Collaborative teaching in the universal essential school library

By Dr Carol A. Gordon

Snapshot

Our long-standing author of the Research into Practice section, Dr Carol A. Gordon, continues the discussion on the integral role of the Essential School Library in teaching and learning. Dr Gordon explores the important role of collaboration and the benefits of digital options, maintained by the school library, to teach and support the guided inquiry process.

The school library profession is in a dynamic period in its history as it continues to evolve from the stereotypical, book-based library model to a multimedia practice supported by a substantial body of research. This iconic shift offers opportunities for the profession to enrich classroom-centric teaching using a collaborative pedagogy that brings teachers and teacher librarians together to plan, execute, evaluate and revise units of inquiry. However, occasional or non-existent collaborations between classroom teachers and teacher librarians account for the underuse of teacher librarians as well as their libraries' collections and technologies. The logistics of time and space can limit, or even eliminate the dynamic functions of school libraries that have the potential to be a valuable resource for creating and supporting a 21st century education. Even when school libraries are equitably financed and adequately staffed there is often insufficient and inequitable access to school library resources and staffing for students and teachers. It is often the case that classroom teachers can opt out of collaborating with teacher librarians who offer support for resource-based learning and inquiry-based problem solving in rich print and digital contexts. For example, in many cases in the United States research-based learning has not been institutionalized in schools to ensure that all teachers and students engage with teacher librarians to learn and apply pedagogical methodologies that lead to deep learning and understanding.

Virtual collaborations between teachers and teacher librarians can be expanded online to reach all members of the school community.

Even when teachers participate in school library instruction and collaborate with their teacher librarians it is not logistically possible for teacher librarians to collaborate in real time and in person with all their teaching colleagues. Digital technology makes it possible for all teachers to engage in collaborative teaching and with teacher librarians. Teams of educators and teacher librarians can bring resources and services to learners in virtual spaces as they engage in resource-based learning in their classrooms and homes. Most school libraries already have websites, designed by their teacher librarians, which can facilitate universal access to resources, instruction and individualized help. Virtual collaborations between teachers and teacher librarians can be expanded online

to reach all members of the school community. When collaborative teaching takes place in digital environments it can be engineered so that everyone in the school community can access the library's resources, services and the support they need in real time. Digital environments are valuable platforms for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of students' school library projects that are developed through resource-based teaching and learning. These kinds of initiatives make it possible for teacher librarians to extend access to library resources and services across their school communities through group and individualized instruction. Through digital collaboration teacher librarians can share models of inquiry-based learning across the entire school community within and outside of their physical classrooms and schools. This kind of a teaching and learning platform has the potential for teacher librarians to develop diverse models of school library instruction through digitized resource-based learning in collaboration with classroom teachers.

Given that digital technology has the potential to facilitate and support the integration of classroom and school library instruction, how can teacher librarians play a leadership role in supporting online resource-based teaching that breaks down the barriers between classroom and school library-based teaching and learning? What are the pedagogical methods and strategies generated in research and practice of school librarianship and education that support the concept of the 'Essential School Library' illustrated in Table 1. (Gordon, 2021)

