A Book in the Hand is Worth Two on a Disk

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This article presents the argument that school librarians need to make critical judgments with respect to the inclusion of technology in their elementary school libraries. Two concerns in particular are addressed: how technology may change the reading culture of young children and how businesses’ technological interests should be cautiously interpreted when children’s reading development is considered.

The elementary school library has changed considerably over the past 20 years. No longer is it simply a book depository that students visit once a week to borrow one or two books or spend time “researching” a topic in the encyclopedias. Today’s school library offers a central location for staff and students to extend their abilities to be effective users of information with the assistance of the school library media specialist. Supported by a range of technological aids, the modern elementary school library, however, appears to be moving toward an information-power model as opposed to a model where youngsters may develop as members of a literacy-loving culture. It is not the intention of this article to denigrate the usefulness of technology in library offerings. Rather, the purpose of this article is to suggest that elementary school library staff explore who really benefits from the inclusion of technology in the library and if its use meets the developmental literacy needs of their young clients.

The focus on incorporating technology presents two concerns with respect to elementary school libraries and their clients. The first centers on how technology may change the reading culture for young children; the second concern addresses the question of whose interests really are being served—business or children?

Technology and Reading Culture

The busiest aisle at a local discount store the size of two football fields in my neighborhood is not the one that houses computers and their accompanying boxes of software. Rather, it is the aisle that offers a wide selection of books at reduced prices. Here, one can choose from cookery and gardening manuals, bestselling novels, travel guides, and children’s favorites to mention only a few. In rows two to three deep, customers jostle with one another. One young woman notes aloud as she picks out a gardening book, “Sitting by the fire on a cold winter’s night with this book ... now that’s living!” Those around her smile knowingly. She has struck a chord; we all belong to the
literacy club to which she unwittingly referred where curling up with a good book brings pleasure and enjoyment.

Elementary school librarians have known for decades the power of a book that appeals to the imagination of the children. They stocked their shelves with challenging, interesting, and exciting literature that acted as a lure to children to explore the world. Perennial favorites were borrowed time and time again, recommended by one child to another, or on the advice of the librarian. Youngsters awaited favorite authors’ new offerings with anticipation.

Prior to the advent of the whole language movement in classrooms, librarians provided rich literacy programs during library periods. For many children who were offered a steady diet of uninteresting and banal texts in their reading programs in the classroom, the school library offered one of the few opportunities for them to expand their literature horizons and to develop their understanding, under the direction of the librarian, of what it was like to be a real reader. In other words, the librarian was the pivotal force around which children developed a love of books and reading. For a limited time each week, children read for their own reasons or listened to librarians read to them rather than completing dull and repetitive reading tasks. Comments from the librarian such as “How did you like that book?” “Wasn’t that a great ending?” or “I have another book here that is a bit like the one you just read” demonstrated to children that not all reading needed to be carried out to answer comprehension questions.

Librarians have been instrumental in tipping the scales from the perspective that reading was primarily a school task to one that viewed reading as a sociocultural event. Discussion and dialogue about book choices and children’s personal responses to text were integral components of library sessions. The quality and range of print materials supplied by the school library were an indicator of the value the school community placed on reading as a way of knowing and as a means for constructing knowledge about the world.

Today’s classrooms generally do not include the tedious and repetitious reading tasks of a decade ago. Aesthetic as well as efferent responses to text have become more obvious in children’s reading programs. Classroom libraries abound. Teachers encourage students to participate in periods of uninterrupted sustained silent reading. Book fairs, readathons, and cross-age reading events reflect how the reading culture of elementary schools has changed over time. Reading is seen to be important and youngsters’ reading achievements are celebrated.

It might be assumed, therefore, that the library has a less vibrant role to play in building and maintaining the reading culture in today’s elementary schools. The library, however, is one of the few authentic educational offerings in the school that has a community counterpart. When children make use of the school library, they are provided purposeful and meaningful occasions for learning that they can transpose easily to real-life situations.
Access to and use of the school library allow students genuine and legitimate opportunities to view the community library as a source of print and other materials for lifelong learning. Particularly for children who live too far away from community libraries or whose parents do not use such facilities themselves, the school library is the model of the richness of text that is available for personal use in future years. Regardless of good intentions, classroom or personal collections cannot meet the wide range of individual reading needs and interests. The variety of books selected by knowledgeable librarians is just as critical a component for building an active reading culture today as it was years ago. The caring and enthusiastic librarian who knows what books will interest young children in elementary school continues to be a positive force in moving children into the community literacy club.

