

Getting on the Train: A Decade of Shifting Culture in the School Library

by Alanna King

Introduction

In August 2019, I was asked to travel to Buenos Aires to keynote at their first ever “Day for School Libraries (Jornada de Bibliotecas Escolares)”, a day that the Ministry of Education and Innovation put together for 700 school library stakeholders. They want to take their educational system and make it more ready for the future using school libraries as the vehicle. I was asked to come because I have been exactly where they are - in an in between place knowing the change I wanted to make but not knowing how to begin. This experience helped me to hone my thinking into a retrospective of my work to shift my school’s culture in the 10 years that I worked as a teacher-librarian. Looking back then, the concepts that I encountered that made a difference in my journey include transliteracy, design thinking, participatory culture, change cycle theory, and triangulation of assessment pedagogies. If I was in the position to redesign our system using school libraries as the vehicle, I would make sure that every stakeholder understood these five concepts.

Librarians as Pedagogical Agents

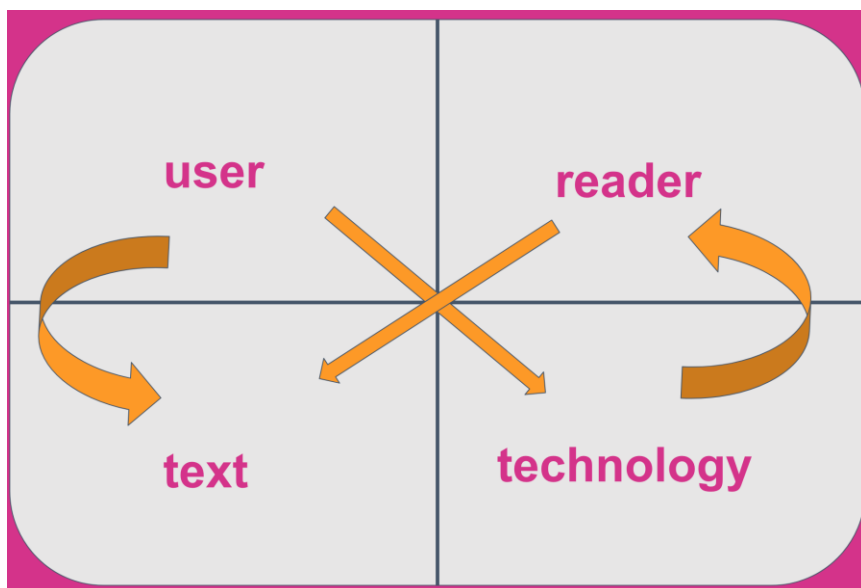
Before I can tell you how my experience shaped my secondary school library learning commons, I have to tell you about myself as a teacher. I studied drama and literature at university. Teacher’s college taught that curriculum was foremost important and that content was king. We used to make sure our averages were not too high. We used to treat assessment as a form of gauntlet, punishing anyone with late marks and tricks on our tests. Learning to teach with the success of students in mind had the greatest impact on my trajectory as a school librarian. I incorporated drama in my English classes, technology in my media classes and we didn’t do anything unless it was for an authentic audience. The progress of cloud-based software and the utilization of social media to project our portfolios and access experts in the greater community took us down new pathways of learning that we never came back from.

In 2009, three things happened that changed my trajectory in teaching. I started teaching online and wrote an online English course for the Ontario Ministry of Education. Then I joined Twitter and my professional learning network exploded. With my skills in educational technology expanding, my creative outbursts and my passion for literacy, I was asked to be the head librarian at my rural secondary school of 1400 students. When I moved into the library I was really excited because I thought every moment would be filled with a calm sense of happiness, helping students and staff access our print and digital materials but it wasn’t. It was more competitive than I anticipated. We had 45 desktops for 1400 students and about 100 teaching staff. We had a paper sign out book on the library desk for access to these computers. We had a

lot of physical space taken up by materials that were more up-to-date in our online databases. Almost every interaction I had was filled with a desperation brought on by a scarcity for resources. Whether they were texts or equipment, I knew I had to help make sure that the availability and accessibility to learning improved dramatically.

