

Libraries as iCentres: helping schools

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Abstract

This article is based on a keynote address presented by the author at the joint conference of the School Library Association of Queensland (SLAQ) and International Association of School Libraries (IASL) held in Brisbane, Queensland, in October 2010. For a full version of the keynote, visit: <<http://www.iasl-online.org/events/conf/2010/>>.

Introduction

Librarians should become excited about the prospects opening up for libraries that are willing to become engaged in developing new ways of operating with information and communication technologies (ICT)-based learning. These changes are required to help schools and their learners become engaged and interested in changing their learning activities to meet the future needs of our society.

These prospects provide opportunities for libraries to become even more central to networked learning communities, both in helping young people prepare for the world of the future and in supporting the emerging demands placed on schools and learning created by information- and service-focused advanced economies.

This article presents a strong argument that librarians need to take proactive leadership roles in schools analogous to that of the chief information officer (CIO) in organisations, and that libraries need to evolve into what will be described as iCentres — the hub of the digital learning-based activities of a school.

A preferred future for school librarians: The library as an iCentre

The research findings from the most recent Australian Schools Libraries Study (ASLS 2006) supported the development of an all-encompassing technology and learning support centre, which Lee and Griffin (2010, Ch. 9) suggested should be called an iCentre. A very similar concept was proposed by Loertscher *et al.* (2008, 2010) and uses the term Learning Commons. Hay (2010, p. 151) suggested that this 2006 ASLS study demonstrated that:

... students have increasing dependence and demand for a school library facility that provided them with access to state-of-the-art technologies, resources, services and teaching to support their learning.

The detailed advice contained within the Lee and Griffin (2010) edited compendium is an excellent Australian-based resource for librarians who plan to be proactive as CIOs and maintain their iCentre influence and presence in futures-oriented schools.

Some selected features of relevance to schools and their libraries

The remainder of this article provides justifications as to why this type of library transformation is so essential, by concentrating its comments on the following aspects:

1. The new socio-economic environment that students in Australia need to thrive in.
2. The many new challenges facing learners in a digital learning environment where traditional adult supervision has effectively disappeared.
3. The emerging trend that 'the home' is now better resourced with ICT than 'the school'.
4. The fact that many school staff members need leadership and support in dealing with a rapidly changing world of options, opportunities and threats created by ICT-based learning developments.

The social and economic setting for the future of our learners

It is possible to recognise patterns and trends in what is developing to replace what is often called a 'manufacturing' economy, which provided the bases for much of our 'conventional wisdoms' about managing, schooling and learning. More importantly, these new trends are creating pressure(s) that are changing the options for our young people to gain both meaningful employment and lifestyle satisfaction from new forms of work and leisure.

A review of the literature (Hough 2008a, 2009, 2010; Shapiro 2008; www.shapingtomorrow.com and www.gsi.sis.org) indicates that there are a number of discernible major trends emerging as we strive to understand the features of an interconnected

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service economy — trends such as:

1. The world is globalising at the same time as the demand for individualised (that is to say, local) service is growing.
2. Technologies now lead social change (in that they develop and provide options before we have discussed if they are socially desirable and acceptable).
3. Technologies (especially Web-based technologies) are changing the ways in which we can define ourselves, our family units, our work and work units, and our economic and ‘social order’ assumptions.
4. As economies focus more and more on ‘intangibles’, knowledge is becoming a valuable commodity, and the concepts of value and innovation take on more complex and sophisticated meaning. For example, Shapiro (2008) reviewed the likely future relationships of the USA with the emerging world order and describes likely limits on the sole superpower but argues that it will retain that position primarily because of its unique abilities to develop ICT-based applications.

This globalising world context provides the broad setting within which Australian schools and their libraries need to assist students to prepare for success in the 21st century work and social settings.

The Australian setting

A recent national ‘think-tank’ exercise produced the report *Australia 2020*, which identifies four major trends:

- **Dealing with changing climate** (with sub-issues of sustainability, population, water, environment).
- A **national** rather than an individualised approach is needed.

- **Developing people.**
- **Strengthening civil society.**

It has begun to codify the future aspiration (Australia 2020, p. 38):

To foster a reputation as an effective global citizen, especially through our contributions to the resolution of global challenges and issues.

