

Together We Are Stronger: K-16 Information Literacy Collaborations

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Education is lifelong and broad based. Many institutions and experiences will contribute to every individual's educational experience.

Bundy, 2002, p. 53

It has long been recognized that high school students use academic libraries to support their school work (Craver, 1987). Burhanna and Jensen (2006) suggest that developing collaborations and partnerships among academic librarians and K-12 teacher-librarians will help students make a more successful transition from high school to university by equipping them with the essential skills required to meet the information literacy demands of their 1st year post-secondary studies and beyond. The term K-16 has been coined in the United States to describe education from kindergarten through completion of an undergraduate degree. Cahoy and Moyo (2009) point out that K-16 collaboration efforts are a "result of the renewed higher education outreach efforts of the last ten to fifteen years" (p. 21). They maintain that the purpose of K-16 collaborations is to ensure that students are academically prepared and will be able to succeed in post-secondary education. The authors further contend that "collaborating to better understand and develop students' information literacy skills is integral to impacting student academic success" (p. 21).

Both the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in the United States have defined information literacy as the foundation for their instructional efforts. Both organizations recognize that teaching information literacy skills is recognized as critical to lifelong learning. In 1998, AASL and ACRL formed a joint task force to look at ways to encourage closer collaboration between K-12 and post-secondary librarians. As Nichols, Spang, and Padron (2005) suggest, the publications *Information Power* (AASL, 1998) and *Information Literacy Competency Standard for Higher Education* (ARCL, 2000) clearly connected the commonalities that these two organizations share in preparing students to meet the information challenges of the 21st century. From this joint task force, an *AASL/ACRL Blueprint for Collaboration* (2000) was developed which identified existing successful collaborative partnerships and made recommendations for future collaborative efforts. Currently, in the United States collaboration among post-secondary librarians and K-12 is more evident; however, the same collaboration does not appear to be evident in the Canadian environment.

There is a solid foundation of articles that describe collaborative projects, particularly American-based partnerships. One excellent example is Burhanna's (2007) article titled *Instructional Outreach to High Schools: Should You be Doing it?* Not only does it provide an overview of a specific program, but includes key questions, considerations,

and recommendations for establishing partnerships. However, for the most part, these projects are not research-based. Rather they detail the components and elements of a particular program focusing on collaboration and partnership. The majority of articles unfortunately are in the vein of “how we done it good” case studies. The current study steps away from describing a particular program and focuses on key stakeholders’ conceptions of what is required for successful collaboration. Key stakeholders include: academic librarians, teacher librarians, school administrators, and university researchers.

Purpose of the Study:

The study sought to examine and explore stakeholders’ conceptions for establishing meaningful collaborations focused specifically on information literacy, between academic and school libraries.

Methodology:

An open-ended survey instrument with six questions was developed and was pre-tested with one academic librarian and one teacher-librarian. Minor changes were made based on feedback.

The open-ended questions included:

1. What are the ways that teacher librarians/school library media specialists and academic librarians could collaborate on activities related to information literacy?
2. What are the potential benefits of establishing collaborations between teacher librarians/school library media specialists and academic librarians?
3. What potential barriers or hurdles exist for establishing collaborations?
4. Why is it important to establish collaborations between teacher librarians/school library media specialists and academic librarians?
5. With whom should collaborations be established (e.g. administrators, committees, councils, etc)
6. Are you aware of any current collaborations? Please provide detailed descriptions of established collaborations.

This exploratory study identified participants from four key stakeholder groups including: teacher-librarians, academic librarians, researchers/faculty whose expertise involves school libraries, and school administrators responsible for school libraries.

Key stakeholders were identified through previous personal collaborations, recommendations, searches of conference presentations and workshops relevant to school libraries, university library websites, and traditional literature searches. In order to inform a Canadian perspective, the majority of key stakeholders identified were Canadian. However, some experts from the United States were identified and included in the request for participation as it was felt that their expertise and knowledge would benefit the study.

