Building Indispensability: the Virtual Librarian and Other New Roles

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Author's note. An earlier version of this article appeared in Minnesota Media, Fall 1993. It seems like only yesterday. Most of what I wrote at that time has held up pretty well. I'm not sure if that means I am simple-minded or visionary, but either way it meant a minimal re-write. While this is not the verbatim text of the keynote I'll be giving at your conference, it encompasses most of the same ideas. Hope you enjoy.

> *Who can find a virtual librarian?*
> *for her price is far above rubies.*
> **after Proverbs 31:10**

The three roles of the teacher-librarian as outlined in ALA/AECT's *Information Power* in 1988 and reinforced in *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* in 1998 are just fine as far as they go. Teacher, information specialist, and program administrator are, and will remain, important roles for our profession. But these tasks have been around for over 10 years in print, and conceptually long before that. Ten years! - an eon in a time when an encyclopedia of information can travel across the globe on a beam of light in a fraction of an eye blink. I advocate that the times require adding three more roles to our profession: Virtual Librarian, Crowsnester, and Rabblerouser.

Virtual Librarian

I've helped design five new media centers in my career. Designing the last media center in 1993 was the first time I'd actually bargained away floor space. Floor space had always been the *last* thing I'd give up when the inevitable budgetary cutbacks were made. Carpet, air conditioning, more shelving, or display cases could always be added later, but once floor space was relinquished, it was gone. In designing our new middle school in Mankato, however, I argued that floor space at a certain number of dollars per square foot be traded in for a good computer network running throughout the building. Why?

Information has gone digital – no question. Already some speculate that 20% of the world's information resides in an electronic format and by the end of the decade, well over 90% will. Our media centers already reflect this. Nearly all school media centers have encyclopedias that talk, videodiscs of laser-read art and music, CD-ROM players that provide mesmerizing information about presidents and animals, real time connections to the outside world through interactive television and the Internet, and searchable databases of geography and career information. A major tool (and symbol) of our profession, the card catalog, is no longer a wooden box of drawers but a spinning platter of rust coated plastic with a keyboard and monitor attached. Information exists ever less in physical space, and ever more in "virtual space" - space inhabited by electrons and light waves.

Does physically reducing the size of the media center mean our jobs as media center administrators are becoming less important? I think that depends on how well our profession accepts the role of Virtual Librarian. One of the beauties of digital information is that it travels extremely well. Connect a common copper wire to two computers and the transfer of information between them is nearly instantaneous. If we accept that our resources are legitimate in electronic formats and that they reside in virtual space, stringing wire to all the classroom computers in our school makes **the entire school the media center**. Wow! If we use a wire to connect us to nation-wide or world-wide networks such as the Internet **the entire world becomes our media center**. Double wow! Our physical media center may have shrunk, but our virtual library has expanded explosively.

What might some of the functions of the Virtual Librarian be? Network administrator certainly seems like a natural role. Training staff to use e-mail, remote file storage, and Internet search engines is a great job. How about becoming an electronic information evaluator and selector? Or even more importantly, becoming a teacher who can develop information evaluation skills in her staff and students? When information is transmitted to a class instead of the class being transmitted to the media center, where should the Virtual Librarian be working with students? For families who can connect to the school information networks via home computers and modems, does that mean the Virtual Librarian becomes a community education worker too?

I believe many of our traditional roles are diminishing. It doesn't take ten lessons to teach a CD-ROM magazine index like it did to teach the insidiously designed *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. Good whole language teachers are doing a fine job introducing quality literature to children. Everyone should be purchasing processing and cataloging right along with the books they buy rather than wasting time (and tax dollars) doing so in-house. And more and more administrators are realizing that babysitting can be done as effectively by paraprofessionals as by professionals - and at a huge reduction in cost.

I strongly maintain that the only way we will remain viable as a profession (and have any job security) is to offer indispensable services no one else in the school building can or will. The Virtual Librarian delivers such services.

Crowsnester

Both *Information Powers* do a wonderful job of outlining how the teacher-librarian can support restructuring and educational

reform. Efforts in outcome based education, whole language instruction, inclusive education, constructivist education, brain-based teaching, diversity awareness, and global education are all getting some help from the library profession.

Yet it seems too often the teacher-librarian is one of the last to leap on the tailgate of educational change rather than the one to sit in the driver's seat. And unfortunately we are ignored by some staff development activities all together because we are not viewed as being "real teachers."

