



In the United States, we are at the juncture between the Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative and Obama's Race to the Top with its promised billions connected to "innovation."

# Curriculum, the Library/Learning Commons, and Teacher-librarians: Myths and Realities in the Second Decade

DAVID LOERTSCHER

**A**s the second decade of the 21st century opens, every classroom teacher and adult learning specialist in the school (including teacher-librarians) is trying to answer the question of what needs to be taught to a generation of young people who face incredible global competition.

These same young people drop out of school at an alarming rate (Fox News, 2009), making them, along with many others, unhappy with the ways of present-day education.

In the United States, we are at the juncture between the Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative and Obama's Race to the Top with its promised billions connected to "innovation." Where are we now? What are our prospects for the future? To which wagon should teacher-librarians hitch our team? At this fork in the road, which path should we choose? What questions need exploration? What should our focus be? Perhaps a reality check linked to some possibilities might stir our thinking a bit as we face this decade.

**Myth #1:** What we teach in the classroom and in the library/learning commons is our prerogative.

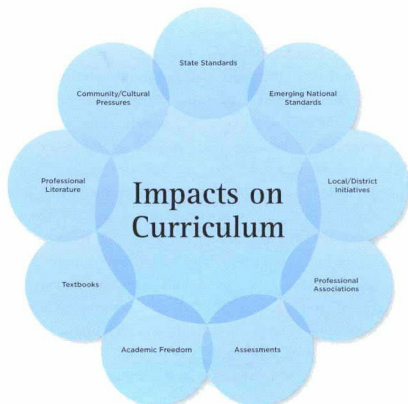
**Reality #1:** Others have more and more control over what we teach, if not how we teach.

In Figure 1, try to think of all the pressures on classroom teachers and teacher-librarians that determine what we teach. Frankly, it is a conglomerate of conflicting ideas and mandates driven by assessment, competition, and expectations. During the standards era of the 1990s, many professional organizations were funded by the United States federal gov-

ernment to develop standards that would help teachers determine what to teach in history, language arts, mathematics, science, and other disciplines (NCTM, 2001; NCSS, 1994; AAAS, 1991; NCTE, 1996). Of course, every professional organization thought their discipline to be foundational in education so when Robert Marzano (1999) did a major review of the total pool of ideas that young people should master, the list would require 20 years to teach at a normal pace.

As a result of the major national curriculum documents, most states of the United States wrote or revised their state standards. Those documents or their revisions are in place in many schools and districts as mandates of what teachers and teacher-librarians should teach.

Then along came the elephant in the room: assessment. One would think that assessments would be built to match the mandates of the state standards documents. Not so. Across the nation, government officials sought to get a handle on "academic achievement" so they could compare across schools, districts, states, and nations. The assessments did not match the state standards neither could they be compared across the nation. There were various competing tests that cost taxpayers enormous



**Figure 1.** The pressures on classroom teachers and teacher-librarians that determine they teach affect curriculum in so many ways!

sums as they became very popular with the general public who wrung their hands in dismay as test score after test score did not show any improvement in what they believed it should.

In order to compare the United States to other nations whose governments instituted a single test as a yardstick, the United States federal government created the NAEP test (<http://nces.ed.gov/nation-sreportcard>) given to a random sample of students in reading and mathematics. The results of these tests have been used in the past decade to compare student achievement internationally.

Students in the United States have not made the hoped for gains predicted that the No Child Left Behind initiative was pushing. Figure 2 illustrates this struggle between testing and the curriculum.

