

# Reflections: A case study on one school librarian's career

By Dr Carol A. Gordon

## Snapshot

Our longstanding Synergy contributor, Dr Carol Gordon, describes her career journey and in doing so illustrates something of the changing nature of our profession and the importance and power of reflection.

*We do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience.*

--John Dewey

*(Note: This article is adapted from a paper written for the 2019 pre-conference of the American Association of School Librarians in Louisville, Kentucky.)*

## The challenge

While I was visiting Santa Fe, New Mexico this summer I discovered a plaque in San Miguel Chapel honoring Alice Cunningham Fletcher, an American ethnologist, anthropologist, and social scientist. She served as Chair of the Managing Board at the School of American Research in New Mexico from 1900 to 1912. The inscription on the plaque contains Alice's comments on her personal growth through her work.

*Living with my Indian friends I found I was a stranger in my native land. As time went on the outward aspect of nature remained the same but a change was wrought in me. I learned to hear the echoes of a time when every living thing even the sky has a voice. That voice devoutly heard by the ancient people of America I desired to make audible to others.*

School librarianship is at a crossroad and the decisions we make, or do not make today will determine whether the profession enjoys a tomorrow.

Recently released data show a loss of almost 9,200 full-time equivalent (FTE) school librarians (15%) nationwide from 2009-10 to 2015-16, with more than 10,000 total losses since 2000. (Katchel & Lance, 2018, p. 14)

## School librarianship is at a crossroad...

Katchel's interviews of school administrators suggest that the high turnover of superintendents and principals led to instability in school library support and staffing. A national investigation by the Australian Department of Education identified key elements of change in information services in schools, including the decline of the number of school libraries and librarians. The investigation concluded,

A vicious cycle has resulted from under resourcing school libraries and having insufficient numbers of appropriately qualified staff in them, leading to a poorer quality service, which reduces the demand for teacher librarians as well as the attractiveness of the profession to prospective students. (Australia Department of Education, 2011)

Connell (2014) drew the following conclusion from this investigation:

The importance of the teacher librarian is intrinsically linked to effective and responsive information curation and dissemination in distributed environments within and beyond the school ... Yet there are new schools being built with no school library, and many schools that downplay the importance of a school library and trained teacher librarian in their midst ... It is too simplistic to assume that technology and financial considerations are the driving force behind this shifting change. Is there also a crisis of competence? ... How does a teacher librarian stay 'in touch'?

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The school library profession has evolved through professional development initiatives such as pre-service, in-service, and continuing education delivered through coursework, staff training, conference events, and professional supervision and evaluation. These kinds of initiatives tend to dichotomize professional and personal growth. More recent initiatives such as

mentoring, personal learning networks, and communities of practice have the potential to create opportunities for school librarians to experience personal as well as professional growth. While these pathways are helpful, are they effective enough to change the perceptions of educators and policy makers about the school library profession? Have they helped school librarians to cross traditional borders as their job functions move from teaching information literacy to teaching multiple literacies and critical thinking and from being exemplary library teachers to becoming teachers-of-teachers? Dynamic, creative, and inspired school librarians can establish the school library as essential to equitable and sustainable access to information, resources and instruction for all members of the school community. However personal as well as professional growth, as we define it today, is essential to meet these challenges.

Our professional experiences, when combined with reflection, are opportunities for personal growth that give impetus to subsequent professional development. While these experiences can cross pathways of culture, time, role, or geography, they reveal similarities, or trends that point to the convergence of professional and personal growth. This paper shares with its readers my reflections on the pathways that shaped my journey.

**Our professional experiences, when combined with reflection, are opportunities for personal growth...**

## Choosing the pathway to teaching

My first professional career was teaching English in the New York City high school from which I graduated. As I crossed the pathway of student to classroom teacher I recalled Mr. McNamara's lessons, punctuated by stick figure cartoons he drew on the chalkboard that captured complex economic concepts. I recalled Mrs. Porrozzi's reading of Samuel Coleridge's poem, 'Kubla Khan'

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which I memorized so I could own the experience of its haunting rhythm and rhyme. My teachers were my heroes but when they became my mentors, and eventually, my colleagues, I moved from a member of a student audience to an objective observer of teachers working behind stage. The familiar school I knew as a teenager became strange and unknown. I was learning that the past is another country and the self-knowledge I gained

through reflection helped me to define the kind of teacher I wanted to become. Years later when I crossed the border from school library practitioner to information science researcher, I sensed that I knew the way. I was following the same pathway where I learned how to make the familiar strange in order to gain new perspectives.

