The Emerging Concept of the School Library Media Center

Looking at our Roots

If you were alive in 1979, you have lived the entire history of the microcomputer. Likewise, if you were alive during World War II, you have lived almost the entire history of the school library media center. True, school libraries, particularly high school libraries, existed at the turn of the century, but their development was limited.

Like the microcomputer, the school library media program has undergone a radical change in philosophy and conception since its beginning. Like any other rapid change in ideas, the development of school libraries is unbalanced. Many centers are indispensable to the educational program, others are peripheral to it. Some centers have moved with the times, others are moving, and still others have remained unchanged.

To understand the current philosophy of the role that a library media center should play in a school, a short historical tour of library development is necessary. Three developmental stages have taken place. These may be titled the "three revolutions."

THE FIRST REVOLUTION: Centralization of Information Storage and Retrieval

The first revolution began just after World War II, when a number of leaders in the library and audiovisual worlds conceived a revolutionary idea for school libraries. These visionaries challenged the idea that a school library should be just a repository for books designed to supplement a child’s reading. In the place of a warehouse, these leaders dreamed of a center in each school, staffed by a trained professional educator, which would contain not only printed materials but also a wide
range of audiovisual materials and equipment. The function of that center would be not only to house a vast range of material but also to interpret that collection to the teachers and students of the school. At first, audiovisual collections were added to book collections. In the 1980s, computer technology made storage and retrieval of vast quantities of information possible and this technology began to take its place in the library.

The library world’s first revolutionary soldiers were professors in university library science and audiovisual departments, state library supervisors, district level library supervisors, and visionary building level personnel. Mary Gaver, Bob Brown, Frances Henne, Carolyn Whitenack, Margaret Rufsvold, Mary Peacock Douglas, Harvey Frye, and James Finn are but a few of the brilliant minds who lent their strength to the cause. What did they do? What did they advocate?

Classroom collections were merged to form centralized collections, and audiovisual media and equipment and computers were purchased. Print collections were improved and made more appealing. Facilities were constructed and remodeled. Professional and clerical staff were employed. Public relations programs were fostered. And most important, leaders encouraged and succeeded in getting local, state, and federal governments to spend money to create these new organizations within the school.

At first there was some parallel development, with libraries containing only print media and audiovisual centers containing audiovisual materials and equipment. The most influential leaders, however, encouraged a merging and blending of all media into a comprehensive center with the appropriately trained personnel to handle the entire spectrum of media services. Practically, most schools could afford to hire only one specialist and so looked for a single and broadly educated professional who was knowledgeable about all the media. More recently, we have begun to see the split re-emerge as schools have created technology plans and installed hundreds of computers. Some schools divided responsibility for information between the librarian (print formats) and technology coordinators (electronic information delivery). Still, visionary leaders see providing information in all forms ever invented or that ever will be invented as the true function of a single administrative entity: the school library or library media center.
THE SECOND REVOLUTION: Integration of the LMC into the Curriculum

Often, so much effort is expended in creating the LMC of the first revolution that when it is complete, answers to the question of what to do next are often uncertain and sometimes embarrassingly absent. This has been particularly true in the decade before the millennium as computer technology has been installed in vast quantities in K-12 schools. Everyone seems to agree that there is great potential in the LMC program for education, but the problem of ensuring that teachers and students use it properly and capitalize on that potential becomes a stumbling block. The old saying, "out of sight, out of mind," applies to LMCs because a teacher and a student must make a concerted effort to leave the learning environment of the classroom and go to a separate location in the building to use either computer lab facilities or the LMC. Many fine facilities, stocked with plenty of books, audiovisual materials, and computer equipment, are underused. In such cases, administrators become rightfully anxious about the situation, and in the absence of evidence of worth begin to cut back on the rate of investment in a facility and program that do not carry their own weight.

In the 1990s, educational theorists popularized constructivist education, as opposed to behaviorist (more traditional) education. Traditional or behaviorist teaching is commonly known as the lecture method, or textbook teaching. Constructivist educators become coaches of learning, allowing the student a much greater part in educational planning. The constructivist teachers often emphasize project-based learning, inquiry, groups of students doing investigative projects, or "engaging problems." Suddenly students need more than just lecture notes and textbook resources to succeed. They require a rich information and technological environment from which they will be extracting, producing, and using their projects.

This new role is a natural extension of the role of the library media specialist and of the center. The specialist who knows materials in all the modern formats and who understands how to use these materials across the technologies to make an impact on instruction is the logical partner to the teacher. Instead of one person at the head of the class carrying the entire burden of instruction, the library media specialist, as a second adult expert, shares in the coaching of learners as they build expertise in the various disciplines. The LMC is thrust into the very heart of the instructional program. It becomes accountable for progress in every facet of the school's curriculum. Thus, the library media specialist is just as interested in student achievement as is the teacher. If achievement is low in any area of the curriculum, the library media specialist and the teacher review ways to improve
student performance by using materials and educational technology more meaningfully.

