Microdocumentation of the Impact of Teacher Librarians on Teaching and Learning

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There always seems to be a worry across the profession about gaining and then holding jobs in a fluctuating educational market. As specialists in any school, teacher librarians are vulnerable—as are others such as art and music teachers—to layoffs at the slightest dip in the budget. I and others in the field regularly address the topic of indispensability—the idea that when push comes to shove, we are not the only employees of the school trying to hold our positions. Some argue that only through legislation can this happen. I argue that those who clearly demonstrate their indispensability are those who are most likely to keep their jobs. By indispensible, I mean those who have made a concerted effort to stay relevant in the expansive information landscape and the technological revolution. But one factor has remained constant for decades: Those who have learned to partner with teachers and coteach learning experiences with classroom teachers are those who are the most highly respected among their faculty colleagues and administrators.

We have the large research studies from the great Keith Curry Lance and Ross Todd that so many of us have touted over the years, yet often folks want to know if what teacher librarians are doing makes a difference. Do any of your activities affect the quality of teaching and learning and the resulting impact on student learning?

Some years ago, when I was doing many workshops around the country where both teachers and teacher librarians were in attendance, I kept noticing a common thread of comments by the teachers in the audience. The ad slogan "Things go better with Coke" kept being repeated by teachers as, "Things go better with my librarian." Better how? When? How much better? Those questions finally resulted in a study I conducted in 12 schools and published in *Teacher Librarian* (Loertscher, 2014).

The results surprised even me. Two thousand-two hundred teachers reported that when they taught a learning experience in the classroom alone, about half of the students met or exceeded their expectations. In those same schools, when coteaching happened between teachers and teacher librarians, 70% to 100% of the students met or exceeded both adult's expectations. Really? That powerful? I think that study needs to be replicated widely and in at least 100 schools, and here is how you can help.

First, we need to decide what it is that we do that would make such a major difference in a learning experience. We could eliminate many actions as improbable, for example:

- We circulate books regularly.
- We booktalk books.
- We teach students how to search a database and then send them back to the classroom not knowing if they used those skills in their research projects.
- We provide space in the library learning commons for students to use any time during the school day.
- We are careful catalogers of our collections.
- We put a list of tips on how to do research on our library website.

Such activities, while common, would not likely have the power to make a substantial difference.

Ross Todd said to me recently, "Propose a technique known as microdocumentation of impact." To me, this means concentrate not on the aggregate scores on standardized tests across all students; rather, document impact at the microlevel of the classroom—learning unit by learning unit. In other words, what difference did you make in a learning experience when you folded into the teacher's objectives your rich information world and the clever use of technology that might boost learning?

Fran Kompar in Connecticut, who works with a number of school districts who are adopting the learning commons model said to me, "Superintendents want to know the specific things that teacher librarians contribute to a learning experience." So we invented the LIIITE Model (pronounced as Light Model). Here are the six specific things teacher librarians can embed in a learning experience:

1. **L**iteracy
2. **I**nformation
3. **I**nquiry and Discovery
4. **I**nstructional Design
5. **T**echnology
6. **E**xpertise

Let's go deeper into specifics with examples of each of the strategies that might make a major difference in a particular learning experience (CT = classroom teacher; TL = teacher librarian).

LITERACY CUTTING EDGE builds skills and enjoyment including wide reading, digital production, and citizenship across many types of media and information formats and devices.

The TL and CT realize that the topic at hand will require the learners to build considerable background knowledge to be successful in the main project. They assemble a range of their favorite resources but also invite students to discover more. Instead of a one-size-fits-all textbook chapter, every student has a number of choices of background reading, viewing, and listening that they consume both as homework and in sharing the best sessions with their peers. The adults recognize that the students have generated substantive questions and are prepared to create their own projects. Perhaps we call this strategy "personalized reading/viewing/listening," since we end up with many levels of difficulty, languages, and interest levels.

While reading, viewing, and listening to information resources, the CT and TL introduce the learners to mind mapping to help them draw pictures of the major ideas they are encountering. The students use their mind maps during small group discussions mentored by both adults. The adults note that pictures often help English language learners join in the conversation much more easily. A much higher number of learners exhibit deeper learning of complex texts and ideas.

INFORMATION CUTTING EDGE helps learners discover high-quality print and digital resources across the global network.

While doing an inquiry project, the TL and CT encourage the learners to get very picky about what they read/view as they are exploring many resources. For each source the students choose, they need to justify their selection and tell why they rejected other sources. When examining the bibliographies used, the CT and TL note an improvement beyond just Wikipedia and random selections. In addition, the learners start to realize that there is wide choice in what they select, in addition to what the adults are suggesting.

As a part of the Big Think (Loertscher & Koechlin, 2009) activity after an inquiry project, the learners make judgements about information quality, fake news, propaganda, and who is saying what for what reason. Students who feel they have failed receive encouragement from their peers, so that the next time they do such a project, everyone will try to help everyone else be healthy skeptics.

INQUIRY AND DISCOVERY CUTTING EDGE coteaches inquiry projects from beginning to end; facilitates self-directed learning, making, and creativity.

During the introductory portion of a learning experience, the students get so interested in the relevance of the topic that they start suggesting what they would like to learn. The CT and TL provide their prescriptive plans and allow individuals and small groups to do what they want. They end up with self-directed projects that are much better than what they were going to prescribe. The difference in motivation, success, and progress in both topical knowledge and soft skill development are very apparent.

