The school library of today: Guises and “universal” roles

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In recent years, the disappearance of traditional libraries from Britain’s schools has attracted strong criticism. This paper explores how the computer-oriented information environments that have replaced them do, however, share similarities with old-style book areas. Specifically, each: (a) connects users with information, (b) offers resources that are available to everyone, (c) incorporates structures that demonstrate how large collections of information may be organized, (d) forms a space for developing and practicing information skills, (e) provides a welcoming environment for all, (f) unites pupils of different ages, and (g) may afford access to staff who support the learning process. The paper concludes by suggesting that, irrespective of the nature of the “library”, the existence of an intermediary who can discharge a range of teaching and learning functions is crucial.

The evolving school library

The vastly increased prevalence of information and communications technology (ICT) is one of the most fundamental differences between today’s schools and their counterparts of thirty years ago. In previous eras, it would have been rare to find in Britain a school of any real size that lacked some sort of central collection of books and a work area for associated pencil and paper study. There is now, however, a growing trend in the UK towards school “libraries” that are mainly or even wholly electronic. This is especially the case in the secondary phase. It is true that some new school buildings which accommodate old-style book rooms are continuing to be constructed. Monkseaton High in the north-east of England provides a case in point (Shenton, 2011). Here, in September 2009, the organization moved into recently completed multi-million pound premises, where separate spaces are allocated for a “reading room” and several independent learning zones accommodating only computer workstations. Nevertheless, figures stated by Alan Gibbons suggest that as many as around one in five academies are opening with no library at all (Gibbons, 2008). Schools of this type are usually built in deprived areas of the country where levels of educational achievement are low. The premises of schools that have been deemed to be “failing” are replaced with new accommodation and, it is hoped, a fresh ethos is instilled. Technology tends to play a prominent role in the teaching and learning activities that take place within academies. There are also frequent reports of existing secondary schools jettisoning their traditional libraries. Typically, in their stead are either study centers which combine often limited book provision with ICT facilities or areas consisting solely of networked computers. In some instances, the change is motivated by concerns that the use made of large book areas is insufficient to justify either the space they consume or the costs necessary to maintain an up-to-date collection. Elsewhere there may be a feeling that, amidst all the high-tech innovations in teaching and learning, book rooms appear anachronistic.

The shift has attracted much criticism in many quarters (see, for example, Adams, 2008; Lightfoot, 2008; Owen, 2009), and, for some commentators, any situation in which the profile of
books within a school suffers a major reduction is deplorable. According to Susan Elkin (2012), “Books are to education and learning what air and water are to life. Every child needs access to the printed word.” Rather than dwelling on what has been lost as a result of the switch from traditional library to computer-oriented resource center, however, it is illuminating to consider the various ways in which an essential continuity is maintained across the two ostensibly very different types of information environment. This paper discusses at length seven particular features that are shared by old-style school libraries and the new breed. It is principally concerned with information environments in secondary schools (which, in Britain, are attended by youngsters aged eleven to eighteen), although some arguments could be applied to schools that deliver education in either of the two main phases. Where one of the issues raised is intended to relate specifically to primary schools (which cater for children from four to eleven), this is stated explicitly.

**Both connect users with information**

Traditionalists are, of course, unlikely to accept any notion of a school “library” without books. As Schopflin (2003) notes, “To many, libraries are collections of physical objects” (p. 56). Nevertheless, in the anonymous article “The Information Age”, the Internet is described as “the world’s largest library” (p. xxix). If we accept use of the word “library” as legitimate in this and related contexts, we may conclude that, on the most fundamental level, libraries can be assumed simply to offer materials which are available for exploitation. Certainly, over the years several eminent figures have formulated definitions of librarianship and libraries that give little or no emphasis to the book element. As long ago as three decades back, Urquhart (1981), a renowned innovator in document delivery services, asserted that the former was “concerned with the flow of information to individuals” (p. 56). It is striking that he makes no explicit reference here to any form of physical collection. A similar omission is apparent in more recent observations. Heine, Winkworth and Ray (2000), for example, maintain that a library may be understood to constitute “a system that enables and facilitates access to information resources” (p. 244), and Tise, Raju and Masango (2008) describe a library as “a conduit for information” (p. 341). If such an organization is regarded merely as a means of connecting users with information, there would seem to be closer associations between traditional libraries and the new generation of study centers than one may initially assume.