Transliteracy

In my work in the library, I noticed that the students and staff were always coming to me with one of these problems: they didn't know how to read or what to read, they didn't know how to choose a text appropriate for their needs, and then reading and texts were compounded when the users used any sort of digital device. They didn't know how to use the technology or it was unfamiliar to them. I began researching more then and found that this interplay between texts and devices is called transliteracy (Thomas, 2013).



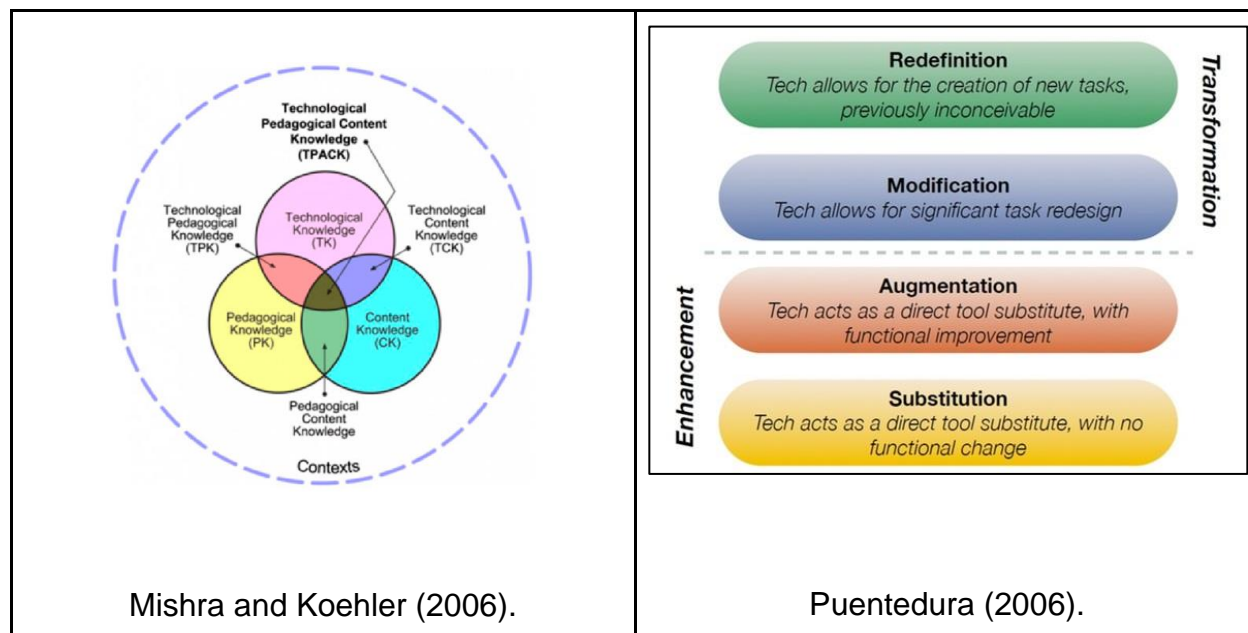
(King, 2013)

Through my Masters in Education program, I was challenged to make a mission statement for our library learning commons. Here's what I came up with: "To provide all staff and students with opportunities for success in their development of fluency in reading, writing, research and digital publishing".

This mission statement helped me to prioritize and focus my work. With devices and digital content evolving continuously, my focus singularly became teaching staff and students to be adaptable to change, taking prior knowledge and applying it to new mediums and new challenges. As their unofficial coach I needed to display this courage in our daily work and soon the school library became the transliteracy standard for the rest of the building.

I started to look for models of integrating technology into every lesson to help manage these large and complex inquiry projects that students were doing, and to set the

example to staff how technology made learning more accessible for students. I wanted to match my subject expertise, combined with good pedagogy, and I found that increasingly digital tools were a great help. I needed research to have informed discussions with administrators about the “why” of technology integration and I found that both TPACK (Mishra & Kohler, 2006) and SAMR (Puentedura, 2006) gave us models that furthered our understanding.



