



# The Future of Libraries

*What roles are your media center and media specialist playing in helping your students navigate the Age of Information?*

**Lawrence Hardy**

**K**atie Zimmerman's seventh-grade science class nearly fills the darkened computer room at the Williamsburg Middle School library. A low buzz passes through the air as the students sit at terminals and search among three online encyclopedias and dozens of databases offered at this school on a quiet, wooded hilltop in Arlington, Va.

"They're working on their science fair projects, so we have a multitude of topics going on," Zimmerman explains.

"Eclectic" might be another word to describe the topics students have chosen. They range from the sports-related (How high will a basketball bounce on difference surfaces?), to the cerebral, two-variable take on plant growth (What combinations of water and water-absorbing minerals will produce the tallest plant?), to the truly inspired (Which mashed potato recipe will produce the thickest dish?).

"I'm a big mashed potato fan," says the young researcher, who came up with the idea after she was home sick and restricted to a diet of spuds. She's looking up all kinds of unusual mashed potato recipes on the databases and "free"

Web. "The white chocolate sounds good," she says. "But I'm not sure about the raspberry."

In one corner, a self-described avid reader who consumes books for two hours most weekdays (and longer on weekends), is on the website of the Lexile Reading Framework, an algorithm for assessing student literacy. Like any seventh-grader, he wants to compare Lexile reading levels with the average length of words for those levels to see what patterns he can find.

All right, maybe not like any seventh-grader. But he has a compatriot in librarian Adela Eannarino, who's found a *Publishers Weekly* article about Lexile ratings on the Gale Group list of databases. Does he want her to send it to him? No, thanks, he says politely. He's deep into Lexile's own site, but could use it for background.

"Do you want me to e-mail it to your home?" Eannarino asks. Yes, thanks.

## **At the center or on the cutting board**

This exchange wouldn't have happened 20, or even 10, years ago. But, since the turn of the century, the amount of



online information has grown exponentially, as have the number and variety of applications. Students have more information at their disposal than ever before, but that doesn't mean they are any better at evaluating it than their card-catalogue-bound predecessors.

In fact, researchers say, students' seemingly innate facility with new technology belies a widespread naiveté regarding the abundance of information they're retrieving—its accuracy, reliability, usefulness, and impartiality. Young people need guides and teachers, as much in this so-called "Information Age" as in any other. And that's why many educators and advocates say that high-quality school libraries—staffed with certified librarians—are essential to the academic mission of successful schools.

"School librarians are needed more than ever now to deal with the changes in the instructional environment," says Ann

At left, students at Williamsburg Middle School in Arlington, Va., use the library's online resources for their research reports. Above, Williamsburg librarian Adela Eannarino discusses the role of school libraries in the digital age.

M. Martin, head of Library Information Services for Virginia's Henrico County Public Schools and past president of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL).

School libraries largely have avoided big budget cuts during the current recession, though notable exceptions can be found in economically troubled states such as California, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. But with the economy continuing to sputter and many state and local governments anticipating deficits next year, school libraries and librarians could become a target for cuts.

"Our fortunes go the way of the fortunes of public educa-

tion funding,” says Julie Walker, AASL’s executive director.

But, while teachers have direct “custodial care” of students, Walker says, other professionals who support the academic mission of the school—counselors, nurses, social workers, and librarians—are more vulnerable.

Joyce Kasman Valenza, a school librarian for Springfield Township High School outside Philadelphia and a blogger for *School Library Journal*, agrees, putting this issue in the form of a challenge to her colleagues.

“As schools are making tough budget choices, if the librarians aren’t at the center of the school culture, they’re on the cutting board,” she says.

### Strong research skills

Part of the problem is a general misunderstanding about what today’s librarians do, or even what they should be called, a point not lost on AASL leaders. With information bombarding us 24/7, the thinking goes, who needs librarians? We’ve connected the schools to the Internet—what more is there to do?

“Schools and school districts poured a lot of money into technology of all types without always doing the necessary faculty training,” says Margie J. Klink Thomas, assistant professor of library science at Louisiana State University, who has written on the use of library resources for non-college-bound students. “So I think some administrators may feel that, yes, there’s a whole world of information out there. We’ll just Google it.”

People who know how to do research on the Web can see the folly in that statement, but unfortunately, many young people—and adults—cannot. Google searches can be useful, school librarians say, and everyone uses them. Wikipedia has its place. But these shortcuts often aren’t the best way to navigate the multifaceted Internet. For that, students and teachers need more expertise from those who, in most schools, are the first to embrace emerging technologies: school librarians.

After helping students do research, Henrico County’s Martin often asks them to tell her the easiest thing about their project, the hardest, and what they would do to change it. Once, when she asked students to describe the easiest thing, one replied: “There was so much information.”

And what was the hardest?

“There was so much information,” another answered.

