

## **The Role of School Libraries and Librarians In the Digital Age**

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### **Abstract**

Technology is a game changer. The advent of the 21st century brought many technological challenges to school libraries. It affected the ways school librarians plan and implement library programs, as well as, the conduct of library services and operations. This paper compares two paradigms in which traditional library practice is based on versus current schools of thought on library practice as espoused by thinkers in the profession. From here, the 21st century roles of the school library and the school librarian are enumerated. Position statements on the contributions of school libraries to the attainment of literacy goals are included together with researches that prove the relevance of school libraries to student achievement. The last part of the paper is a brief report on school libraries, literacy and reading initiatives in the Philippines.

### **Introduction: My School Library Story**

The school library I went to in elementary looked like a small cave with its walls painted white. It had shelves pushed to the wall and books filled those shelves. But I merely looked at the books and did not ask help from the school librarian. My first library visit to the school library was in first grade. I was only six years old, but I was already a reader.

My grade one classmates and I went there as one class four times in a school year. We used a library card to borrow books. It took me four years to go to the library to borrow books from there. If not for my mother who pushed me to check books I could read and borrow from the library, I wouldn't have dared go back.

What happened in between my hiatus from the school library? How did my reading habits grow and develop? My mother filled the gaps. She's a librarian and at the time I was in elementary grades, she worked in a school library that's very different from my school's. She borrowed books for me. As I grew up, my reading choices changed and developed.

By high school, I became one of the few friends of the librarian. As for my mom, she did not stop bringing home books I could read until I was old enough to go to the bookstore on my own and buy books of my choice. In high school, there were a few of us book geeks who exchanged and swapped books. On some occasions, we would stay after school to talk about the characters we loved and hated. Our reading choices were an array of varied genres and formats: from romance to horror, fantasy to realistic fiction, comic books, magazines, anthologies and pocket books that were affordable even to our small allowance.

These days, to borrow books from the school library I use my ID number which is logged in by default in the library database. To read online journals and encyclopedia articles, I use a username and password. At home, I log in the Internet and, clicking the Bookmark button of my web browser, open the school library's OPAC for instant searching of books and resources. My kids, age 15 and 11 years old respectively, read graphic novels, the Harry Potter series, Capt. Underpants, John Green, Neil Gaiman, and yes, Twilight. Sigh. To keep up with my high school students I read what they read, and more! A good number of them could not understand the book format, so we acquired three Kindles. This coming school year, we begin developing our ebook collection.

In the 80s and well into the early 90's I owned a Sony walkman and collected audio tapes. Two years ago, I bought myself an iPod and my eldest taught me how to search for free mp3 downloads online. I could use the sync and Bluetooth features of my iPod to transfer audio and video files from one gadget to the other.

Indeed, a lot has changed since the day I received my first library card.

### Technology and Library Paradigms

Enter technology.

It changes the way information is consumed, created and communicated. The examples I enumerated above are personal ones. It is merely a small part of a bigger whole . There are many ways in which technology has altered the rules of participation in knowledge creation and in the dissemination of information. In this day and age,

technology is not just a tool that can be used to improve our way of life. It has become an environment that must be managed. The advent of technological changes that is so palpable in the 21st century demands a new set of skills for us to function well and meaningfully. Having said these, it is the best of times and the worst of times to be a school librarian.

Traditionally, we apply literacy skills -- understand, interpret, create and communicate information from a host of media and information formats. These set skills are still relevant in the 21st century, however, with the influx of sophisticated tools capable of producing information so fast that it fluidly morphs information into something else every second, every minute, in an hour, we need to level up from traditional literacy skills to survival skills of the 21st century. If stability is the buzzword of 20th century thinking, then change is the word that defines the 21st century.

