School Library Websites: The Bricks and Mortar of the Virtual Library Space

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The Problem

New thinking about the school library as the centre of a learning commons puts equal emphasis on the physical and the virtual space. Our spaces set the stage for our instructional approach, the foundation of which has always been resource-based. With the emergence of instructional models placing the library at the centre of a learning commons, our collective imagination has been captured with ideas about transforming the physical space of the school library. We put considerable thought into how to facilitate access to resources in an environment that fosters a flexible and innovative approach to instruction. We also understand that elements of the library's design create comfortable places for individuals to explore and reflect.

Yet it seems that very little consideration has been paid to design elements of the foundation of the school library's virtual space, the website, or even its mere existence. In an age when our catalogue is online and when we provide access to sophisticated online database and eBook collections it seems incomprehensible that we pay very little attention to the digital home base for these collections. How are we serving up our online resources to our clientele? The virtual front door to our online library experience is the homepage of the library website, yet so many school libraries have no virtual home. What of the instructional supports that are so important to the library program? In the digital age, when school library programs are taking the lead in the integration of technology into learning, why do school libraries struggle to provide a home for the learning resources they use to scaffold students' learning experiences.

The library website and associated resources support learning in the library, across the school and from home, round the clock. The virtual library has huge potential for engaging learners when and where they want to engage. More than anything else that we have to offer, the website can extend the library program beyond the four walls of our physical spaces. Yet the creation, care and feeding of the virtual library space continues to elude many. Loertscher (2008) describes the school library learning commons as space that is totally flexible, accommodating all manner of learning experiences, while continuing to function as a place to access resources. The virtual learning commons, according to Loertscher, "is both a giant, ongoing conversation and a warehouse of digital materials – from ebooks to databases to student-generated content – all available 24/7 year-round." Loertscher's vision focuses on exploiting social technologies for active engagement in collaborative learning. The concepts of interactivity and collaboration are fundamental to the notion of the library as a learning commons and are particularly important as libraries extend this construct into the online environment. But if the digital warehouse Loertscher describes is poorly organized, inaccessible and unsearchable, what foundation do we have for scaffolding the online learning experience?

The problem has been around for a long time. Many teacher-librarians pioneered school library websites back in the 1990s, writing in raw html or with complex web authoring desktop software. Their dedication was admirable, but the technology itself was a formidable barrier for most, who did not have the capacity to venture down the virtual road. Even a good fifteen years later, a pervasive web presence for school libraries eluded us. At the Ontario Library Association Super Conference in 2006 keynote speaker Joyce Valenza made a strong case for building rich school library websites, and looked to a future where "the 21st century virtual school library will have as broad an influence as its physical counterpart, expanding and reinterpreting library service, meeting young users' information needs where they live, play and work – on the Web." (OLA, 2006). The technological barriers to building useful school library websites in 2006 were, in many respects, barely any different from the barriers that existed in the early 1990s. But everything has changed in the years since. Complex desktop software and file transfer protocols have been replaced by powerful and user-friendly online web authoring tools. Collaborative web content management systems eliminate the bottleneck of server uploads and facilitate distributed ownership for content creation.

Fast-forward yet again to 2012, and despite significant advances in web authoring technology, the paucity and poor quality of school library websites remains a very serious problem. An extensive if informal exploration of school and district websites in Ontario reveals some promising pockets of excellence, but the overall picture is bleak. My explorations (Brooks Kirkland, 2011) revealed that:

- Many, perhaps most, school libraries have no visible web presence.
- The problem is far more acute in elementary schools than in secondary.
- Where websites exist they often have minimal content.
- Lack of attention to design factors renders many websites difficult to use.
- School library websites, or where they don't exist, school websites, most frequently have no visible links to online resource collections like research databases or eBooks, let alone the library catalogue.
- Central school district library websites exist in only a few instances and where they exist schools are not always connected to them.
- Little imagination has been used in many cases to scaffold access to online resource collections for learning success.

Even where there is a will to build a more meaningful web presence considerable barriers remain, including time and staffing constraints and lack of knowledge about or access to current technologies that make website creation easy.

The biggest barrier seems to be lack of awareness that there even is a problem. School library practice is more grounded in its context, education, than it is in the rest of library practice. There is little doubt that a survey of the quality of school websites in general might reveal that lack of a meaningful web presence for school libraries may indeed be a subset of a more general problem in K-12 education. In a rare study of the efficacy of school websites Hartshorne et al (2008) evaluated fifty elementary school websites on criteria related to effective design, structural elements and content. Only ten

percent of the websites were scored as either good or exemplary. Seventy percent we evaluated as being below average or poor.

Perhaps by putting school libraries' web presence in the larger context of K-12 education the situation might not seem particularly problematic. I propose that we in school libraries must, by the very nature of our mission, hold ourselves to a higher standard. How can we profess to be leaders in resource-based learning and the integration of learning technologies when we have little to no visible online presence, and when the design of that presence, when it exists, often does little to empower users?

Standards for Library Websites

The focus of Treasure Mountain Canada 2012 is to update standards for school library programs in Canada. The standards document we are striving to update, *Achieving Information Literacy* was published in 2003. Incredibly, it pays only passing attention to information technology, even though at the point it was written we were well into the digital age. The vision of technology seems to be restricted to limited access in the supervised setting of the school library. Even as standards are expressed as a rubric, the school library website is just one subset of the category *Communications through ICT*. Absence of a library website is not even mentioned In the Below Standard category. A library website that provides information and access to online databases and links is considered acceptable. An exemplary school library has a website that "provides access to automated library catalogue with online booking, resources for students, comprehensive databases, school library information, and links." (CSLA/ASTLC, 2003).