Technology is beginning to take center stage as the key component to reforming the structure of the school library. Lauded not only as a tool for accessing sources outside of the school community and as an effective way to record collection data with ease, the computer is seen as a medium for providing text with multimedia capabilities. Although the first two applications of technology in the library obviously have merit, there is little understanding of how electronic glitz may influence the young child’s development as committed reader. The touch and feel of books is as important to the young child as the content contained within them. The realization that one can take the book to any location to be read at any time, be it in bed or inside one’s desk during a science lesson, demonstrates to children the power and portability of print. Developing an awareness of how we weave books into the fabric of our lives regardless of our location builds an understanding of reading as an integral and comprehensive part of our lives. However, we will only read that which interests us and to which we have access.

Elementary school librarians find themselves caught in the proverbial Catch 22 situation. How can they continue to offer a full range of current print materials that children may borrow and enjoy while simultaneously building technological support in the library in times of considerable financial restraint? Pressure is put on them by parents, administrators, and sometimes staff members to place most of their financial eggs in the technological basket. On the other hand, they realize that updating literature collections is of critical importance to fostering lifelong reading habits in the young clients they serve. Glancing around the library, technocrats see shelves upon shelves of books and come to the incorrect conclusion that it is not more books that are needed but more technology. Elementary school librarians look at the same shelves and realize that much of which is housed there is out-of-date for either content or student interest.

One way of out the dilemma might be to combine the need for new texts in the technological framework. With the advent of the CD-ROM, computers are currently capable of providing text with which the child may interact. The compact disk can hold the information contained in a whole en-
cyclopedia or several individual texts. Unlike print texts that become dogeared and worn, the compact disk is practically indestructible. However, the disadvantage is that only two or three youngsters may access the computer that runs the disk at one time. With a limited number of terminals available, access to these electronic materials is restricted. Furthermore, the electronic version of the book frequently contains pictures and music not offered in the original version. One may wonder if the day will come when a child notes to the librarian “The CD was OK but the book was better!” Like their movie counterparts that paint a definitive picture of the events in the text, the electronic version may rob the child of building an imaginative picture as she or he processes the print.

To ignore technological support in the elementary school library would be inappropriate. There is no doubt it has a place as a medium for children to access content area materials that are current, interesting, and challenging. However, we may regret our actions if we jump on the topical educational bandwagon too quickly. If we purchase electronic materials that may not help develop a greater desire to read and that do not provide opportunities to read in many contexts, or if we place too much emphasis on purchasing technology to the detriment of maintaining and extending current hard text collections, we may find that our young clients will not find our libraries the exciting and interesting places we think they are, in spite of their electronic bells and whistles. As leaders in the school community, we may be saying that reading is important, but our actions in directing most of our attention to primarily electronic sources may be sending the opposite message to the children.

Like the young woman in the anecdote at the beginning of this section, children come to realize as they become members of a reading culture that they can explore the world through text, in their own place and time, in ways that pale in comparison with that offered through technology. The book may be mightier than the disk in enticing young children to become lifelong readers for it allows them to be readers when and where they want to read as opposed to being constrained by the location demands imposed by technology.

Whose Agenda Is Being Served?
Several publishing firms currently offer interactive story and nonfiction books on CD-ROM that can be accessed only on expensive and sophisticated computers. School libraries as well as other centers throughout the school are being encouraged to purchase these machines in order to provide students with a technological edge for future employment. For the libraries in particular, these advanced computers are seen as a way to reduce future print material expenses. We should not be naive, however. Given the explosion of capability for what computers can currently do and the projection for their future capabilities, we know that the machines we buy today may well be obsolete tomorrow. The result is, of course, that the current computers and
their accompanying CD-ROMs will gather the same dust in the same storerooms where their sister purchases of the early 1990s sit.

