

Join Us

Head for the Edge, May/June 2002
Doug Johnson
dougj@doug-johnson.com

90% of what is known about the human brain has been discovered in the past 10 years.

I can't verify the factoid above, but it rings true. With the use of CAT scans and other technologies, the brain has become accessible in much the same way the sea became knowable once SCUBA gear was invented. And as understanding about the brain grows, doctors can change the way they treat its problems. The physician practicing medicine the same way she was taught it even ten years ago is unethical – if not an outright quack.

School library media specialists and school technologists are also practicing in powerful currents of change. Higher accountability requirements, new sources and formats of information, and new discoveries of how humans learn have led to fast and important changes in our field. And I would argue that is as important that we stay current as it is for the physician. After all, as one pundit puts it, doctors can only harm one person at a time; teachers can mess up a whole class.

It can be tough to stay informed. *There is just so much to learn!* I've a stack two feet high of unread journals from the past couple months. I get dozens of informative emails I shouldn't be deleting without reading each and every day. There are hundreds of books I've been meaning to get to. What's a person who works for a living supposed to do? Improving professional practice while actually practicing one's profession has been likened to changing the oil on a moving car. I agree.

There is hope. One of the most helpful and necessary things professionals in any field can do to stay informed and connected is to join their professional organizations. Really, really.

While a variety of excellent technology specific organizations like ISTE exist, I'm going to promote those that serve school library media specialists for now. These come in basically two flavors: state and national.

You can find contact information for your state's library media organization at:
<www.ala.org/aasl/aa_directory.html>. For example, Minnesota's state association is the Minnesota Educational Media Organization (MEMO).

The national organization for school library media specialists is the American Association of School Librarians, a division of the American Library Association. AASL's website is <www.ala.org/aasl/>.

I am really surprised more folks in our profession don't belong to either their state or national organizations, especially knowing what these groups can offer.

1. **Communications.** Most state organizations excel at this. Through newsletters, listservs, journals and regional meetings, I can keep up with the important happenings around the state. It's great to have that great human database of experiences to which to turn and learn. Check out *Knowledge Quest*, AASL's well-edited journal that presents a balance of research, best practices, and inspiration.
2. **Legislative action.** Our state organization formulates a legislative platform and hires a lobbyist to speak for us to lawmakers. We have been able to influence funding, professional certification, and state-wide telecommunications projects in this way. AASL and ALA speak on our behalf on federal education, professional standards, copyright, and information access issues.

3. **Conferences.** I'll admit it. I'm a conference junkie. Whether state or national, school library media conferences are wonderful for:
 - Connecting with seldom seen colleagues (Whew, I'm not the only hopelessly confused person in the world.)
 - Hearing keynote speakers (Cool. New ideas for the teachers' lounge.)
 - Attending breakout sessions (At last, practical advice for solving real problems.)
 - Visiting vendors (All right! Free pens and sticky notes.)
4. **On-going educational opportunities.** Professional organizations are a great source for workshops, done in a physical or virtual classrooms, that can help us all survive and thrive during rapid change. AASL's ICONnect offers email-based classes free to its membership in topics ranging from K-12 Internet Issues to Navigating the Web.

So OK, I have my problems with professional organizations too. They sometimes seem resistant to new ideas and new voices in leadership, becoming ideologically entrenched - forgetting Einstein's warning that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I question the political strategies of ALA at times. And like most people, I detest paying dues and going to meetings. But if any of these things are keeping you from joining, remember: If you can't beat them, join them. Then beat them.

My friend and fellow media specialist Tom Ross of Aitkin (MN) reminds us of perhaps the most important reason to join our professional organizations:

I am struck by our need to meet with each other to willfully engage in a battle for an optimistic vision for what we do. While the struggle for improving our media programs is often political and social, it is also a battle of the *mind*. If we remain alone in our understanding of the gifts we share with our students, we fail to feed ourselves the vital truths that will empower us to go once more "into the breach." We spend so much time flailing against the wind that we forget to rejuvenate and that tiredness too can undermine our goals, our programs, and our best intentions for our students.

How do we rebuild our vigor? By supporting each other, by taking classes where we sharpen our skills, by sharing our woes, by calling on each other, and by meeting together at conferences. We must celebrate the moments of magic we have experienced and strategies we developed to obtain those moments. In short we must be colleagues to one another. Because we usually don't have another media specialist next door, we must break out of our buildings and our districts and go and seek these experiences.

Tom, you're a poet. I look forward to seeing you at the fall conference!