As a high school student I crossed a border between classroom and library. I was inspired by the small public library around the corner from my school. I started with the 'A' shelf in the fiction section and worked my way through Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Willa Cather, Charles Dickens, George Eliot... I never spoke to the librarians and they never spoke to me during the four years I visited the library every week to return and check out books. I came to realize that was exactly what I loved about that library. In the school library I did not have the luxury of reading what I wanted to read. There was never enough time for that, nor was there tolerance for conversation and the exchange of ideas. My school librarian was of the 'Shhhh!' ilk. So it was my public library that gave me permission to take the glorious reading journeys I experienced as a teenager. It was this pathway that prepared me for Steven Krashen's work in literacy research. I identified with his free voluntary reading hypothesis based on research findings that showed young readers improve their reading, along with spelling, grammar, and writing, by reading. (Krashen, 2004) Since reading improvement depends on deep and sustained reading (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) it is critical for young readers to engage in voluntary reading that offers free choice.

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I was motivated years later, as a professor and consultant, to visit seven schools in Shanghai, China to observe and comment on their school libraries and literacy programs. I recognized immediately the role Stephen Krashen had played in shaping literacy development in these schools. Students' writings and drawings of their reading experiences littered the walls. Every week students performed dramatic re-enactments of their favorite books for their classmates. Teachers offered training to parents in how and what to read to their children. When I visited

an elementary school library I observed a 'reading lesson' as the librarian read a book aloud and asked questions that developed students' comprehension. This geographical border crossing raised an important question for me: Why is free voluntary reading research embraced by Chinese educators and not by those in many places in my own country? This question motivated me to conduct literacy research with Departments of Education and school districts. I created, replicated, and studied an interactive online summer reading program that replaced restricted

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reading lists that favored the classics and privileged books. My focus group research found, sadly, that reluctant and struggling readers were spending their time reading 'alternative' media which they had been conditioned to dismiss as not 'real reading.' In this virtual space that looked like amazon.com all students could engage in free choice as they browsed through the site and blogged about their choices and reading experiences.

## **Choosing the path to school librarianship**

I began my professional life as a high school English teacher in New York City. Marriage, two children, and seven years later I was a homesick homemaker living in the Midwest, a thousand miles away from family, friends, and the city life I loved. I was ready to return to teaching but there were no jobs for which I qualified in my small town. I resorted to substitute teaching at a nearby high school and after two months received a phone call from the director of the adult education program. He offered me a job as a 'roving teacher' which meant I had a caseload of 20-30 students whom I visited in their homes once a week. My car was my office as I circulated through the poverty-stricken inner city, often finding that my students' phones had been shut down or they had moved. Most of my students were black women who desperately wanted a high school diploma. The materials we used were special needs oriented, but not oriented to adults, or commercially produced procedural books on auto mechanics or homemaking. It was this experience that opened two critical pathways for me: Working with economically disadvantaged minority students and creating curriculum for them that was meaningful and dignified. English for adults only became the standard text for the city English/Language Arts text for the city and clinched my growing interest in school librarianship.

I decided to attend library school at a university within a mile of my home. The summer I finished my degree I received a phone call from the Board of Education. It was late August and the middle school librarian had announced her retirement three days before the school year began. The middle school had never been racially integrated because the city had not complied with a

Supreme Court mandate. The school was closing at the end of the school year and would re-open as a Job Corps Center. The children from this Black community would be bussed across the city to white schools. The community was outraged and organized, to no avail, to keep

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their community school open. I was charged with dismantling the school library before I even knew how to manage one. I was responsible for distributing substantial print, audio-visual, and hardware collections across 13 school libraries in the city. In this unfamiliar and contentious scenario I felt like a stranger in a foreign land.

