

## **Climbing Mountains - Methods for Mentoring Teacher-Librarians** by Diana Maliszewski

### **Collaboration and the Library Learning Commons**

“No man is an island, entire of life itself...”  
(John Donne, 1624)

Islands and mountains are landforms that are not easy to travel but are worth the effort. So is learning. A school library learning commons (LLC) is important to learning and the LLC is, by definition, is not created in isolation. The visionary Ontario document on school libraries, *Together for Learning*, describes it as “a flexible and responsive approach to helping schools focus on learning collaboratively” (Ontario Library Association, 2010, p. 3). The most current national standards and inspiration for cross-Canada changes to school libraries, *Leading Learning*, states “the library learning commons is the physical and virtual collaborative learning hub of the school” (Canadian Library Association, 2015, p. 5). School library professionals are expected to build learning partnerships with all members of a school’s community (Ontario Library Association, 2010, p. 11) and to facilitate collaborative engagement to cultivate and empower a community of learners (Canadian Library Association, 2014, p.11). “The successful school librarian must use collaboration and partnerships to expand educational opportunities and community networks” (Hayes, 2003, p. 36). Whether it be as a general mentor for new teachers (Moreillon, 2015, p. 27), for a combination of students and teachers (Martin and Johnston, 2013, p. 6), or as a technology mentor for the school (Perez, 2013, p. 23), teacher-librarians are often needed as “learning sherpas”, because “local, regional and global connections and collaborations are a vital part of progressive, future-oriented learning environments” (Canadian Library Association, 2014, p. 11). Despite this vital focus on collaboration, the position of school library professional can be a lonely job, due to the solo position in a school (Ricks, 2013, p.17), diverse duties (Wong, 2014, p. 26) and unique role (Van Deusen and Kraus, 1995, p. 29). To many new teacher-librarians, the learning curve associated with mastering their responsibilities may seem like a huge mountain.

### **Supporting New Teacher-Librarians**

“Who watches the Watchmen?” (Alan Moore)  
“The cobbler always wears the worst shoes” (French proverb)

How do teacher-librarians (TLs) and other school library staff members, especially those new to the profession, refine and hone their skills after their initial academic training? In her article for *Library Media Connection*, Chris Gustafson encourages her readers to “figure out a way to meet with other teacher-librarians...because only other librarians fully understand what you do and can push you to do it even better” (Gustafson, 2013, p. 26). There are many ways to connect and learn from other teacher-librarians and to then transfer these collaboration skills to their

work with other members of the school community. This paper will examine the methods most used by the Toronto District School Board to support new teacher-librarians, investigate a method used by four other school boards in North America, and explore how the mentorship model can be transferred from a new teacher tool to a new teacher-librarian support strategy.

## **The Toronto District School Board and Supporting New Teacher-Librarians**

“It takes a village to raise a child” (African/Nigerian proverb)

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is the largest school board in Canada and fourth largest school board in North America. It serves 246,000 students in 595 schools. In 2015, 17,415 permanent teachers work for the TDSB. Due to its size, providing adequate support for new teacher-librarians can be challenging. Despite the various obstacles, TDSB supports teacher-librarians in many ways.

TDSB provides staff development for new and experienced teacher-librarians, and for revitalizing library collections and facilities through the Library Learning Resources and Global Education (LLR) department. The LLR department, which falls within the larger Teaching and Learning Program department, provides a variety of services including: instructional support for teacher-librarians, school libraries and delivery of interdisciplinary studies courses; professional library support with professional collection and research assistance; teaching resources bookable and streamed media; and Library Technical Services support with cataloguing, circulation and collection management (TDSBweb). The LLR department central team works collaboratively with teacher-librarians to develop and promote the library learning commons as a catalyst for 21st century learning approaches (Canadian Library Association, p. 12).

The central LLR Instructional Team, led by the Program Coordinator and three Instructional Leaders (two elementary and one secondary) recognize the unique needs of TLs who are new to the role. The team provides a variety of supports beginning with a new teacher-librarian Summer Institute, led by Instructional Leaders, and library system training led by Library Technical Services. New TLs who are not able to attend the Summer Institute are offered professional development in September combining programming and library management support with library system training. An additional half day of training, exclusively for new teacher-librarians, is offered later in the year.