Let us take a moment to consider the relevance to the user of the mechanistic functions of libraries. Whilst it is important that they introduce young people to the delights of books and reading, another significant role lies in helping them to acquire what is necessary to meet particular information needs that must be addressed if underpinning life situations are to be resolved. Environments with a greater ICT emphasis can fulfill this function equally effectively as their traditional counterparts. Moreover, in terms of fostering a love of literature, we should remember that even novels can be made available electronically. The challenges to schools of promoting the reading of fiction are obviously considerable when no paper collection is involved, however. We may well also mourn the fact that the new information environments do not offer users the physical sensation of holding an actual book. Given the tactile orientation of many young children, in particular, this is not a weakness that should be lightly dismissed in the primary phase of education.

As well as dealing in information itself, each kind of environment aids the user’s efforts to converge on particular sources through the provision of search tools. Taken as a whole, these range from library catalogues and subject indexes to search engines and meta-search engines, Web directories and subject gateways. Enquirers may, of course, choose to ignore these in favor of a more direct route and go straight to the book shelves or type in the address of a known Web site. It is a measure of the essential congruence of the traditional school library and the computer-oriented equivalent that, as Figure 1 demonstrates, it is possible to construct a single generic model which represents the key characteristics of both. There can be no doubt that an information professional is integral to each, whether they be cast as a conventional “librarian” or, in the words of Judith Elkin (1996), an “information navigator” or “information facilitator” (p. 245).

Let us take a moment to explore the holistic scope of the diagram. Most fundamentally, it shows how the “library”, whatever its form, is situated within the school. Beyond is the macro environment, which brings to bear a wide variety of influences on life in the institution. Each kind of library will be visited by users, who are driven by their own particular information needs. Several options are available within the library to a user aiming to satisfy such needs – they may
consult an intermediary such as the information professional or one or more of the tools that exist to facilitate access to information. Alternatively, they may go at once to the sources themselves. In many cases, what is retrieved ultimately leads to learning and knowledge on the user’s part and this is exploited by that individual both in school contexts and in interactions with the wider world.

The key difference between the two environments is obviously one of medium – traditional libraries have specialized in paper materials, whereas their twenty-first century counterparts emphasize electronic resources. Other contrasts also spring to mind, however. In days gone by, librarians, in consultation with teachers, actively selected books and other paper materials for inclusion in their areas, whereas today those responsible for a “library” centered around the Internet are just as likely to be concerned with using filtering mechanisms to exclude material deemed to be unsuitable.

Both offer resources that are available to everyone

One of the most significant features of the old-style school library has been its value as a resource that is accessible to all pupils. Regardless of what is available at home, any member of the school community can use its collection of non-fiction materials for purposes as diverse as tackling homework assignments, pursuing information in support of personal interests and solving “life problems”. Today, a modern school library offering computer workstations linked to the Web can play a key role in countering the “digital divide” which emerges as a result of youngsters having different levels of domestic access to the Internet. Furthermore, unlike the books in a school library, Web sites can, for the most part, be viewed simultaneously by all users who require them, although routes to some sites that could be invaluable may, of course, be blocked by filters that are imposed at either a school or local authority level. Traditional and modern school libraries, then, provide pupils with an information pool that is common to everyone. Local public libraries may
make a similar “equalizing” contribution but a study by Shenton demonstrates that, for younger children, accessibility depends to a large extent on the inclination of their parents to use the facility (Shenton and Dixon, 2002), whilst teenagers may be skeptical of what the public library can offer them. Youngsters consulted for the Fulfilling Their Potential project made a range of criticisms of libraries. They were, for example, regarded as “dull”, “boring” and “dark”, seldom open and manned by staff who on occasion could be unpleasant (The Reading Agency, 2004: 21). The research of Poston-Anderson and Edwards (1993) suggests that adolescents are unlikely to go to a library in pursuit of information that may help them deal with personal concerns. In contrast, as Bennett (1998) appreciates, the anonymity that is afforded by the virtual world may be welcomed by users who feel self-conscious. We may thus conclude that some youngsters may well favor the electronic environment when looking for help in certain situations.

It must be acknowledged, however, that a wholly electronic school library may also bring into sharp relief divisions between youngsters. Speaking on the radio program Analysis: Clever.com (2009), Nicholas goes so far as to suggest that the digital world effectively disenfranchises those who are unable to handle effectively the vast amount of information it makes available. In a school context, learners who are forced to use electronic resources because the paper collection has been removed are clearly expected to possess the skills necessary to exploit materials that are offered in this way and suffer if they would have preferred to take more traditional approaches to finding information. Clearly, the human information specialist comes into their own when those who struggle in the electronic environment require support.