“You can just Google it, and you can be hip-deep in it or armpit-deep in it,” Walker says. “But that doesn’t mean you have the information that meets your needs.”

Or the ability to evaluate it. According to *The Google Generation*, a report by the British Library and the technology nonprofit JISC, “The information literacy of young people has not improved with the widening access to technology; in fact, their apparent facility with computers disguises some worrying problems.”

Adults with strong research skills who came of age before the Internet explosion generally have pretty good

radar for assessing the relevance and reliability of a website, whether it’s from business, government, a private foundation, or an academic institution. The same can’t be said for young people, who, according to the report, “have unsophisticated mental maps of what the Internet is” and “often [fail] to appreciate that it is a collection of networked resources from different providers.”

### Achievement link

Dozens of studies from 19 states and one Canadian province point to the link between high-quality school library programs and student achievement. For example, a 2005 Illinois study found higher levels of library staffing, more flexible library access, better technology, larger collections, and higher library funding were associated with significant improvement in reading and writing test scores at all grade levels: elementary, middle, and high school.

Similar results were found the same year in Wisconsin, where researchers found that students in schools with full-time certified library media specialists and full-time library aides scored higher on the Wisconsin Knowledge Concepts Examination.

A key link exists between dynamic school library programs and the development of 21st century skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. The AASL’s 2007 publication, *Standards for the 21st Century Learner*, cites several “Common Beliefs” that are related to the kinds of skills developed through school libraries. Among these beliefs:

- Reading is a window to the world.
- Inquiry provides a framework for learning.
- Technology skills are crucial for future employment needs.
- The definition of information literacy has become more complex as resources and technologies have changed.

Martin refers to “multiple literacies” that include fluency with print as well as graphics, audio, and video.

“If you look at a picture, you have to be able to ‘read it,’” she says. “What is it teaching you? What is the information being conveyed?”

And these skills aren’t just for college-bound students. Thomas, the LSU professor, recalls her work as a school librarian in Fairbanks, Alaska, many years ago and how the industrial arts teacher came to her and asked, somewhat tentatively: “Mrs. Thomas, can my students come in here?”

“I was appalled to think that I had communicated that vo-tech students aren’t welcome,” Thomas says.

She recalls assisting a vo-tech class that researched the history of roof trusses, and helping a student who wanted a career in underwater welding.

### ‘Mix the batter; make a mess’

Librarians must help make school a place where students do more than learn rudimentary, low-level skills that they can demonstrate on a test, writes Valenza, the Springfield

Township librarian, and Doug Johnson, director of media and technology for Minnesota's Mankato Public Schools, in the October issue of *School Library Journal*. But to do so requires a shift in the traditional conception of "library."

"Libraries need to change from places just to get stuff to places to make stuff, do stuff, and share stuff. Our libraries should not be grocery stores. We need to use those groceries, to open the boxes, pour the milk, mix the batter, make a mess."

In her job at Springfield Township High, Valenza follows that recipe. When she told students she was working on a keynote address for the K12 Online Conference, which would be viewed and heard throughout the country and around the world, students were excited and wanted to help. So she involved them in the multimedia presentation, collaborating with the school's film and theater departments.

"My keynote is now a totally collaborative process," she

## Helping students become sophisticated users of information

With its ultra-high ceilings, abundant natural light, and low shelves with books attractively displayed to encourage browsing, the library at T. C.

Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., has the feel of some kind of school library/high-end bookstore hybrid.

And that, of course, is by design.

"You know the old adage: 'You can't judge a book by its cover?'" says librarian Gerard Joria. "Well, yes, *you can!*"

Publishers spend a lot of time creating enticing covers, he says; so instead of cramming the books side-by-side in towering metal shelves, why not put them out where they will be admired, leafed-through, and maybe taken home?

Joria and his fellow librarians must be doing something right because, according to Joria's statistics, more than 10,400 items—the vast majority of them books—were checked out during the 2008-09 school year by the school's approximately 2,300 students, a 40 percent increase over the year before. "This year," Joria says, "I'm already on pace to break that record."

So, whether we're talking old adage ("You can't judge a book by its cover") or new one ("Nobody reads books anymore"), Joria has a single response: "Not true."

The imposing library in this modern, environmentally sensitive building also embraces the digital resources of today, with subscriptions to 21 online databases. During the last school year, database usage more than doubled, Joria says.

T.C. Williams serves a diverse student body, with diverse needs. Nearly half of its students receive free or reduced-price lunches; about half are African-American, with the remainder roughly evenly divided between Anglos and Latinos. To address the digital gap and prepare students for 21st century learning, the 10th- through 12th-grade school has a one-to-one laptop program. Students can access any of the library's databases from their homes or classrooms.

Conventional wisdom says, "Everything's on the Web. What do you need libraries for?" Joria says. "Well, not everything is on the Web. Not everything on the Web is



free, and not everything on the Web is accurate."