The popular and prolific Australian social commentator Hugh Mackay has suggested in his most recent publication (Mackay 2010) that Australians have 10 social ‘desires’:

- To be **taken seriously**.
- To have **‘my place’**.
- For something to **believe in**.
- To **connect**.
- To be **useful**.
- To **belong**.
- For **more**.
- For **control**.
- For **something to happen**.
- For **love**.

Two key points that can be made from this rapid overview are, firstly, that schooling as we tend to describe it was invented by the needs of a manufacturing society to prepare people to work in that society and our schools now have many irrelevant features because the needs of that pattern of society have ceased to be relevant to advanced economies like Australia. Secondly, that a naive over-reliance (or a too narrow focus) on just the technology will not be adequate to meet these Australian and world challenges. For example, in the 2008 Australian Boyer lecture series, Rupert Murdoch (2008, p. 25) stated:

I believe that technology is ushering in a new golden age for mankind. I also believe that technology is making the human side of the business equation — skills and knowledge — more valuable than ever. As technology

levels the playing field, the human factor becomes more important, if you run a business. In plain English, you need good people more than ever. That’s because computers will never substitute for common sense and good judgement. They will never have empathy either. To be successful, a business needs good people who can see the big picture, who can think critically and have strong character.

Current trends created by developments in ICT

There is an excellent review of ICT-based change trends in Australian school settings provided by different authors contained within Lee and Griffin (2010) as follows:

- Lee and Finger (2010, Ch. 1, p. 6) provide comparative details of ‘paper-based’ versus ‘digital-based’ paradigms of schooling.
- Lee (2010, Ch2, p. 22) describes the features of a networked school community.
- Lee (2010, Ch. 3, pp. 38–39) describes the features of ICT-based growth in schooling as a ‘ramp-up’ period over 1995–2002, followed by a digital take-off period of 2003–2010. There is also a conceptualisation of the differences between proactive and reactive schools as they evolve with the use of ICT.
- Lee (2010, Table 6.1, p. 107) summarised the contrasting features of home versus school, as part of a detailed argument that schools should learn to network with the community and use the home-based, 24/7 availability of digital technologies as a major learning resource for students.
- Johnson (2009) reported 7 Metatrends in Digital Technologies (see Lee and Finger, 2010, p. 201).

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In addition, one of the most pressing technology-based applications affecting Australian schools and their libraries is the development of detailed public scrutiny through Australian Government-sponsored and endorsed websites such as MySchool, MyHospital and the proposed MyUniversity. This trend is mirrored in overseas government practices, for example, OFSTED in the UK and www.khda.gov.ae for the UAE. In essence, data (often selected by non-educators) about schools is now directly available for public scrutiny, and the reality of school league tables and 'value-adding' data analysis will be intensively scrutinised by both informed and non-informed commentators.

This 'Transparent Democracy' has enormous long-term implications for schools, their staff and their facilities such as libraries, and school librarians will need to be part of a very proactive leadership move by school executives to ensure this data is used to benefit schools.

Issues for the digital generation

Libraries need to assist staff and students to deal more effectively with the following types of issues which are subsets of a major challenge for Web-based citizens, namely developing and protecting one's cyber image and reputation:

1. Copyright and protection of intellectual property (for example, plagiarism).
2. Protection of privacy (in a world which is constantly creating more e-scrutiny).
3. Protocols of learning online (for example, chat or discussion or noticeboards).
4. Conduct or protocols for e-communication (for example,

mobile phone protocols, SMS, e-mail, Twitter and Facebook protocols) or avatar behaviours.

5. Cyber-bullying and appropriate Web-based behaviour(s).
6. Protecting against e-predators (identity theft, grooming, paedophilia, avatar relationships).
7. Ethical use of information harvested on the Web (identity theft, plagiarism).
8. Building and upgrading digital competencies for learning (following a search engine, for example, Google, rapidly provides large quantities of unsorted, low-grade information — the challenge is bringing credibility and meaning to the information).
9. Acceptance that digital learning has adult implications that can be triggered by individual behaviour(s) at any age — if you can access a Web-capable device.
10. Acceptance of adult or legal concerns, for example, sexting or cyber bullying and so on.

Although these issues are usually associated with the activities of young learners, they are, in fact, issues that will need to be faced by all generation(s) as they become more Web-based in their behaviours. However, a difference of great relevance to libraries is that younger people are, typically, more reckless and aggressive users of the technologies, but lack the wisdom and guidance of older generations, who are themselves struggling with mastering the technologies rather than guiding the young.

