Giving Up
Head for the Edge, Mar/Apr 2015
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My school librarian wife came home frustrated one day last fall. She had spent the afternoon looking for a classroom set of print dictionaries so she could teach her classes how to use guide words.

"Seriously?" I asked. "I don't remember that being a terribly important skill even when I had to use a print dictionary growing up on the prairie."

"It's on the state comprehensive assessment test," she replied. "You tell the politicians there are more important skills students should master."

Nice to know Minnesota is on the cutting edge of teaching whole-life skills - from life in the 20th century. I wonder if braiding buggy whips, trimming lamp wicks, sharpening quill pens, and formatting floppy disks are still essential for "career and college readiness" as well? Humans hang on to these old skill sets because nobody likes giving things up - or giving up on things.

In our personal lives, it's hard knowing when to give up on a project after spending a great deal of effort on it. It's sad to give up on a house full of fond memories even if the new house is bigger and closer to work. And to give up on a relationship, even when it's no longer supportive or even healthy, is usually heartbreaking.

As professionals, we don't like "giving up" traditional tasks or roles either - even when other jobs demand our more immediate attention and add more value to our students, staff, and organizations.

But as sad and painful as it may be, we need to start figuring out what we need to give up professionally. Every year, the school librarian's list of responsibilities increases. Digital content specialist, curator of resources for differentiated instruction, technology integration specialist, course management system trainer, professional development provider, textbook manager, 1:1 project coordinator, school website manager - the list goes on.

So what do we give up in order to shoehorn new responsibilities into the same 40 or 50 or 60 hour work week?

First let's establish some guiding principles on making these tough choices. We should ask ourselves about any task:
- Does it have real value to students or teachers?
- Does it help meet your school's specific goals?
- Does it acknowledge the rise of digital resources and the skills needed to use them?

Here are some of my suggestions:

1. **Give up teaching how to use print resources.** As fond as our personal memories may be of them, the atlas, dictionary, encyclopedia, and almanac are yesterday's news. Reference has all moved online. When is the last time *you* used a print dictionary except when playing Scrabble? Right clicking on the unfamiliar word to get a definition is so much quicker. Atlas or GoogleMaps? Almanac or GoogleSearch? Parts of a book or Search Inside the Book? Let's just take it as a given that no matter what the socio-economic level of the information seeker, such searching will be done electronically in our students' future.
2. **Give up original cataloging.** Still holding on to those volumes of Sears Subject Headings? Order your books pre-cataloged or use Cataloging in Publication (CIP). Nobody, but nobody, cares about the precision of cataloging except the librarian. Online catalogs have for years searched all fields, not just subject fields. Oh, did I mention that nobody cares about cataloging?
3. **Give up doing annual inventories.** Inventories are useful if your school burns down and the insurance company needs numbers on which to base its payment. That's it. Read the shelves with scanner in hand every three years at most. Better yet, get a volunteer to do it. Inventory is complete waste of time.
4. **Give up agonizing over reports.** The state needs to know the square footage of your library? You can spend an hour and be 99% accurate or I can spend five minutes and be 80-90% accurate. (Hint count the ceiling tiles both ways and multiply.) In 35 years of filing reports using my 80% accuracy in 20% of the time rule, no one has ever come into my library to check the accuracy of my figures. Johnson's "a job not worth doing is not worth doing well" applies to state reports as much as school reports.
5. **Give up teaching kids.** SAY WHAT? A library friend many years ago asked, "How is my time best spent - teaching a skill to a class of 30 kids or teaching a class of 30 teachers who will in turn teach 900 kids? No, don't quit teaching kids, especially one-on-one. But when prioritizing one's efforts and energies, give your role as professional developer priority.

Are there other jobs you could give up that would have a minimum impact on your program's effectiveness? Techie Tuesday inservices that no one attends? Reading every book nominated for awards? Reading the shelves? Playing computer technician?

Perhaps it is impossible for us to objectively judge which tasks are most important to our students and staff. We should be asking them, and our boss, of course, to help us prioritize. I'd guess our lists of indispensable and dispensable tasks will not be in perfect alignment.

An oft-repeated axiom is that "We need to prepare students for their future, not our past." As a lens through which we as librarians make tough calls on how expend our time, energy, and teaching priorities, that's pretty sharp focus.