Collection Development

Digital & Elastic Collections in School Libraries: A Challenge for School Library Media Centres

by David V. Loertscher

Let's face it. Any young person connected to the Internet from home knows about the Google search engine and more often than not, "googles" their way to find information for their reports.

Forget the school library. It's only open a few hours a day anyway and lots of the best things they have for reports can't be checked out anyway (read that: reference collection). The news spreads quickly among classmates through instant messaging: to get commentary on a novel, go to...; To get stuff for the science report, try...

Teacher librarians who hear such messages realize very quickly that there is a new competitor in the world of information. We can be frightened, threatened, concerned, and scared, but competition is generally a healthy element if you know and understand the competition and its inroads into your market.

There are lots of reasons to compete with the full Internet for attention in the lives of young people: four billion sites – most of which are junk; advertising at the top of many Google searches; lack of quality information; the aging of many Internet sites; the overwhelming surge of information when a search is done, etc., etc., etc. There are also some good reasons to keep Google at hand: government information, international information, news sites, travel maps, etc., etc., etc.

Books are certainly not dead, but part of their function of information transfer is being replaced by digital information sources. This is happening in certain areas where books were never very good. No school library media centre could ever afford to have 30 to 50 newspapers available or 300 periodicals. No school library media centre could house or afford a current reference collection to match the real needs of students (and even if they could, those materials were never easily available).

The computer has changed library media centres forever. In our short 40 year history (a few more or less depending on your location), school library media centres centralized their collections, added multimedia collections to books, and now are creating digital collections that make the collection accessible 24
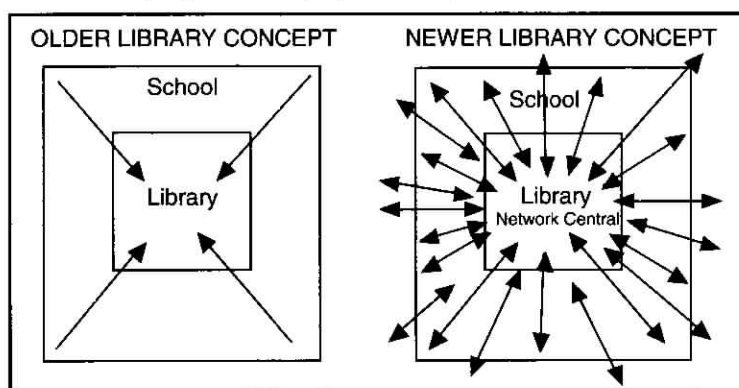
hours a day, seven days a week.

The following illustration demonstrates that basic shift. From the era of centralization, we now think of library media centres as ubiquitous on school campuses and in every home that has access to the Internet.

If we are to really compete with Google, a good place to start is to conduct focus groups with both teachers and students to question them about the competition, our services, and what would really help them accomplish the information tasks and needs they face. Then listen. And design a better mousetrap. It is certain that as access to information systems comes to the fingertip of every student and teacher through various devices now known or yet to be marketed, more and more individuals will require instant service at the elbow. The potential for equity looms large par-

ticularly for rural and large urban areas the more connectedness becomes a reality. Here are a few starter ideas for competing in today's world of digital school libraries:

1. Create a library media centre portal that is attractive to your students and teachers and one that they will want as their home page when they boot up their devices. Make it a place where:

a. Students can get their assignments, lessons, and links to success on any of their assignments.

b. Students can access tools they need to accomplish required tasks

(graphics programs, graphics libraries, word processors, data analysis forms, etc.)

c. Students can search first within a very high quality and safe information environment – then google their way to other things if needed.

d. Teachers can place their courses and all their connections to individual students.

e. Teachers can access professional information from a wide variety of sources local, regional, national, and international.

f. Teachers can link into educational projects and have their classes participate with others across the world.

g. Teachers can access the tools they need to survive in their classrooms.

2. Build a high quality and safe core digital information environment for students and teachers. Start with the notion of the Bradford distribution which said that 80 percent of the questions asked of a library can be answered by twenty percent of its resources. That is, there is a core of digital works that will be workhorses just as the printed dictionary, encyclopedia, and almanac have done for the reference shelf. Include in this collection:

a. Basic reference information that students and teachers need almost every day.

b. Periodical collections that have highly successful hit rates for most

any assignment across the curriculum.

c. News services that will serve the current needs and retrospective searching required by your faculty.

d. A core collection of the best web sites to support the school's curriculum and that are pinged regularly to insure that they really exist and are available.

e. Links to specialized collections of other libraries, museums, governments, and other useful information regularly required by teachers.