The computer industry is in the business of selling computers and the peripherals needed to run them effectively. To believe that the industry wants to educate children to be better readers is ingenuous. Leaders in the field of microtechnology continue to proclaim that their desire is to have a computer on the desk of every child in the nation. Generally, their reasons center on students having access to information. Rarely, if ever, is there mention of the student as a critical reader of that information or of the student as explorer, through electronic means, of the human condition and its possibilities. One may assume, therefore, that the technology industry sees a population that it can access easily as future customers and the school becomes the store where they are housed.

Business has already entered the field of reading throughout North America. Pizza Hut is an example that comes quickly to mind. This business enterprise has been lauded by politicians for its innovative reading incentive program. Briefly stated, the program offers children a free pizza if they read a certain number of books. Such extrinsic rewards defeat a culture of reading for its own sake and pleasure. More insidious perhaps is the fact that the elementary schoolchild who has read his quota of books must be accompanied to Pizza Hut to collect his free pizza as he is too young to go alone. The result is that the cost of the "free" pizza for one child in the family escalates to $20 or $30 for the whole family. Whose agenda is being served here? The child may benefit to some degree from his reading marathon but will be also left with the message that quantity of reading is more important then quality. On the other hand, Pizza Hut has realized about $15 profit for its "innovative" program. This is the profit for only one child. One can well imagine how much money this business is making across the nation from its spurious attempt at encouraging children to read.

Elementary school staff, especially librarians, know that bribes of any kind, whether they are gold stars or free pizza, do not build an authentic reading culture for the child. Unfortunately, their better judgment collapses when business pressure, uninformed parental and political advocacy, and inadequate government financial support for education allows them little choice.

Technology and its accompanying software change as quickly as a snowball melts in the Sahara. For schools in general and school libraries in particular, keeping abreast of the technological upgrading demands financial outlays well beyond their capabilities. However, now that business is showing such interest in education, perhaps educational leaders should not be concerned about monetary restrictions. Business will come to the rescue with innovative ideas to help offset the costs of new technology. Will the day be far off when advertisements will be inserted between the "pages" of an electronic book as business leaders and tightwad politicians show their "concern" for the high cost of incorporating up-to-date technology in the school
environment? One may imagine promotions for everything from toys to snack foods as commercial inclusions at the end of chapters or pasted on the hardware itself. Knowledgeable educators will be told that their fears are ungrounded and even old-fashioned when they question such well intentioned endeavors. After all, do not students watch commercials on television? We should respond that we welcome business support but that we will accept it only under conditions that we think are educationally sound. In other words, we should suggest that we will accept money to maintain our libraries with those texts and electronic materials we think most appropriate for our students. In addition, we could suggest that their tax-deductible generosity will be noted in a letter to parents as well as on a plaque hung on the library wall.

Another side of the business interest is shown in its efforts to off-load its obsolete computers onto the school. Our initial response as educators is to see this gift as a small blessing from heaven. However, when we try to incorporate these business machines into the daily workings of the elementary school curriculum, we find that the computers are not suitable for young children, the software has little to offer in the way of enhancing programming, and the cost of adjusting them to school needs is beyond our financial resources. While we ponder on solutions to these problems, business makes political and financial gain. On the one hand, the cooperating business is seen as being community-minded, and on the other hand, it receives a tax credit for its donation. Although there is no intention here to denigrate the intentions of individual business people, business as an whole is pushing its own economic message into the school climate, not always to the benefit of the students it says it wishes to help. As school libraries most often house the majority of these technological hand-me-downs, it becomes the responsibility of the librarian to address and solve the problems of how to use the unwanted gifts. The result is that he or she has less time to facilitate and mediate the teaching of the curriculum for staff and less opportunity to focus on maintaining the reading culture of the school.

Conclusion
There is no doubt that technology should play a vital and continual role in the education of elementary schoolchildren. How that role will evolve depends on the input from and decisions of school librarians in particular who have the expertise and knowledge to view the influence of technology from a broader perspective than that of the classroom teacher with respect to the development and maintenance of a reading culture in the school environment. Just as librarians nurtured an authentic reading environment in past decades, they are in a difficult but enviable position to demonstrate that a reading culture is too precious to risk for the whims of business interests and educational novelties.