It was about the same time in Japan as their example of "exam hell" began to percolate into the classroom as teachers prepped students for testing rather than learning. In the United States, all eyes were focused on the classroom teacher. If only the teacher would use direct teaching techniques and cover the material to be tested, all was supposed to work. In some districts, teachers were told to be on the same page in the textbook as their colleagues across the nation so that students could theoretically get the same lesson at any school they

happened to be attending that day. Thus far, the emphasis on direct teaching is not showing up on national tests. Teaching to the test does raise scores minimally in the short term but researchers have yet to demonstrate that substantial progress in either math or reading is being made. Instead, researchers report minimal to flat results. Multiple analyses of the NAEP scores exist for both math and reading. One such interpretation is by Kevin Carey (2009). What began as a good idea that no child would be left behind ended up as a program to bring every child up to a minimal level and to grade level; to fill gaps and in the end, to mediocrity.

Now, the National Governors Conference has sponsored a set of national common core standards that has been in draft

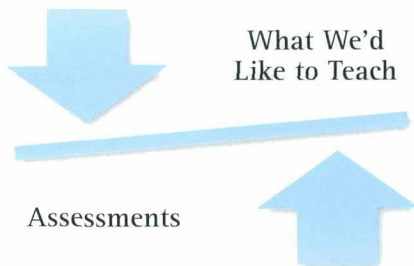
form and should emerge in 2010 (<http://www.corestandards.org>). Reading and mathematics are the first of these standards and their effect on states and local standards are a matter of conjecture at this point.

**Implication #1:** Teacher-librarians in schools where textbook lecture approaches, direct teaching, and lockstep coverage are the predominant practice will find a very high wall and locked door into the kingdom of the classroom. Stimulating interest in various topics and having resources that will be about these topics and accessible to students for individual work, will not happen. This is true for any of the specialists in the school such as reading teachers, instructional supervisors, and teacher technologists. Holding on to a library program/learning commons is viewed as an expensive frill that does not and cannot raise achievement in spite of the Lance research to the contrary (2005, 2002). When budget woes hit a school, any frill program is subject to cuts immediately, particularly one as expensive as the library/learning commons.

**Myth #2:** Assessment is going away.

**Reality #2:** Assessment is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

While legislatures and governments seem unable to resist the pressures of testing, testing, and more testing in spite of its astronomical cost to the taxpayer, some modifications may be in the wings. Strong arguments have been made to test not only what a young person knows but also their 21st century learning-how-to-learn skills. While the United States currently uses the



**Figure 2.** The current assessments model presents a weight on our best intentions.



## JUNIOR FICTION

### REACHING FOR A DREAM

**A doctor like Papa.** Natalie Kinsey-Warnock, James Bernardin. HarperCollins, 2002. \$14.99. 978-0-060-29319-2. Grades 4-6. Margaret desperately wants to be a doctor, but Mama says it's too hard and dangerous a life for women. Then, when an influenza epidemic hits Vermont, Papa needs her help to care for the sick. Will Mama's words prove correct?

**The kite fighters.** Linda Sue Park. Clarion, 2000. \$15.00. 978-0-395-94041-9. Grades 4-6. In 1473, as two Korean brothers combine their skills at kite-making and kite-flying to enter the New Year kite competition (at their young emperor's secret request), they discover their destinies and learn to trust and respect each other.

**Leading ladies.** Marlee Matlin. Doug Cooney. Simon and Schuster, 2007. \$15.99. 978-0-689-86987-7. Grades 3-6. Megan may be deaf, but it isn't going to keep her from pursuing her dream: to play Dorothy in her fourth-grade class's version of *The Wizard of Oz*.

**Lumber camp library.** Natalie Kinsey-Warnock, James Bernardin. HarperCollins, 2003. \$4.99. 978-0-064-44292-3. Grades 4-6. Ruby loves to read and wants to be a teacher, but when Pa dies in a log jam, Ma goes to work and Ruby has to drop out of school to care for her siblings. Is Ruby's dream dead?

**Sunny Holiday.** Colleen Murtagh Paratore. Scholastic, 2009. \$15.99. 978-0-545-07579-4. Grades 4-7. Sunny loves dandelions, holidays, dancing, the color yellow, and her parents. She doesn't like having to visit Papa in prison, her mama's mean boss, and living in a run-down neighborhood with no park. So, things are gonna change...

