Beyond Google (and Evil)

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The role of the teacher-librarian is increasingly multi-faceted and thankfully moving away from the monastic stereotype of the sexless bookworm. Or perhaps not. The hilarious vignette entitled "Medieval Help-Desk" found at both www.youtube.com and, thankfully, at www.teachertube.com, illustrates our roles: we put students and teachers at ease with new technologies that facilitate research; we are indispensable resources for both staff and students; and finally, like Virgil, we can be counted upon to lead the school community, like Dante, through the labyrinthine paradise (or inferno) of information. Monks' robes or nuns' habits are optional.

Along with our colleagues in the classroom, teacher-librarians hold the keys to help unlock the vaults of print and electronic information; however, it is the mandate of the latter to facilitate the quest for information (as opposed to knowledge!). The plethora of data available to students has become, ironically, an obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge. Blogs, podcasts, and aggregators (sites that "curate" other websites and sources) multiply by the thousands on a daily basis, both democratizing the access and dissemination of information but at the same time obscuring fact from fiction. We can all "find" information: it is what we do with it that has now reached the tipping point.

In his recent essay, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" (*The Atlantic*, July/August 2008), author Nicholas Carr posits that the ubiquitous search engine has indeed limited both our need, and indeed, our capacity to think deeply. We have become of a society of skimmers and scanners; this in turn, he asserts, has a physiological impact on the neurocircuitry of our brains that will eventually modify our cognitive behaviour. He observes, "Our ability to interpret text, to make the rich mental connections that form when we read deeply and without distraction, remains largely disengaged. . . We can expect . . . that the circuits woven by our use of the Net will be different from those woven by our reading of books and other printed works." Scary stuff. And yet, the readiness with which our teaching colleagues encourage the use of general search engines is testament to this trend.

We are encouraging our students to become, in Carr's words, "pancake people" where immediacy supersedes depth. Time-pressed society does not encourage or reward students to think deeply; a sign of this is the phenomenon of rubric evaluation where one "ticks" off achievement rather than assesses the merit of work. Critical and higher level thinking skills and Bloom's Taxonomy continue to be the pedagogical backbone of teacher education and yet both are increasingly challenged. Expediency over effort seems to be the unspoken mantra,

accompanied by the hand wringing over the increase of plagiarism and lack of academic integrity.

What to do? The answer is twofold. First, the prevailing assumption that the classroom teacher is adept at navigating the internet and locating credible information must be confronted as false. It is therefore the job of teacher-librarians to teach not only students, but also their teachers in order to increase overall web-literacy as well as to facilitate research. Second, teacher-librarians must continue to engage in active collaboration with the classroom teachers to produce assignments that are authentic, meaningful and feasible.

The Action Plan: Teacher Librarians must:

- Show leadership by offering professional development to staff. Teachers are consistently pressed for time and appreciate any type of efficiency that can be brought to their practice, whether it be marking, classroom management, planning, or, in this case, access to information.

- Emphasize the need for access to access credible, accurate information for all teachers and their students.

- Familiarize staff with electronic databases and catalogues accessible from school and home.

- Present an orientation outline at a department heads' meeting and clarify how the library can facilitate the delivery of program and meet the research needs of students.

- Offer a brief tutorial to subject departments at the end of their department meetings so that their particular needs can be addressed using examples that support curriculum, e.g. biomes, economic depression, global warming, literary criticism. One such on-line tutorial is found at http://www.knowledgeontario.ca/TeachOntario/index.html.

- Collaborate with teachers to produce activities and units of studies that will develop skills that not only locate information, but develop the necessary thinking skills that will lead to synthesis and analysis of information.

By focusing on databases made available to schools such as EBSCO and Knowledge Ontario, teacher-librarians can produce evidence-based studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of these resources. Teachers will understand how digital libraries will enhance both the quality of student work and the efficiency of program delivery. Katrine Watkins and Kathleen Elder describe how their

"Google Game" succeeds in streamlining Google searches for students with the use of connectors and limiters such as quotation marks, +/- signs, and site operators. (School Library Journal, 01/01/2006). Applying these tools to advanced Boolean search strings will achieve similar results, without the questionable credibility factor inherent in Google searches.

The Tools:

Teachers, like their students, want their information quickly. They want to know that their valuable time is not being wasted. Teacher-librarians must show them how to confront the tsunami of data that they and their students face on a daily basis. Lee Rainie, the director of the Pew Foundation's Internet and American Life project confirms that "In the Internet environment, where so many people are creating their own content, navigating all of that is certainly a newly required literacy. In order to be a competent, successful citizen, you need a new set of tools." Rainie recently co-authored a study that underscores that belief. Her research that found nearly half (46 per cent, in fact) of Americans used the Internet to inform themselves and shape their opinions on the 2008 presidential election. In 2004, it was 31 per cent; in 2000, 16 per cent (*Toronto Star*, September 13, 2008).

- Show them how Google hits compare to database hits with regard to a subject specific to their practice

- Show them how to minimize the number of hits on a database search

- Introduce them to citation helpers, both on-line and print so they are aware of new formats and they can reinforce the need for academic integrity with their students

- Collaboration should be from start to finish. Teachers and teacher-librarians must not abandon each other after the starting gun has been fired; the teachers must inspire the students and reinforce research skills and the teacher-librarian must cheer them all through the home stretch, ready to offer a hand with planning, implementation and evaluation.

Web literacy is only one challenge among many facing educators today. Transformed by the internet, the school library is no longer the cloistered repository of information. Like the character in the YouTube vignette, we are constantly bemused, frustrated and yet inspired by new technology and innovation. Not only must we be leaders and facilitators in the school community, we must model and apply these new skills as citizens of the twenty-first century. The seminal work loosely referred to in the title of this article alludes to the post-modern predicament in which we as educators find ourselves. If, as Sartre

asserted, that we must define them ourselves by our actions, it is incumbent upon society to rethink Google, and think.

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