Tony Wagner, co-director Change Leadership Group at Harvard Graduate School identified seven survival skills for the 21st century (2008). These are critical thinking and problem solving; collaboration across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurship; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; and curiosity and imagination. The functional literacy we learned from traditional schooling, at least among people in my age group, remain essential base skills to move around content and comprehend knowledge. Critical thinking, flexibility, imagination, analysis, leadership and collaboration vertically and horizontally are new keywords school librarians need to embrace in order to endure and to remain relevant.

Let's see how libraries and librarians in general are responding to these changes?

In 1920, SR Ranganathan, mathematician and library guru of the 20th century devised five laws of Library Science. These are:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his [or her] book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism.

These are the principles and paradigms I learned in library school. And, I took it to heart. Ranganathan's laws speak of enduring truths and philosophy of librarianship. Allow me to go through one law at a time.

*Books are for use* - Indeed, if books are not read, its purpose for being ends at being a physical book. A book is a tried and tested technology for storing information and ideas that can influence and shape minds and ways of thinking. Books are not decorations on shelves. It must be organized, circulated, checked up for inventory, promoted, talked and discussed about. If its worn, call the book doctor for repair and upkeep.

*Every reader his or her book* - Not all readers are the same. A reader has his or her own information needs which, in traditional ways, can be answered by a book, a magazine, a journal. Libraries need to know its readers to address their reading and information needs. Librarians develop a collection that considers the contexts and experiences of readers.

*Every book its reader* - Books are intended for an audience. Children's books for kids; young adult fiction for teens; adult fiction for grown ups. Non-fiction and reference books cater to readers from different disciplines. A mathematician will always need his or her math books handy and available. History books, social science journals and magazines are on the top of the list of history professors, etc. In the library's collection development program, it is necessary that all disciplines are allotted a budget for book acquisition. When our readers go to the library, there is a library resource meant for their perusal and reading pleasure.

*Save the time of the reader* - Our library structures and systems must be efficient and effective. Assessment and evaluation measures to continue the effectivity of library services, systems and structures are regularly done.

*The library is a growing organism* - Ideas, information and knowledge change. Books and print materials as repositories of these ideas, information and knowledge must be revised, reprinted and re-stocked. The library collection must be updated to keep with the times. The number of readers and their contexts change too. Librarians need to grow professionally to better serve readers as well as, manage library systems and services effectively. Activities that promote literacy and reading contribute to a living and vibrant library program.

These paradigms exist and are practiced in many school libraries. Then again, with technology, library services and programs are not just about books anymore. Our readers, especially the young ones are born into the digital age. They are called the digital natives who dwell among us, digital immigrants.

What is the difference between the two? The digital native's language is technology. Growing up surrounded by computers, broadcast media and the Internet, digital natives process information differently from digital immigrants who read books and printed materials and witnessed the development and invention of these gadgets.

I am a digital immigrant. I had to understand the difference between a TV box and a remote control TV set of the early 80's. My children, 15 years old and 11 years old respectively, are digital natives. They need not read the manual of their new mobile phones as they learn using it hands on. Online, they read information not on linear patterns but in dynamic processes combining micro and macro thinking skills, part whole and whole-part relationships. They multitask while working on their assignments. My son has earphones, listening to the radio via mobile phone while reading a textbook. My daughter watches TV while completing an online journal. Because my husband and I are digital immigrant parents, we worry on the stability of their strategies to learn.

This is the digital age. This is the scenario that school libraries and librarians find themselves in. That's why, Ranganathan's laws were modernized by library thinkers. Michael Gorman and Walt Crawford did a variant of the five laws. These are:

1. Libraries serve humanity.
2. Respect all forms by which knowledge is communicated.
3. Use technology intelligently to enhance service.
4. Protect free access to knowledge.
5. Honor the past and create the future.

Let's play spot the difference. What changes can you see on the 5 Laws of Library Science by SR Ranganathan's to that of Gorman's and Crawford's version? What similarities are there? Remember, these "laws" were written in different eras and generations. What factors have shaped the evolution of the laws?