NAEP test for international comparisons, its multiple choice mostly content-knowledge test items do not reflect higher-order thinking or other 21st century skills. One possibility is to move to the PISA international test (Programme for International Student Assessment, [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)) that requires students to read longer passages with problems that need solutions. A test like this does tap many 21st century skills so both content and process knowledge is being assessed.

**Implication #2:** Should the opportunity arise for multiple assessments of both content knowledge and 21st century skills, the door to teacher-librarians should be open considerably further than at any time over the last decade. Teacher-librarians will need to take advantage of such opportunities. To get prepared to do this, teacher-librarians need to assess the effect on student learning of the information and technological resources they supply to students during a learning experience in the library/learning commons. It does little good to say, "I taught them to evaluate web sites" or "They used a wiki to accomplish a collaborative task." One must be able to point to the result of better information or effect on wikified projects. What was better? For what percentage of the students? Utilize Big Think strategies (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2009) to jointly assess content and process knowledge on co-taught units with teachers. If you can begin reporting outcome every time there is an intervention of the library into a learning experience, you will be ready to take advantage of any shift in assessment from content knowledge toward 21st century skills.

**Myth #3:** The curriculum of the classroom teacher and the learning commons are two separate spheres of work. That is, the teacher should concentrate on content knowledge and the teacher-librarian should concentrate on 21st century skills (including information literacy).

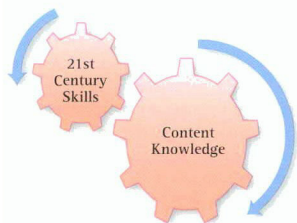
**Reality #3:** No one in education seems to have recognized that teacher-librarians "took over" information literacy and now 21st century skills. Both content and learning-how-to-learn has always and continues to be the role of the classroom teacher.

A popular scenario for teacher-librarians over the past two decades has been to homestead the territory of information literacy skills, create a curriculum, and teach the various skills at an appropriate grade level—all in an isolated approach. The theory has been that if one could dictate information literacy as a part of the state curriculum and test the skills, teacher-librarians would have job security.

A second scenario is that 21st century skills are means to ends and should be integrated into content learning. In this view, the teacher-librarian and the classroom teacher join forces to push both content and learning skills together. For example, during a research paper project, the real function of the research skills lesson is to teach the student how to master content knowledge. Figure 3 demonstrates this idea.

Notice that the learning skills drive the construction of deep understanding. If separated and taught in isolation, the result will be the same as pushing on the clutch of an automobile. If the clutch is disengaged, the auto goes nowhere. One can argue and find supportive research that content knowledge will never reach excellence without engaging process skills. Thus, reading skills, information skills, media literacy, critical thinking, and creative thinking are inseparably connected to content mastery and invention of new knowledge.

If a learner uses 21st century skills to master topical knowledge, we advocate that transfer and sophistication grows topic by topic across grade levels until a sense of confidence that "I can learn anything I want to learn" is part of a learner's dispositions.



**Figure 3.** The wheels turn together....

Teacher-librarians are sharply divided on this idea as demonstrated in two AASL publications. For example, the new national guidelines, *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (AASL, 2009) charges teacher-librarians to integrate information literacy into co-taught learning experiences. However, *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner in Action* (AASL, 2009) created by a different AASL committee advocates grade by grade teaching of information literacy skills as a curriculum with only some reference to integrated teaching.

**Implication #3:** Both sides of the argument for a 21st century curriculum taught in isolation and the integrationists need to do a major test of both systems—particularly in the age of Web 2.0 technologies to test a variety to benefits to learners using either or both ways. A major study of best practices needs to be done on this issue. In the meantime, integrationists doing Big Think metacognitive activities can document with the classroom teacher the idea that “two heads are better than one.” The isolated teaching of curriculum folks should be able to document the effect of their work on the basis of learning outcomes rather than merely time and skills taught.

**Myth #4:** Best practices research completed in the last several decades applies to the teaching and learning of the digital generation.