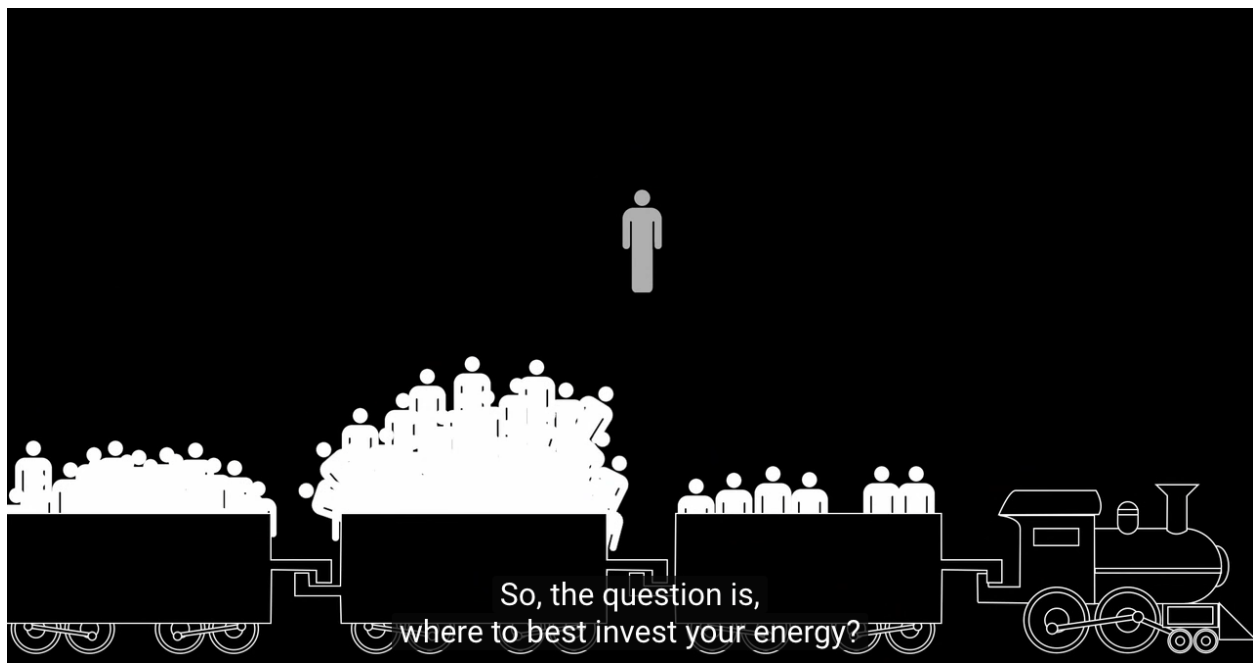
The problem now became that I was in a 150 year old building with a mish-mash of print resources, digital resources beyond my ability to purchase or collate, and essentially a giant computer lab in my library space. I quickly realized that the task of transformation was going to require more than my help. Thankfully we had great leadership in our libraries at the school board, and some changes were made. All purchasing and management of digital content is now done at the school board. We have a provincial license on many of these resources so they are free and available to use by our whole province. However it was the change in collating these resources into a portal for a single sign on that helped everyone access them easily. Our board IT people also purchased and integrated a single package of cloud-based software that allowed the educators to level the transliteracy playing field for all students.

In the school library this allowed me to offer reading and research material in different forms. I removed our print reference section and increased our graphic novel section by 600% over the course of the decade. I poked and prodded at any teacher-lead traditional value of a book’s length or authority as a means of being worthy of studying. We accessed the text forms available through Alternative Education Resources Ontario (AERO) and I empowered our special education department to make them shareable on the cloud. I had changed the perception of my role from the keeper of the resources to someone who was redefining resources, as Puentedura (2006) intended. Of course

there were teachers who pushed back, but I observed this dissonance and looked at it as an opportunity for discussion.