While SR Ranganathan's philosophy of a reader centered library service and a library that continuously grows in terms of collection and programs, Gorman's and Crawford's laws take on a perspective of library services that adhere to global citizenship, the moral implications of the profession, and the equitability of information access and creation of knowledge. This change from a stable knowledge base to a more dynamic and participatory nature can be attributed to technology, educational reforms, shifts in paradigms, philosophy and ways of knowing others and the world.

### The Role of the School Library and the Librarian

The school library, in this event of changes and shifting paradigms, has moved emphasis from collection development to student centered services to the development of lifelong learning skills (a belief system). Three ideas are perpetuated in lifelong learning: collaboration; leadership and technology (Information Power, 1998). With these movements, the role of the school librarian takes on new forms. The school librarian is a teacher, an instructional technologist, instructional planner, and a library manager.

It used to be that library management is the only work expected of school librarians. But, the dynamic flow of information and the technology to which it is stored, created and communicated has changed the rules of the game and how it is played.

School librarians provide physical access and delivery of information as library managers. The tasks like cataloging, classifying, keeping indexes and orientation of users on the library, its systems, collection and staff, and conduct inventory at the end of the year are fundamental services and programs of the school library. On top of this, school librarians provide intellectual and virtual access and delivery of information. In these cases, the school librarian assumes teaching and instructional technologist roles. It is imperative that when school librarians collaborate with teachers in the delivery of the school's instructional programs the library skills instruction, whether embedded

with Information Literacy skills or Media Literacy, is contextualized on students' culture and experiences. School librarians need to know teaching pedagogy and develop macro thinking skills to understand the school's curriculum. When teachers plan their unit lessons, school librarians are with them as instructional consultants, helping them source out resources, both in school and outside the community, and providing them with a wide array of learning tools and technology. Furthermore school librarians function as dialogue partners of teachers and school leaders in discussing methods, strategies and techniques in teaching students with different learning needs and styles. As technological advancements surround and bombard us with all forms and variety of information, school librarians need to be guided by three principles: upholding intellectual freedom; adherence to legal standards; and the observance of professional ethics.

When school librarians play active roles, as teachers, instructional partners and effective library managers, the school library's services and programs contribute greatly to student achievement.

In 2008, Scholastic published a compilation of school library researches dubbed as School Libraries Work! This document contains position statements of the National Commission on Library and Information Science of the US and highlights of school library related researches that were conducted in nineteen US states (from Alaska to Colorado; Ohio to Pennsylvania; Missouri to New Mexico) and in one Canadian province (Ontario). Researches conducted by the groups of Lance et.al (2002); Kuhlthau et. al (2004); Smith (2006); Todd (2004, 2005, 2006) spanning two decades showed similarly remarkable findings. The results of the empirical studies reflect the indispensable value of school libraries contributing greatly to student achievement. The presence of school libraries in the lives of children in grade school and high school levels lead to higher test scores; school library programs and services firm up study skills and research skills; the collaboration between teacher and school librarian leads to authentic learning with in the classroom and outside its four walls. The report further identifies four strong points on the role of school libraries (2008).

a. School libraries have an important role in teaching.

School librarians design programs that support the curricular offerings of the school. From the collection development program to the instructional program, school librarians consult, collaborate and work with teachers and school leaders for the planning and implementation of such. Pedagogy and curriculum are two factors that help librarians in creating a collection development program. School librarians can team teach with teachers in teaching information literacy skills and research skills. School libraries offer flexible teaching schedules to accommodate individual students, small group and big group classes.

b. School libraries are leading the way for technology use in schools.

School libraries provide information access to all. With this provision comes the

technology necessary for students, teachers and school community to use information. Computers with Internet access are present in modern school libraries. School librarians facilitate the training of these technologies to clients and users.

c. School libraries inspire literacy.