Instructional Leaders provide written guides in a new teacher-librarian package and a website targeting new teacher-librarians (Hall, 2015). It is a department goal for the library Instructional Leaders (ILs) to make contact with every new teacher-librarian via: Summer Institute, September professional development, in school visit, email or phone in the first months of the school year. This can be challenging as the names of new TLs are not provided to the department and must be sought out through a variety of means (Hall, 2015). New TLs are able to access supports provided to more experienced TLs including collection development workshops, a fall and spring Resource Fair and

collection development tool for new purchases; exploration classrooms (which are classes taught by experienced TLs under observation of six visiting TLs, facilitated by an Instructional Leader); and the Library Learning Commons Showcase (a marketplace style sharing of practice by TLs to the TDSB education community, face-to face experience with materials posted online)(Hall, 2015).

Other information sources available to all teacher-librarians are: the *Library and Learning Commons K-12 Expected Practice* document, the *Library Learning Commons Handbook*, *Imagine the Learning* and *Research Success* guides, and the *TDSB Virtual Library* (Hall et. al, 2015); information about the Ontario School Library Association and its annual conference; support for ordering and running the Ontario Library Association's "Forest of Reading" program; and information regarding the "TD Summer Reading Program" offered by the Toronto Public Library. To facilitate making connections in the TDSB TL community, the department sends out a variety of communications via a TL List Serv and regular updates via a *What's Happening@Your LLC* blog <http://tdsblibrary.blogspot.ca/> as well as posting announcements, discussion forums, links and relevant documents on the Library Learning Resources and Global Education central communication site on the TDSB internal AW? network (Hall, 2015). These information sources are not meant to replace connections built between TLs in the field.

To build capacity for teacher-librarian leadership, as well as to encourage collaborative sharing of professional practice for all teacher-librarians, Instructional Leaders have fostered the development of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) for after school meetings. The PLNs are led by TL facilitators chosen by ILs based on their years of experience and their use of teaching strategies that aligned with the department's priorities (e.g. inquiry-based learning; digital learning). Facilitators are volunteers; they are provided with a day of professional development, and a Facilitator's Guide, to encourage professional dialogue and sharing, and asked to coordinate at least three local meetings for their area TLs. The original model was based around the 20 Families of Schools (FoS) within TDSB with 48 facilitators. The model was altered in 2014 and replaced by a smaller number of Region Facilitators (28) (Hall, 2015). The change was made because of the challenges in finding adequate numbers of facilitators. This may be a result of staffing and enrolment changes within TDSB which has resulted in fewer TLs having a full-time position in the library. The new model provides flexibility for teacher-librarians who wished to attend a meeting outside their FoS boundaries. These after school networking meetings can provide informal mentoring for new TLs who choose to attend.

In the virtual realm, the Toronto District School Board's Library and Learning Resources team has developed several online arenas for teacher-librarians to access as part of their Professional Learning Community (PLC). They have a Twitter account, a Facebook page, a YouTube account, a Pinterest presence, an Animoto for Education account, a Screencast account, a Storify membership, a Picktochart, Credly, and Mindomo accounts, the previously mentioned "What's Happening" blog, and a page on Academic Workspace, which is the online communication centre for the board (Weaver,

2015). All of these virtual and organizational tools are mentoring supports. The TDSB Library Department does not label all these initiatives as such, but these are tools that use group mentoring, informal mentoring, and online mentoring (Strachan, 2015, pp. 6-7) to support new teacher-librarians.

## **The Mentorship Model in Other North American School Districts**

“Every kid needs a mentor. Everybody needs a mentor.” (Donovan Bailey)

What is a mentor? The acknowledgements section of the book, *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships* (Lipton & Wellman, 2003, i) begins thus:

“The term mentor originated with Homer, who, in *The Odyssey*, tells of Odysseus, King of Ithaca. Upon leaving for battle in the Trojan War, Odysseus placed his son Telemachus in the care of Mentor, who served as a teacher and caregiver. In contemporary lexicon, the word ‘mentor’ has become synonymous with a trusted advisor, friend, teacher and wise person.”

