Libraries in the age of information plenty

Head for the Edge, October 2014
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Our job is not to get back all the books, but to get back all the readers.

Libraries were created in an era of information scarcity. In the form of analog materials - tablets (stone, not silicon), scrolls, folios, and bound books - knowledge and narratives were rare, expensive, and easily lost, stolen, or damaged. The librarian rightfully was the "guardian" of the temple of information, charged with protecting the contents within.

But it's time to move on. Really.

The giant copy machine that is the Internet has made information plentiful. A smartphone with its 3G Internet connection makes available more books, magazine articles, and news stories than the largest physical library will ever be able to hold. So what is there for the library "guardian" to protect exactly?

The challenge for today's librarian is not to keep kids from abusing the library's stuff, but to get kids to use the library at all. The library experience for many learners is now completely discretionary.

When students and staff are not required to use our facility and our resources, we have to start thinking differently about our library's roles, rules, and attitudes - and our own as well.

I am putting on my library patron hat writing this column. Here are the biggest reasons I avoid some libraries - and what we as a profession should do about them.

1. **Unfriendly librarians.** I am always shocked when I see kids treated as an annoyance by any library staff member - professional, clerical, or technical. You fix this by firing the staff members with the negative attitude and replacing them with those whose personal mission statements include service to children. Those who understands it is their job to be bothered. The staff should be the primary reason for coming to the library - not the reason one avoids it.
2. **Overdue material fines.** Libraries with policies that seem to emphasis getting books back instead of getting books out, drive me nuts. Find positive ways (a friendly phone call, for example) of helping kids and teacher show respect for other library users by the timely return of stuff. Please, a book sitting on a shelf may as well not exist at all.

3. **Computers "for school use only" policies.** School libraries should encourage personal learning not just academic learning. OK, a library may have a limited number of terminals and priority should be given to school work, but there is absolutely *no* reason for a library workstation to sit unused if there are students wanting to look for information of personal interest. This is a simple policy change. A computer sitting unused may as well not exist either.

4. **Material checkout restricted by age or reading ability.** It drives me insane to hear about my grandsons' (or any child's) book checkout being restricted to the "easy" book section or a set of preselected materials when they go to the library. At the very least, librarians should allow a child to check out one book of personal choice from anywhere in the library along with a required book.

5. **Poorly weeded collections.** A badly weeded collection is not the sign of underfunding but of professional incompetence. Would you go to a grocery store where half the food is past its expiration date? If funding is a problem, collections should be getting smaller, not older. The only fix for old, cruddy collections is a dedication to weeding - and an information campaign to staff about why weeding is imperative. Empty shelves, not those stuffed to the gills with junk, call for a larger budget.

6. **Rules focused on what can't be done, not what can be done.** Draconian rules that take the form of "Thou shalt not" dictates are a clear sign the librarian has not moved beyond the guardian mindset. Focus one's rules on what users can do in the library. (See "Signs of a Welcoming Library" in the March/April 2010 issue of *Library Media Connection*.) As schools adopt 1:1 or BYOD programs, we must have a list of allowed activities for personal devices*.

7. **Excuses.** There is no excuse for a library program that is not getting better. Problems with budget, staffing, facility, scheduling, and administrative support are not good reasons for not providing kids and staff access to good reading materials, open Internet access, and information literacy skills. It is our attitude, not our situation, that determines our efficacy. Get your head around it.

Going to the library is no longer a privilege or an obligation. It is a only a desire. And if we don't make our libraries desirable locations, the library will cease to exist. Make your library the most loved place in the school.

Editor: Please set the following off in a separate text box. Thank you.

Dear Students,

In the Left Overshoe School Library you may always use your personal smartphone, tablet, netbook or laptop and our guest network to:

1. Read a book, magazine or blog post of personal (school appropriate) interest.
2. Work on an assignment for a class.
3. Play a game that builds skills related to a class. (If you find a game that contributes to your learning, tell me about it.)
4. Have a serious discussion with a classmate about a topic in a course using an online discussion tool.
5. Listen to an educational podcast or view an educational video. TED talks and Khan Academy videos are always OK. (Remember to use your headphones.)
6. Organize your life by reviewing/updating your calendar, to-do list, or address book.
7. Write in your personal journal.

If you have another activity that you think is productive, convince me of its value. I'll listen.

Sincerely,
Mr. Johnson