



# School libraries – on borrowed time?

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The way we access information is changing. Ten years ago, an article such as this would have been available only in print; now you can access it in hard copy, online using a PC or laptop, on a tablet device, or if you are really keen, using a web-enabled phone.

Fairfax newspapers recently announced a massive downsize in response to the increasing use of technology to access the news, and bookshop closures are a tangible reminder that print is, to an increasing degree, dying. As e-books replace traditional hard copy texts and computers allow access to up-to-the-minute educational resources, do schools really need libraries anymore?

If the Building the Education Revolution (BER) program is anything to go by, many schools believe that we do. Of the 10,551 projects funded by the BER, 3009 were school libraries (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010), an interesting statistic in the context of the unfolding technological revolution, especially given that there were other project options to choose from including classrooms and multipurpose halls. There has been much in the mainstream media about the obsolescence of libraries in schools, and by extension of

teacher-librarians (TLs) themselves, but while some aspects of a traditional library may have become outmoded, access to quality and current information is as important as it ever was to teachers and students.

Despite heavy investment in the bricks and mortar of libraries, funding cuts in real terms brought about by programs such as Local Schools, Local Decisions (LSLD) in New South Wales are likely to have a negative impact on the range of services that TLs have the resources to provide.

Megan Hart is a TL at Woolgoolga High School on NSW's mid north coast. Feedback from her colleagues indicates that a recent restructure of the Department of Education and Communities, made without public announcement, has shed positions that TLs relied on for curriculum support and for overarching functions such as managing state-wide relationships with national cataloguing bodies. As the LSLD initiative pushes more responsibility back into schools, individual TLs will need to dedicate time to translating policy into practice, rather than drawing on centralised experts, reducing the time they have for their expanding portfolios of duties.

Hart has 16 years experience in education and her ethos of, "work hard and do whatever you can for the children to help them to learn about inside and outside of the classroom," reflects the value that she brings to her school. Regrettably, she sees the prospect of the removal of TLs from schools as a very real one. "Teacher-librarians will be a dying breed if the principals don't make literacy (and reading) a priority. With a reduction in school funding and possible LSLD frameworks for principals to save money, the possibility of having no teacher-librarians is frightening."

But perhaps the biggest threat to school libraries and their staff is the increasing reliance on digital, rather than print matter. The promised paperless office of the 1990s never eventuated, but schools are already experimenting with paperless technology. Samantha Renehan, a Year 9 student at Melbourne's Aquinas College, reports that the school library has 12 Kindles, for which there is always a huge waiting list. Renehan herself is, however, ambivalent about how information is delivered. "Personally, I don't really care which way people are reading the information, being an actual book or online. It is just a good thing they are actually reading," she explains.

## *In some ways the advent of online resources has therefore made the role of the TL even more pivotal*

Neither Megan Hart, nor Robyn McCormack, TL at Our Lady Help of Christians Primary in outer Melbourne, foresees a future entirely without books. Says McCormack, “I don’t believe that printed books are going to completely disappear however there are e-books, Kindles, etc that are going to grow in popularity, so school libraries should be incorporating these into their catalogues and therefore some of the ‘book money’ would be spent in this area rather than on printed text. I still spend a healthy portion of my library budget on fiction books. There is a great demand from my ‘patrons’ that I keep our school library up to date with all the latest reading material.”

For Hart, the prospect of a library without books is unlikely for another reason. “With the current evidence of the lack of retaining information being shown by e-books (at only 60–70%), our children will not learn to read for meaning without the physical book. I can read the news online but cannot recall everything I have read. Skimming and scanning does not create understanding, it just locates information, a relatively low skill in the information process.”

Hart’s observations are backed up to some extent by Arizona State University research. A report entitled “*To Scroll or Not to Scroll: Scrolling, Working Memory Capacity, and Comprehending Complex Texts*” (Sanchez and Wiley, 2010) found that students exposed to texts with scrolling formats had poorer comprehension results, largely due to the difficulty in locating

information. While the study focused on online presentation in “page-like” format compared with online information that requires scrolling, there are clear implications for students who primarily use the internet for research purposes. The study also found that readers with a lower working memory capacity were particularly disadvantaged by many online formats. Without the development of resources that cater specifically to how students will most effectively digest what they read, the desirability of totally removing hard copy books from school libraries is highly debatable.