Four school districts that created formal mentoring programs for their teacher-librarians - Anne Arundel, Maryland; Iowa City, Iowa; Atlanta (and DeKalb County), Georgia; and Henrico County, Virginia - have specific criteria for defining and selecting mentors for teacher-librarians, also called school library media specialists or school librarians. The most common criteria for choosing teacher-librarian mentors is their geographical proximity to the peers’ schools (Bicksler, 2004, p. 28; Buddy and Williams, 2001, p. 18; Ricks, 2013, p.18), the mentor’s character, alternately referred to as their mentor personality traits (Bicksler, 2004, p. 28), appropriate characteristics and personal attributes (Van Deusen and Kraus,1995), and temperaments (Buddy and Williams, 2001, p. 18). In addition, the work experience and reputation of the mentor - the mentor’s years of teaching experience (Bicksler, 2004, p. 28; Buddy and Williams, 2001, p. 18) or whether or not they are respected by other library media professionals (Van Deusen and Kraus,1995) were selection factors. Another mentor criteria less frequently cited was the similarities between the school populations (Buddy and Williams, 2001, p. 18; Ricks, 2013, p. 18). The number of new school library media specialists (Bicksler, 2004, p. 28) factored into the Maryland model, but the Iowa model worked with volunteers or requests (Van Deusen and Kraus, 1995). All four programs required the mentor’s interest and commitment of time and effort to the relationship. Communication skills were valued and sought out but also nurtured and developed through training sessions.

The activities, roles and expectations differed from region to region but shared the following commonalities.

In Iowa, training was provided to mentor candidates on how to be a good mentor. Mentors and protégés were expected to communicate with each other frequently via

phone and occasionally visit in person. Mentors were expected to listen “with a combination of objectivity and caring” (Van Deusen and Kraus, 1995) and to use reflective techniques to offer analysis, give advice, and guide the protege to consider options. The pairing was expected to last two years.

In Georgia, mentoring was a one year commitment and involved regular communication, via telephone calls and emails. An informal luncheon for both mentor and mentee was hosted by the district library coordinator, as a way to introduce the individuals to each other, explain the program, schedule support meetings, and establish the responsibilities involved with being a mentor or protege. Face-to-face visits, called “support meetings” were held often between mentor and protege (Buddy and Williams, 2001, pp. 18-19).

In Maryland, the program for mentoring school library media specialists (SLMS) also lasted one year. Volunteer mentors attended a mentoring workshop during the summer and met about seven times between September and December, to allow proteges to observe veterans conducting lessons, share lesson ideas and help new SLMS prepare for their first evaluation as a new school library professional. The mentors met their proteges at a summer orientation program as well as at six additional times when new SLMS were released from their schools. Other “field trips” to the central office, the Library Media Services department, and full day presentations were provided to new SLMS (Bicksler, 2004, pp. 28-29).

In Virginia, formal training for new school librarians and their mentors was provided. The partnerships were scheduled to last one year and began with a kickoff meeting for mentees and mentors. The expectations were that partners would meet monthly and visit each other's' schools several times. The Henrico County's Collaborating Partners mission statement was to provide “professional collaboration between new and existing librarians through frequent conferences and reviews of teaching and learning, information access, and program administration processes” (Ricks, 2013, p. 18).

In almost every state example, a variety of data was collected as evidence to determine the program's success and evaluations were conducted. For the Atlanta Public Schools and DeKalb County School System, evaluation meetings were held at the end of each year to discuss what worked and didn't (Buddy and Williams, 2001, p. 20). In Anne Arundel County, participants were expected to keep monthly journals documenting their interactions, as well as to complete an evaluation at the end of April (Bicksler, 2004, p. 29). In Henrico County, evaluation of the program was conducted through a rubric, end-of-the-year surveys for mentors and mentees, as well as an examination of library staff retention rates. Documentation came from a contact log both partners kept (Ricks, 2013, p. 18). Each mentoring program referenced their data to remark on the success of these mentoring programs and to highlight the benefits that came to mentors, mentees, and school districts involved.

## The Mentorship Model in Ontario

“Having a formally assigned mentor is not linked to growth - being mentored is.”  
NTIP longitudinal research findings (Strachan, 2015, p. 28)

Ontario has a history of strong mentoring traditions. The Ontario Ministry of Education has a Ning created specifically to support mentoring (<http://mentoringmoments.ning.com/>) and has produced several e-books about the topic. As one of these publications, entitled *Mentoring for All*, states, “powerful learning designs like mentorship de-privatize instruction, foster collaboration, and support ‘small-l’ leadership via the intentional sharing of knowledge and practice between colleagues” (Strachan, 2015, p. 3). The strategies used by mentors as mentioned in the book *Being an Effective Mentor* were aligned with the Ontario context and every strategy has an Ontario equivalent.

