Serving up a smorgasbord of collaborative practice: Keys to approaching collaboration in your school and how to encourage teaching colleagues to participate in this journey with you

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Serving up collaborative practice: creating a menu

Collaborative practice which acknowledges differentiated learning needs of students, diverse long term educational outcomes, and acknowledges the respective skill sets of both teacher and librarian in delivering a curriculum which embraces the future focused needs of 21st century learners – to be literate and numerate, critical and creative thinkers, active seekers, users and creators of knowledge, informed decision makers, and active participants in their future world.

Looking at the journey of two school library managers and their diverse school communities, both involved in the Otago/Southland Information Literacy Project from June 2007 to November 2008. This project, commissioned by the National Library of New Zealand in collaboration with the Otago University Education Department and the New Zealand Ministry of Education, involved the participation of librarians and teachers from seven schools from the Otago and Southland regions of New Zealand looking at a collaborative approach to student learning outcomes and focused on year 8 students.

Introduction and background

In 2005 a group from the University of Otago undertook a survey of first year tertiary students, teachers of senior secondary school students and tertiary staff investigating both the perceived and actual ability of students to use information and research skills. The results of this survey were presented to interested parties at the university in January 2006. The results overwhelmingly indicated that while teachers, lecturers and the students themselves rated their abilities to be either average or very good the actual results clearly showed a very poor ability to find and evaluate information.

The results of this project generated discussion as to the cause, and possible measures that could be employed to turn these statistics around in a way that would positively impact future students' information literacy skills. As a result of this the Otago/Southland Information Literacy Project was developed.

This project became the intersection at which both schools began sharing the journey of information literacy in their respective communities.

Curriculum

The New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, a revised and updated curriculum document, with implementation begun in 2009, makes clear links to information literacy throughout the entire document but nowhere more so than in the vision statement. The vision statement describes the need for young people to be confident, connected, actively involved and lifelong learners. These lifelong learners are described as literate and numerate, critical and creative thinkers, active seekers, users, and creators of knowledge, and informed decision makers (p.8).

The key competencies within the document relate to thinking; using language, symbols, and texts; managing self; relating to others; and participating and contributing. While all of these competencies directly impact on students' ability to be information literate, we have focused mainly on the following competencies in our work:

Thinking – students who possess this competence are competent thinkers who actively seek and use information in the pursuit of knowledge, and are reflective, critical and perceptive in their questioning of the information found.

<u>Using language, symbols and texts</u> – students who possess this competence use the skills of critical literacy in understanding the subtleties of all forms of communication. Competence also implies confident use of a range of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

<u>Participating and contributing</u> – competence in this area will see students feeling connected to their own communities, locally and globally, and will foster contribution, participation and an understanding of the role that they can play in their community.

These over-arching principles within the new curriculum have been at the forefront of our thinking when working with teaching staff to establish new ways to plan and implement improved teaching and learning with the 21st century student in mind. The simplified and more streamlined strands within the individual learning areas provided the next links to information literacy. In working with both home based classroom teachers and with subject specialists we have found the imperative within the document to focus on teaching both information literacy and critical literacy.

Collaboration
To establish the parameters within which both schools sit it is important to note that the two schools are at opposite ends of the academic spectrum. One is a large decile eight year 7-13 secondary school situated on two separate campuses and has a roll of approximately 1850. Decile rating is an indicator of socio-economic circumstances of the population of the school community. The lowest decile is one and the highest is ten. The focus at this school is on academic achievement, with a planned progression to tertiary education for a significant percentage of the student body. The other is a small, decile two year 7-13 secondary school, approximate roll 400 at which a high proportion of students enrol with test results showing poor literacy and numeracy skills. Around 40 % of the students at this school are of Maori or Pacific Island descent.

Obviously, these are generalisations which do not acknowledge the fact that both schools work hard to meet the needs of all students. However, it is important to acknowledge that the schools have approached the information literacy issue from differing perspectives, and the solutions found have been adapted to suit the needs of widely disparate student bodies.

In the case of James Hargest College the work on information literacy had already begun in 2005 due to school's involvement in the Teacher Designed Schools Project which is a whole school five year initiative giving all staff at the participating school the opportunity to contribute to the future direction and decision making for that school. The library manager was part of the research group investigating aspects of seamless transition for the newly merged secondary school and specifically undertook research into the transition opportunities for the development of an information literacy programme that could cross and intersect departments, year levels and campuses and ultimately lead to a smooth transition to tertiary education or training opportunities.

In the four years since participation in the Teacher Designed Schools and Otago/Southland Information Literacy Projects the library manager has collaborated with members of senior management, heads of departments, teaching staff and other library professionals to develop a range of programmes and approaches to achieving the goal of creating information literate students and lifelong, independent learners.

Part of this approach led to the development of Information Literacy Modules at year 9 and 10 levels. These are assignments written by the library manager in conjunction with heads of English and Social Studies incorporating the teaching of a range of information literacy skills including online searching techniques, successful database usage, forming key questions and search phrases, note taking skills and creating bibliography and reference lists into a format that allows students to not only learn and practice these skills but produce work by the end of the module that is able to be assessed and marked as part of their course.

Specifically targeted one-off lessons for their students are offered to teachers of all senior classes to reinforce aspects of the research process. Teachers are seeing the tangible benefits of taking advantage of this support to their teaching and the range of classes extend to include subjects as diverse as English from years 11-13, Physical Education at year 12 & 13 levels, year 12 & 13 Biology, Chemistry and Physics, Art History, Music and years 11-13 History. Currently work is continuing on a programme for all year 7 and 8 students and a series of interactive tutorials preparing year 13 students for tertiary studies is about to begin.

