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

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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To learn about the field of K-12 online and blended learning and its impact on research, practice, and policy, there are a number of resources that school librarians can explore, as well as share with teachers, parents, administrators, and other community stakeholders. These are listed below with brief descriptions of each:

District Guide and Framework to Blended Learning Measurement—Measuring success in online and blended learning is not simply a matter of replicating brick and mortar approaches. The guide and framework are essential for identifying the intricacies and unique characteristics of these learning environments. They were developed by Dr. Saro Mohammed, a Partner at The Learning Accelerator:

- <http://learningaccelerator.org/blended-learning/blended-learning-framework>
- <https://thejournal.com/articles/2015/09/08/guide-offers-5-steps-for-measuring-the-impact-of-blended-learning.aspx>

Keeping Pace—An annual publication by the Evergreen Education Group, Keeping Pace is a great way to keep up with the current state of K-12 digital, online, and blended education:

- <http://www.kpk12.com/reports/>

Clayton Christensen Institute—The Christensen Institute is focused on blended learning models with an emphasis on school transformation:

- <http://www.christenseninstitute.org/education/>

Regional Education Laboratories—The Midwest and Southeast RELs have dedicated part of their research agendas to virtual learning. Their work can be found on their respective websites:

- <http://www.relmidwest.org/research-alliances/virtual-education-research-alliance>
- http://rel-se.fcrr.org/research-alliances/blended_and_online.aspx

North Carolina State University (NCSU) Friday Institute's Leadership in Blended Learning—Focused on blended learning leadership training, the Friday Institute at NCSU is helping to provide training programs for school districts across the country:

- <https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/focus-areas/education-workforce-development/leadership-in-blended-learning/>

Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (MVLRI)—The research arm of the Michigan Virtual University, MVLRI was established in 2012 by the Governor and Michigan Legislature to expand Michigan's capacity to support new learning models, engage in active research to inform new policies in online and blended learning, and strengthen the state's infrastructures for sharing best practices. The team also leverages the talents and experience of practitioners and researchers in the field by way of a Fellows program:

- <http://www.mvlri.org>

International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL)—iNACOL publishes standards for quality online and blended teaching, online programs, and online courses:

- <http://www.inacol.org/resources/>

About the Authors

Lucy Santos Green, EdD, is associate professor and program director of Instructional Technology at Georgia Southern University. She earned her master's in library and information science at Texas Woman's University and her doctorate in instructional technology at Texas Tech University. Her article with Dr. Stephanie Jones, "Instructional Partners in Digital Library Learning Spaces" (*Knowledge Quest*, March/April 2014) was named a 2014 Top Twenty Library Instruction article by ALA's Library Instruction Round Table. Along with Dr. Kathryn Kennedy, she co-edited *Collaborative Models for Librarian and Teacher Partnerships* (IGI Global, 2013). Her latest book, co-edited with Dr. Jennifer Banas and Dr. Ross Perkins, *The Flipped College Classroom: Conceptualized and Re-Conceptualized* is set to be released in May 2016 by Springer Publications.

A former classroom teacher and school librarian, she is the past president of the school library media division of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, and the current chair of AASL's Best Websites for Teaching and Learning Committee. Dr. Green frequently presents, researches, and publishes on global school librarianship, school librarians in digital learning environments, and instructional partnerships between school librarians and other education professionals.

Kathryn Kennedy, PhD, is the assistant director of the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute, the research arm of Michigan Virtual University. She earned a master's in library and information science with a concentration in children's and young adult literature from Florida State University and her doctorate in curriculum and instruction with a concentration in educational technology from the University of Florida. Prior to joining MVLRI, Dr. Kennedy was the director of research for the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) as well as an assistant professor of Instructional Technology at Georgia Southern University. She co-edited the *Handbook of K-12 Blended and Online Learning Research* with Dr. Rick Ferdig and published articles on teacher preparation for K-12 online and blended learning in the *Journal of Online Learning Research*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, *American Journal of Distance Education*, *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, and the *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*. Dr. Kennedy's practical and research experiences include preparing

education professionals for technology integration and instructional design in traditional, blended, and online learning environments.

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