

THE MANY FACES OF SCHOOL LIBRARY LEADERSHIP

Second Edition

Sharon Coatney and
Violet H. Harada, Editors



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Shifting Our Vision for Our Futures: Leadership as a Foundational Element for School Librarians

David V. Loertscher

If one asks Google to define the term “leader,” one of the interesting ideas that emerges is the following: “a person who rules or guides or inspires others.” Notice that the three main words, “rules,” “guides,” and “inspires,” are given equal billing, and if applied to a teacher librarian or another specialist in the school who is not designated as the organizational boss, they seem at first to be contradictory. Yet, if we change the definition slightly to the idea that power (“rules”) is a result of guiding and inspiration, this juxtaposition takes on enormous significance.

The presumption by many is that the position of teacher librarian in a school is a relatively powerless position; yet, the same view is contradicted by the idea that information is power, knowledge is power, and wisdom is extremely powerful. Such a stereotype comes from the idea that the container of information, including the vehicle of delivery, is not important. That is, the telephone itself is not the important idea; rather it is the content of the messages delivered. It is not the keeper of the information or the conveyance that is paramount; it is the data and information delivered that are the primary concern.

For a half century, the position of school librarian has been viewed by those both inside and outside the library profession as a selector and disseminator of information via the various popular devices at hand: a room where stuff is housed, managed, circulated, and maintained. Over this time, the vehicles have changed. Consider the evolution of the book itself, accompanied by a vast array of audiovisual devices and the emergence of the ubiquitous digital devices.

When we centralized the containers of information a half century ago, the librarians held power because we were the sole source of information and the devices needed to use that information. We held the keys to the treasury. Cross us at your own peril.

Three factors changed the landscape: the transfer of analog to digital, the appearance of the ubiquitous computing device, and the appearance of Google. Thus, in the last

decade or so, a revolution of global significance has occurred: the democratization of devices, channels, and the information itself. Suddenly, I did not have to get out of my seat, walk down the hall, and enter the kingdom of the library. The library down the hall became a very minor information source as compared with the Internet; and, a vast and even overpowering information source was at my fingertips.

For those in our profession who presumed that the source of our power was the things and stuff we assembled and disseminated, the abrupt change has been disturbing. We have put up protective measures and arguments. Tradition, tradition, tradition has been the cry. The goal has been to try to legislate our position and force everyone into the tyranny of the past. It is not working and it will not work.

From whence does our leadership power emerge? Is it the stuff? The management of devices and delivery systems? The protection of things? From being the autocrat of a designated space? Sadly, our profession is split on this idea. I would pose the idea that it has never been about the stuff! If one reads and rereads the various standards and professional literature across decades, it has always been about the use of information rather than its existence that mattered most.

For many, the power of the position as teacher librarian came primarily from the transformation of things and resources into high-quality teaching and learning. Only secondarily did we rejoice in the means to the end.

We cannot fight, nor should we try to fight, the democratization of information and technology. It is a battle that has already been lost and was not our central role in the first place. The transfer of leadership power has already occurred. The sooner we transfer our source of power from things to the quality of teaching and learning, the better. It is not about the books. It is about the percentage of successful readers and lifelong readers. It is not about the information skills themselves; it is about the production of successful inquirers. It is not about the gathering of facts; it is about stimulating deep understanding.

All fields confront the same dilemmas in the era of ubiquitous information and information devices. Do we need doctors in the face of an onslaught of medical information at the fingertips? Do we need lawyers when the means of conducting legal business is freely available? Do we need athletic coaches or art teachers when the means to teach ourselves is readily available 24/7/365? Do we need teachers when the means of international delivery of instruction is possible?

Financial pressures and just plain ignorance have led to the question "Do we really need a library anymore?" The question arises when the assumption by both administrators and teachers is that stuff and devices were the central role of the library. Perhaps the enemy has been us all along. If we misinterpreted the source of our own power as things rather than enhancement of teaching and learning, then we must bear the burden of that misconception.