Teacher-librarians need to become inhabitants of an educational crowsnest. Like the sailor high atop a ship's mast, a critical role of our profession is to scan the horizon for educational, technological, and societal changes that will affect our students, teachers, schools, and communities. What kinds of things does a Crowsnester do?

Crowsnesters read. They read *Educational Leadership* and *Kappa*n even if it means not having time for *School Library Journal*. Crowsnesters can summarize the *SCANS Report* and know the latest debates on educational listservs on the Internet. They download the latest *From Now On* <www.fno.org>newsletters from the web and know when will the next version of school-adopted software will be released. Crowsnesters read stuff by David Thornburg and Alan November and Elliot Soloway, and their bookcases contain Peter Senge and Louis Perelman and Alvin Toffler and Theodore Sizer and Jane Healy. Crowsnesters seek, read and use research.

Crowsnesters travel. They raid other schools for great ideas. What exciting things are happening in the schools and media centers in your region? Crowsnesters regularly attend professional conferences and technology workshops and computer seminars. They take teachers and principals and board members and students with them when they travel, so that when exciting things are seen or heard, others share the dreams and visions.

Crowsnesters learn and teach and learn some more. Once it was enough for information-technology specialists to garner a body of specialized knowledge and then, like wizards, ration it out to patrons who needed it (which often created resentment in the patron). Advances in technology have made the "wizard" approach to service unethical. Everyone needs not just information, but the ability to harvest it and work with it and use it. ***The most valuable person in an organization today is not the one who knows the most, but the one who can learn the best, and can teach that which is learned to others***. If it is my job to teach word processing, it is not enough that I learn a word processing program and build staff development activities around it. I must also be learning the next version of the program. Or better yet, I should be exploring the next generation of communication tools like an html editor. And interestingly enough, the Crowsnester who empowers others through teaching useful skills, concepts and applications, instead of being resented like the "wizard," is valued and respected and, yes, sometimes even liked.

I strongly maintain that the only way we will remain viable as a profession (and have respect among our fellow professionals) is to offer indispensable services no one else in the educational organization can or will. The Crowsnester, as well as the Virtual Librarian, delivers such services.

Rabblerouser

Information Power is a wonderful document. But like an inspirational sermon heard only by the choir, are the words in it actually changing anyone or anything? How many educators outside the media profession know, or even know of, this fine document? Unless the teacher-librarian accepts the role of Rabblerouser, I think the percentage will be so small that the publication of *Information Power* will have been a sad waste of trees and well-intentioned professional effort.

I have a personal list of things I believe absolutely stink about schools and society, and that something should damn well be done about. Here's a partial list:
- schools don't serve all children equally, and many children not at all
- schools lack leadership and vision
- schools lack excitement and stimulation
- children are treated as second class citizens, especially in regard to information
- schools are designed for teachers, administrators and parents - not children
- most classrooms are adult-centered, not child centered
- the majority of learning is not motivating or enjoyable
- media and technology programs (which are child-centered) are not adequately funded
- there are too many poor children
- there are too many children living in worlds of violence
- censors get too much attention, and promoters of intellectual freedom get too little
- educators are mostly reactionaries, and parents don't care enough

I could go on. One doesn't have to agree with a thing on this list, but I think everyone must believe schools and society can be made better.

The teacher-librarian's role as Rabblerouser is not one of critic, but one of builder. Remember the Noah Principal: "No more prizes for predicting rain. Prizes only for building arks." Rabblerousers have a plan, vision or principal around which the roused rabble can rally. If your budget were magically increased 1000%, do you have an improvement plan you could immediately start implementing? If you were suddenly given total control of you school's staff development program, do you know what you'd teach? If you were made King or Queen of your school, what decrees you would immediately enact?

Too many of our school buildings and districts lack effective leadership for change. In such situations, a clear vision well-articulated by the teacher-librarian, can have a tremendous impact. The teacher-librarian as Rabblerouser can fill a directional

void. Teacher-librarians make especially good Rabblerousers because:
- our programs affect the whole school climate,
- we advocate information skills and individualized learning for all children,
- we have few subject area biases and territories to protect.
- and we're usually darned charming.

Rabblerousers must challenge the system to be effective agents for change. They do so by working on school governing committees, leading staff development activities, and exemplifying great teaching practices themselves. Rabblerousers are involved in curriculum revision. They write for their district newsletters and talk to their PTO's. They hold offices in their unions and other professional organizations. Rabblerousers write to their legislators and attend political functions and school board meetings. They form strong networks with fellow Rabblerousers inside and outside their profession.

