# Impacts of changes in teaching on school libraries: a personal reflection

**by Sigrid Kropp**

### Biography
*Sigrid Kropp is an executive teacher in a P-10 school in the Australian Capital Territory. She has completed a Bachelor of Education, Secondary, at University of Canberra in 1993. One of her majors was library and information management. she has worked as a teacher librarian in various ACT schools.*

### Myth
Teachers are busy people. Perhaps there are some who work 8.30am to 3.30pm and relax every day of the students' holiday period; however, I think that this is a myth. This myth is perpetuated by people who have only a superficial knowledge of a teacher's work, bureaucrats who need to recruit more teachers and can't/won't pay more, and desperate parents who themselves are working long hours and do not have the energy to entertain/supervise their own demanding children. If there is someone out there who keeps these mythical hours and still delivers a vibrant and engaging curriculum, please let me know how you do it.

So what has changed in the past 10 years? Technology surely wins the race. Technology has radically changed all aspects of teaching – from information gathering to presentation styles. We used to look at the presenter; now, more often than not, we look at a screen. In my second year of teaching in 1995, I moved to a school that had recently computerised its catalogue. The cabinets with the card catalogue were still there and it was not until these cabinets were removed and the cards used for scrap, that students started using the online catalogue. Teachers tended to ask rather than do their own searching. One of the professional opportunities I offered to the staff was a basic computer course. This course included checking electrical connections, switching on the machine and care of disks. Computers were used mainly for word processing. Within four years, the school boasted more than 100 computers for student use, a ratio of 1:5, and most teachers were accessing resources stored on the school's server. Jill joined the

library staff and provided the impetus to explore. She provided advice and links to Internet sources, encouraged teachers to place lessons and assignments on the school's intranet, and generally moved us all towards the next phase. In my current school, the role of proactive teacher librarian is filled by Paul. He offers in-service sessions to class teachers and students on various topics such as online bookings, interactive whiteboards, digital media and computer applications. By working across all key learning areas, he is the bridge between technology and the classroom.

## Mixed blessing

The World Wide Web has, of course, been a mixed blessing. Students are generally quick to embrace technology and quite happily use it to communicate with each other. This often lulls teachers and students into overestimating students' computer skills. There is no arguing that students know how to access the Internet, search engines and online games. They love the mobile phone and complete interactive games while I am still trying to work what the game is. However, in an educational context, students do not use these resources effectively. It reminds me of someone who may have learnt to drive on back roads and the family farm but does not know how to drive in congested city traffic conditions. They can manipulate the machine, but only in a very narrow context.

Plagiarism is a constant menace. We need to keep abreast with the rapidly changing copyright rules and plagiarism policies, and share these with staff and students. Whereas students are less likely to copy large chunks of information when handwriting as it takes too long, online resources allow a person to cut and paste huge swathes of information. Knowing how to take notes and reference sources remains of prime importance.

What has not changed is the need for teachers to teach the student how to synthesise information into knowledge. Information literacy skills are even more important now than ever before if we want to develop resilient life-long learners. Students can make an assignment look absolutely whiz-bang and submit it online, yet it can lack substance. As teacher librarians, we decide what is worthwhile, well written and essential when we purchase books and other resources for our library. We need to share this skill. It is vital that we teach the students how to judge the veracity of their online information and sources. The problem for us is, of course, how to do this when the students think they know it all and when, often, they understand how to manipulate the tools better than we do.

The positive impact of changes in technology? My colleague Rosalie says: 'This has enabled me to continue to study, to access unbelievable resources, to network with people, share stuff and gain help from everywhere … this has all been a plus for me as a teacher librarian, especially when we are so often isolated by the very nature of our job.'