Change Cycle Theory

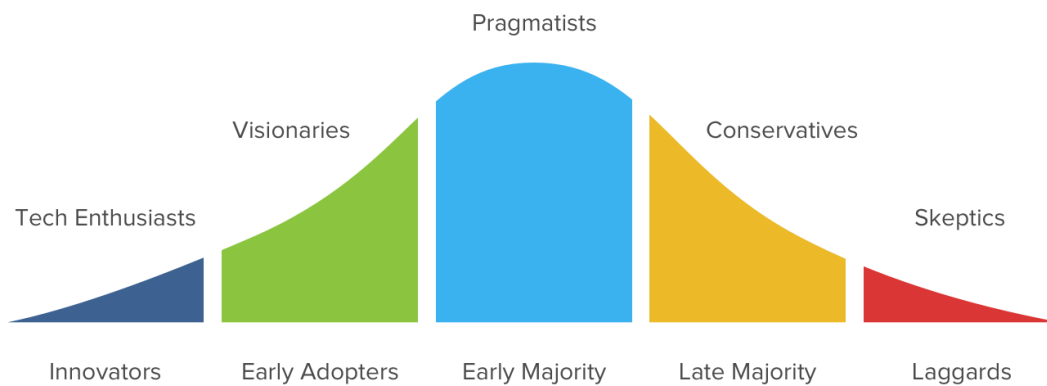
The dissonance continued. I was starting a revolution. About this time I encountered a change mindset that helped me to have the daily courage to do this work. This video by Nasher (2012) rolls around in my head all the time when I think about how to make culture shift and change happen. It was the inspiration for my presentation in Buenos Aires.



I needed more colleagues in the front train car. My principal was in one car back, watching me and encouraging me. The friends I was already collaborating with cheered me on. Most of the school was noticing that I was making changes and having success, and slowly they started to want to become part of it.

Little did I know, there are actually sociologists working on how ideas spread. This phenomenon can be explained really well in the graph called "The Rogers Adoption Curve" (Abrams, 2010).

Product Adoption Curve



It sounds like a simple concept. I would classify myself as an early adopter/visionary. What is much more challenging is to realize that change takes a long time. I would say that the dissonance continued over easily three years before I started to see a true shift.

I knew I had significant changes but the biggest hurdle was to actually shift the culture that the school had become accustomed to for the last twenty years. I thought I was making changes that were rippling throughout the school but the shift plateaued. I had a few colleagues on board but not the majority. It was difficult to measure cultural shift. How did I know that all of my hard work supporting transliteracy was making an impact, creating the changes in pedagogy that were most needed to prepare our students? I began to capture evidence, and the easiest way to do this was to remember to take photos when I saw innovation happening. I made an annual report to present to anyone who would listen, and I boasted constantly about our achievements. Within a few semesters we had more collaboration than we could handle, and our focus shifted again. We needed to create systems where the users could independently navigate challenges, and where the achievements we had made were sustainable. I set about then working on improving our infrastructure, being the loudest advocate for each teacher and each student. I asked for every classroom or teaching space to have a computer for the teacher to use, reliable internet to the teaching computer, a digital projector and screen, and reliable wifi for student use.

Design Thinking

What I wanted was a gleaming example of what every teacher in the building could aim for. It would take a lot of hard work behind the scenes to make the library learning commons this shining beacon each day, but I wanted to build a library space that would really epitomize the learning commons ideal. I needed to empathize with our users and define what changing the culture in the library would achieve. I had no financial resources yet, but I was beginning to develop a prototype. Then I was given an

opportunity to refresh my library's carpet. Because there was a necessity to move the entire computer lab in order to access the carpet underneath the computers, suddenly I could leverage a complete redesign. This opportunity only happens in my school board once every twenty years. I convinced my principal that we needed a redesign and that this was the opportunity to do it. As well, I had researched that our school building was mandated to be fully accessible to anyone with mobility challenges by the year 2025, so I was able to secure more funding from our accessibility department. This project took two years to complete and I secured funding for only the carpet, the widening of our main entrance to accommodate anyone with mobility challenges, and a very expensive accessible elevator. Being able to completely redesign our space, however, was priceless.

Here are my criteria that both fit with our new pedagogy and helped convince the administration to make this change: collaborative, accessible, available, participatory, and flexible. If we were going to have newer learning methods then we needed to develop our learning spaces with these new possibilities in mind. One of these possibilities is the idea that students may be seeking out resources in each other in small groups, across subject areas, even with experts on the internet who can video conference with our students. Likewise, accessibility is often better for all learners, not just the ones with the greatest needs. We wanted all learners to be able to access independently and universally. Even representing the diversity of our students in the literature and resources that we provide continues to be a challenge. Despite funding cuts and staffing challenges, I was determined to make sure that our library was a reliable place to go for students. I wanted our resources in print, in digital formats, and our trained and valuable staff to be available to the entire school body. Through a series of financial compromises, I believe we achieved a re-design based on empathy of our users.

