Becoming Teacher-Librarian 2.0

Anita Brooks Kirkland
Library Consultant,
Information Technology Services
Waterloo Region District School Board

If you've visited a school library recently, you'll know that it's a very social place. The only straight rows you will see in this classroom are in the stacks. Collaboration is the focus of teaching and learning strategies in the school library program. Teacher-librarians collaborate with classroom teachers to plan, teach and assess research units. The instructional approach in the library is constructivist, with students creating their own understanding, most often through collaborative activities, and the conversation continues with the school library providing fundamental support for independent reading and engagement in reading. There is no program in the school that is better suited to exploiting the possibilities of social software.

School Library 2.0

Indeed there are many teachers and teacher-librarians using social software to enhance student learning. In my school district a secondary library runs a blog, engaging students in conversation about the books they are reading. Students are now podcasting their own book reviews. At another school, a teacher uses a blog for literature circles. The wiki provides an ideal format for collaborative writing, and is being used very effectively to develop higher order thinking skills through conversation and collaboration. Students are using podcasting as a presentation format for everything from book reviews to interviews and research reports. A local high school podcasts its daily radio program so that members of the school community can listen in when, where and how they want. Classes are using social bookmarking to collaborate on collecting resources for research. Teachers and teacher-librarians are discovering ways to enhance student learning through authentic and interactive online experiences.

Fad, Fantasy, or Fundamental?

Is the use of Web 2.0 technology just a fad, or is it becoming a meaningful part of the instructional landscape? Is School Library 2.0 a fantasy, or is it becoming a reality? The fact is that while there are many examples of Web 2.0 technologies being used in schools, adoption is sporadic. The meaningful integration of information and communication technologies into the curriculum has always been inhibited by a number of factors. Using interactive web-based technology introduces additional concerns about the school's role in protecting student privacy. Typically there is significant bureaucratic lag in developing policies and technical infrastructures that keep pace with innovations in teaching with technology, a situation that is accentuated by the widespread accessibility of web-enabled tools outside the technical infrastructure of school districts.
But can we, as teacher-librarians, let these challenges prevent us from exploiting the potential of Web 2.0 technologies for program delivery and student learning? The world of information is shifting drastically, and we, as the information specialists in our schools, have a responsibility to understand these changes. Our students live their lives on the social web. In many instances, schools have been spending their energies warning students about the dangers of this online world rather than helping them develop the information skills and context necessary to understand it.

Web-based social networking tools offer huge opportunities for enhancing student learning. They offer great potential for facilitating the collaborative model that is the core of school library instruction. While there is sometimes a temptation to use new technologies solely for the engagement factor, these tools offer far more potential to improve program delivery and student understanding. Engaging in these technologies in this way gives students insight into the world of user community created information, making them more critical and discerning information consumers.

Now is the time for educating students about Wikipedia rather than warning them off it, and for exploring and exploiting the potential of social software rather than being overly fearful of its dangers. We need to learn about this huge movement, where we have access to the knowledge and opinions of anyone and everyone, and where the value of that information is assessed and ranked by the user community. If we are to remain the information specialists in our schools, we need to master this new media and understand where it fits into the broader information landscape. We need to become Teacher-Librarian 2.0 to help provide context for our Web 2.0 students.

Becoming Teacher-Librarian 2.0, Step-by-Step

**Step 1. Explore:** The best way to learn Web 2.0 is to explore Web 2.0. Take a close look at Wikipedia and how it works. Explore Technorati, Flickr, Digg, Del.icio.us and other flagships of the Web 2.0 revolution. Explore the world of podcasting through iTunes and the world of school podcasting through the Education Podcast Network. Subscribe to, and follow the blogs of leading thinkers in the school library world and the wider library world to engage in the conversation about these issues (see Professional Blogs to Explore at the end of this article).

**Step 2. Exploit Professional Learning Opportunities:** There has never been a richer variety of ways to access professional learning. The big conferences are critical in engaging us in the big ideas, and for linking with other teachers and librarians. More and more professional learning opportunities are accessible to us when and where we need them, especially where face-to-face learning is inaccessible. From the webcasts offered by The Partnership’s Education Institute to the blogs and podcasts where the conversation continues, opportunities for professional growth are coming to us rather than requiring us to go to them. We need to take advantage of Web 2.0 enabled learning resources to learn about the Web 2.0 world.
Step 3. Consider the Implications: Aside from the huge implications that all of this has for the broader world of information, what implications does it have for our own world of school library instruction? What new evaluation skills do we need to teach our students to help them assess online community-created information? How do we help our students and our fellow teachers understand the place of populist content in the far richer and broader range of resources available to us, online and offline? How do we help students and teachers understand that encyclopedias and the online community’s neutral view are not the most desirable for complex and academic research, where critical strategies include seeking out deeper expert knowledge and a broad range of informed opinions? How do we teach academic honesty within the raging debate about digital rights and copyright, and the emergence of the information commons movement? What are the implications for student privacy of using social software tools for instruction, and how do we move forward from the education community’s sometimes over-wrought focus on the dangers of the web to instruction that focuses on developing the critical literacy skills necessary to learn how to engage knowledgeably in the conversation? How do we assess the impact of using these new tools on student learning and use that information to improve our own practice? How do our own program guidelines and standards need to evolve to address our society’s technology-enabled understanding of information creation, delivery and access? We need to engage in professional conversation about these issues and collaborate on developing the solutions.

Step 4. Engage: If we wait for the book to be written that answers these questions for us, we will be too late, and the information landscape will have shifted further out of our grasp. The good news is that the reason our students are so engaged in the social web is because the social web is extremely easy to engage in. Interactive web tools are “user-friendly” by their very nature. Our professional role is to assess where they fit in the instructional program. From putting Wikipedia into context for students and teachers, using podcasts to deliver learning when and where our students need it, engaging our students in literature through discussion blogs or enabling richer collaborative research through wiki technology, finding and using these connections needs to become part of the teacher-librarian’s wide and varied instructional toolkit. It’s not a fad or fantasy, but fundamental to our role as the information brokers for our schools.
Professional Blogs to Explore

Blogs about school library programs:

Joyce Valenza’s NeverEndingSearch: http://joycevalenza.edublogs.org/


David Warlick’s 2 Cents Worth: http://davidwarlick.com/2cents/

Alan November’s AlanNovember Weblog: http://nlcommunities.com/communities/alannovember/default.aspx

Blogs from the wider world of libraries:

Jenny Levine’s The Shifted Librarian: http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/

Michael Stephen’s Tame the Web: Libraries and Technology: http://tametheweb.com/

Stephen Abram’s Stephen’s Lighthouse: http://stephenslighthouse.sirsidynix.com/