Forty-six prospective participants were contacted through email. Eighteen completed

surveys were returned, resulting in a 39% response rate.

Participants included:

- Six teacher-librarians. Included both TLs working in elementary and secondary schools. All participants had masters degrees/certifications relevant to school libraries. Average number of years teaching was over 25 years.
- Four academic librarians (one non-Canadian). All involved in high school partnership programs through their academic libraries. Average number of years of working in academic libraries was 11 years.
- Five researchers whose expertise involves school libraries (one non-Canadian). Four of the researchers held PhD/EdD, MLIS (or equivalent) and BEds. One researcher held a BA/MA and PhD.
- Three school administrators responsible for school libraries. All held qualifications relevant to school libraries including MLIS or MEd with concentration in school libraries.

Completed surveys were received via email so transcription was not necessary. Data analysis focused on identifying common themes. Each survey was read thoroughly, noting key concepts and significant statements. The significant statements were grouped into themes of related meanings. The survey responses were constantly referred back to for internal validation and verification.

Results

Several themes arose from the data. Major themes include: communication, one voice, mentoring, student success, time and differences. Themes are discussed from a holistic perspective; that is, the themes that arose from the data were meaningful to all four stakeholder groups.

Communication

“The librarians could actually communicate with one another.”

It seems that librarians working in different library settings rarely meet to discuss common concerns as they do not, for the most part, participate on the same committees, organizations, or conferences. Respondents suggested that teacher librarians and academic librarians need to start including each other in their professional organizations. For Alberta, particular associations, organizations, and committees mentioned included: Alberta School Library Association, Alberta Learning Library consultations, district school library consultants, district curriculum specialists, and literacy and media councils.

It was also noted it is essential that communication must not only be between librarians, but in order to be successful must include as many stakeholders as possible, particularly senior administration at both K-12 and post-secondary institutions.

Specifically, other key stakeholders include educators (referring both to teachers and education faculty), principals and other school administrators, trustees, boards, councils, and government. Each of the key stakeholders brings a unique perspective and expertise that needs to be shared in order to understand the complexity of information literacy as a lifelong learning continuum. As a researcher commented, “it cannot be a librarian-to-librarian thing. It needs to involve institutional policy makers, point-of-contact providers, technology experts, instructors in both institutions, and database/publisher provides, and students”.

One Voice

“Pulling on the same team in the same direction, we can be very powerful.”

Respondents noted that it is essential that academic and school librarians have one voice, “sing the same song”, develop a common vision, and send a consistent message. It was noted that the outcome for both academic and school libraries is knowledge development, and with a collective vision and program alignment, we would be able to be better able to bridge student abilities between the two levels of education.

One way to accomplish this is through the alignment of program outcomes. It was recommended that we work together to develop a scope and sequence of essential skills related to information literacy at all levels including elementary, middle school, high school, and post secondary. Through the shared development of information literacy benchmarks, students’ abilities across the educational spectrum will be better understood. As one participant stated “build information literacy programs that more holistically look at learners from school to the academy”. There is a continuity of learning, knowledge, and skill development that can be realized through combined efforts. A teacher librarian noted that “as professionals working with students of all ages, I feel that it is important to develop a broader picture of information literate learners at all levels. When we can envision the skills and competencies that students need at the post-secondary level, we can incorporate these competencies into our work with students from K to 12”. A school library researcher further commented that we “need a learner-centric rather than library-centric vision, i.e., it is about the learner, not the library”.

A teacher-librarian noted, “a shared voice to Advanced Education and Education departments would help to identify some of the information literacy needs of learners at all levels”. Currently, in Alberta, libraries fall under three different ministries: Education (school libraries), Advanced Education and Technology (academic libraries) and Municipal Affairs (public libraries). Recently, Alberta Education established the School Library Services Initiative (SLIS) that is investigating school library services. What is unique about this new initiative is that it pulls together the three ministries responsible for libraries in Alberta together in one interbranch committee, focusing on seamless access to library services for all students. As one participant stated: “until these groups have a shared goal and shared trust, any collaborations are likely to fail”.