Participatory Culture

Above all, I wanted our space to be flexible, to be able to clear the way for presentations in different formats, but to be able to accommodate new learning methods in all sorts of ways. I wanted to be able to observe the students at work and have natural conversation spaces. One of the changes that forever changed how the school approached technology integration was opting out 45 desktop computers for 120 mobile devices which relied on our ubiquitous wifi. We added an online calendar for booking, and the feelings of scarcity diminished.

This physical change had a real impact on the experiences of both the staff and students. We started to use the library learning commons for every gathering. In many ways it wasn't so much our technology that drew new projects to the space, but instead the space itself with flexible room for innovation. One class started brewing coffee and selling it from the library learning commons for teachers, and then a separate math class came down to make sure that they were breaking even. Special guests came to visit in the library, not in the cafeteria. By moving the books up to the main floor they were not only more accessible to all students, but the space they left behind created two

large spaces that could be used for multiple purposes. Instead of classes booking the equipment ahead of time, the redesign also allowed for greater spontaneity because the space and equipment were reliable, such as our permanently installed green screen.

At this point, I leaned on my pedagogical expertise to take learning deeper and to aim for redefinition on the SAMR model in our learning experiences. Having been influenced by the work of Henry Jenkins (2006) and Nina Simon (2010) in participatory culture, I guided the restructuring of large inquiry projects to include audience participation. A feedback loop is when authentic feedback drives the next step in the inquiry process (Jenkins, 2008). In making the library learning commons the hub for innovative learning, it allowed us to create feedback loops where the students were able to connect with each other in new social ways that were authentic. To do this I tried to incorporate a participatory culture into the design of each project allowing for adaptability where students could be more involved in participating in their learning. The showcases happened at the midway part in projects so that students could present to an authentic audience to test their ideas. Their final projects had to involve this feedback somehow. Or students used the feedback on their final showcase to inform reflection. The feedback was in a variety of forms from conversation, to a graffiti wall, to ranking or to submit their ideas anonymously in a digital form. In many ways our projects still looked like show-and-tell from the outside, but the difference was in our pedagogy and the cross-curricular nature of our audience.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky theorized that the best learning takes place in social situations: “[e]very function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals” (Vygotsky, 1978). At times of participatory learning, the traditionally quiet library is no more as learning depends on authentic socialization. This level of engagement became commonplace in the library learning commons where it would not have come easily in the previous design of the library.

Being the model of innovation is kind of like teaching in a fishbowl in that I was constantly on display. As hard as it was to be extroverted all the time, I tried to live each day being radically transparent and highly visible to the staff and students. Random people came by all the time to look at what we were doing. But this was the golden time because I was able to start conversations and suddenly we were collaborating and planning the next experience to happen in the library learning commons.

Triangulation of Assessment

My thinking shifted further still when I started to see that I couldn’t always see my students be successful in their final products, even though I knew I they were capable and I had seen them demonstrate my expectations in class. As learning is continuous,

assessment has to be informative and integral to the iterative process. So with the help of assessment consultant Sandra Herbst (2015) I started to go in a different direction by trying to work into my pedagogy other ways to assess the understanding of my students. I began to use a pedagogy which I used as a teacher-librarian and use now in online and face-to-face teaching called the "Triangulation of Assessment". The practice itself of utilizing conversations and observations to gauge student understanding wasn't new to me but being able to use it as part of our overall evaluation scheme was. As a teacher-librarian triangulation allowed me to anticipate where in projects that students would benefit from feedback in conversations and observations. By having a predetermined set of criteria that I have constructed in collaboration with the teacher, I used technology to facilitate the capturing of these conversations and to track the growth of the students. Suddenly I was collaborating on a whole new level with colleagues and renewed the role of teacher-librarian further still. Returning to a commitment to pedagogy raised our level of collaboration as my observations and conversations became an indispensable component of student growth.

Conclusion

By making our devices mobile and adding wifi, our teaching of technology didn't rely on every student being at the same step to use it. Students were empowered to use technology for their learning as they were ready and it was the librarian's job to be responsive to this need. Our teaching became more individualized and focused on learning rather than on the management of resources. I am able to spend time diagnosing what each patron of the library learning commons most needs, and to begin where they are. These changes emphasized again and again that the future ready teacher-librarian is a pedagogical agent and a learning leader.

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