The curriculum is another area of great change. We are exposed to more and more information. How do we decide what is essential? My personal memory store is so full that sometimes it shuts down completely. I started teaching when I was 44, so one could blame my advancing years. However, as even young teachers find the crowded curriculum a challenge I believe my shutdowns are a safety mechanism (just like the surge protector on your electrical switchboard). There are ever-increasing compliance requirements. Even simple excursions now require a plethora of paperwork. Parental

support has changed – they are more critical of what we do and more litigious. The need to be accountable has become a major component of a teacher's life. Assessment and reporting has become more rigorous and requires a great deal of time, thought and energy. These are good changes. But there are still only 24 hours in a day. Personally, I would love eight hours of sleep, not five or six.

There is not enough time to spend on literacy and numeracy, to concentrate on the basics. We need a lot more energy, thought and planning to ensure that we cover the essential skills. We have parents and governments deciding on content. In the Australian Capital Territory, all schools, government and non-government, have moved from profiles to essential learning achievements, or ELAs.

The framework states clearly what the ACT community believes is essential for all students to learn, and what we expect all students to be able to do as a result of that learning. It lays the foundation for high curriculum standards in all ACT schools by identifying the essential content that should be taught to the children and young people of Canberra.' (Barr 2007)

In some key learning areas, the content is huge.

Every time changes are introduced, they create angst and more work. As teachers, we generally suck it up and get on with the job of teaching. Here, too, there are changes. In exchange for a miniscule increase in pay, we have been required to do an extra hour of face-to-face teaching. Even one hour of increased face-to-face teaching has an enormous flow-on effect, such as increased class sizes, because there are fewer teachers. This results in more marking, more reports and more playground duties. The consequence is stressed teachers. Even with the best will in the world and a strong and supportive student management policy, there are times when the library becomes a safety net for the classroom teacher. There, they have additional support for student management and a chance to regroup. The impact on the library is, of course, that it can become a place where learning becomes difficult due to loud and disruptive behaviour and sometimes unplanned or under-planned class activities.

Inclusive education has a raised profile. It is becoming the norm that children with additional needs do not have to be closed away and catered for in special schools or classrooms. This requires the teacher to cater for children who march to different drummers by differentiating the curriculum. In a mainstream classroom of, on average, 28 students, this could mean that one has five or six students with individual learning plans. There is a stronger emphasis on the pastoral role and the teaching of social and emotional learning, which traditionally was the role of the family.

The school library has long been a haven for those children who do not do well in the playground, either socially or physically. The playground is a place for physical activity, a constantly moving population and social dialogue. Our isolates and those who prefer a more sedentary environment gravitate to the library. It provides a space that is both defined and has well-known guidelines. Our library is a hive of activity before school, during the breaks and after school. Much of it is social. It provides us with a dilemma. How do we provide for the academic needs of the students at these times? How do we switch from social time to learning time when the end-of-lunch bell rings? We provide

specific areas within the library where those who wish to study or work can sit. One such space is a glassed-in computer room allowing supervision from within the library proper. Appropriate computer use is monitored and restricted through log-ins and firewalls. We also play bad cop, good cop (I am not the good one). Does any of this sound familiar?

The role of the library and the teacher librarian appears to be a constant. How we deliver our messages may have changed, but we are just as vital now as we were 10 years ago. Although we may still work in physical isolation from other teacher librarians, we have better access to each other. To some extent this has been detrimental to our professional organisations. All teachers are pushed for time; making time to attend meetings when the business can be conducted electronically becomes just too difficult. We have to sell the emotional and social benefits of face-to-face meetings. We have to work smarter in order to give us some work-life balance. I envy those who have achieved that balance; I am a long way from mastering that formula. So why teach? Personally, I love it. Most students are nice people and my colleagues are wonderful. I know I make a difference and it does not matter if that is not always recognised by the student. When the radio comes on in the morning (even if it is sooner than desired), I look forward to the day.

*The author thanks colleagues Stephen James-Smoult, Kate Smith, Rosalie Knox, Paul Huard and Eileen Dunstone.*

**Reference**
Barr A 2007, Every chance to learn: curriculum framework for ACT Schools, ACT Department of Education and Training, <http://www.det.act.gov.au/teaching_and_learning/curriculum_framework>.