Rabblerousers are a pain in the neck to reactionary teachers, administrators, and communities who continually complain about education, but have never understood that "if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten." Sometimes things become uncomfortable or even downright scary for Rabblerousers. They get lots of figurative rocks thrown at them. But it's impossible to be a good teacher-librarian without being a Rabblerouser. We need to remind those who enter our profession that it takes just as much courage to be an educational Rabblerouser as it does to be a police officer, firefighter, or soldier. Perhaps it's not even a role one adopts only as a teacher-librarian, but as a caring, involved member of the human race who has passions beyond oneself.

I strongly maintain that the only way we will remain viable as a profession (and sleep with clear consciences) is to offer indispensable services no one else in society can or will. The Rabblerouser, as well as the Crowsnester and Virtual Librarian, delivers such services.

Sidebar: Surviving Educational Transformation

Surviving Corporate Transition (William Bridges, William Bridges and Associates, 1990.) is a pretty awful title for a pretty good book. While Bridge's audience and examples are from the business world, much of the theory he extols works just fine in schools and should be heeded by teacher-librarians in this time educational transformation.

Downsizing, restructuring, role redefinition, site-based management, local empowerment, accountability, consolidation, co-location, and TQM seem to be the current educational buzzwords of choice. The number of teacher-librarians in my region has lessened, while the amount of work asked of those who remain has grown. As society changes because of the information explosion, everyone's role in it will change - including yours and mine. I happen to be rather fond of getting a paycheck, and I know everyone's position is vulnerable to cuts. Bridges offers three valuable suggestions for keeping one's job:

1) Head for the edge. *The people who work along the interface between the organization and its external environment are the sources of all the information that is needed to survive in this rapidly changing world.*

Are you, as your building's information expert, capitalizing on this important task? Do you read, filter and direct information to your patrons who not only use it, but become dependent upon it? As information moves from print to digital format, are you the "interface" to the Internet, to on-line card catalogs and databases, and to CD-ROM sources?

Are you the school's emissary to other organizations in the community that also provide services to your "customers?" Do you facilitate the use of other libraries in the community? Can you tap into the information services and professionals of local post-secondary institutions, government agencies, business, and health care organizations?

Do you "add value" to the information search process?

2) Forget jobs and look for work that needs doing. *Security in turbulent times comes from doing something important for the organization, not from filling a long-standing position.*

The most successful teacher-librarians I know listen to teachers' and principals' problems. As we all know, most teachers aren't shy about sharing them. What in your building is important and *may not be getting done*? Interdisciplinary units? Staff development in technology? Care and circulation of equipment? Site-based council? PTO chair? Building newsletter? Student council advising? Peer counseling? Computer network management?

I've always had an affinity for jobs no one else wanted - especially those my boss liked to pass off. If my job and someone else's job were both on the line, my supervisor's reasoning might go thus: "If I fire Johnson, I'll have to find someone else to do all those nasty jobs he's taken on, or I'll have to do them myself. Hmmm, let's see who else I might axe instead..."

I would not be too narrow in my definition of a professional task either. It might be better to perform vital clerical or technical work than an unnecessary "professional" duty. But then lobby for support.

3) Diversify your efforts into several areas of activity. *Like diversified investors, people with composite careers can balance a loss in one area with a gain in another. Consequently, they are not subject to the total disasters faced by people who have all their bets on one square.*

Some media people I know are removing their teaching endorsement from their license. Now if you feel that if you can't have

a job as a teacher-librarian, you'd rather not have a job in education at all, that's exactly the thing to do. But unless you have a real good feeling about that last lottery ticket you bought, be aware that the employment in the "real world" is not always that rosy either. (I knew somebody who worked in business once and he complained a lot about bad bosses, inhuman demands, long hours, and poor pay. Remember Dilbert works in the corporate world, not education.)

      The smart thing for those of us who must work to do is to *add* areas of endorsement. Coaching, ESL, middle school, administration, and reading certification all make one a more valuable employee. In the same vein, a list of successfully completed projects, grants, or workshops show administrators that you are versatile. If your media job is reduced or eliminated, a great track record betters your chances of the school finding a new place for you or of your securing work in another district.

Making Change Work For You is the chapter from which these nuggets of wisdom were lifted, and the title captures the spirit of true proactivity. Remember the Chinese word for crisis is made of two separate characters: one meaning danger, the other meaning opportunity. Do everything you can to stay in the library and in education. All students need great people like you in their lives!