"Our job remains to help students find and use information," he adds. "That doesn't change."

What can the specialized databases do? Consider a typical search on a social science issue. On Google, it could produce 60 million responses, some from sponsored sites, advertisers, and other non-neutral sources. The SIRS Researcher database will find only a "couple of hundred" that are relevant, Joria says.

Or say students want to research something that personally interests them—for example, tattoos and body piercing. "If you go to [the Teen Health and Wellness database], you're getting a whole different set of information than if you went to Google for tattoos and body piercing," Joria says.

Ultimately, the librarian's goal is to help students become sophisticated—and skeptical—users of information, people who understand *why* the Google search produces different results than the one from Teen Health and can then evaluate the information based on where it's coming from. But learning to do this takes more than having the Web at your fingertips; it takes instruction, guidance, and the kind of teaching that certified librarians provide.

The proof of the library's relevance in a school where every student has personal Internet access is in the library usage figures Joria cited above.

"If they were finding what they want on their own," he notes, "they wouldn't be coming to us."

told *ASBJ*.

Valenza and her students have experimented with video, flip cameras, and digital storytelling, and they have created what they call "PowerPoint Reform Tools."

"We have banned backgrounds, slide demonstrations, and clip art," she says.

In the article she wrote with Johnson, "Things that Keep Us Up at Night," the two talk about what they fear for their profession: budget cuts, a restricted view of learning and exploration, the failure to embrace social media like Twitter

or PLNs (personal learning networks).

Paradoxically, these challenges and opportunities make it both an unsettling and exciting time to be a school librarian, Valenza says.

"I am concerned that people won't recognize the opportunities," she says. "I think this is the best time, in the history of time, to be a librarian." ■

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## Can e-books and print peacefully coexist?

Thomas Parkman Cushing's will was quite specific. He wanted two "seminaries of learning" built in his hometown of Ashburnham, Mass., one for girls and one for boys. He had lofty, pedagogical requirements ("students are to think rightly and systematically upon the objects and principles which are to influence and govern them during their subsequent lives") as well as more mundane, material ones:

"The building for the school for males [will] have a tower, a clock, and a bell weighing no less than two thousand pounds."

The schools also should have "ample grounds for exercise and recreation," the 1850 will proclaimed, and "a suitable library."

Now, more than a century and a half later, the prestigious New England boarding school still teaches students to think rightly and systematically (today, we might call that "critical thinking" and "problem solving"). It retains its lush lawns and playing fields, its clock tower with the monumentally hefty bell. But whether Cushing Academy has "a suitable library"—well, that's a matter of some debate.

Last summer, Cushing began getting rid of most of its 20,000 library books because students simply weren't reading them. Instead, it started focusing almost entirely on digital resources, including its multiple library databases and 65 Amazon Kindle e-books.

When *USA Today* wrote about the school's decision last fall, a firestorm erupted, with at least one blogger likening it to book-burning.

In response to criticism, Cushing's headmaster, James Tracy, wrote an open letter explaining the decision and posted it on the school's website.

"Our view of the matter is that we love books so much that we want our students to have dramatically increased access to millions of volumes rather than just 20,000," he wrote. He said he would be delighted to see a Cushing student sitting under a tree reading Chaucer, "whether she or he holds a paperback or a Kindle to do so."

Several newspaper editorial boards and the American

Association of School Libraries were more measured in their criticism, but still expressed dismay.

"Every librarian we know is in the vanguard of technology use at his or her school and a passionate reader and user of printed books," wrote AASL President Cassandra Barnett and representatives of two other school library groups in *School Library Journal*. "To suggest that the two are mutually exclusive is regressive and reveals a lack of knowledge both of the way digital information is created, sold and used, and of the value of appropriate printed materials to many users."

Indeed, an increasing number of school libraries have embraced sophisticated library automation systems, which streamline and expand search functions, and enhance interactivity and social networking capabilities. For example, the systems enable students to post their own book reviews and recommend books and other media to the rest of the school, making the library a more dynamic, participatory place.

AASL has recognized e-learning as well. Last year, the association's 2009 Innovative Reading Grant was awarded to a Kindle-based Louisiana program called "Reading 2.0: Attracting Middle School Readers in the 21st Century."

Gerard Joria, a librarian for T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., says school libraries will probably have fewer printed books in the future and more digital materials. But he wants to see where the technology is going before jumping into the e-book phenomenon. Besides, he added, e-books are simply too expensive for most schools to purchase right now.

However, in an analysis for *Online* last year, technology consultant Jean Bedord predicted that significant improvements in such products as the Kindle and Sony Reader, as well as a flood of recent publicity, suggest that the e-book's time is coming—at least for the general public, if not yet for school libraries.

"So what's different this time around?" wrote Bedord. "Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of the Amazon Kindle is a clear indication e-books have hit mainstream America."

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