But have these second revolutionary ideas worked? Have they been embraced by school library media specialists, teachers, and administrators and adopted into the operational plans of the school? The answer is both yes and no. Some library media specialists and districts have adopted second revolution methodologies and are excelling. Others have accepted the philosophical concepts but seem to be going through an identity crisis. These are the educators who have learned the rudiments of constructivist ideas but have not been able to practice them. They feel that their present program of education is already overwhelming without adopting something totally new. Yet they are attracted to the constructivist ideas, so they feel guilty. They perceive a gap between what they think they should be doing and what they are able to do. Still others do not grasp the new view of library media programs because they have not been able to coordinate all the philosophical ideas of the last 40 years into a coherent pattern, an overall look at what should be done.

There seems to be no consistent pattern of library media services or its philosophy of integration into the curriculum. As a wave of retirements in the school library media field hits after 30 years of service since the school library was invented, questions abound concerning what new person and what new role should be pursued. One thing is certain: As the next millennium begins, the push for technology in the schools has not produced automatic gains in educational performance. Revolutionaries of the second order are working hard to integrate machines, learners, and teachers into an effective learning/teaching environment. The task seems as formidable as ever.

**THE THIRD REVOLUTION: Transformation of the Entire School into an LMC**

Library professionals and many principals usually think of the library as the "hub of the school," a place where everyone goes to get materials and equipment. Now, however, in the age of technology, the library has become "Network Central," with its tentacles reaching from a single nucleus into every space of the school and beyond into the home. Where we once thought of the library as a single learning laboratory, now the entire school becomes a learning laboratory served by Network Central. It becomes both centralized and decentralized at the same time.

The LMC staff combines the advantages of the first two revolutions but becomes the human interface between print and electronic information systems, technology, and networks on the one hand
and the learners and teachers on the other. This essential element is illustrated in figure 1.1.

As this system develops, the LMC program and information technology extend from a central location into every learning space in the school and into the home. Figure 1.2 clarifies the newer concept.

**Traditional**
- Print rich
- Print and AV oriented
- Centralized (one location)
- Rigidly scheduled
- Single person staff
- A quiet, almost-empty place

**New**
- Information rich in every format
- Multiple technologies
- Centralized and decentralized simultaneously
- Flexibly scheduled
- Professional and technical staff
- A busy, bustling learning laboratory
With the advent of high technology and sophisticated networks, some schools have approached high technology as if it were separate and distinct from "the library." But after the wires are in and the equipment in place, it soon becomes evident that materials and information merely have new paths to take, while the concept of a vast store of materials and information poised to serve teachers and learners, called "the library," the "LMC," or "Network Central," remains intact.

Revolutionaries of the third kind include administrators, library media specialists, and teachers, all of whom decide that an evolutionary pattern of change for the library media program is unacceptable. These people are too impatient to wait while the LMC evolves gradually from a passive warehouse/technological facility into an active participant in instruction. They demand an immediate payoff in the investment made in the LMC. They want a return on the million dollar investment, NOW!

These revolutionaries review the current concept of the library media program, see where it must go, and re-evaluate every policy and every practice that has existed in the past. Throwing out much of the past, these people ask: What will it take to see that technology really enhances learning in this school? What will it take to see that each teacher collaborates with the library media staff to raise academic achievement? These persons reinvent the library media program and are ready to hold it accountable to learning.
Radical change is not easy to implement in any organization. But sometimes it is the only way to make progress. Often the change can be implemented as an experiment to be tried and then evaluated after a period of time. The following examples illustrate this type of revolutionary change.

Example 1: The principal and the teachers note that the library media specialist in an elementary school has no time to work with units of instruction because scheduled classes of library skills instruction take up the bulk of the specialist’s time. There is no one to help guide teachers in the use of technology, no one to help students learn information literacy skills so they won’t drown in information overload. The administrators and teachers decide to do away with scheduled library time and replace it with flexible access time so that all have access to the LMC all day long. A program of collaborative planning and use of the center is created and reported upon monthly for review by the site council and the principal.

Example 2: The principal of a high school notes that the LMC is being used to research term papers by the English and social studies departments but not by any other departments. Most teachers in the building are getting some materials and technology from the center, but it is largely empty. In this school, every classroom has been equipped with a few computers but there is little evidence that the computers are being used. With the encouragement of the library media specialists, department heads, and technology coordinators, the principal assigns a specialist to be a functioning part of each department. A program of joint planning with departments is instituted. Summer planning days are held with teachers who have not previously worked with the LMC and its technology. These teachers and the library media staff plan units of instruction designed to take advantage of an information-rich environment, implement those units during the school year, and report their progress to the administration. One by one, each department in the school takes on such a planning session until the LMC is a part of the total curriculum.
READINGS

Overall Concept of the Library Media Center


The History of School Libraries

Latrobe, Kathy Howard, ed. *The Emerging School Library Media Center: Historical Issues and Perspectives* Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1998. Essays written on a wide variety of historical issues, including topics such as the education of school librarians, school libraries and progressive education, intellectual freedom in twentieth-century school libraries, collection development over time, and the development of a body of research literature.