Mentoring

“Building upon each other’s expertise.”

Mentoring was a common theme. The majority of participants felt that both academic librarians and school librarians could contribute to each other’s expertise. It was seen that professional development was a two way street, and that there should be an appreciation of partner’s expertise. This suggestion is somewhat different than the literature on collaborations between school and academic libraries. The majority of programs reported in the literature have the academic librarian as “expert”, providing guidance to teacher librarians through workshops, symposiums, lectures and other professional development opportunities.

The respondents in the current study clearly recognized the knowledge and expertise that the two groups could share and build upon. One respondent suggested that teacher-librarians and academic librarians could visit one another’s libraries to observe students of all ages in “action”. Through site visits, student engagement with the research process could be observed, challenges and successes noted, which then could form a basis for common understanding, discussion, and subsequent collaborations. As teaching is a reflective practice, observing other professionals teaching would provide a window into new approaches as well as one’s own practice. One respondent commented that she “learned to self-examine my own practice because I knew I was being observed. It made me more reflective of my practice and choices I made in teaching”.

It was also suggested that incorporating more technology into professional development would help to reach rural areas, as well as bring together larger urban cities into one meeting place. Technology such as webinars, Elluminate, and video conferencing were suggested.

It was noted, though, that not all schools, or school districts, have qualified teacher-librarians to effectively collaborate with post-secondary librarians. In such instances, mentoring may indeed be more along the lines of the academic librarians providing professional development opportunities for library technicians and library clerks. In such cases, it was suggested to include district specialists and resource consultants so that there is a strong connection with curriculum and student experience.

Mentoring was also seen as essential for pre-service teachers and for university faculty. A school library administrator commented that he believes “we must educate our educators before they will realize the significance of the need” for a united and collaborative approach to information literacy. Teacher librarians and academic librarians could co-teach to groups of university faculty and practicing teachers. Further, modeling for pre-service teachers was seen as important. Participants suggested that collaborative joint teaching amongst teacher librarians, education faculty, and academic librarians could provide rich learning experiences for pre-service teachers, where they could see the benefit and usefulness of integrating other professionals into their teaching activities.

Student Success

“Collaboration would also allow for conversations about the skills students need in order to achieve success.”

Collaborating could lead to a better student experience. One participant suggested that “students would be better able to see continuity with their learning as they move between educational institutions and be able to make associations between common learning processes in both environments”. Indeed, the purpose of many of the programs in the literature is to enhance student success as they transition to post-secondary institutions. Student success is contingent upon developing competencies that matter to students and “teaching the knowledge-building, critical thinking competencies that enable students to do something with the information that they seem to easily find in order to achieve with their curriculum studies” (researcher). Without such competencies, students are left floundering. A local study conducted by University of Calgary faculty member Doug Brent, illustrated that challenges with library research is one of the major hurdles students face in the transition from high school to university (2006). “We all place the success of the students at the forefront of our work”, but participants felt that having a piece-meal, non-integrated or non-continuous approach to information literacy from K-12 through to post-secondary, i.e. a K-16 perspective, threatens student academic success.

Time

“Finding the time to collaborate is often a hurdle, but if the will is there, it can be made to happen.”

Almost every participant responded that time, or lack thereof, was a significant barrier to collaboration. Finding time to attend meetings, make site visits, build professional development opportunities, and to develop scope and sequence information literacy standards is extremely difficult. For teacher librarians, there is also the issue of release time. There was also concern over who would pay for the release time. It was further mentioned that if there is no institutional commitment to collaboration, it may be more difficult to incorporate efforts into one’s daily work. As one academic librarian commented “teacher librarians and academic librarians are often over worked and have little time for initiatives that could be viewed as “extras” which are not core responsibilities of their jobs”. Rather, collaboration would be relegated to evenings and may become an additional burden on top of already busy schedules. Respondents suggested that administration at both schools and universities have to be pro-active and put forth resources, including acknowledgement of time requirements, to enable collaboration.

