librarians are doing good things. That works fine for some purposes, but it is limited in scope and application. Deciding which data to collect and doing more with it will become absolutely essential as budgets continue to dwindle.

School librarians need to track data in a way that informs their choices and communicates with a larger audience on a continuous basis. The school library of the future ought to track all the user interactions occurring in the card catalog software (in various levels of aggregate to address privacy issues). There ought to be trend data for searches, most popular checkouts, least popular authors, etc. I ought to be able to graph the checkout statistics for individual titles longitudinally. At a minimum, all the information I can get about a website for free from Google Analytics ought to be available. More importantly, this data must be analyzed and acted upon frequently. Yearly or quarterly reports aren't going to cut it. This data ought to inform daily decisions and select elements ought to be

published regularly to help tell the story of the school library program to the public at large.

Data can also be used to motivate students and provide data for metacognition. A lot about library data is ripe for gamification. In the same way that Google Reader provides charts about the number of posts I've read and on what days I read them, library catalog systems could provide an impressive wealth of information to students for their own analysis. Badges, leader boards, and other game-based reward systems could be integrated as well, all using data directly from your catalog software. Maybe you need a Harry Potter badge earned by students who have checked out the entire series. I know I'd love to see how many total pages I've read in the last year. Keep in mind, this isn't meant to prove anything. Of course students could check out all the books and not read them. This is meant to be fun. The data is already in the system; we ought to use it.

The Future

This won't be a smooth transition. There will be lots of bumps in the road, and many people will be unhappy no matter what happens. This is a time of change, and the

change won't be optional. I believe school librarians can and should play a key role in determining their own destiny, but those choices need to be made now. **THE FUTURE ISN'T THAT FAR OFF.**



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