Students learn from the books, computers and resources available in the school library. When they read these resources and learn from them, a host of literacy and numeracy come into play. Many school libraries host storytelling sessions, book discussions, workshops and talks by writers and authors. There are opportunities where books and stories are created in the library as well. Art exhibits and performances can be staged in the library too.

d. School libraries don't matter without certified school librarians.

School libraries manned by certified school librarians are more likely to make a difference in the lives of students. The academic requirements and professional experience of certified school librarians prepared them to manage library systems, structures, programs, services in a wide array of technology and different learning styles and needs of students. Certified school librarians are bound by law and moral obligations to fulfill the task, mission, vision and goals of the learning institution.

The tremendous effect of this research prompted legislators in the US to create a commission on school libraries called National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (June 2007). The commission submitted the following resolution to the US Congress:

- a. School libraries be given and provided with up to date resources from print and nonprint materials;
- b. School librarians or school library media specialist be given a "highly qualified" classification;
- c. Every school library be staffed by a highly qualified, state certified school library media specialist.

In the UK, Williams, Cole and Wavell (2002) conducted a critical review of literature pertaining to the impact of school libraries on student achievement and learning in primary schools. Evidences to prove and support the positive correlation between school libraries and student achievement were present. The following were identified as factors to learning: teacher and librarian collaboration; quality and variety of collection; adequate funding; flexible provisions of the library's services and programs; quality and frequency of library input and participation in support of teaching and learning; qualified library staff; standards to enhance effective teaching and learning experiences.

The Australian version of the study (Lonsdale,2003) reported the same findings but

distinguished the following factors as affective and effective to student achievement and learning: information literacy skills integration in the curriculum and strong computer network connecting the library to the classroom. The study also shows that provision of school libraries lead to an exposure to print rich environment and free voluntary reading. This develops comprehension, grammar, spelling, vocabulary and writing style of students. A positive effect of school libraries in students' self-esteem, confidence and sense of responsibility for their own learning is indicated as well.

Indeed, these consistent findings on school library research supports the fundamental and vital role of school librarians and school libraries.

### School Libraries Here, There and Everywhere!

In a recent regional conference in Bacolod by the Rizal Library and the International Association of School Libraries (IASL) last April 27-28, 2012, many school librarians from local private schools presented papers based on research and practices, projects and initiatives which they implement in their respective school libraries. However, a gaping hole was left open by the public school library sector.

This is a reflection of the current state of school librarianship in the country. Private school libraries are better funded. Private school librarians have wider exposure to professional learning networks. Despite RA 9246 that regulates the practice of librarianship in the country and the revised School Library Guidelines (Order no. 56, s 2011) of the Department of Education that indicates staffing requirements for school libraries and standards of operations to be followed by both sectors, public school library system is faltering. The Library Hub project of the Department of Education is kept afloat

Then again, hope floats. Then again, hope floats. Take for example, the Library Hub project of the Department of Education that provides plastic bins filled with books for schools in the different regions has been in operation since 2005. The Mother Based Instruction that kicked off in 2009 may not be a school library initiative, but the development of instructional materials has involved school librarians based in Manila to help the government and private agencies involved in the project. Another project of the Department of Education that focus on school library development is the building of pre-school classroom cum school library. This is in actualization of the expanded preschool or Kindergarten program. With the assistance of AGAPP (Aklat, Gabay, Aruga Tungo sa Pag-angat at Pag-asa) Foundation, low performing schools are identified and school libraries are built there. The school library functions as a preschool classroom too.