Differences

“There is an incomplete understanding of each other’s work as professional librarians to support student learning for 21st century learning.”

It was noted that academic librarians and teacher librarians are in fact different. They

do not share the same discourse, read the same literature, or share the same qualifications. They often have different educational routes. Teacher-librarians may or may not have an MLIS. Often they will have a MEd or advanced certificate focusing on school libraries. Academic librarians, on the other hand, all have an MLIS, or equivalent but many do not have any formal training as educators. Academic librarians are trained to be librarians, whereas teacher librarians are trained to be teachers. They may, therefore, have different discourses around the concepts of information literacy.

The two groups belong to different professional associations. Most strikingly, they have different constraints on their work. The academic year is different and the day-to-day interactions with students and faculty (including teachers) are different. Release time is not an issue for academic librarians. In fact, academic librarians are often expected to pursue service and research opportunities as part of their recognized workload, whereas teacher librarians are not.

It was also noted that different geographical locations could be challenging. It may be easier for urban-based schools to develop partnerships with academic libraries because these libraries are situated close to each other; however, this is usually not the case for more remotely located schools. Using technology such as Elluminate for synchronous meetings or blogs/wikis/listservs/web 2.0 for current developments might help to mitigate the proximity concern. Some respondents suggested first meeting face-to-face so that strong connections could be established, and then meet virtually.

Most importantly, though, is that the educational qualifications for teacher librarians vary from school district to school district, from elementary to high school, and even from school to school. A 2005 Statistics Canada study, *Canadian School Libraries and Teacher Librarians: Results from the 2003/04 Information and Communications Technologies in Schools Survey* determined that, despite a body of evidence that shows teacher-librarians help improve student achievement, few Canadian schools have a full-time qualified teacher librarian on staff (Statistics Canada, 2005). Recently, the Alberta Government released results from its June 2009 school library survey where it was discovered that over 90% of schools do not have a qualified teacher librarian and 74% have fewer than a 0.5 FTE assigned to the school library. School libraries may be staffed by library technicians or by library clerks who have no formal training or certification. As noted by participants, collaboration then may be quite difficult because of the lack of shared understandings.

Discussion

Ritzo, Nam, and Bruce (2009) maintain that “building strong collaborations among schools, public libraries, a university programs, and other organizations within our communities is paramount to our combined futures and our collective goals of literacy, universal education, and community empowerment”. (p. 83). The results from the current study certainly concur with this.

Although the majority of programs in the literature purport to look at a K-16 continuum, most of the described partnerships focus on the high school – post-secondary transition. In the current study, participants saw collaboration focused on information literacy efforts as a continuum across students' entire educational experiences, rather than just a concern with transition to post-secondary education. As one school administrator stated:

With a higher level of collaboration, the information skills, outcomes, and resources would be taught to all levels of students as a developmental or ongoing process rather than having to start over with the basics at each level. The outcomes and skills could truly become a part of life-long learning process that progresses over the student's school experiences

In a personal communication with Ross Todd, (2009), he stated that, "if collaboration does not take place, we hold students at ransom and limit them on their information quests because of institutional hurdles". "K-16 collaborations are concerned with student success and furthering students' information literacy skills" (Cahoy and Moyo, 2009, p. 26). In Alberta, there is a genuine desire and commitment to initiating collaboration amongst librarians from different libraries. Academic, school, and public librarians all have a vested interest in students. There is beginning to be a "cradle to grave" perspective with respect to library services and support. Alberta Education's School Library Services Initiative is the official first step in integrating key stakeholders in the education of students.

"Together we are stronger, more effective and better able to serve all learners in elementary through post-secondary educational institutions to become information literate citizens in the 21st century" (teacher librarian)

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