3. Include on the library media centre portal links to all the major collaborative units being done between classroom teachers and teacher librarians.

a. Links to assignments.

b. Links to courses on the web.

c. Links to projects and activities in the school.

4. Provide a teacher librarian work space complete with links to operational tasks, information sources, and helps to perform LMC tasks.

5. Build avenues to wholesome and popular recreational sites and activities.

As the size of the digital collection grows and the size of the print collection becomes smaller yet vibrant, the time usually spent on cataloguing, circulating, re-shelving, and maintenance of the print collection will now shift to keeping the digital collection current and accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In fact, a role shift toward "chief information officer" and "information coach" is happening as digital collections expand.

One of the best places to ascertain whether you are starting to build a good portal is to look at the collection of school library media centre web pages assembled by Peter Milbury of Chico High School in Chico, California at: www.school-libraries.net. Look at the newer sites added regularly and their features, designs, contents, and presentation. Each year, they get closer and closer to becoming "essential" sites for teachers and students. Many commercial companies are also creating digital tools and collections that are relevant. Teacher librarians who do not yet know how to create and maintain web sites should drop everything else and learn!

Elastic collections

Projecting into the very near future, I see the development of what I would term elastic collections of digital materials and information for teachers and students in K-12 education. In the world of print information, we were never able to respond very quickly to curriculum changes, immediate heavy demands for certain titles, holiday materials, high interest but short-lived information such as sports figures, celebrities, or hot topics. Digital libraries can respond almost instantly to such demands if we think in terms of an elastic collection.

Let us suppose that *Harry Potter* 5 hits the market and we know that the demand for access to 500 copies the first day of publication will hit our library portal. Perhaps we will be able to lease those 500 digital copies for ten days and then reduce the lease to 30 copies for the next three months, ten copies for the following year, and 1 archival copy thereafter when interest has gone to almost zero. The same could happen with any high-demand popular reading material.

For assignments, a similar elastic notion might come into play. For example, suppose AP chemistry students are doing some high level research. The first day in the library, students receive training on searching *Chemical Abstracts* using a prototype tutorial. The second library day, access to *Chemical Abstracts* is opened for one hour while teacher-librarians and chemistry teachers assist students in finding what they need. No school library media centre could afford a subscription to that very expensive resource on a yearly basis, but a one-hour lease might be sufficient to accomplish the information task at hand.

Thus, in the elastic collection, information resources expand or contract as curricular demands are placed upon the library media centre collection. Emphasis has gone from what we own to what we provide "access to." And a description of the collection would change depending on the hour of the day or the needs of the curriculum. The notion here is that the collection begins to turn from teacher librarian control to user control with teacher librarian management as a seamless invisible operation in the background.

In this scenario, the Bradford Distribution becomes central. What the library media centre leases on a regular basis are those information sources with high and effective hit rates. The elastic collection contains less-accessed information on an as-needed basis.

Is the elastic collection available at this writing? (April, 2002)? No, but it is very close and will be coming very rapidly as producers and consumers in the music industry come to terms with issues facing the digital world. Are and will digital collections be expensive? Yes. But they must be considered just as gasoline is to school buses and electricity for lighting – a part of the regular infrastructure cost of the school.

In addition, commercial firms are developing better and better collections all the time focused on curriculums of the various states and provinces. For example, commercial databases with the same title might have quite different contents in California than in Toronto, Canada. We need not think of books, databases, or information resources being locked in their content. Already, newspapers and magazines published the same day in different locations contain differing information and advertising.

Teacher librarians will have to learn many new collection development skills as all this evolves, yet the tried and true "provide the right information, to the right user, at the right time, in the right format, in the needed language, at the right reading level" has never been so possible as in the era we are approaching. We can now move to thinking about personalized information spaces that are interactive, assistive, and nurturing. There hasn't been a more exciting time for the school library media program. ❧

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Books by Doug Johnson

The Indispensable Librarian: Surviving (And Thriving) in School Media Centers in the Information Age. 1997.

Indispensable Teacher's Guide to Computer Skills: A Staff Development Guide. 1999.