Both incorporate structures that demonstrate how large collections of information may be organized

Streatfield and Markless (1994) indicate that a school library can serve as a “learning exhibit” – a model that shows how substantial quantities of information are managed (p. 102). A “library” based on a school intranet or virtual learning environment (VLE) can form a comparable exemplar, providing a practical manifestation of conceptual hierarchies, with documents arranged in folders and sub-folders for ready retrieval, as well as demonstrating how information may be accessed via different approaches, e.g. through hyperlinks, nested menus and keywords. Whilst the uniting of information according to categories and under headings is evident in traditional and electronic situations, pupils may be more receptive to principles regarding the organization of information if they are exhibited in computer-based contexts rather than in the paper environment because, for many youngsters, the former are now more meaningful and relevant. The arranging of files in groups and hierarchies will already be familiar to pupils as a result of their experience of managing their own electronic documents, whereas the school library’s principles for organizing books may seem altogether abstract and esoteric. As Kuhlthau (1988) recognizes, it is difficult to teach youngsters even the basics of a scheme such as the Dewey Decimal Classification System unless they have begun to understand the rudiments of decimals.

Both form a space for developing and practicing information skills

Traditional and electronic school libraries alike offer arenas in which youngsters can learn and hone their information skills. Although it may be possible for pupils to achieve reasonable academic success at school through using mainly computer-based resources in support of their independent learning, staff must also be cognizant of the need to foster skills associated with the kind of range of materials that youngsters will require in their lives subsequently, notably in the workplace and Higher Education. Despite periodic predictions of a paperless society, it seems unlikely that any such situation will be entirely realized in the lifetime of today’s pupils so, ideally, the information training ground within a school should be of a hybrid type. Boothroyd, Chair of the Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians (Ascel), notes that, in the long term, problems result from controlled situations in which educators ensure a close match between the assignments they set and the resources made available via VLEs. How, she wonders, will youngsters fare in more demanding situations later when “they will be required to navigate through and select from a mass of information stored in many formats and found in many places?” (quoted in Owen, 2009: 1).

Research by Shenton (2008) reveals that, in the electronic environment, secondary schoolers are prone to assume that Web-based information retrieval is so straightforward that little assistance from others is needed. Pupil understanding of how searches may be conducted,
however, is often rudimentary; the systematic broadening and narrowing of a search in the light of initial results, the use of Boolean logic and the employment of more advanced system features are seldom apparent in schools. Moreover, the crucial task of assessing material rigorously for qualities such as relevance, accuracy, currency and impartiality also goes unaddressed all too frequently. The need for youngsters to increase their skills in these areas emphasizes the importance of the role of some kind of truly information-rich environment, be it either a networked ICT zone which connects users to the Web or a more traditional book area served by a computer catalog.

Where access to information materials is facilitated in a variety of ways, even if the environment itself is wholly computer-oriented there will be opportunities not only to foster pupils’ skills but also to enable them to follow their own predispositions and respond to their particular circumstances. Systems supporting the retrieval of information via keyword(s) tend to provide a highly direct route, although clearly they are dependent on the ability of the user to spell reasonably accurately the terms they are entering to represent their subject. In contrast, a hierarchical, menu-based approach, while less direct, makes fewer demands on spelling ability, supports users who have an inclination to browse and helps them to conceptualize their area of interest in terms of broader, narrower and related topics. It may also prove easier for youngsters to use since, as Liebscher and Marchionini (1988) explain, systems tailored towards browsing exploit the fact that recognition is less cognitively demanding than the more proactive generation of an effective query in which the user enters their own terms.

We must accept, however, that the wholly electronic school library will, by its very nature, allow youngsters to develop skills only within the virtual world. The higher order reading skill of scanning, for example, may become neglected if, over and over again, youngsters use automated “find” facilities in order to locate information within a particular document. For many years, writers have detected other key differences in information-seeking strategies that result from the very different characteristics of the paper and electronic environments. Nearly fifteen years ago, Plant (1998) contrasted the “surfing… channel-hopping mode” associated with the Web and applied in relation to material that must be “laterally traversed” with techniques used to exploit “linear texts or library classifications” (p. 46). More recently, Malik has suggested that the “flicking and bouncing” approach to reading on the Web may make it impossible “to indulge in the pre-Web sit-down-quietly-and-absorb-a-book kind of reading” (Analysis: Clever.com, 2009).