Table 1

The Essential School Library Model
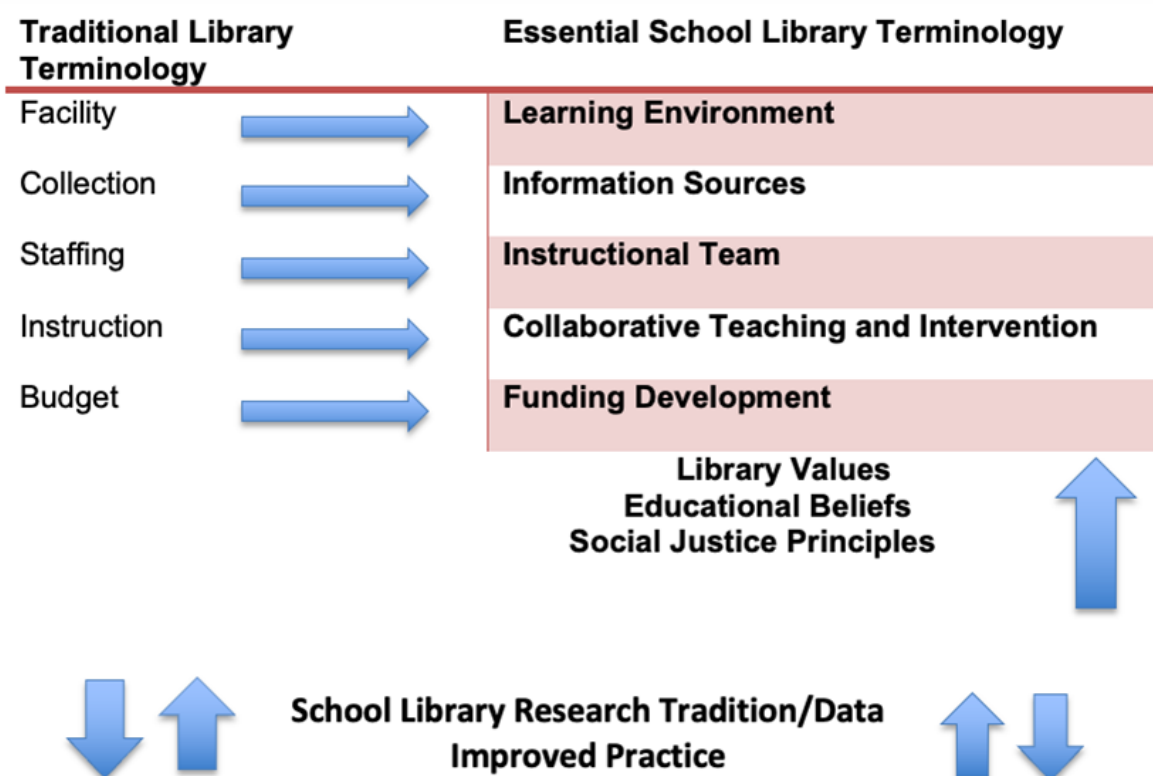
This framework changes traditional terminology to underscore the shift from a traditional concept as a passive collection of resources to a dynamic vision for the school library to become a dynamic learning environment, supported by library values, progressive educational beliefs, and social justice principles. The concept is well-suited to a digital teaching and learning environment as well as a physical school library setting. At the heart of the model is an instructional team of teacher librarians, classroom teachers supported by traditional library values, and contemporary educational beliefs that include constructivist learning theory and research-based practices, constructivist practices that include Guided Inquiry, including the Information Search Process, resource-based learning, and social justice values that champion equal opportunity and fairness.

Through digital collaboration teacher librarians can share models of inquiry-based learning across the entire school community...

The school library profession is already moving to apply resource-based teaching to its real time instructional practice, paired with inquiry learning. However, it is a matter of scale. At present physical school libraries struggle to provide universal resource-based activity because access to many resources and help are still anchored in the physical school library. While this has its advantages, this model cannot attain and sustain a vigorous, inclusive school library program that offers universal access to resources and help to all students and teachers. A carefully crafted instructional program bridges the physical and digital environments to become inclusive. When the physical school library includes a digital platform, it has the potential to reach all students and teachers. This is an undertaking that requires consensus building and careful planning to integrate physical and digital resource-based learning through an organized plan that builds consensus. School principals have always been important in the success of school library teaching and learning and can be partners in assuring universal access and use to the library resources and services that are critical for the integration of school library instruction into the rhythm of traditional pedagogy.

Teacher librarians play a critical role in the integration of school library and classroom instruction. Early adopters of this goal can lay the digital groundwork as models for a universal hybrid library that has the potential to reach all students through virtual help centers when classroom teachers and teacher librarians integrate their services as they share their knowledge and expertise. A carefully planned strategy includes access to school library materials and services by building a collection of resource-based learning tools and models of exemplary collaborative tools. Digital platforms are the key to expanding the reach of teacher librarians to all teachers and students. These platforms have the potential to model resource-based inquiry teaching methods. Teacher librarians could launch virtual assistants for library users and use the Universal Essential School Library model to train classroom teachers, as well as instruct students, in research-based pedagogies such as Guided Inquiry and the Information Search Process (Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2012), Evidence-based Practice (Todd, 2006)

and Action Research (Gordon, 2006). Digitized platforms can offer these research-based practices to support inquiry teaching and learning in the Universal Essential School Library.

