

Design Thinking and the New AASL Standards

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Scenario: As a part of the STEM program of the school, the principal wants to incorporate design thinking into the various student projects. It would function as a kind of “genius hour” where 80% of the students’ time is spent in class, but 20% is devoted to creation, invention, design, and creativity—as the students create their own projects and work either as individuals or in small groups. Knowing that you have just returned from the AASL National Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, where you were introduced to the new National School Library Standards, he invites you to the next professional development meeting to share in 5 minutes what the new standards say about the design thinking plan and how the library can respond.

This column continues the discussion from the October 2017 *What Works* column of *Teacher Librarian* about creation, design, invention, and other projects that stimulate makers. The request from the principal could have been about almost any major initiative that is starting or under way in the school. The requisition could have been about personalized learning, a major reading initiative, mastery, or ESSA plans, just to name a few contemporary issues.

Consulting the index to your copy of the standards, you notice that none of the current popular terms in education are included, so an intensive search of comparable ideas will need to take place. This column is a record of our own search and analysis of the standards in order to incorporate them into any schoolwide initiative rather than trying to build an isolated library kingdom with an independent and separate mission from the school.

The first challenge of the standards is to figure out the structure of the volume as an entry point into specific topical concerns. In order to get our head around the standards, we did the following:

- Embraced three approaches to get a full picture of any topic: a section on learners, another about librarians, and the third one about the library
- Used visual models or large and extensive tables
- Focused on six major areas for each learner (inquire, include, collaborate, curate, explore, engage), with subtopics of think, create, share, and grow

From the initial orientation to the standards, we took two dif-

ferent approaches. Loertscher reviewed the standards book serially to try to discover design thinking clues, and Harlan concentrated her search using the standards app that can be downloaded for \$13 from the standards website. Here is what we found.

LOERTSCHER’S EXPLORATION

Standards for Learners and Clues for Design Thinking

- The learner is at the center
- The learner has choice
- Empathy, the first step of design learning, was used and described by the standards team in their study of “personas” or stakeholders, in order to ascertain what types of professionals would benefit from their work
- The shared foundations—*inquire, include, collaborate, curate, explore, and engage*—apply to the traditional form of inquiry where learners consider what is already known about a topic or issue. While there is some overlap with design thinking, the differences need articulation.

Standards for Librarians: Clues for Design Thinking

A major role of the librarian is to help learners progress from “thinking about knowledge needs to creating knowledge products” (p. 45) (One would assume that this would mean research papers, reports, presentations, etc.)

- Librarians encourage learner’s exploration and innovation at all levels in all curricular areas and areas of personal interest.

Standards for Libraries: Clues for Design Thinking

- The library helps learners explore relevant personal and academic questions.

Assessments

- Keep a log.

Putting It All Together

- Explores the idea of asking learners, librarians, and the library program to create knowledge. It is the place where the word *design* appears: “Problem solving through cycles of design, implementation, and reflection.”

HARLAN’S EXPLORATION

On the surface, the AASL app is a good deal, giving you access to the standards. It is clear early on that the information is limited compared to the full text, but it has some added value. The

app allows one to search the shared foundations, key commitments, and competencies. It also allows one to compare side by side the elements of the standards for learner, school librarian, and school library. Visually navigating the interconnected elements of the standard is an invaluable tool. For considering how design thinking is embedded (or not) in the standards, the ability to keyword search and search filters are also helpful.

In exploring the app by keyword, you will have to be creative with search terms. While the app opens up the results from the index, the language of the new standards is still significantly different from the language of design thinking. For example, in design thinking, the use of *empathy* is related to understanding a human-centered problem, whereas in the standards it is related more to encouraging respect and empathy for a variety of viewpoints. This makes more sense in the third step of design thinking: ideation. I used a variety of keywords, and eventually “defining the problem” revealed a common commitment that was frequently connected to problem solving: Discover and innovate in a growth mindset developed through experience and reflection. This is not immediately a clear connection, but diving deeper, we find competencies related to problem solving through design, implementation, reflection, and modeling persistence. Essentially, in regard to this point, in the process of design thinking, our own search and analysis skills will come heavily into play.

In regard to generating ideas to solve a problem (ideation), the skills involved return us to the idea of how empathy is used in the standards, which heavily emphasize both collaboration in problem solving and respecting the ideas of others. An important component in design

thinking is the element of ideation—brainstorming any and all possible solutions. Moving from ideation to creation, the testing and iterative element of the design thinking process of inquiry reinforces inquiry as ongoing, recursive, and needing time. The standards themselves are project and problem oriented, so searching for creating and testing a prototype is an exercise in frustration. There are too many entry points. One specific component of each key commitment (as represented in the app) is *create*, which is represented as a series of competencies.

Standards do not have to be prescriptive; they are a road map to a destination with different routes to the same place. Using them creatively and critically can prepare you to answer your administrator’s need to connect to design thinking. The app has less detail and supporting content than the text but allows for comparison and searches. But do not expect to easily find common educational trends; it will be your responsibility to collaborate and work with others to make the connections to your school’s initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In reflecting on our own analysis of the standards, it is quite apparent that traditional inquiry as assigned by most classroom teachers is the central focus. That is, learners are given a topic or choose one, investigate what is known about the topic, summarize what is known, and share some type of product. The standards go into great detail about this type of inquiry and then embed other program activities that the library could foster.

If the practitioner is going to make use of the standards for any type of local initiative other than traditional inquiry, an extensive search in the standards doc-

ument is required to ascertain any hints that might support that idea. Thus, in our scenario, the librarian would need to spend hours of searching and researching to provide the answer for the principal. He or she would need to be creative and well versed in the school initiative.

The \$13 app of the standards may be one useful way to get one’s head around a specific topic. And, if the pdf version of the standards is searchable, that may be another way to find a particular topic. However, as Harlan has pointed out, the vocabulary used in the standards can be quite different from the terms used in the larger world of education.

Our suggestion for the implementation committee of the standards is that they create more briefs or materials on current popular initiatives and link them to advice in the standards. We fear that without such interpretations, the standards will be ignored by the education community at large because of their complexity, cost, and a dense structure that is very jargonistic. Attention spans of professional librarians are probably decreasing as fast as those of their students, and busy administrators need speeches they can understand and repeat if they are to support the goals of the document. Just purchasing the \$100 printed document, if you are an AASL member, and handing it to the principal is probably not going to lead to the improvement of the library program in the school.

A much more in-depth review of the standards document will appear in the next issue of *Teacher Librarian*. Stay tuned.

REFERENCES

National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries. American Association of School Librarians, 2017. 328p. ISBN: 9780838915790.