It is ironic in the face of conflicting information about the need for mammography at various ages that the advice is to "talk it over with your doctor." Yet, in the face of ubiquitous information and conflicting information, we do not hear the entire media community telling us to "consult your information professional." We already know that to just plug it in and turn it on in the world of technology does not automatically make a difference in how teachers teach, how kids learn, and how the results are achieved. So, why should we retreat as a profession? **We should not retreat.** It is fascinating that a parallel example is sitting right under our noses. Most school districts hired tech directors to manage both administrative and instructional computing. Taking our Google

definition to heart, many tech directors assumed that their power came from ruling rather than from guiding and inspiring. Suddenly, librarians discovered the problems associated with network dictators who were exacting organizational rules akin to centralized library rules. No. Do not. Cannot. Only on my timetable, not yours. Librarians are at the forefront of protest as access to information on any personal device becomes central to teaching and learning. Have we been hypocrites? Our message may have been: "You open your networks, but we prefer to keep control of our kingdoms!" We all need to realize that centralized control is neither desirable nor possible. Students already know how to get around locked networks. They also know how to get around the school library to get what they need.

Just like doctors, we need not concern ourselves with ruling over medical information or, in our case, the world of information; rather, we transfer our leadership power to guidance and inspiration, and we make ourselves as indispensable as doctors are. To do this requires rethinking, critical thinking, creative thinking, and sound decision making on our part. We cannot presume that what we learned in library school still applies. We have to question everything we have always done.

Happily, the sources of information we need to shift our own focus sit right under our noses:

- We have the means to understand the trends across the nation in education and the various disciplines of teaching.
- We see a parade of teaching strategies marching through our libraries week in and week out. This gives us a perspective on the quality of teaching that few others have in the school.
- We watch as children and teens struggle with information and technology as the new digital generation. Few others in the school see the range of student behavior that we see.

In other words, the transfer of our leadership foundation comes from the data streaming into our heads, if we will only pay close and analytical attention to it and respond in thoughtful ways. It is upon that foundation that we build a vision that will not just confront the present but one that has sustainability over time. We cannot shift to being guides-on-the-side and inspirers unless our own vision shifts.

Many in the profession have already shifted the source of their leadership power and others are in transition. Still others try to ignore the fact that their house is built on the beach and the hurricane is moving at a steady pace toward them. I see great hope in the behavior of the leaders in our profession. Here are a few examples:

- A growing number are transforming their libraries into learning commons where the ownership is passed from the librarian to the teachers and students.
- Library Web sites, formerly one-way streams of information, are becoming more conversational and Wikipedia-like.
- School improvement is being centered in the learning commons as the idea of experimentation, action research, trial and error, and change is centered in this neutral territory of the school.
- Teacher assignments are becoming conversations rather than dictates. Students, teacher librarians, teacher technologists, reading specialists, and other specialists enter the conversation, and inquiry rather than regurgitation becomes central.
- Library skills are being replaced with twenty-first-century skills. And, these skills are recognized as means to an end rather than ends in and of themselves. The skills drive deep understanding of content even when that content knowledge is shifting. The idea is that we are

smart and flexible. We make decisions based on the best information at our disposal and can shift those decisions as knowledge evolves.

- The emphasis of technology is not upon the devices, networks, and the flashy Web 2.0 tools themselves but upon their impact as learning objectives and challenges are faced. Technology is the slave of learning; learning is not the slave of technology.
- The packaging and delivery of information is not as important as the impact of those systems on teaching and learning. If everyone in the school could now read the latest blockbuster novel, then it is my duty to see that everyone can access that resource whether in print, digitally, or via audio.
- Collaboration and coteaching of learning experiences is still a foundational mission of the learning commons. “Bird” units and parallel teaching are not a part of the learning commons programmatic thrust.
- The teacher librarian sits at the table of the central governance of the school and, in particular, the councils that are pushing curriculum, innovation, and achievement.
- The physical space of the learning commons has the look and feel of a learning space rather than a storage space.
- The various network systems operate seamlessly on whatever a teacher or student has as their preferred access device.
- The learning commons is the center of school culture both in physical and virtual space. Everyone has a sense of ownership and wants to contribute to the “commons” concept. We all build, construct, contribute, help maintain, and learn to act responsibly, ethically, and safely. There is a predominant atmosphere of “You help me; I help you; and, we all help each other.”

There has been no more exciting time in the history of school libraries. Those on the carousel, however, have to reach out to capture the brass ring. Those who fail to shift their vision are already at risk of losing their positions. Industries that refuse to change, doctors who do not keep up, and individuals who do not keep retooling themselves are doomed. It is scary for some but the era of opportunity for others. It is the time to forge a powerful leadership position.