At James Hargest College the growth of intentional teaching of information literacy and research skills has come about due to the success of the information literacy modules at the year 9 and 10 levels but also due to word of mouth from teaching staff who have seen the difference it has made focusing on specific learning intentions with a perceived 'expert' in this area.

Although the library manager at Aurora College had been involved in ongoing information literacy professional development and integrated curriculum initiatives throughout her 15 year career, the journey towards collaborative practise truly began with the Information Literacy Project in 2007. During that project the teachers and librarians participated in shared professional development which focused on developing a shared understanding of information literacy, understanding its fit within the new New Zealand Curriculum and in particular the key competencies, and the importance of critical literacy in a 21st Century world. Professional development delivered by Rosemary Hipkins, Dr Susan Sandretto, and the attendance of both library managers at Dr Ross Todd's Guided Inquiry seminars strongly influenced the thinking and ongoing practice in both schools.

At Aurora College the initial collaborations proved successful in improving student learning outcomes, and provided the impetus for further collaborations across the school as other teachers and learning area leaders saw the benefit of focusing on guided inquiry with its targeted interventions, and in particular its focus on information transformation, as opposed to transportation. This has become a catch-cry across the school at all levels when planning units of work, and particularly when critically analysing the assessment processes planned. Work continues at year 7 and year 9 with integrated curriculum units being developed in an effort to allow students to see the practical connections between all of the subject areas, and collaboratively planned guided inquiry lies at the heart of this planning. Communication between library staff and teachers has been strengthened, and a growing number of teachers share the planning process with library staff, and actively seek support in teaching information literacy.

Collaboration across Aurora College has extended to an ongoing focus on the literacy needs of many students. Professional development has been undertaken by all teaching staff to improve teaching of literacy in all subject areas. This has now become part of the collaborative planning process with respect to information literacy within the library programme. Specific emphasis is placed on providing opportunities for students to explore and critique a range of text formats, and their associated text features. Evidence gathered so far, in a study managed by a secondary literacy advisor has shown significant gains in student ability to make meaning from non-fiction texts following this explicit teaching.

Core Knowledge
Acknowledgement must go to Dr Ross Todd for the impact his presentations have had on the work in both schools. Sharing of Dr Todd's message with staff across each of the schools has led to a greater awareness of the need to ensure that learning experiences, and assessment processes, measure transformative use of information.

One of the key points taken from Todd's seminars was the emphasis on moving away from the teaching practice of abandoning students to the research process. Often, teachers have widely assumed that students have the specific skills at their fingertips to allow them to complete independent research. Librarians have also been guilty of contributing only to the information locating part of research assignments, when it is clear that our expertise extends far beyond that, and we need to be employing that expertise to the advantage of student learning outcomes. Targeted interventions by teacher and librarian must underpin the research

process and support our vision of young people who can not only locate, but interrogate information in their search for knowledge. As a final reflection from Ross Todd in his summation of the findings of the student learning through Ohio State libraries: A summary of the Ohio research study, he comments that the provision or absence of concrete opportunities for students to learn in a rich, complex and diverse information environment and reach higher levels of achievement is centred firmly around the provision of effective school libraries, which is critical to ensure no student is left behind.

Another key message, as mentioned earlier, was the need to ensure that the lesson design did not facilitate simple cut and paste, or transportation of information. The task design must provide opportunities to question, manipulate, reformulate and otherwise interact with the information found. This is where the thinking competency has found its place in much of the collaborative lesson design at Aurora College. Finding innovative ways to ensure that critical literacy becomes part of the process, and that assessments measure actual learning has become key to our collaborations.

Student engagement is improved through structured immersion in the topic at the beginning of the guided inquiry process. Allowing students to connect to prior learning, to wonder, and to wallow in interesting, engaging and thought provoking information bites (and bytes) before they begin their own inquiry has facilitated real engagement, better questioning, and in many cases has led to calls to action, initiated and followed through to their conclusion by the students themselves. The collaborative process has proved key to this, as librarians use their expertise to locate much of the immersion material, and assist in planning a range of activities designed to arouse student interest in the topic.

The collaborative partnerships at Aurora College have directly led to greater innovation in using Web 2.0 technology across years 9-13 in particular. Through interaction with the librarian, who has a strong interest in this area, teaching staff have gone on to incorporate such things as videoed role plays for assessment, the use of Wordle to present results of research, and using online back-channel applications to engage and stimulate student interest in learning, to name just a few. Other teachers are now exploring blogging as a format for teaching writing for publication, and the innovations, and consequently, student engagement, continue to improve. A small group of teachers have also begun collaborating with library staff to create their own teaching websites, with subject information, assessment outlines and other information of specific use to students made available via the web.

These are just some examples of the ways in which the core knowledge of librarians has been brought to the collaborative table to facilitate improved student learning outcomes. A key change in our professional practise has been the acknowledgement that our role in the teaching of information literacy extends well beyond the traditional role of the school librarian. No longer just the keepers of the book resources in the school, we must now be internet experts, be able to demonstrate and model critical literacy.

Conclusion
Collaboration in the case studies outlined has resulted in improved communication and understanding of expertise between teachers and librarians, and in improved learning outcomes for students. The work is just beginning, and as the information environment continues its exponential expansion, the combined strength of collaborative teaching will share the burden between teachers and librarians. Both parties bring individual strengths to the partnership, and each party also learns from the other, benefiting the professional practise of each. Students are better served by working with two professionals, and the benefit of seeing their teachers working collaboratively, as we so often expect them to do, cannot be overstated.

The information landscape is set to continue growing in its complexity and interactivity, and its successful navigation by the students of today and tomorrow rests on their ability to interrogate and interact with it confidently and critically. The writers believe that students' success will be directly linked to the success of the collaborative partnerships in their educational environment, and so, the conversations will continue.

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