I was about to learn how to use my new-found experiences as grist for the reflection that would guide me as I re-invented my professional life. The principal was a formidable figure, standing well over six feet tall. This former professional hockey player ran a tight ship. There was an assembly every Monday morning run by this no nonsense Black man who spoke to students with authority. You could hear a pin drop in the auditorium that resonated with his deep, steady voice. He counseled students on how to walk with confidence, how to dress appropriately, and how to maintain good hygiene. In his office he was soft-spoken and approachable as he mentored me in the language and customs of a culture foreign to me. He handled difficult situations with grace, even though he was receiving death threats from angry members of the community.

To my surprise crossing professional and cultural borders helped me to grow intellectually and emotionally. I knew that I needed to translate my textbook perception of a school library culture into an environment that was safe and comfortable for my students. I started an unstructured after school program in the library where students came to play their music, eat their snacks, and experiment with cameras, overhead projectors and other 1970's technologies as I moved them gently to the stories and information that awaited them on the library's bookshelves.

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I extended library hours, closing at 5 pm every day. The library quickly became a safe haven for these latchkey children as the word spread that it was cool to hang out in the school library. On a November day the students decided to decorate the library bulletin board. They crafted a Thanksgiving table, with all the trimmings, from construction paper and posted their Polaroid photos around the table, along with a

snapshot of me. We had crossed the border between school and family as I learned that my students needed a safe harbor from the storms that were brewing in their neighborhood and in their homes before they could begin to function as library users. This was more than a step forward in my professional development. It was an insight that changed my conception of the kind of librarian I wanted to be. It was a moment of personal growth that led me to finding effective solutions that can normalize the school library as essential rather than expendable. Reflective journeys, marked by crossing borders, geographically or metaphorically, have been transformative experiences throughout my professional life.

## **Traversing cultural pathways**

When I moved back to the northeast I worked in a culturally diverse, but mostly white middle class middle school where none of the staff seemed to know anything about Black History Month. It was 1980, twenty years after the decade that yielded the Civil Rights Act and an era

of protest that gave birth to Black pride. In partnership with a Special Needs teacher we transformed the library into the I Have a Dream Museum where students were guided through by an audio tour of exhibits, borrowed from members of the Black community, which brought Black history to life. Members of the Black community also shared their experiences with students, including a former cafeteria worker who hosted her friend, Thurgood Marshall, in her home where he wrote the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education*. An African-American town official talked with students about what it was like to be a soldier in World War II while serving in a segregated army. A refugee from South Africa shared the film, *Seven Days in Soweto* and his first-hand experiences living with apartheid. Local television and radio stations featured an array of the library's multicultural programs, such as *Cape Verdeans on Cape Cod*, that drew local community members into the school to share the cooking, crafts, and music of their culture. The concept of library as museum expanded the appeal of the library as a living museum of the town's cultural roots. It was a transformative experience for our school and its community. Black history, sequestered on the library's shelves between the covers of books rarely read, jumped into the sunlight and the consciousness of Black students who could now feel proud of their heritage.

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## **Immigrating to foreign pathways**

Pathways to personal epiphanies that drive the achievement of great things in one's chosen profession included for me the crossing of geographical borders that gifted me with the immigrant experience. It was my dream to live in Europe, immersed in a foreign culture and language. I wanted to cross the border between public and private schooling to see what I could learn and how good a school library could get with adequate funding, a highly qualified international faculty, and a diverse faculty and student body. School libraries enjoy high status in these schools partly because they are the primary source of English language reading materials that support instruction, which is almost always in English. I had heard of independent international schools founded by educators that served, for example, the needs of employees of multi-national corporation or government officials and diplomats to educate their children in a 'foreign' country. Some of these independent schools are proprietary but most are not-for-profit. Faculty includes local educators but most are usually British and American. International schools generally have grades pre-K through year 12, and sometimes include year 13. Faculty worked way beyond the school day, but every six to eight weeks there was a one-week break when staff often traveled.

