Virtual Libraries: From Brick to Click

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Twenty- first century learners need a variety of skills and resources beyond a physical place. Students, staff and community members need a designated space where these skills can be honed, practiced and retrieved. In today's digital world, how do teacher-librarians go from that physical brick place to the virtual click space? How do you build a virtual library? What should be included and what criteria considered when adding resources to this space? Why is it crucial that teacher-librarians (TLs) take on this role rather than other professional staff?

In our schools today, we teach digital natives. This means students who enter and are currently in our schools have only known life surrounded by internet access, computer games, cell phones, downloadable music and all things digital (Prensky, 2001). So what does this mean for teacher-librarians and our school library collections? Simply put, we need to be where our students are. We need to create a space beyond the physical place where they can locate evaluate and use a variety of resources and practice skills needed to be in the digital world (Proske, 2010). Virtual libraries allow students, staff and the community to retrieve resources and receive instruction in a space designed specifically to meet the needs of a given school (Valenza, 2005). For Saskatchewan libraries following the provincial policies and guidelines, this means providing virtual resources and a virtual collection (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008).

From Brick to Click

Teacher-librarians have to carefully plan and then take steps to build a successful space for their virtual collection. This begins with the mission statement of the school and the library itself. Mission statements drive the school's accountability for student learning and should clearly define student learning goals and principles (Zmuda & Harada, 2008). What purpose will the virtual library fulfill? Who will utilize this new space – students, staff, the community or a combination of all three? The virtual library should also be part of the library mission statement and indicate the purpose and the intended audience.

In her book *Your Library Goes Virtual,* Audrey Church states that in your preplanning phase, you may wish to do a needs-analysis where you look at the purpose, audience and the collection policies and procedures in order to see what specifically will need to be added in terms of a virtual library. You will have to consider the new additional workload and marketing this new addition to your library so that users are aware of this new invaluable space and plan accordingly (Church, 2007). Once a purpose and an audience has been identified, the teacher-librarian must take into consideration how this web space will look like (appearance) and what will the resources be in this space (content).

The Virtual Library's AC (Appearance and Content)

Today most school divisions will have access to a server and have hardware for students to have some form of access to the internet so there is no longer the same concern compared to when the first virtual libraries were developed. Technical aspects of creating a virtual library are no longer the largest hurdle (Jurkowski, 2010). When considering the actual virtual library, you need to decide what format to use– a wiki, a blog, a space within a portal or the school division intranet.

There are many ideas available of how you may begin building your virtual library with the mission statement and the curriculum ultimately determining the appearance and content of your virtual library. Today there are libraries to look at as exemplars and Joyce Valenza has even created the Virtual Café library wiki (www.tlvirtualcafe.wikispaces.com) for teacher-librarians to seek additional information about this crucial component of the library and see a variety of different virtual libraries from around the world (Valenza, April 5, 2011).

Appearance

It will be important that the home page and interface will reflect ease of use since our students are used to the simplistic features of Google and will not invest the time to use a more complicated interface (Lippincott, 2005). The homepage should be user centered and not resource based. Looking at a number of different virtual libraries and putting your audience first is key when creating your own virtual library (Braxton, 2004). Users should never be more than three clicks away from their intended site (Grantham, 2007).

Summarizing Audrey Church's (2007) work, the following factors should be deliberated when constructing your virtual home page.

- **Language**: keep the vocabulary at your audience level, for example instead of OPAC use Library Catalogue or Find Books as a heading

- **Basic information:** make sure there is a title, contact info and when the virtual library was last updated

- **Layout:** structure each page to have the same layout including the navigation buttons
    - use a lighter background with dark text
    - make sure that your library name is on each and every page
    - have an easily identified return to the "Homepage" from every page of your site

- **Links**: make sure they go directly to the intended information and not a page where the user must navigate further to get the information

- **Graphics:** use sparingly and make sure they serve a purpose
    - be aware of the amount of time that graphics may take to load
    - avoid animated graphics which may be distracting rather than inviting

- **Content**: have clear titles and subtitles
    - create "draw magnets" which draw the users to specific places on the page such as bold text
    - keep paragraphs short and use bullets for longer lists
    - use fonts appropriately, for example information that may be skimmed should be in a larger font

- **Usability:** this will be an important factor depending upon your audience, younger students have more difficulty manoeuvring around a page versus older students who need plenty of interaction and want to avoid anything "childish" looking

- Readability: how users scan or read your web page is different than print material, studies show that users read using either a "Z" or "F" pattern and thus information should be placed strategically (Abilock as cited in Church, 2007)

Investing and spending time in the beginning, using a storyboard and mapping out ideas will lead to the creation of an organized and useable site which in the long run will save you both time and energy (Herring as cited in Church, 2007).