Mentoring Strategy	Ontario Mentoring Context
Direct Assistance	School or Work Site Orientation / Consultant Stance
Demonstration Teaching	Observation / Debrief / Action Plan
Observation and Conferencing	Scaling Questions / Coaching Stance
Informal Contact	Building Relational Trust / Listening
Collaboratively Assessing Student Work	Moderated Marking / Collaborative Stance
Role Modeling	Interaction with Colleagues / Students

(Strachan, 2015, p. 14)

Other Ontario Ministry of Education professional development initiatives with mentorship as a foundation include the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP), the Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA), the Annual Learning Plan (ALP) and the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) (Strachan, 2015, p. 31).

To support the focus on mentorship as a significant tool for professional development, in 2009 the Ontario College of Teachers created an Additional Qualification course on mentoring. The course elements include theoretical foundations of mentoring, developing the mentoring relationship, working with the adult learner, and supporting reflective practice (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009).

### Applying the Mentorship Model to Supporting New Teacher-Librarians in the Toronto District School Board

“Congratulations on being a mentor for a TDSB Beginning Teacher. You are an important advocate for professional learning and growth for a person just starting out in their career.”

(Karen Murray and Jennifer Watt, Course Directors)

I had the opportunity to experience first-hand the powerful impact of personalized mentoring when I enrolled in the York University Mentorship Additional Qualification course in January 2015. The unique aspect of this course was that it was aimed at a specific audience: TDSB teachers. Course directors Jennifer Watt and Karen Murray were the Instructional Leader and Program Coordinator for the Teachers Learning and Leading Department of the TDSB. This was their goal:

“We created the mentoring course in hopes of offering a space of professional growth and support for teacher-leaders in our board who engage specifically in collegial learning-focused relationships. We feel that mentors are often the unsung heroes of education and that mentoring is left out of educational improvement discussions. We wanted to shine a light on the importance and impact of trusting, collaborative professional relationships in improving teacher practice. We also wanted to provide different conceptualizations mentoring (mentoring as a political and transformational act, mentoring as a reciprocal professional relationship, mentoring as an evidence-based practice). Offering the course also allows us as central board staff to gather narrative evidence of how mentoring and mentoring professional development is taken up by different people and by different schools and regions of the board.” (Watt)

Since the TDSB-specific Mentor AQ began in 2013, there have been 39 graduates over three years and two of them have been teacher-librarians. (Watt) The type of mentor relationship the course focused on developing was what might be described by the Ontario literature as “broker” or “one-to-one mentor matching” (Strachan, 2015, p. 6) and resembled the formal mentoring programs used by school library media specialists in the previous American examples provided earlier. Course participants were expected to find a mentee and work closely with them on a shared problem of practice. Although I had two protégés, my main mentee was Salma Nakhuda, a Long Term Occasional (LTO) teacher-librarian at a nearby school. Her vice-principal, Mary-Jane Huh, worked with me a number of years before her journey into administration. Mary Jane also worked with Jennifer Watt and Karen Murray as a Student Work Study teacher and was familiar with one-to-one, long-term mentoring. She “played matchmaker” and recommended that Salma and I work together. This prolonged, in-depth, individualized method of mentorship was different from the previous mentoring experiences I had faced as a Regional and FoS Teacher-Librarian Facilitator. It was a rewarding relationship for all involved.

I discovered firsthand that the benefits of a formal, personal mentor relationship echo the reasons described in the literature, in that professional and personal growth occurs in both the mentor and mentee. Benefits for the mentor include, but are not limited to:

- a close, lasting collegial relationship (Meloni, 2006, p. 33; Van Deusen & Kraus, 1995; Ricks, 2013, p. 19)
- self-awareness and increased reflection (Hayes, 2003, p. 38; Van Deusen & Kraus, 1995; Ricks, 2013, p. 19)
- confidence (Hayes, 2003, p. 38)
- interest in taking leadership roles (Martin and Johnston, 2013, p. 6)
- pride and personal satisfaction (Van Deusen and Kraus, 1995; Ricks, 2013, p. 19)
- empathy (Hayes, 2003, p. 38)
- renewed enthusiasm and rejuvenation (Hayes, 2003, p. 40; Ricks, 2013, p. 19)
- new perspectives and ideas (Van Deusen & Kraus, 1995; Ricks, 2013, p. 19; Lipton and Wellman, 2003, p. 79)

Other tangible benefits exist in districts with formal mentoring programs, such as stipends, release time, professional recognition (Buddy and Williams, 2001, p. 19) paid membership in regional professional organizations, and covered conference attendance fees (Bicksler, 2004, p. 28). I was able to access two half-days of occasional teacher coverage to work with my mentee because of a “Co-Learn with Mentor” initiative in the TDSB (Murray and Watt).