**Reality #4:** Best practices literature often relies on a body of research literature. One of the most quoted authors in this area is Robert Marzano. If one examines the body of research on which he bases his major recommendations, we find that almost all of the research cited is before 2000 (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). This means the best practices are based on research with young people before the major revolution in information and technology happened. The reality for the digital generation and best practices that reach this generation of learners is still evolving (Bowman & Lackie, 2009).

**Implications #4:** Since many teacher-librarians have embraced Web 2.0 tools in their teaching and collaborative activities

with classroom teachers, action research can help sort out what best practices of the past combined with solid strategies in the new world of information and technology actually contribute to learning and push excellence. During and at the conclusion of collaborative learning activities with classroom teachers, take the time to include both formative and summative assessments of both content knowledge and process skills. A body of local action research results will inform the adult partners about what works best with the crop of learners you have at the present time (Moss & Brookhart, 2009). Know the research and contribute to it with your own findings as well.

**Myth #5:** Inquiry as a teaching and learning strategy is dead in the face of state and national assessment practices.

**Reality #5:** Major voices across education continue to push creativity in teaching approach: inquiry, engagement, real learning, global outreach by students, project-based learning, Understanding by Design, differentiation, dispositions, and excellence. Attend any ASCD or ISTE conference. Follow professional publications of Solution Tree, Corwin Press, or Stenhouse among others to note the number of titles devoted to more constructivist strategies and ideas. There is a war of ideas and practices out there. Assessment tends to drive the behaviorist and direct teaching ideas, but teachers looking for engagement, creativity, critical thinking, and outreach are not deterred from sneaking in what they know learners want and regard more with increased effort.

**Implications #5:** The more teacher-librarians hitch their wagon to these counter voices, the more likely they are to lead the way toward excellence. As a profession, we have no future in direct teaching; teaching to the test; rigid objectives—lecture, guided practice, and standardized testing. The learner automatically regurgitating prescribed content is not anything that appeals to us. However, when we promote high level learning experiences in place of *bird units*, we must assess the difference in outcome and results, making sure we shout out the achievement of excellence. Every-

one understands that when we collaborate, learners win. Those classroom teachers who ignore us do so at their learner's peril.

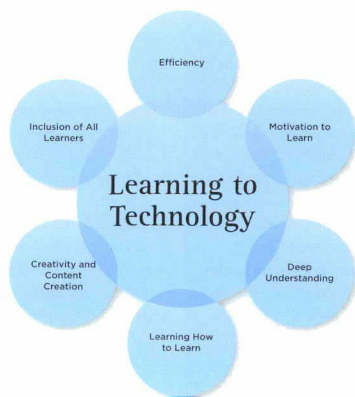
**Myth #6:** Technology is making a difference in teaching and learning.

**Reality #6:** Some applications do make a difference. Most do not—at least it is yet to show up in the evidence. The problem at this point seems to be that many teachers are merely transferring already poor or just plain bad assignments from one medium to another. What was poor on paper is still poor no matter the delivery system. Still others invest their time in the glamour of technology concentrating on a tech tool and its potential uses vs. starting with a learning problem and diagnosing which tech tool can help.

In the first approach, we may provide teachers with many ideas of how a Wiki can be used in their classes. In the learning to technology approach we may diagnose that a class lacks motivation to engage, so we introduce an exciting new technology coupled with a “real” learning experience. Figure 4 illustrates some of the major learning outcomes begging for tech assistance.

While we have covered many specific applications that boost specific learning challenges elsewhere (Marcoux & Loertscher, 2009), several examples here might illustrate the point of prescription to meet a learning need. For example, to increase learning efficiency in less time, we use Wikis to facilitate collaborative writing in a shorter amount of time than if products were edited serially by group members on paper. In order to build deep understanding of major concepts we might use collaborative online graphic organizers edited in real time. For inclusion of all learners, we might offer materials in text, audio, video, and assistive devices at various levels of complexity. We hold the technology accountable to produce the results we desire rather than dazzle and hope for a possible impact.