The internet may have brought a wealth of information, but it takes specialised knowledge to be able to critically appraise what is available and to provide appropriate resources to meet curriculum requirements. Hart relays the concerns of many teachers in her network regarding the value placed on TLs’ skills. “Teacher-Librarians are often the human gateway to helping teachers, students and parents with interpreting the curricula requirements for the whole school, and then TLs have to provide relevant information literacy support through teaching strategies, sourcing appropriate information sources for each school’s range of students, etc. This is not just one subject for one year group but every single subject for all years K-6 in primary schools. In high schools, Teacher-Librarians must do this for all Years 7–12 and analyse and resource all the syllabi in each Key Learning Area that is taught in the school.”

In some ways the advent of online resources has therefore made the role of the TL even more pivotal. The quantity of information may have exploded exponentially, but the quality has not necessarily kept pace, and it is critical that schools have someone who is responsible for overseeing subscriptions to programs and databases and for guiding decisions about appropriate content.

Robyn McCormack believes that TLs are well placed to cater to the evolving requirements of schools. “The role of the TL is unique in that we are trained as both teachers and librarians.

We understand life in the classroom, the needs of both the teacher and the students and strive to resource and set up the library to suit all these needs,” she says. While she does harbour

concerns that TLs may have a “use by” date, she is quick to point out the value they can provide to schools with a change in emphasis. “Over the years my role has changed dramatically, however the core of library lessons is still that our students acquire the skills to collect data, critically analyse it, organise their information, problem-solve and finally to communicate their understandings.”

It’s easy to assume that the current generation of students is expert when it comes to technology, and teachers are often intimidated by the knowledge that is second nature to digital natives. It might therefore come as a shock that they don’t know everything. A UK report on technology in schools clearly highlights why appropriate instruction in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is fundamental to students’ effective use of the resources available to them.

“Digital literacy does need to be taught: young people have usually acquired some knowledge of computer systems, but their knowledge is patchy. The idea that teaching this is unnecessary because of the sheer ubiquity of technology that surrounds young people as they are growing up – the ‘digital native’ – should be treated with great caution” (The Royal Academy of Engineering, 2012). While classroom teachers have a role to play in education about technology, much of the responsibility for developing effective ICT literacy skills, especially in primary schools, falls to TLs. Just as students were taught (and still are) to be judicious consumers of print, TLs are now fundamental in ensuring that students can competently evaluate online information.

The stereotypical watchful librarian with sensible shoes and a morose demeanour may be withering in the glare of technology, but a new breed of forward-looking and adaptable TLs are evolving in libraries of the 21st century. With a host of technology supplementing, and in some libraries eclipsing the traditional book as an information source, the role of TLs not just as book custodians but as knowledge managers and facilitators is one that few schools could do without. **ET**

### Further reading

- Commonwealth of Australia (2010) *Building the Education Revolution Implementation Taskforce: Interim Report* Retrieved 22 July 2012 from: [http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/BuildingTheEducationRevolution/Pages/berit\\_news.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/BuildingTheEducationRevolution/Pages/berit_news.aspx)
- The Royal Academy of Engineering (2012) *Shut down or restart? The way forward for computing in UK schools* Retrieved July 27 2012 from: [http://royalsociety.org/uploadedFiles/Royal\\_Society\\_Content/education/policy/computing-in-schools/2012-01-12-Computing-in-Schools.pdf](http://royalsociety.org/uploadedFiles/Royal_Society_Content/education/policy/computing-in-schools/2012-01-12-Computing-in-Schools.pdf)
- Sanchez, C.A. & Wiley, J (2010) *To Scroll or Not to Scroll: Scrolling, Working Memory Capacity, and Comprehending Complex Texts* Retrieved 27 July 2012 from: <http://casanchez.faculty.asu.edu/pubs/scroll.pdf>