A great deal of reciprocal learning happened during my formal year of mentorship with Salma. The shared problem of practice we worked on involved our schools’ use of the Ontario Library Association’s Forest of Reading program (see [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1vXScnhowbpMy4n72CUjzknDxtmQM\\_EJISYRstFDkauQ/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1vXScnhowbpMy4n72CUjzknDxtmQM_EJISYRstFDkauQ/edit?usp=sharing) for a synopsis). As Salma summarized, “We planned it together. Salma needed support to run the book club and Diana I offered students as ‘leaders’ to conduct book reviews. We coordinated times and days. We created Google docs for each student and shared with each other and students. We hooked up on Skype and figured out the phone numbers to call for convenience” (Nakhuda, 2015) As I wrote in a reflection shortly after our official mentoring was completed, “Salma’s enthusiasm got me excited and led me to try something I had never attempted before at my school” (Maliszewski, 2015). I also wrote that “in addition to a great mentee, I’ve gained a wonderful friend that I can be vulnerable and honest with, and can have conversations about professional practice that will benefit both of us” (Maliszewski, 2015). In fact, as this paper was written, Salma is working at my own school as the LTO ICT/Media teacher and we plan and reflect together as often as we can, sharing our kindergarten drama lesson plan ideas regularly, deciding how to accommodate for a student with low vision, and continuing to nurture the synergy generated during our initial collaboration as mentor and mentee. We are both better teachers as a result.

## **Reflections on Multiple Mentoring Practices in the Toronto District School Board**

“All mentoring programs are unique and no one evaluation approach is appropriate for them all”



(Hayes, 2003)

“Several characteristics of successful mentors have been identified in the research: confident, secure, flexible, altruistic, warm and caring. These same characteristics appear in studies of effective library media specialists”  
(Van Deusen and Kraus, 1995)

I have several dreams that this research narrative might help accomplish. A first suggestion would be that more teacher-librarians could be encouraged to take a Mentorship Additional Qualification course or an equivalent, as the skills learned from this course would benefit all teacher-librarians, including experienced ones.. Not only would the veteran teacher-librarians learn how to collaborate more effectively with their own students and teachers, they would teach new teacher-librarians how to overcome challenges and collaborate with others.

Secondly, it would be mutually beneficial if the Library Learning Resources and Global Education Department and the Teachers Learning and Leading Departments could collaborate more closely to discover common ways to support new teachers and new teacher-librarians. Although the size of the board restricts the amount of support that can be offered centrally like other districts can provide, such rewarding connections made between mentor and mentee can strengthen the district’s cadre of teacher-librarians and strengthen the support system for new teachers. It would be fabulous if all teacher-leader training mentioned how mentoring can occur with specialized teachers, like teacher-librarians. We could use teacher-librarians as obvious choices as co-mentors for new teachers, as well as for new teacher-librarians. Statistically, there are more teacher-librarians in the board than there are AQ-level trained mentors; if more teacher-librarians are trained as and perceived as mentors to new teachers, it would be easier to support new hires.

A third wish of mine would be to continue to diversify the number of mentoring options available. As Jim Strachan explains in *Mentoring for All*, “high growth new teachers accessed five to seven different mentoring supports” (Strachan, 2015, p. 5). No one mentoring method is perfect, because the “best” method depends on the individual, but having a variety of mentoring paths to choose from would benefit the widest variety of learners. My mentee, Salma, indicated a preference for one-on-one mentoring:

“I liked how the advice/help was tailored to my specific needs as a learner. It is totally different than attending group sessions. Here, I am in control and I lead the learning. I take it where I want to go.” ... “being mentored by someone who is capable and who is interested in helping me improve has more of an impact on my professional development than doing a course, if not more” (Nakhuda, 2015).”)

Personal mentors can be the anchors that help new teacher-librarians ascend, guiding them to the top of their profession. Veteran teacher-librarians can act as belayers,

protecting their new colleagues from “falling”, and as they both journey together, they can appreciate the effort, the process, as well as when they reach the summit ... together.

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