Collaborative projects between librarians in public and private schools are happening. The Book Mobile project of De La Salle Zobel (Marco, 2011) is aimed at providing books to public school children in the Muntinlupa district. The school librarians of De La Salle Zobel tell stories when the Book Mobile visits a public school. Another De La Salle School, the one in Lipa, Batangas City conducts the same outreach project. The school librarians of De La Salle are cognizant of the literacy values brought by books



and reading. They have chosen the public schools in their district who are lacking in reading materials as recipients of their outreach activities. Similarly, the MUNTIPARLAS (Muntinlupa, Paranaque, Las Pinas School Association of School Librarians) conducts regular storytelling sessions and book donations to public schools in the area. By exposing public school pupils and students to books on top of the prescribed textbook readings

There are many non-government organizations who support and help school library development in the country. One example is Sambat Trust, a UK charity that assists public school libraries in Tanauan, Batangas by establishing a curriculum and context based library collection in public schools. The charity is on its seventh school library project. It provides teacher training to public school teachers on literacy activities and basic library operations.

There is also Sa Aklat Sisikat that has been organizing classroom libraries in public schools that run the Read-athon Program in grade four levels. Teachers are trained to conduct the program efficiently and effectively.

With the implementation of the K-12 program of the Department of Education this school year, PASLI (Philippine Association of School Libraries, Inc.) organized a forum where school librarians listened and asked questions on the new program. The roles of school librarians were also discussed to prepare the mindset in the successful implementation of the K-12 curriculum. The forum speaker, Dr. Ed Fermin, identified the roles of the school librarian in light of the K-12 curriculum. School librarians are library managers, instructional technologists and teachers too. I will flesh out these roles later before the end of my keynote. In the forum, a clamor for a standardized library instruction program where information literacy skills and media literacy are embedded came about. This would be PASLI's challenge in light of the K-12 program.

Speaking of library instructional programs, private school libraries like the Ateneo de Manila High School Media Center and the Assumption College Integrated School Libraries continuously update, not only their collection development program, but their instructional program too. The former implements an Information Literacy Skills Program following Kuhlthau's Guided Inquiry paradigm and model of information processing (Cabunagan, 2011). The latter, on the one hand, enriches its library instruction program for the elementary grades by subscribing to the Lexile - Academic Enrichment Program of Scholastic. The program helps the school librarians gauge the readability levels of students and matches them with books they can confidently read (Nera, 2011).

In the international scene, IASL and the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) reports school library initiatives and activities from different parts of the globe. I am impressed at the speed in which school library associations in Europe, the Americas and progressive countries address issues like transliteracy, Web 2.0 applications, cloud computing and media literacy.

In Portugal, public libraries are creating family reading programs. By coordinating with schools, reading programs for children as young as the toddler age are set up. In Honduras, training for school librarians was designed through a grant. Swedish school libraries are being established through new legislation supporting school library development. Nigeria has a Uniform Basic Education (UBE) Program that identifies the school library as an arm to promote education and literacy development.

Position papers like the School Library Manifesto (IFLA 2002) and the "A Library for Every School" proclamation (IFLA, 2010) serves as guide for practicing school librarians in the field. The manifesto contains the mission, vision and goals of the school library for which, on top of local and national standards, can be used as a set of principles to anchor school library practice on. The UNESCO's white paper on the Literacy Decade (2003 - 2013) explains the contribution of the school library in actualizing the provision of the right to read and the access of information to all. Another document which school librarians will find informative and helpful would be the new Media Literacy Curriculum by the UNESCO. This document is a guide for practicing school librarians in creating lessons for library instruction that has Information Literacy and Media Literacy merged integrated.

### School Libraries in the ASEAN

In light of all the reports, research and initiatives actualizing the important roles of school libraries and librarians, school leaders need to recognize the roles and support school librarians and libraries. A constant revisitation of these roles is necessary to maintain standards at par or beyond. Regular conferences such as this, is an initiative to keep the standards of school library practice in the Southeast Asian region in check. A professional learning network among school librarians of the ASEAN can be established to further look at similarities in practice and theory and vice versa. Furthermore, resource sharing among school libraries of the region is a project that can be explored especially with the use of technology as conduit or bridge between schools and librarians. We need to learn from each other and our experiences. We can collaborate and become leaders in our communities and the bigger society. We can build a better ASEAN through school library services and programs.

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