

# School Librarians and K-12 Online/Blended Learning: Moving Critical Conversation beyond the Medium

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Much of the professional discussion surrounding our role as school librarians focuses on the ever-changing and flexible nature of the job. School librarians have quickly added a large list of technological responsibilities: maintaining a school website, delivering professional development on technology tools, coordinating school-wide BYOD programs, establishing computer coding camps, and more. Change in the profession has also resulted in change in the library space itself. The Learning Commons movement is still going strong, while makerspaces invite students to explore, create, and contribute their own artifacts and experiences to the library collection. One particular aspect of education, K-12 online and blended learning, is quickly and quietly impacting school librarianship, and yet, professional discussion of this topic remains minimal.

Brenda Boyer, a school librarian in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, and a leading voice on the topic of school librarianship and K-12 online/blended learning, passionately explains why school librarians must engage in this critical conversation: “Libraries need to meet learners where they are, and where they are is on their laptops, tablets, and phones. To remain relevant in the lives of our digitally connected students, school libraries must be both available and useful” (Boyer 2016, 4).

## Design of Digital Learning Environments

The first step in providing library services to online and/or blended learning students is digitizing resources and access so that these are available beyond the traditional school day. Virtual, flipped, and embedded libraries have been on the landscape for quite some time. In 2007, members of the National University Virtual High School (NUVHS) identified three key areas where librarians were needed: 1) curriculum development, 2) enhancement of online instruction, and 3) student-learning support; all needs that NUVHS members explained could be met with librarian-developed online resources (Rohland-Heinrich & Jensen 2007). Five years later, Joyce Valenza elaborated on her own library’s digitization using a flipped library structure (Valenza 2012). Valenza’s blog post shifted the three key areas from static collections of materials and basic chats to a more active collection of instructional videos and student-created artifacts. Unfortunately, much of the conversation surrounding virtual libraries stalled at this first step.

When we stall at step one, when we decide that digitizing and organizing resources for a K-12 online student is sufficient, we are not fulfilling our professional mission. We are not collaborating with teachers and students to support connected learning, learning that integrates “interest-driven learning, learning with peers, and academic learning” (Ito and Martin 2013, 30). When we stall at this first step, we are not advocating for the crucial and *active* role we play in this learning. If we are to actively shape the role of school librarianship in K-12 online and blended learning, we need to move on to step two: identifying the essential skills necessary for serving as active instructional partners in the online space. Brenda Boyer claims this step begins with a hard, self-evaluative look: “What is your library’s mission statement? What are your professional goals? How well do you believe you are meeting those priorities? How would shifting some library services, resources, and instruction to the online environment help you meet these various objectives?” (Boyer 2016, 5). To help you answer these questions, we believe it is necessary to be aware of the ideas and issues being explored by K-12 online/blended educators and researchers.

## A Brief Overview of Current K-12 Online & Blended Learning Landscapes

Current conversations happening in the field of K-12 online and blended learning center on the need for a common vernacular for talking about what it means to teach and learn in meaningful ways within online and blended settings. Standards from both the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) and the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) reflect the idea that “good teaching is good teaching.” However, these standards also emphasize that until we get to the point where we have a clear idea of what online and blended learning should look like, the field needs a guide to ensure that the space does not get watered down, ambiguous, and ineffective. The other key piece to addressing the development of this space, is to think about it less in terms of methods of delivery (online and traditional classroom, etc.)—a harkening back to the Clark-Kozma media/methods debate (Clark 1983, 1994; Kozma 1991, 1994) and the “no significant difference” phenomenon (Russell 1999)—and to think more about the instructional strategies themselves.

It is also important to understand that growth in K-12 online and blended learning is not just due to more virtual schools opening their doors. Instead, the fastest growing sector of online and blended learning is in public school districts. Because of this, it is even more critical to prepare educators for these learning environments in a way that is immersive. The ideal way to do this is to infuse online and blended learning environments within educator preparatory programs. Preparing future school librarians in particular enables members of our profession to harness expertise that connects across curriculum, instruction, and technology for targeting learning that occurs at the intersection where these three areas meet—essentially becoming *the guides* the field so desperately needs. School librarians have also been tapped for mentoring K-12 students who are taking supplemental online courses. As an example, the State of Michigan requires that all online students be assigned a mentor, resulting in the creation of research-based strategies to help prepare educators who are serving in these new roles (Freidhoff, Borup, Stimson, and DeBruler 2015; Michigan Virtual Learning

Research Institute 2014; Borup and Drysdale 2014; Stimson, Freidhoff, & Kennedy 2014).

## Conclusion

As instructional leaders in evolving learning environments and, consequently, change agents, school librarians are best equipped to guide students through the murky and fast-flowing waters of digital literacy, online identity, and knowledge curation. In order to do so, it is essential for the profession to become active in the K-12 online and blended learning educator and research community. It is imperative that we are informed of the latest research, best practices, and findings; knowledge that will help us be cognizant, for example, of the dangers present in blind acceptance of concepts such as the labeling of students as *digital natives*. Not all students have equitable access to technology for learning, and those who do may or may not know how to leverage that technology for their own learning. School librarians must help students and other educators bridge the gaps that exist between content areas, curriculum, technology, instruction, and knowledge construction to arrive at true, meaningful, and connected learning: learning that is active, constructive, cooperative, authentic, and intentional (Jonassen 2008). We encourage you to become an informed and active voice in the critical conversations that shape the role of school librarianship in all learning spaces, whether face-to-face, blended, or fully online.

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