The school library served grades six through twelve with a collection of over 40,000 books and a bank of eight computers equipped with CD-Roms. Over the years this grew to fully equipped middle school and high school computer labs managed by an IT aide and a completely integrated instructional program that replaced the 'computer teacher.' All middle school students learned technology skills on a need-to-know basis in the context of resource-based inquiry learning. There was a dedicated computer lab where students across grades six through eight experienced

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10 to 13 sustained curriculum-based units of study every year. The librarian, IT director, and teachers collaboratively designed these units. The IT Director worked with the Head Librarian [that was me] as the library became the hub for the provision of administrative and educational digital technology.

My favorite project focused on ninth graders. The high school principal was concerned that students in this grade level were falling between the cracks. Eighth grade middle school students were benefiting from the integration of inquiry learning and the use of technology and digital resources while all tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade students were engaged in the International Baccalaureate program that challenged them to choose specialized areas of study in addition to their generalized program and to compose an Extended Essay that involved structured inquiry and the use of resources and data in a particular discipline. I worked with the English Department Chair and the Ninth Grade Advisor to design a performance-based program that required each ninth grader to maintain a journal that documented the progress of their projects. The only learning outcome that was not accepted was a research paper. Student projects included composing a musical piece, creating a fashion show, creating goals of bike safety program in the school parking lot, planning and executing a cultural artifact derived from their home countries such as an architectural piece or a meal. Since the projects used performance-based assessment students created their own rubrics to evaluate their project outcomes. One of the goals of the ninth grade project was to develop autonomy, self-discipline and self-evaluation, and the skills needed to successfully plan and execute a project such as meeting deadlines and following directions. To this end we created a self-management rubric that was used by the students as well as their self-selected advisors who met three times during the project to compare their descriptive evaluations. These advisors could be any adult except their current teachers. An exhibition of student work, presented by the students at the end of the project, opened the school to the German community as well as to the entire school community. Teachers volunteered as judges to evaluate the students using the student-authored rubrics and a narrative that was entered into the students' permanent records. Grades were not given so that the focus was on the quality of the students' work based on student-authored rubrics, and their journals that were guided by writing prompts that addressed process. I was finding out how good a school library could get when there were no restraints to designing educational programs that were guided solely by what is best for students. In crossing this geographical border I felt I had discovered a new frontier. My private school experience gave me permission to create programming with no holes barred. School administrators were open to change and traditional barriers such as scheduling and financing evaporated when they saw opportunities to support the diverse needs of their international students.

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## Switching paths from practitioner and to researcher

My border crossing to Germany held a surprise benefit when an American university brought a doctoral program to Frankfurt. Professors came to the international school to teach accelerated courses from fall through spring. During two summers the doctoral candidates traveled to Boston to study on campus. My middle/high school library became a resource for the doctoral students since we had Dialog, the first online system for retrieving digitized information. During the year of data collection for my dissertation study I was able to do an exchange with the head librarian of an international school in London where I conducted my doctoral research. As I collected my

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data for my study of how concept mapping does or does not affect the information searching of grade ten biology students I learned the science of reflection that required the research to be unbiased, systematic, and analytical. I felt as though all the pathways I had chosen were converging, blurring the line between my personal and professional growth.

## Walking the pathway of academic libraries

The most important perk of my international experience has been the ongoing friendships forged from a common international experience. By the time I left Germany my Frankfurt friends had scattered the world, from England to Japan, taking on new jobs principals and heads of other international schools. My life was enriched by their friendships, and also by the places they called home. I have visited many of them and they have come to the States to visit as well. The door I opened has opened doors around the world. I see the world differently now and I appreciate the value of putting one's own perspective into international contexts. For the first year I returned from Europe my consulting took me around the world to Europe, Asia, and Africa. This was an education in itself. At the end of that year I interviewed for the job of Education librarian at a university and was hired. I brought my school library experience to an academic library that had not yet transitioned from print to electronic journals, nor was the instructional role of the librarian a widely-held idea. I was able to bring not only the Education library and the School of Education into the digital world. This particular crossing was particularly satisfying because I was able to help professors and students to cross the border between analog and digital. It seemed that all my border crossings had prepared me for this challenge.