**Implication #6:** Teacher-librarians who ground themselves in the possible applications of technology devices, software, Web 2.0 apps, and online resources, transform that knowledge into prescriptive “cures” during collaborative lesson creation with



**Figure 4.** Technology would certainly make a difference in meeting any of these learning goals.

classroom teachers. Together the team chooses technologies to meet a learning challenge and rejoice in the results or the next time around, find a technology that will accomplish the learning goals. Classroom teachers keep coming back to the "physician" who delivers the cures.

**Myth #7:** School libraries make a difference in teaching and learning.

**Reality #7:** Many research studies done by Lance, Todd, Achterman, and others have been conducted in the following states and Canadian Provinces including Colorado, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Alaska, Florida, Ohio, Delaware, Michigan, Minnesota, Indiana, Illinois, North Carolina, Texas, Wisconsin, California, Ontario (Canada), and Idaho. (Reports, presentations, and brochures are available at <http://www.lrs.org/impact.php#on>. Printed copies of studies are available at <http://lmc-source.com>.) Repeatedly, school libraries are linked with achievement. However, the problem lies in the type of research performed in these studies. The studies use either correlational or qualitative research, neither of which is acceptable by the United States Department of Education as gold standards research such as experimental or quasi-experimental research design.

What this means is that we cannot say certain characteristics of a school library

program CAUSE higher achievement. We do know that schools that care enough to have high quality library programs also have higher achievement scores. It does not mean, if a school principal hires a teacher-librarian and implements a library program, scores will go up automatically. We might expect some influence. We might anticipate a consequence if we provide a certain set of services. Over and over and over, we do see an effect. Why? And why, if the correlation is so strong do teacher-librarians continue to lose their jobs to support personnel? In times of financial exigency, few jobs are safe, but teacher-librarians can be confident that high quality school library programs have and continue to have an effect. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies need to be done. In the same breath, both co-relational and qualitative research methods have been acceptable for a century and are likely to continue as quite acceptable research methods.

**Implication #7:** The various national and state studies of school library impact are interesting and informative when establishing a set of program services likely to make a difference. The problem is, however, what makes a difference in your school, with your teachers, with your set of students and community? There are a number of professional resources available

that help teacher-librarians discover their own effect on teaching and learning in their particular schools (Loertscher & Todd, 2003).

Ross Todd and others have been urging and demonstrating the power of evidence-based practice on what we decide to emphasize in our programs (2004). We can be certain that support and supply services in and of themselves do not make enough difference to brag about. It is the demonstration of actual impact of technology, information, books, 21st century skill integration, and collaborative construction of learning experiences that can be probed for direct impact. Using the measures we already know day in and day out, adding up the resulting effect over time, and reporting the results to everyone who will listen is the strategy that will provide the best predictor of our indispensability in each school where we practice.

### QUESTIONS FOR THE DECIDE AND COROLLARIES FOR INDIVIDUAL PROGRESS

As we think of the next decade, what are the possibilities to consider? What are the questions that come to mind? Here are a few.

1. Do learners really thrive and excel in a technology-rich environment? Corollary: Do my learners actually thrive in the environment I have provided?
2. Do learners subjected to a high-quality information environment develop a higher quality of deep understanding than kids who merely surf the Net? Corollary: When I co-design learning experiences with teachers, what evidence is there that high-quality information makes a difference in their products and learning?
3. Does the move toward a client-side based learning commons place the traditional school library at the center of teaching and learning? Corollary: As my program moves toward a learning commons, what evidence do I have that it has moved closer to the center of teaching and learning?
4. Does the development of knowledge building centers that turn directive assignments into conversations among classroom

teachers, students, teacher-librarians, and other specialists have an effect on what is learned and how it is learned? Corollary: What evidence has come from knowledge building centers I have constructed that both individual and group learning was enhanced by this collaborative space?