**Both provide a welcoming environment for all**

Gorman (1998) comments, “There are many stories of solitary children finding peace of mind in the school library” (p. 50), and the experiences of Sheehan (2009) are testimony to the continuing role that modern media centers play in this regard. Sheehan writes how the facility he manages “has become a safe haven where students feel they belong and can be themselves”. Both the new breed of study center and traditional school libraries afford opportunities for guided exploration and experimentation by young people in a safe and controlled environment. Whilst we may wonder whether the youngsters who gravitate to the two different types of “library” are likely to be comparable, we must recognize, too, that any library will acquire its own unique “user base”.

**Both unite pupils of different ages**

In terms of a more communal dimension, since libraries form one of the few places within schools where youngsters of different ages are brought together for similar purposes, they help to promote a whole school ethos which is missing when pupils are taught in classes consisting of individuals from the same year group – a situation that is the norm, of course, in many schools. A key theme evident in work exploring the modern study center in schools, colleges and universities is the unity that has been seen to emerge across users. Gardner, Woolford and Colvin (2007) highlight how such areas can lead to interactions between learners with different abilities or who are at different stages in their education, and Christie and Everitt (2007) draw attention to the way in which the LearningZone at the University of Arts London can unite students from different colleges and make them “feel part of a university community” (p. 33). If we accept Herring’s (2011) claim that one of the purposes of education is that of “encouraging people to relate well to others” (p. 3), then the importance of the opportunities such facilities offer for social integration should not
be overlooked. Nevertheless, Jackson and Shenton (2010) cast doubt on whether a true esprit de corps is always achieved. They write that, despite the positive messages that emerge from the literature,

Shenton has discovered rather less unity among the users of the facility with which he is familiar. Frequently, those seated at computers are either working individually or in their own peer group consisting of a small number of tightly-knit friends. Where the latter is the case... there is rarely any significant interaction between the different groups unless this is specifically required in a formal session taking place in the area (pp. 219-20).

On the basis of this evidence, we may question the extent to which true community cohesion emerges and whether, in certain institutions, what is actually gained is merely the strengthening of existing ties between peers. Even this benefit cannot be taken for granted. Pickard (2008) reports how all the learning resource centers that she visited in her study had a policy of one student to one computer. She goes on to note that peer interaction was discouraged in these environments. It would appear likely that, in these circumstances, individualized pursuits, rather than collaborative working, will result. Such a solitary dimension is very different from the social aspect that Dennis (2011) particularly associates with the “learning commons” approach to information provision – another option that is coming to replace traditional libraries in many educational institutions. Other significant contrasts also spring to mind. Books and cafes often form important elements within learning commons facilities; in the modern study center, however, paper sources frequently play a very limited role, and the presence of food or drink may well be prohibited in any area of a school where computers are accommodated.

**Both may afford access to staff who support the learning process**

Time and time again, this is an aspect where traditional and modern school libraries alike are weak in Britain. There are many cases where libraries featuring book collections are managed not by professional librarians but by library assistants, aided, on occasion, by pupil volunteers. In schools for young children, even these personnel are largely absent, with a class teacher usually responsible for the library within an overall remit that may be as wide as “resources” or “literacy”. Often much of the day-to-day work is discharged by parental volunteers. It is an indication of the rarity of professional librarians in British primary schools that Finch (2007), who holds one such position, found “no other primary school librarians in the area” to whom she could turn for advice when she took up her post (p. 39).

As book collections disappear from school libraries and are replaced by computers, the danger arises that the staff responsible for such areas are ICT technicians who have not been trained in the principles of information management and, since their role may well be less people-oriented than that of the librarian, they are unlikely to be so familiar with the real needs of the end-user. Whereas Marshman (2011) sees the role of the information professional to be one of “liaising between disparate groups of people; finding a common way forward that breaks down barriers; helping people find the information they need to conduct research and make decisions”, the prime concerns of technicians and network managers may well be to ensure the functionality of the systems for which they are responsible and to provide maintenance. Yet, far from doing away with the need for information specialists, the advent of the new technologies has actually emphasized it – the huge, and still growing, amount of information that can be found electronically, the poor degree of organization of the material and the dubious nature of much of its quality all increase the importance of the expertise of such a professional within a school. It may be argued that the key change that has taken place in recent years is that, today, such a practitioner is less concerned with helping the user “find what’s out there” and more involved in enabling the individual to decide what, from the mass of material available, is best for their needs. It is certainly revealing that, for many users, one of the attractions of subject gateways is that the electronic resources to which access is provided can be trusted because they have been purposely selected.