**I brought my school library experience to an academic library...**

## Crossing the border into academia

My next transition involved moving from academic librarianship to academia where I taught in the school library preparation program, advised doctoral students, and conducted research on school libraries. As I met my colleagues I knew I was in the right place to pursue my research. Kuhlthau, Todd, Belkin, and Cantor were cited in my dissertation and journal articles. My

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dissertation adviser, Carolyn Markuson, introduced me to Carol Kuhlthau's work and I have been citing her work ever since. Carolyn also introduced me to Ross Todd, who was curious to meet the person who had written the article, 'Is Fish a Vegetable: A Qualitative Study.' These heavy hitters influenced my education as a researcher. I feel that all my pathways and border crossings have put me in their paths.

Reflection, and particularly my pathways that involved making the familiar strange ultimately led me to studying action research whereby practitioners learn how to collect evidence, analyze it, and state their findings which inform their future actions in the course of their work as school librarians, but particularly with regard to instruction. It was a transformative moment when my colleague, Ross Todd, and I talked about action research as a tool of evidence-based practice, a paradigm shift that was brought to school librarianship by Ross. Our work together brought me to Australia and many other countries as I learned how to negotiate time zones, rigorous workshops and presentations, and the many borders, both geographical and metaphorical, which had prepared me for my role as a researcher. By walking the academia path I met my colleagues in Australia, including Susan La Marca who invited me to write this column, which I have been doing for the past 20 years!

The groundwork for my research on action research methods had been created over the course of five years during my work as an academic librarian. Fortunately for me Susan Ballard was the school library and technology director for a school district in New Hampshire. Susan hired me as a consultant to train school librarians to use action research methods.

This was one of my favorite pathways that brought my work full-circle from making the familiar strange as a high school teacher to becoming a researcher and to finally bringing research methods to practitioner school librarians. After five rich years of working with Susan and her staff it became clear that action research is not only a tool for the professional development of school librarians; it is also a pathway to their personal growth through making the familiar strange.

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## **Findings**

Although these are the experiences of one school librarian, a content analysis on the narrative yields 'take-aways' that may spark ideas for how we can prepare school librarians to grow personally and professionally as they work to make school libraries essential. Here are the conclusions I have found. Perhaps you have found others! If so, please share them with me through email.

### **1. Growth experiences are connected through bridging**

Reflecting on the commonalties among our experiences, whether we are making professional

job changes or not, helps us to recognize commonalities that we have with other professions. We do not have to literally walk the path; we can find connection with other professionals simply through conversation.

## **2. Each experience opens the door to another growth experience**

A by-product of new experiences and reflection is the network we create when we change pathways and acknowledge the people who are walking the same pathway.

## **3. Personal growth is addictive**

Linking person and professional development presents the opportunity to act as individuals in our professions which supports innovation and leads us to the path of constant reflection and improvement as free agents as well as participants in a profession.

## **4. Making connections between the past and present can be predictive of future decisions**

When we reflect on the present in relation to the past we have the opportunity to project the patterns and trends in our behaviors and decisions into new and future opportunities.

## **5. Job satisfaction increases as confidence and measured risk taking increases**

Risk taking is not confined to making big changes; it can happen in our own backyards.

## **6. The risk in stepping outside of a comfort zone is minimized by experience and past risk taking**

While there are practical obstacles to changing jobs and careers, crossing over to other pathways can be metaphorical as well as geographical. For example, the past can be considered 'another country.'

## **7. Geographic borders open the way to growth when there is a conscious connection between the past and the present**

When we put the past behind us we lose a rich databank of information that can be re-interpreted and applied to our present endeavors.

## **8. Metaphorical and physical border crossings are fundamental to making cultural adjustments**

One does not have to jump from one career or place to another when an open mind drives us

to consider multiple perspectives that we can gain from our own experiences, including our reading.

## 9. Multi-dimensioned careers create a multi-disciplinary store of knowledge that results in creativity and innovation

Our store of knowledge can be enriched by breaking down disciplinary barriers by reading and assimilating what we can learn outside of the experience and literature of school librarianship.

## 10. We do not walk our pathways alone

As I reflected on the past it occurred to me that while I often felt I walked the pathways of my career alone, there many others walking with me. My colleagues and friends have enriched my journey. Their like-minded collaboration, different perspectives, and friendships have challenged and encouraged me. I consider my readers to be part of the company I have kept through my writing, hoping that I have opened pathways for them.

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