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Where in the Role Are You Anyway?

DOUGLAS ACHTERMAN and DAVID V. LOERTSCHER

In the literature on collaboration between classroom teachers and teacher librarians, two deliverables are commonly mentioned: content knowledge and process knowledge. What are these? Reduced to the simple, students are challenged to learn the what – the content knowledge – and they are challenged to learn how to learn that content so that they deeply understand – in other words, process.

When you sit to plan with a teacher and you are looking at the standards of what the learner is to know and be able to do during a certain learning activity, then it is instructive to divide the objectives into content and process objectives: what they must know, and how they are to learn it.

WHAT WE DO KNOW

In practice, teacher librarians relegate content knowledge to the teacher and offer to handle the process objectives. We look for opportunities for research projects to be presented at our doors so that we can teach the research process. We expect the teacher to introduce the learning activity and cover the content in the classroom, then come to the library for process instruction, and then the rest of the learning activity is completed in the classroom.

The flaw in this concept is that the teacher librarian is disconnected from what teachers consider as the essential element of the learning activity. They may view the process instruction as a quick intervention into the unit but really not the central element. In fact, under intense pressure for their students to score high on tests, they may feel that there is little time to concentrate on process knowledge because they do not perceive process knowledge as essential.



A typical example might be something like this. The learners are studying California missions. They have done some work in their textbooks and other activities in the classroom. When they come to the library to do their report, the teacher librarian shows the class some good resources and demonstrates the best way to search for information on the Web. He or she might teach them a few ways to discern whether they are getting good information and help them to cite the sources they used in their assignment. After the library work session, the learners go back to the classroom and the next group comes in for their library lesson.

The problem here is that the teacher librarian has no

evidence that the library part of the learning experience resulted in a better understanding of California missions. And, if they never see the reports, then there is no way to know if the process instruction had any impact on the creation or the assessment of the reports. From these types of experiences, what can teacher librarians report as their contribution to the school? They could report the number of classes taught during a week or month or quarter, but they would be hard-pressed to say anything about what students are learning or whether the students in the school are becoming more and more sophisticated process-learners.

A NEW ROLE

If we ask the question of collaboration, “Are two heads better than one?” then what do we really mean? Our theory is this: when the teacher librarian takes on an equal responsibility of helping learners learn content knowledge, something basic shifts that makes all the difference in the world. Suddenly both partners are building both content and process knowledge. They can do this better together than either one can do it separately. In the action research projects reported at <http://davivl.org>, one reads this in every report – learning is enhanced when both partners accept both challenges. It is often an “Ah ha!” experience for both partners.


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 shortcut the stockpiling phase to
 emphasize an analysis and synthesis
 of the information gathered.*


Traditionally, teacher librarians have concentrated much effort on helping students to locate information. Not surprisingly, students think of research as largely a gathering and organizing of facts. Ross Todd (2006) has observed in research in New Jersey schools that students predominantly exhibit an additive approach to knowledge development. That is, students tend to simply add to their stockpile of facts as their research progresses. This may include some sorting, organizing, and grouping around particular themes, but typically the final products more or less represent a surface-level accumulation of

facts. By contrast, deep learners demonstrate an integrative approach to knowledge building. They are focused not so much on the simple gathering of facts, but on using facts to build explanations, to synthesize facts into more abstract groupings, and to reflect on the synthesis and analysis of facts to draw conclusions, make predictions, and stake out positions.

The inclination to stockpile facts is exacerbated by the fact-oriented nature of our standardized testing and even encouraged by educators eager to raise scores. Teachers often feel as though there is already too much in the curriculum to spend as much time as they do on research projects, and as locating and stockpiling facts becomes easier and easier, the value of the school librarian in this research process diminishes.

GETTING IN DEEP

One solution to this predicament is to shortcut the stockpiling phase to emphasize an analysis and synthesis of the information gathered. Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis allow us to create collaborative learning activities in which students stockpile facts together quickly, then slow down to analyze those facts to form deeper understandings.

A conversation with a high school social studies teacher last spring sparked a collaborative effort to help students get beyond the facts and closer to what Wiggins and McTighe (2001) call "enduring understanding." The teacher expressed frustration with his students' inability to understand how the individual pieces of his content fit together. They could master the facts, but they had few opinions, little ability to evaluate, and no tools to help them reach conclusions or make predictions.

I asked about the standards we were addressing. We looked at those and agreed they did not go far enough. In 15 years, I asked the teacher, what do you want your students to remember about this? He wanted them to understand that World War II happened the way it happened because of the way all the different pieces fit together – that history is really an intricate web of cause and effect. It needs to go beyond knowing a bit about Pearl Harbor, a bit about D-Day, a bit about the Holocaust.