The planning stage of developing collaborative teaching units starts with identifying a knowledge base of academic disciplines which has been remarkably stable over several centuries. These bodies of knowledge, and their methodologies are critical to ensuring that evidence, rather than opinion or bias, establishes a consensus for the bodies of knowledge that are worth teaching and learning, i.e., language, mathematics, physical and social science, music, literature, and arts, personal and moral logic, history, religion, and philosophy. Phenix argues:

> Since the object of general education is to lead to the fulfillment of human life through the enlargement and deepening of meaning, the modern curriculum should be designed with particular attention to these sources of meaninglessness in contemporary life...If education is to be regarded as grounded in the search for meaning, the primary goal of a philosophy of the curriculum is to analyze the nature of meaning. (Phenix, 1964, p.5)

The knowledge base of traditional disciplines identified by Phenix has been remarkably stable over the last two centuries even when new knowledge is added to academic research. These bodies of knowledge set borders that are critical to ensuring that evidence, rather than opinion or bias, establish a consensus of knowledge worth teaching and learning, i.e., language, mathematics, physical and social science, music, literature, and arts, personal and moral logic, history, religion, and philosophy (Phenix, 1964). While the evaluation of student achievement is important, it is also critical that the educational program, as it is delivered in a hybrid system of traditional and digital methodologies, is evaluated to determine its effectiveness.

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Measuring and evaluating student performance is accompanied by the evaluation the hybrid instructional program. As educators, parents, and other stakeholders influence community standards it is imperative that academic standards guide the taught curriculum to ensure the effectiveness of instruction and support in digital contexts that meet high standards of accuracy and fact. Phenix's work establishes benchmarks for what is factual and what is worth knowing. In a digital environment of information overload the school library can be a refuge for a rich learning environment for all learners. In a study conducted in New Jersey a teacher noted:

> The school library is the place where the disciplines meet. It's where the disciplines are integrated. In the classroom we sometimes become compartmentalized. Here, students can access information across disciplines, and I think that's a really important application of the knowledge that's happening in the classroom. They can come here and apply it in a real world setting." (Todd, R.J., Gordon, C.A. &Ya-Ling, Lu, 2011, p. 65).

Consensus on the definition of the taught information is critical to an inquiry approach to teaching the academic disciplines. The roles of educators, parents, and other stakeholders influence community standards that in turn, influence what is perceived as factual and worth knowing. In a digital environment of information overload the school library can be a refuge for a rich, albeit controlled learning environment for all learners.

The library profession has a research-based consensus about how inquiry learning is taught. Guided Inquiry (Kuhlthau, Manitoes, & Caspari, 2012) is a valuable tool for information-based inquiry learning yet many teacher education programs do not teach pre-service teachers to use Kuhlthau's Information Search Process to understand the predictable thoughts, actions, feelings associated with encountering new information. The methodology identifies the thoughts, feelings, and actions of learners as they interact with information in the process of assimilating information that becomes new knowledge. It is rare that classroom teachers are familiar with this teaching tool that identifies stages of information processing in terms of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the learner. While teacher librarians play a crucial role in bringing the classroom and school library together, it is often the case that teachers are not trained to use the tools of Guided Inquiry when they bring their students to the school library. This results in the loss of opportunities using interventions that help students as they engage in Guided Inquiry.

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When teacher librarians engage teachers in collaborative teaching it is important that they share their knowledge of information processing. In the school library teaching methods are aimed at deep understanding rather than memorization. This raises critical questions such as: What is the job description of the teacher librarian? How are these library services best delivered to the school and broader communities? What is the role of the classroom teacher in learning in the library? What is the role of the principal in supporting teachers and teacher librarians as they engage in collaborative teaching? What is the appropriate role of parents in the selection and access of library materials to the school community?

Teacher librarians need a broad base of support across their schools and greater communities when they strive to become essential components of an educational system. It is reasonable to expect that preparation programs provide educators, teachers, principals, and information technologists with knowledge of the methodologies and services teacher librarians provide to broaden the support teacher librarians need as they engage with information processing and knowledge construction. Parents and other members of the greater community also need a deep understanding of school library pedagogy. Students need to be prepared and supported by their parents, as well as classroom teachers, when they engage with information. Students should also be explicitly prepared by their teachers to understand the function of the school library and the teacher librarian in their education. 'It takes a village...'

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