

Beyond Databases: Librarians in a Project-Based Language Arts Curriculum

Sarah Evans, University of Washington, 312 Miller Hall, Box 353600, Seattle WA 98195, sarahe@uw.edu

Abstract: This study examines how librarians were positioned and their expertise leveraged in high school classrooms enacting a project-based ninth grade English Language Arts curriculum crafted from design-based research. Using a sociocultural lens, a qualitative analysis of the data reveals that in most situations the librarians' lack of embeddedness in the school and students' lives positioned them as outsiders and diminished their effectiveness in scaffolding students in the research process.

The Major Issue(s) Addressed

Effective learning requires access to people and resources that represent experience and knowledge in the field of study (Barron, 2006; Bell, Tzou, Bricker, & Baines, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991). To support students in developing the skills required for completing research papers, librarians are often asked to provide their expertise as information professionals. A skilled librarian does more than provide books, but also mentors individuals throughout the research process, from task definition to evaluating the final product. Each student comes with a personal history of information seeking and use that needs to be recognized and incorporated into the instructional scaffolding. In order for a librarian to develop useful instruction, they need to know both where students are coming from and where they are going, having a vision of the curricular goals. These purposes are best met by having a librarian embedded in the school setting. (Dresang, 2013)

Despite librarians' value as information experts, many schools no longer employ a full-time trained librarian as a member of their staff. In order to meet the need for expert advice on the research process, a teacher may turn to local public librarians, particularly those whose work focuses on youth. While these public librarians are also information professionals, they are not embedded within the life of the school and, more particularly, the lives of these students. Additionally, they may not have knowledge of the curriculum and will likely only talk to the students a handful of times. In such a situation, it is unlikely that the public librarian's expertise will be fully utilized, given their limit connection to the students and their needs. Yet since many teachers and librarians across the country engage in this manner, it is important to explore the facets of this situation.

Therefore, this research poster explores two questions: 1) how are librarians' expertise leveraged in a school setting? and 2) how are librarians' positioned in a project-based English Language Arts curriculum? The data comes from a two-year designed based research project to create a 9th grade English Language Arts curriculum that is project-based and offers opportunity for interaction with experts. Analysis reveals the affordances and constraints within the school setting for leveraging librarian expertise.

Potential Significance of the Work

This work is potentially significant in two ways. First, it examines how adult expertise functions in the classroom. Second, it considers how librarians, who are often called into classrooms, are positioned within a curriculum. For many decades K-12 educators have sought ways to connect their students with "real-life experts" in their community. Librarians are a part of most educational communities, whether as a full-time member of the school staff and/or a trusted resource within the realm of student lives. Yet little existent literature in library sciences and none in learning sciences examine the role of these adult mentors in the learning of youth.

The Theoretical and Methodological Approach(es) Pursued

The author examines this research from a sociocultural viewpoint, considering the practices enacted in the situation. Particular attention is paid to the how librarians function as part of the students ecologies of learning (Barron, 2006) and how librarians were positioned within the curriculum (Wortham, 2006). Qualitative content analysis was conducted on video recordings of public librarians presenting in a classroom, survey data of student opinions about these presentations, and librarians' expert feedback on student work during the first year. From the second year, the author analyzed interviews with a school librarian and field notes from conversations with enactment year teachers. Initial themes were identified in consultation with experts from the research team, after which the author analyzed the data corpus for additional themes.

Preliminary Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

During the first year enactment of the curriculum, public librarians were asked to participate in a unit on current controversies and argumentation writing. The purpose was to have these librarians share their expertise in seeking credible information on current events as well as other parts of the research process. Yet because the public librarians were not embedded in the life of the school, their knowledge of the students and the curriculum was limited. Additionally, the teachers positioned the librarians as outsiders in how they spoke with and about them. When the librarians came to share their expertise in class, it was in the form of a presentation that did not draw on the students' knowledge of information seeking nor demonstrate the depth of knowledge and resources that the librarians could offer. Many students had seen similar presentations before and quickly became disengaged in the activities meant to assist them, later complaining about the librarians' visit. Later in the unit, the librarians participated in a potentially more effective activity by reviewing individual students' potential references for the argument paper and offering advice. Here the librarians were better able to assess the individual students' needs and scaffold their suggestions to maximize learning. Unfortunately, because of the students' frustration with previous interactions, most did not take the librarian's feedback seriously.

During the second year enactment, teachers of the curriculum at multiple locations were invited to use their local school and/or public librarians to participate in the current controversies and argumentation unit. Such a simple request proved complicated by the various administrative and political structures in different schools and towns. For example, in one situation the teacher worked as part of a special program that was being housed in another school building, and felt they could not access the school library. In another town, there was no school librarian and the nearest public library was a town away. In contrast, one of the high schools had a librarian working full-time on staff that had made an effort to become embedded in the life of the school. This librarian understood the curriculum and maintained positive relations with the teachers. Positioned as a reliable resource to the students, she was able to assess and respond to students in the controversies unit as well as later units. She observed changes in the students' patterns of inquiry in the library and found they asked more sophisticated questions as they participated in the units and she was able to work with them repeatedly over time.

Based on these initial findings, the implications are that librarians have the potential to be valuable partners in student learning if their expertise is leveraged properly. Librarians, whether on the inside or the outside of the school, need to be positioned as the experts they are by teachers and students. They also need to understand the curriculum and find ways to build on students' knowledge, not assume what they need to be told, such as repeating a stale presentation about databases.

Relevance to the Theme of the Conference.

This study is about learning and becoming in practice, in that we sometimes learn or become something unintentional when theory meets practice. In theory, as the curriculum was designed, utilizing the expertise of school and public librarians seemed logical and relatively easy to accomplish. In practice, the affordances and constraints of the school settings and the practices of the participants lead to librarians positioned as uninformed outsiders and students learning that these information professionals aren't able to assist them in achieving goals. While many schools had difficult situations with their librarians, the example of the well-embedded high school librarian provides hope that students, and teachers, can learn a different lesson.

References

- Barron, Brigid. (2006). Interest and self-sustained learning as catalysts of development: A learning ecology perspective. *Human Development*, 49(4).
- Bell, Philip, Tzou, Carrie, Bricker, Leah, & Baines, AnnMarie D. (2012). Learning in diversities of structures of social practice: Accounting for how, why and where people learn science. *Human Development*, 55(5-6), 269-284.
- Dresang, Eliza T. (2013). Digital age libraries and youth: Learning labs, literacy leaders, radical resources. In J. Beheshti & A. Large (Eds.), *The information behavior of a new generation : Children and teens in the 21st century* (pp. 93-116). Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Lave, Jean, & Wenger, Etienne. (1991). *Situated learning : Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wortham, Stanton. (2006). *Learning identity : The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning*. Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of fellow researchers Paul Teske, Annie Kuo, and Déana Scipio as well as the work of the University of Washington Institute for Science and Mathematics Education and Educurious Partners.