At school lunch, a CT and TL happen to sit together for the first time, and the CT is telling the TL about this unit she is teaching and how boring it is to the students and all the behavior problems that are resulting. The TL says, "Suppose you bring the students into the library learning commons for this assignment? I'll come up with a couple of ideas over the weekend and let's eat lunch together on Monday and we will see what you think." On Monday, the TL presents two ideas, and on Tuesday the students find themselves in a makerspace with a very different idea about what they can do to help them learn about the original assignment. The result is not spectacular but certainly not any worse than was going on before. The adults decide to continue the conversation.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN CUTTING EDGE codesigns engaging learning experiences that combine content knowledge and learning how-to-learn skills.

Tired of the old bird projects, where students chose a bird, did research, and made oral presentations, the CT and TL create an umbrella question about the various characteristics birds have. After initial research, learners are asked to compare and contrast characteristics. As merged groups, they build

a giant wall collage of various birds with similar characteristics and act as docents on parent's night. The adult mentors note the difference in deeper learning about individual birds but also about birds in general.

The CT and TL have usually collaborated by taking turns: You teach this in the classroom, and I'll teach this in the library learning commons. After reading an article about the difference between turn-teaching and true partnering, they decide to both be mentors with the students at every stage of the unit. Their first trial is a bit awkward, but they soon learn how to create a symphony together. The percentage of students who meet or exceed both adults' expectations increases dramatically.

TECHNOLOGY CUTTING EDGE

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The CT and TL recently attended a workshop on using the Google Suite of tools with their classrooms. They are both intrigued with the idea of collaborative writing, thinking, designing, and editing that can be done in real time with groups of students. They decide to embed collaborative work into a unit they have done together previously to see if it makes a difference. Their first experience doesn't yield much, but after practice a few times with the same class, they see major improvements in how the students work together and the sophistication of the learning when compared to what they have seen before.

When faced with a science project and the CT has a class of many English language learners, they decide to test a couple of tech games designed to build vocabulary. On the first day, for games in the library learning commons, they split the class into two groups. After 30 minutes of trial, they talk to the students and find out that one of the programs is fun and the other is boring. The second day, they abandon the boring program and pair up students so that they both get to work on the better program. The students are so interested in the adults respecting their opinions that their motivational level goes up and so does their vocabulary.

Previously, the CT had been using Google Classroom to give and grade assignments. Likewise, the TL had created suggestions for research on the library website. In conversation, they find that they are dissatisfied with the research products that the students have created. To work more efficiently, the CT makes the TL a collaborative partner in Classroom for that assignment. The new collaborative space combines the ideas of the two professionals, and the students discover that there is only one place to go for everything they need for their assignment. This simple change in the partnership makes a big difference in the outcome.

EXPERTISE CUTTING EDGE

contributes expertise to enhance teaching and learning through collaborative leadership.

After a Big Think with their students about a current project, the CT and TL realize that they could improve as adult mentors, so they decide to attend an upcoming professional development seminar together to see if they can get some fresh ideas.

When confronted with a biology project coming into the library learning commons, the TL recognizes that she knows very little about the topic of the unit. She asks the teacher for some recommendations and does her homework before the scheduled project. The CT notices the difference as they mentor the students through the unit.

Hopefully, these examples demonstrate the potential of overlapping/merging the classroom with the library learning commons resources, technology, and most importantly, the professional staff.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

I would like to ask at least 100 schools across the United States and Canada to participate in a simple microdocumentation of cotaught learning experiences between classroom teachers and teacher librarians. The time investment is very brief and tries to model how building-level teacher librarians could track the impact of the library learning commons and its professional staff on teaching and learning.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

During the months of September or October 2017, the teacher librarian is asked to coteach one or more learning experiences with any classroom teacher in the school. Coteaching is defined as a learning experience where the two adults plan, teach, and assess a learning experience as partners. After the learning experience is over, both the classroom teacher and the teacher librarian would respond to a simple Google Form questionnaire that asks:

- School name
- Grade level of the unit
- Position (CT or TL)
- Title of the unit
- Very brief description of the unit

- How many students were in the learning experience
- How many of those students met or exceeded both adults' expectations
- Any comments about the experience
- Name and email if willing to be interviewed or clarification needed

More than one experience can be reported from any participant and the cooperating teacher. No identification of school or persons involved will be reported. And the response should take five minutes—or less.

In research terms, the unit of analysis is the classroom, not the whole school. The decision on how many students met or exceeded adults' expectations is based on the assessments that the adults did, whether by paper and pencil, by observation, or by any other measure of content learning of judgments about the soft skills. Because the unit of analysis is all the students in a classroom, there is no need for fancy statistics; simple percentages of success suffice. In effect, the researcher is looking for patterns across simple case studies. Those who participate in the research report will get a copy of the research report. Hopefully teacher librarians will find this simple measure something they can use all through the school year as they prepare their annual reports and do planning with administrators and the faculty. For example, the local report might address how many times during the year the classroom and the library learning commons merged to conduct a learning experience and what percent of the students met or exceeded the adult expectations. Is the result better than the research done in the previous study where 2,200 teachers claimed that about half of the students met or achieved their expectations when they taught alone in the classroom? So what? And what's next?

Would we always expect success when coteaching happens? No. In the previous study, two schools reported problems. In an elementary school, there were so many school interruptions such as fire drills, snow days, etc., that the adults just gave up and moved on. In a high school, the language arts teacher expected sophomores to achieve college-level research paper quality in their first try. It didn't happen. The expectation bar can be set too high.

Do you want to be informed about this research project? Participate? Spread the word?

Please email David Loertscher at reader.david@gmail.com to be included.

REFERENCES

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