5. Is inquiry equal to or superior to direct teaching in terms of both content understanding and 21st century learning abilities? Corollary: When the teacher and I have turned boring research into exciting inquiry, what major differences make the added effort worth the work and time invested?

6. Can teacher-librarians really develop a track record of evidence-based practice that will hold up under school, district, state, and national scrutiny? Corollary: What measures do I take on a regular basis that demonstrate results rather than the input of things, materials, teaching time, visits, and access? Who believes the data I collect and report?

Finally, looking ahead at this new decade, we can be sure of a few things:

- Technology and its potential to educate and learn will continue to grow over time.

- Alternatives to the printed book are likely to lead to more and more reading on line. It will be the kids and teens who decide what media they prefer. It will be our job to provide access to what they want and need on whatever devices they prefer and certainly wherever and whenever they care to access what we have to offer.

- The continuing global competition is not going away. High expectations for content knowledge linked with extremely strong 21st century skills is likely to predominate as we try to help our kids push beyond mediocrity toward excellence.

- Research, both formal and action research must blossom more than ever if we are to be a dynamic part of the best teaching and learning.

- High expectations for teacher-librarians in what they know and can do are rising. We will look to our best and brightest to lead this profession into the center of teaching and learning.

## REFERENCES

American Association of School Librarians. (2009). *Empowering learners: Guidelines for school library media programs*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

American Association of School Librarians. (2009). *Standards for the 21st-century learner in action*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

Bowman, V. & Lackie, R., eds. (2009). *Teaching generation M: A handbook for librarians and educators*. New York: Neal-Schuman.

Carey, K. (2009). NAEP Math 2009: What it all means. Retrieved January 2, 2010 from <http://www.quickanded.com/2009/10/naep-math-2009-what-it-all-means.html>.

High school graduation rates plummet below 50 percent in some U.S. cities. Retrieved December 31, 2009 from <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,344190,00.html>.

Lance, K. C., Rodney, M. J., & Hamilton-Pennell, C. (2005). Powerful libraries make powerful learners: The Illinois study. Canton, IL: Illinois School Library Media Association. Available at [www.islma.org/resources.htm](http://www.islma.org/resources.htm).

Lance, K. C. & Loertscher, D. V. (2002). *Powering achievement—School library media programs make a difference: The evidence mounts*. 2nd ed. San Jose, CA: Hi Willow Research and Publishing.

Loertscher, D. V., Koechlin, C., & Zwaan, S. (2009). *The big think: Nine metacognitive strategies that make the end just the beginning of learning*. Salt Lake City, UT: Hi Willow Research & Publishing.

Marcoux, E., Loertscher, D. V. (2009). *Achieving teaching and learning excellence with technology*. *Teacher Librarian*, 37(2), 14-22.

Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Marzano, R. J., Kendall, J. S., & Gaddy, B. B. (1999). Deciding on 'essential knowledge'. *Education Week*, 18(32), 68, 49.

Moss, C. M., & Brookhart, S. M. *Advancing formative assessment in every classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

National Council for Social Studies Task Force. (1994). National Task Force for Social Studies Standards Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. Waldorf, MD: NCSS Publications.

National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association. (1996). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Retrieved December 31, 2009 from <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/Sample/StandardsDoc.pdf>.

National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2001). *Principles and standards for school mathematics*. Retrieved December 31, 2009 from <http://standards.nctm.org>.

Rutherford, F. J., & Ahlgren, A. (1991). *Science for all Americans: American Association for the Advancement of Science project*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press.

Todd, R. (2004). Knowing and showing how school library programs help students learn. Retrieved January 2, 2010 from <http://www.accessola.com/osla/toolkit/Home/EBPLinks.html>.

David V. Loertscher is coeditor of *Teacher Librarian*, author, international consultant, and professor at the School of Library and Information Science, San Jose, CA. He is also president of Hi Willow Research and Publishing and a past president of AASL.