

The Closing of the American Library

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Abstract

As educators ponder the immediacy of teaching an increasing student population with fewer teachers entering the profession, fewer schools being built, and the unplanned retirement of a huge amount of both teachers and administrators, the use of educational technologies will not only be desirable, but in most cases, a requirement in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education institutions. The most desirable outcome for instituting educational technology would be to ensure every classroom was fully equipped with the latest technology that enhanced teaching, information gathering, and presenting outside information. With that costs being prohibitive, turning libraries into media centers, usually only done with schools with abundant resources, has now become a necessity. Libraries were once known as centers for storing and sharing the latest books along side the oldest. They are closing and reopening as centers of technology. The lessons learned from doing this are important to apply to lessons yet to be learned.

Keywords : *Media centers; Libraries; Educational technologies; Education lessons*

Introduction

Other than the invention of the printing press, few technologies have proliferated at a more rapid advance than that of the personal computer with access to the World Wide Web. From that coupling came networking that private individuals, governmental branches, and growth-oriented corporation spawned into a huge information gathering capability. Today's access to information also ranks beside Gutenberg's marvelous creation of moveable type. Just as the creation of mass-produced books gave birth to libraries, the computer with Internet access is now poised to take over the multi-century old functions of that place of learning.

Already few public or private schools refer to huge room that stores magazines, books, and newspapers as a library. Instead, libraries have become "media centers", place where computers, copiers, books, Internet access, video conferencing, and on-line education now replaces the study carrel, lamp, and noise of pages being turned. This ongoing "revolution,

gathering momentum before our eyes, promises to reshape almost every aspect of our lives,” according to Rhodes (2001) but will it? And if it does, do we close our libraries and shift the computer information technology to the classroom and to a teacher who may or may not be as functional as the librarian has (is) been in the past ten decades?

The 1999 Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2000) found that approximately half (50%) of the public school teachers who had computers or the Internet available in their schools used them for classroom instruction. The NCES report also stated that nearly all public school teachers (99%) reported in the survey as to having computers available somewhere in their school in 1999; 84 percent had computers in their classrooms, and 95 percent had computers available elsewhere in the school, usually the media center.¹

But this report does not paint a complete or rosy picture. The Associated Press reported that the US Commerce Department's report on Internet Access for all citizens was closing, experts say that measuring Internet access was not a good enough indicator of online equality.² The E-Rate program, one that brought Internet access to public schools, has not succeeded in connecting nearly all of the public libraries and school in the United States. However, such public access was not nearly enough to bridge the gulf between how all segments of society use computers.

Commerce Department statistics also demonstrated that less than one-third of children aged 10-17 from minority enclaves could access the Internet at home. Not having access at home often meant waiting in line and having limited time to use a computer in a media center which, because of budget cutbacks, was closing early and not opened on weekends.³

Less use of the computer does not augur well for an educated society that has become more dependent upon computers and information technology. By 2002, Internet activities showed huge percentage increases in use. The longer citizens used the Internet, the more useful they found it, according to a study of Web usage. The report was issued by the Pew Internet & American Life Project and is available on-line by searching for *Getting Serious Online*.⁴

According to the study, the largest growth in use of the Internet came with e-mail. Purchasing products, gathering information, downloading

1. National Center for Education Statistics-Statistical Analysis Report, Sept 2000, *Teachers' Tools for the 21st Century: A report on teachers' use of technology*. US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, NCES 2000-12.

2. "Internet Access Gap Closing," Associated Press, 3 March 2002, on line: www.associatedpress.com

3. *Op. Cit.*, Associated Press.

4. "Internet Use Shows Increase," *Florida Today*, page 1C, March 5, 2002, author Sean Hao.

games, all time-consuming and preferred to be read in the privacy of a home, are signs that Americans have no or little use for libraries. The question educators now should ask is “Do libraries need to be closed and reconfigured?” What should the function of a library be when the day arrives that every book, magazine, newspaper, video, DVD, film, reference book, etc., will be available on line? And finally, what effect will closing libraries have on education?

Rising Test Scores

In a recent study conducted in the states of Pennsylvania, Alaska, and Colorado, students in schools with appropriate and sufficient library collections and qualified library personnel tended to perform better on standardized tests, especially in reading, according to research conducted by Kathleen Manzo, a researcher with *Education Week*.⁵ The role of library information programs and information literacy has been in the forefront of updating and modernizing libraries into media centers. Some research suggested that computers alone would be the driving factor in reforming education and increasing student achievement. However, the multi-state surveys suggest otherwise.

Pennsylvania study results

The results from Pennsylvania schools, as measured by the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), found reading score increases with increases in staffing, information technology, and integration of information literacy with the curriculum. Staffing was done with professionally trained school librarians who had training support staff with hours that matched the needs of the school’s students. In other words, the staff was there before school and after school hours had concluded. For information technology, networked computers linked the library to the classrooms and ACCESS PENNSYLVANIA databases, licensed databases, and controlled access to the Internet/World Wide Web, were made available throughout the schools. Time was spent by school librarians teaching cooperatively with teachers, teaching information literacy independently with students, providing in-service training to teachers, serving on standards and curriculum committees, and managing information technology.