In the face of all the challenges that the information-seeker must face, readers may well subscribe to position taken by Tarter, who was, until her recent retirement, one of the foremost school librarians in the UK. She comments, “whether or not a school has a physical library, it is the librarian’s role as a trainer in how to do research that is most likely... to assure qualified school librarians of a job” (Tarter and Hyams, 2010: 28). The fact that information professionals in schools work with youngsters who are still in their formative stages of development has important implications for lifelong learning. Reflecting on the findings of research into young people’s
information behavior, Ronningen (2004) notes how educators involved in training adults in the effective location and use of information may realize that certain “patterns are imprinted in our school years”. The role of the librarian in shaping such behavior in the person’s early life via their own information skills instruction may thus have considerable impact on how individuals are able to find information and exploit it effectively during adulthood.

There are many facets of the intermediary’s role as an educator but the following principles would seem especially important. The professional should:

- be aware of the various models for teaching information literacy (IL), and so be able to make an informed decision as to which is most appropriate for their particular institution;
- be adept at using their understanding of life within the school (its courses, the curriculum, etc.) and the organization’s stakeholders (notably the pupils) to tailor their IL teaching to real needs;
- be able to command sufficient skills as an educator to impart IL instruction effectively;
- have the ability to apply their knowledge of information behavior for the benefit of their IL teaching;
- be creative in drawing on theories from other fields for use in their own IL instruction;
- have enough personal experience of and success in academia to provide authoritative guidance on sound scholarly practice in terms of referencing, dealing with copyright issues and avoiding plagiarism.

These areas are paramount, regardless of whether the “library” is paper-based, electronic or hybrid. On a broader level, Marshman (2011), who is writing for information professionals, asserts, “We’re here to connect people with information, facilitate discovery, and encourage self-reliant learning, and we can do that wherever we are”. Although the author makes her point in relation to practitioners in different kinds of organizations, her argument provides a similar unity in terms of professionals responsible for paper materials and those concerned with electronic resources.

Conclusions

Recent years have seen a marked decline in the number of traditional libraries that can be found in Britain’s secondary schools. Decisions to replace them with resource centers which offer information mainly or exclusively via electronic means have often met with stern opposition, partly perhaps because the switch has not always been justified in educational terms by those responsible for making it. Issues of cost and space, for example, have frequently been cited. Despite the loss or downgrading of central book collections in many institutions, school leaders can still develop the modern information environments that have superseded them along lines that give a high priority to features which have long been associated with conventional school libraries, so maintaining a basic continuity over time and across the different facilities.

After all, each exists to connect users with information and to promote independent learning. Youngsters can be directed to a range of tools that expedite the information-finding process. Each type of environment affords all pupils access to the same information resources. If these are appropriately organized, the structure that has been imposed can constitute an exemplar which models the effective management of information. Whatever their essential emphasis, the environments form areas where information skills can be learnt and practiced. They may serve as a retreat for youngsters keen to find a welcoming and safe place when not in lessons. Their availability to all members of the school has the potential to erode divisions within the organization that arise from the different ages and seniorities of the learners. Finally, they offer settings where there are on hand experts who can support each pupil in their attempts to tackle work and other challenges necessitating the use of information. Any school leader wishing to “update” their traditional library by shifting the emphasis to the electronic provision of information would be well advised not to lose sight of these key principles when making the change.

In particular, moves towards wholly electronic school libraries should not obscure the ongoing importance of the human information specialist. Let us briefly consider one of the roles in which this professional would appear far better equipped than any electronic counterpart – that of uncovering a user’s information need. In this capacity, Gorman (1998) writes, “no machine, no program, no ‘interactive system’ comes even close to rivaling the skill of a trained human brain” (p.
The task for school librarians lies in convincing their superiors and headteachers, especially, of the validity of these words, both in Gorman’s intended context and many others. Even in an all-electronic information environment within a school, the role for the information professional should be a substantial one. Although there is some variation from one author to another in terms of what they see as the most critical priorities for information specialists in the new breed of “school libraries”, it is pertinent to bear in mind the overall message in a conclusion reached by November (2007) – “a reconfigured space, packed to the brim with all the latest and greatest technology, doesn’t guarantee successful learning. It will be the librarian engaging students through personalized instruction, global collaboration opportunities, and creative assignments that will remain absolutely essential” (p. 45).

References


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