Generational differences and their impacts

There has been far too simplistic acceptance of the concept of the

generational 'digital divide' to justify the freedoms allowed to younger learners by misuse of the often-used terms (proposed by Prensky 2005) of *Digital Natives* to describe younger learners, and *Digital Immigrants* to describe older generations. As reviewed by Hough (2010):

Younger generation learners and teachers are ready to adopt and use technology-based learning, at the same time as 'They are yearning for guidance on "the meaning of life" and "seeking values"'.

Worryingly, younger generation learners are not as technically smart as we constantly assume they are. Research-based Australian findings, as summarised by Rowlands and Nicholas (2008) cited in Lee and Finger (2010, 145–146), show:

- The **information literacy** of young people has not improved with their greater access to technology.
- Young people have **unsophisticated 'mental maps'** of what the Internet is and do not appreciate that it is a collection of networked resources from different providers.
- Many young people do not find library-sponsored resources intuitive and therefore **prefer to use Google or Yahoo** instead.
- As a result, a **search engine becomes their primary 'brand'** that they associate with the Internet and they tend to adopt the tools their friends use.
- The speed of young people's Web searching means they have **little time for evaluating** for relevance, accuracy or authority of the obtained information.
- They move rapidly from source to source and spend little

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time reading or digesting the information, and have **difficulty making relevant judgements** about the pages they retrieve.

- Observations show that **boys scan differently to girls**, and that young people scan online pages very quickly (boys rely more on hyperlinks).
- Young people have a poor understanding of their information needs and, therefore, have **difficulty in developing effective search strategies**.
- They make very little use of advanced search facilities and **assume that search engines 'understand'** their queries.
- If they obtain many search 'hits', young people find it **difficult to assess the relevance** of the materials presented and tend to save or print with little more than a glance at the materials.

A very practical implication for librarians is that most students need serious professional guidance on how to use the ICT-based learning technologies well. This is just another version of what Ellyard (1998) proposed as the new role of teachers: to combine *coach and mentor* working in *partnership* with students, rather than as the content expert or director of controlled learning.

Home- or community-based ICT technologies mean that learners can now independently access highly credible, reputable, independent learning websites, for example, <www.openlearn.open.ac.uk>, <www.oedb.org>, <www.asx.com.au>, <www.austhistmuseum.mq.edu.au>, <www.nga.gov.au> or <www.slq.qld.gov.au>. This 24/7, independent access capability means that the 'old' value of libraries as the gateway to organised knowledge has rapidly eroded, and libraries need to

take on the value-adding offered, for example by the iCentre concept.

An equally important reality is that traditionally trained teachers (with a non-ICT-based teacher training and teaching experience background), need serious staff development and support so that these ICT-based changes are not too threatening or 'solved' by classroom teachers remaining defensive and uninvolved.

In partial summary, ICT is now a prism through which all learning should be viewed, and the overview perspective that can be provided by the *iCentre* is a major asset to assist schools to face their future.

Implications for school libraries and librarianship

There is an excellent set of proposals for the future of school libraries contained in Lee and Griffin (2010 Ch. 9). Hay 2010,151:

An iCentre is the central facility within the school where information, technology, learning and teaching needs are supported by qualified information and technology specialists.

At the most conceptual level the iCentre is an amalgam of the following functions:

- The school librarian taking leadership roles as the CIO of the school.
- The iCentre becoming the location for all ICT support and advice.
- The iCentre becoming an exemplar centre of a digital learning location and support facility.

Conclusion

There is overwhelming evidence to support the view that schools need to evolve to become an integral part

of networked learning communities, relying on greater partnerships between schools, home and the community. As a school adapts to face the future, librarians and libraries have a major role to play in this transformation.

Three key lessons:

- Librarians need to actively promote their role as CIO and influence the leadership of the school.
- School libraries need to evolve into iCentre(s), which house(s) the knowledge-based resources essential to modern learning and schooling.
- The iCentre will need to provide students and staff with a 'one-stop shop' for all resourcing of technology and learning needs on a daily basis.

You are reminded of the Confucian curse:

May you live in interesting times.

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Some exemplar websites

<<http://fish4info.org/>> is an example of a next-generation school library catalogue (Hay 2010, p. 153).

Futures-oriented schooling

<<http://malleehome.com>>

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/*/www.becta.org.uk/>

<<http://michaelhoughconsulting.com.au>>

<<http://myschool.gov.au>>