These actions in the Pennsylvania schools cost resources, of course, because with the increase in staffing in libraries, these were corresponding increases expenditures, information resources, information technology, and in the integration of information literacy with curriculum. In addition,

5. “Study Shows Rise in Test Scores,” *Education Week*, March 3, 2000, author Kathleen Manzo.

increased integration of information literacy was associated with higher levels of staffing, larger collections of information resources, and information technology that took the library information program closer to teachers and students.

Alaska study results

In the state of Alaska test scores tended to be higher for all types of schools where there was a professionally trained school librarian, the library staff spent more time delivering library/information literacy instruction to students, the library staff collaborated with teachers on instructional units, the library staff trained teachers in information access, and students were given the opportunity to visit the school library more frequently. The study in Alaska found that full-time librarians were more likely to engage in essential instructional activities that either part-time librarians or non-librarian staff.

The Alaska portion of the study also found that test scores tended to be higher for all types of schools where the library was open longer hours, hours that matched the needs of students. But to attain this conjuncture, there had to be a cooperative relationship with non-school libraries, such as the public libraries. Libraries also had to provide online access to information via the Internet and the World Wide Web, but coupled to a policy regarding selection and reconsideration of books and other materials. All of these relationships, according to the Survey of School Library Media Centers in Alaska, were both positive and statistically significant.⁶ Furthermore, the study found that these relationships could not be explained away entirely by differences in school size, school funding, or teacher staffing levels. Alaskan education officials stated that the work of a professionally trained school librarian had also been shown to be an important factor in high student achievement levels, and that this was a variable they could control. Furthermore, when legislatures wanted to cut spending for schools, the study confirmed that by keeping the library open and staffed, achievement scores did rise.

Colorado study results

The Colorado portion of the study, where a representative sample of 200 of 1,178 elementary and middle schools responded, found that state test scores for students in elementary schools with updated libraries were up to 14 percent higher than for students at schools with older collections. The Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) reading scores increased with improvements in library media programs. Five important findings

6. "Survey of School Library Media Centers in Alaska, 1998," available on line at www.educationweek.org/ew

demonstrated how keeping and upgrading libraries with collections and integration with technology raised academic achievement.

First, schools with well-developed library media programs averaged higher reading scores by 10-15 percent for elementary schools and 18 percent for middle schools. Well-developed programs were ones that had professional staffing levels, collection size and age, and expenditures that matched growth and school age levels.

Second, when library media staff collaborated with classroom teachers, reading scores averaged increases of 8 percent for elementary schools and 18-21 percent for middle schools. Key collaboration activities of library media staff were planning with teachers, teaching information literacy, and providing in-service training to teachers.

Third, when schools had computer networks that extended the library media programs reach into classrooms and laboratories, reading scores rose 6-13 percent in elementary schools and 18-25 percent in middle schools. The computer networks provided access to licensed databases and to the World Wide Web.

Fourth, when access to library media centers were scheduled with flexibility, reading scores improved 13-22 percent overall. Flexible scheduling allowed students to visit the library media center individually, thus receiving individual instruction and assistance.

Fifth, collaboration activities were more likely to occur where the library media specialist was a school leader. The study found that when the library professional met regularly with the principal, served on standards and curriculum committees, and held library media staff meeting, academic achievement rose.

Keith Lance, director of the Library Service Center of the Colorado State Library, concluded from the Colorado portion of the study there was a positive and statistically significant correlation between the size of the school library and library media staff and test scores.⁷

Conclusion

After a decade of research on factors affecting student achievement, Barton concluded that the lack of effective use of computers in the classroom, due in large part to inadequate preparation of teacher in their use, had become a huge obstacle to high academic performance.⁸ His research found that closing libraries to make them into computer information centers would not be indicative of success in better learning efforts. The library media

7. Keith Lance, 2000 Colorado Study Portion, Klance@sni.net

8. Paul Barton, *Facing the Hard Facts in Education Reform*, available on line: www.ets.org/research/pic

center must become the center of the school and the academic achievements of the school. The library was central to what goes on in the classroom and throughout the day, teachers must either come with entire classes, send small groups to work with a library media specialist, or teacher must send individuals to find information needed for academic studies.

There is no need for needless changes in library media centers. The changes needed must be intentional changes, specifically the kinds of change that will enable students to adapt to technology. The use of the Internet has increased dramatically, but unless this technology is taught to students in the setting of information gathering and understanding, which is done in a library media center with professionals, increases in knowledge and academic achievement will not see the increases demanded by the increased complexity of education. Closing library media centers to make them into computer centers for now is not in the best interest of education reforms.