Content: Selection Considerations for Resources

Audrey Church states that it is no longer a choice for libraries to survive and thrive in the 21st century; librarians must rethink collections and services offered by the school (Zmuda et al., 2008). Whether TLs are, selecting print and non-print resources for the physical library or looking for the virtual library there must be criteria to access those materials. Kay Bishop (Bishop & Van Orden, 2007) identifies five essential criteria to use when determining if materials are appropriate for the library, which will also be applicable to the virtual library:

- **Authority**: the credibility and authority of the creators of the resource

- **Appropriateness**: does it fit the learner and fulfill the needs of the curriculum

- **Authenticity**: are facts distinguished from opinions and is the resource valid and reliable

- **Treatment:** will the resource appeal to the intended learner and will it stimulate further learning

- **Arrangement and organization:** does the resource have a logical sequence and will learners be able to navigate the resource easily

A selection policy and procedure manual for a virtual should include a statement of the content or purpose of the electronic resource, the identity of the author, and who the audience is for the resource. (Pearlmutter, 1999). Criteria should be developed to look at not only the resource itself but also the ease of use and the stability of the resource, which may be difficult to monitor on a virtual library (Pearlmutter, 1999).

So what content should be placed on the virtual library? From some experts (Gunn, 2002; Valenza, 2006; Church, 2007; Jurkowski, 2010) in the recent literature, here are some suggestions as to what you may wish to include in random order.

- **Library website:** the gateway to your own library

- **Pathfinders:** customized tools to help students with the research process by providing keywords and subject terms along with specific websites

- **Reference section:** online encyclopaedias and other reference subscriptions

- **Databases:** provincial and local access to peer reviewed articles – be sure to include how users may obtain a log-in name and password

- **Tutorials:** explanations and lessons using a variety of formats informing users of digital citizenship, library operations, search engines, and Boolean searches etc.

- **Area to promote reading:** highlight new books and book reviews etc.

- **Services:** features where you can "Ask a Librarian" so students can get individual help

- **Student celebrations:** showcase student learning using a variety of Web 2.0 tools

Cautions of Managing a Virtual Library

Once one has decided to create a virtual library, there is the eminent danger of trying to do everything at once, which may become overwhelming. As you develop polices and guidelines for selections of virtual resources (Geck, 2006), it will be just as important to create a timeline to build your virtual collection (Braxton, 2004). This way there is a plan that can be adapted or revised while building a strong foundation. Remember to use the mission statement, the selection policies and procedures to ensure that your virtual library is collaborative, inclusive, and not simply a storage space.

Although there will be links and there will be spaces to "store" resources it must not make materials in your physical library redundant (Grantham, 2007). You will have to know both your physical and virtual collections, so you can build the collections accordingly so students, staff and the community can maximize the resources in both libraries. It will be important to include the users of the virtual libraries allowing for the opportunity to offer suggestions so they have ownership of the library and see themselves in both the physical and virtual library. This can take on many forms, such as student, staff and community surveys and collaborations between all of the potential users.   The

danger of course is if no collaboration has taken place between the teacher-librarian and the school community the virtual library may become more of a personal virtual library rather than a school virtual library.

Along with having choice, digital natives want to interact and collaborate with information (Prensky, 2001) and therefore long lists of websites will not draw students to your virtual library. This space should include a variety of formats such as podcasts and video and as much as possible have an interactive component to it. Different formats may also cause some problems if your division filters or blocks different media such as videos and therefore may not be able to be embedded into your virtual library or even be linked to specific sites such as YouTube. Therefore, teacher-librarians will need to be on top of division and acceptable use policies within their individual districts.

The management of the virtual library without set polices and specifically procedures may prove to be problematic. There will need to be decisions made to who can add, edit or delete to the virtual library. Decisions will decide which sections may be open for everyone and those that will be restricted to the teacher-librarian. The VL will have various links -who will have the responsibility of ensuring these links are working? This may become time consuming if your virtual library includes pathfinders for specific subject areas and grades and a plan will need to be in place.