Mention of this intricate web led me to suggest a concept map as the students' final product. I showed the teacher the graphic organizer program called Inspiration, and suggested that perhaps students use this software to show their understanding of how key aspects of the war were interrelated. The teacher liked this idea and our planning began in earnest.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

We split the project into three phases. In phase one, students were introduced to important people, battles, and events of World War II as part of classroom activities,

including film clips, short readings, brief lectures, and work from the textbook. As a closing activity at least a few times a week, the teacher used Inspiration with the class to create small concept maps that connected the day's lesson to earlier learning. This closure activity helped familiarize students with both the software tool they would be using and gave them low-risk practice and guidance in the higher-order thinking required to create good concept maps.

Our theory is that when the teacher librarian takes on an equal responsibility of helping learners learn content knowledge, something basic shifts that makes all the difference in the world.

Meanwhile, I was prepping phase two by gathering materials of varying formats, lengths, and reading levels to help students in their research. Each student was to investigate in greater depth one of the battles, people, or events that had been introduced in class. We created a graphic organizer for each of the three types of topics to help deepen and focus students' investigations, including some broad categories of information to look for, including who, what, where, when, why, how. We also encouraged making connections to other aspects of the war and provided some help citing sources.

Students completed this research in one 50-minute session. The other preparation for this phase included creation of a wiki that provided a separate work space for each topic, including the graphic organizer students completed. At the end of the second phase, each class had created a web resource that provided detailed information about the many battles, events, and people we wanted the students to be able to connect.

In the final phase, students worked individually at computers and used research products generated by all the classes who participated – in this case, three sections – to help review and deepen understanding as they made connections among the many elements of World War II.

RESULTS

In debriefing the project, we noted several favorable results:

- Even though students individually completed less research, their final products reflected a deeper understanding of the overall unit content.
- Virtually 100 percent of the students completed both the research and the concept map, a statistic almost unheard of at our school.

- Many students returned to the wikis and concept maps to add information after class, even though this was not required. Students were highly engaged with the content.
- Class scores on the multiple choice unit test – similar to the state’s standardized test format – were higher than on previous unit tests.

REFLECTIONS ON WHAT WORKS

Most of us who work with K–12 students invariably watch at least some aspect of a unit fall short, and speaking personally, my shortcomings in planning and execution of lessons frustrate and at times haunt me because of the missed opportunities they represent. This unit was unusually successful on many levels, so reflecting on the reasons for that success may help duplicate it in the future:

Backward planning: It was our early focus, on what we wanted students to deeply understand and an identification of a product that could reflect such understanding, that drove our entire design. This vision included the state learning standards but went much further in what we wanted students to understand.

Shared teaching: The classroom teacher assumed responsibility for helping students extract, organize, and cite information. The teacher librarian worked with students to help them record notes that reflected the essence of their

topic and to connect it to the topics other students were researching. In other words, the classroom teacher and teacher librarian taught both content and information literacy skills.

By contrast, deep learners demonstrate an integrative approach to knowledge building. They are focused not so much on the simple gathering of facts, but on using facts to build explanations, to synthesize facts into more abstract groupings, and to reflect on the synthesis and analysis of facts to draw conclusions, make predictions, and stake out positions.

Compressed stockpiling, extended analysis: Students spent less time completing individual research and more time analyzing data for deeper understanding.

Collaborative knowledge-building: Students relied on each other’s research and analyses to create their own understandings. Redundancy of topics across classes helped address some unevenness of research among students.

Alternative assessment: Rather than relying on an assess-



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ment that is exclusively language-bound, the concept maps allowed students to reflect their understanding of content visually, an important consideration for second-language and special needs students.

Transparent technology: The wikis allowed students to share their research within and among classes. Inspiration allowed students to move elements around easily, create color, and shape schemes to communicate their groupings, and add text to their concept maps more easily. Instructions in the use of these tools routinely took just a few minutes. The focus of interventions was, therefore, not on the use of the technology but on their understanding of content.

Shared evaluation of product: The classroom teacher and teacher librarian shared evaluation responsibilities, leading to a better understanding of what worked and did not work in the unit design. This generated productive ideas for improvement.

For more ideas about collaborative projects and technology, visit David Loertscher's wiki from his American Association of School Librarians' Reno presentation at <http://aasl.pbwiki.com>.

CONCLUSION

What do we, the ivory tower professor and engaged practitioner, conclude about content and process learning in the classroom and in the school library? In the case above, we have evidence that learning was significantly enhanced. The library moved into the center of learning.

The classroom teacher boasted a higher success rate than ever before. For teacher librarians wanting their programs to become the heart and hub of the school, we are convinced that success comes through one unit at a time and one more, and one more until the reputation is strong and the buzz among the faculty is simply this -- if you team with the teacher librarian, your students do better.

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