If the virtual library is open for others to edit and add, how will issues of accuracy and authority be tackled? Information or links added must be checked to make sure they are current, relevant and accurate. Procedures should be in place to add, edit and delete information and/or links. Does the resource support curriculum and the mission statement of the school and library? When posting or embedding, copyright will have to be adhered to and modeled. This means that before anything is placed in the virtual library, someone has to determine if there are any copyright restrictions (Grantham, 2007).

Connectivity may also be an issue in schools. Without the connection, there is no access and depending upon the bandwidth within your school, students may have difficulty gaining access to those resources. There are studies demonstrating students who have access to the internet, do not necessarily have the skills to navigate it (Valenza, 2006) .

Purchasing subscriptions may prove to be difficult and therefore may restrict you to a limited number of online resources such as databases. You may end up having to purchase a cluster or group purchase for economic reasons and end up getting resources that may not fit with your curriculum. As a result, you will no longer have resources tailored to your school's specific needs. This may cause more problems for students as they may have a hard time distinguishing and selecting the appropriate databases they should be using (Gunn, 2002).

After you have created your virtual library, you will need to regularly update and yes even perhaps "renovate". It will be important to keep an open mind and to keep in mind your users so that your virtual library is updated and current so that users come back. Once created there is that danger of not wanting to change things up and if a major "renovation" is indeed needed, this job may be placed on the back burner rather than attending to it right away (Jurkowski, 2010).

Why Teacher-Librarians?

There has been evidence recently that a second digital divide may be emerging. The first digital divide is a result of students who may not have access to computers and the internet and thus a disparity grows between those with computers and those without. The second digital divide now emerging is between students who have the necessary skills to benefit from computer use versus those who do not (A new digital divide?, 2010). Students consistently try and Google their way through the internet rather than using effective search skills and engines and this is why the role of the teacher-librarian becomes crucial (Loertscher, 2003). This reinforces the role of the teacher-librarian as we work daily in a setting where technology and information coexist (Zmuda et al., 2008). Being emerged in this environment, allows teacher-librarians to develop specific lessons to assist students with those location, evaluation and selection skills. Often other staff or teachers also are not effective searchers and in need of the same lessons (Valenza & Basch, 2005).

Teacher-librarians are the instructional leaders who work with all grade levels within a school and therefore all the staff and the students. This allows them to be in the unique position to provide resources to fit the needs of the

students and the staff (Hughes-Hassell & Harada, 2007; Zmuda & Harada, 2008). Resources can be tailor-made and scaffolded to build upon previous units of study from previous teachers.   Teacher-librarians also can select resources to suit the needs of particular students who may have specific learning needs and differentiate accordingly.

Teacher-librarians collaborating with other teachers will be able to see the different learning styles within the building and therefore are in a better position to provide resources to fit the learning styles of a variety of teachers rather than individuals who do not work closely with staff (Valenza, 2006). By collaborating with teachers, relationships are developed and teachers will have the opportunity to have input for materials and resources giving them ownership of the library. By seeing the library as a team space, teachers will be more inclined to promote the library, again creating and fostering those relationships where the library is seen as the hub of the school (Brooks-Kirkland, 2009). A further challenge for the virtual library is to follow in the steps of David Loertscher and fellow colleagues to transform both the physical and virtual library into the Learning Commons where everyone is involved with learning and ownership (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2008).

In conclusion, as teacher-librarians, our focus is always to assist our students and our digital native students are in a time of need. They need assistance learning to search the internet in order to locate, evaluate and use information online successfully. The role of the teacher-librarian is to establish that safe haven by using their library mission statements to create a virtual space where students can practice these new skills and most importantly share their success on the virtual library space. As building facilitators, selection policies and procedures must be developed and implemented to ensure sound resources are online that complement the resources in the physical library. As instructional leaders, a variety of formats must be a part of the virtual collection ensuring they are inclusive and match the curriculum and the school's specific learning goals. In addition, these online resources need to meet the specific learning needs and styles of the students, staff and the community and provide opportunities to polish their skills and pursue their personal interests so they will navigate the internet effectively and efficiently.   Because of the hard work implemented by teacher-librarians, users of the virtual library will become more confident and proficient. We begin one click at a time.

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