> From the perspective of information access, information and communication technologies in the school library offer:
> - Ready access during and beyond the day
> - Equitable opportunities for students who do not have computers at home
> - Supervised settings for the use of the Internet and electronic, digital, and online resources.
> - Increased productivity and learning through learner-focused activities
> - Enhancement and extension of the curricula through integration of technologies,
> - Support for a variety of teaching and learning styles.
>
> (*Achieving Information Literacy*, 2003)

Moving forward to 2012 there is much excitement about the learning opportunities that online social environments lend to learning, and how the social web is a natural match for the most basic notions of the resource-based, collaborative learning approach that has been the foundation of school library programs for some time. But it seems that we have skipped a huge step. If one were to go by the school library literature, the virtual space is largely an ephemeral and relatively unstructured collaborative space. The element of chaos has some appeal in reflecting the input of learners into this environment. But the messy business of learning requires some well-designed and thoughtful scaffolding. The school library literature makes very little mention of the bricks and mortar of the virtual space, the library website. By contrast, the rest of the library

world has made considerable progress on its thinking about the importance of the "virtual branch". The state of school library websites compares very unfavorably to the sophistication of ideas and practice in other library sectors. Surely this needs to be addressed. As we strive to lead the way in instructional practice and the design of learning for the 21st century, we seem to have completely lost sight of the importance of our online infrastructure and how it enhances learning. As we explore new standards for school libraries we can learn a great deal from the broader library sector, finding many ideas that could translate very nicely to our K-12 context.

Learning from Our Library Colleagues

Literature and practice from other library sectors tells the story of the transformation of library websites into dynamic, flexible learning environments and the re-invention of traditional library information structures like the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC). Janes (2008) sees the construct of the library existing physically and virtually as key to its existence in the 21st century. "In an increasingly digital world, the idea of the library has to be somewhere *and* everywhere: real, physical locations as well as ubiquitous access. Neither alone will suffice in meeting the varied and expanding needs of our communities, and neither alone expresses the true nature and usefulness of what a 'library' is and can be (and ought to be and has to be) in the 21st century."

King (2009) relates this idea to shifts in how the Web itself has changed the way people use online technology. "The old Web was primarily about finding information and navigating to other webpages. Hence, it was fondly referred to as the Information Superhighway. Today, people driving down that road have discovered communities along the way." He makes the case for developing the library website as a destination and thinking about it as a digital branch, with all of the characteristics and support structures that would be found in a physical branch of the library. These include real staff and real collections with which users can interact. The digital branch also has a real 'building', meaning that the website follows similar design principles as the physical library, with a clearly defined purpose and parallel structure to the sections and services available in the physical space. This extends to the activities that take place in the library. "A modern library can exist in two places – in a building and online. When this idea is taken to the next step, people can now hold conversations with librarians in the building and online. People can hold meetings in the physical library and in the online library." Finally, King introduces the concept of community. Without community the physical library has no reason to exist, he says, and this is also true of the online branch. He suggests that just as library users can interact with staff in the physical library they must also be able to interact with staff online through the use of blog comments and microblogging services like Twitter, instant messaging, and discussion groups in social networks.

Wisniewski (2008) takes a step back, reminding us that the strong design and structure of the library website is key to being useful and engaging. "We need to remember that the user experience encompasses more than those elements upon which librarians have been focusing – usability, accessibility, and findability. It includes more visceral attributes – desirability, usefulness, and value. Library webmasters should

step back and ask themselves if, and how, they are *engaging* users." Wisniewski advocates much stronger emphasis on visual presentation in website design than has often been the case with libraries. Strong design also improves credibility. "Research also shows that less-than-impressive designs affect a site's credibility, so your stellar content and cool services may be all for naught if your design is not up to snuff."

Engaging Readers Through the Catalogue?

Although we might be loath to admit it, many school library practitioners have given up thinking of the online catalogue as an engaging point of entry to the reading experience. Yet it remains the most basic and most consistently available online experience for library users, and although this paper focuses on the actual website, it is worth touching on current innovations in online catalogue interfaces. Our web presence is a doorway to our physical as well as our virtual collections. In recent years there has been a very significant shift in understanding about how catalogue search interfaces should be designed. Where interfaces once reflected the underlying structures of the Integrate Library System database, more current interface designs are based on the actual search behaviors of users. Casey (2007) lends more specific detail to this problem. "The modern integrated library system (ILS) is far more than a catalog interface. But that fact seems to have clouded the reality that, though a small part of the ILS, the catalog is the face that customers see. Customers do not see the inventory management or acquisition side of the ILS; they only see the search or discovery side." He goes on to summarize how the rise of the Internet has raised library customer expectations of library systems. "But the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s brought forth a new generation of customer and it taught people that search and discovery did not have to be quite the painful process exemplified by library OPACs." Casey concluded that customer satisfaction needs to drive development of new-generation catalogues. "Whatever comes next has to include many more ways for our users to involve themselves in the overall OPAC experience, both in planning and in customizing; it has to be far more usable; and, it has to make discovery a far more rewarding experience."

Modern online catalogue search interfaces, pervasive in other sectors but less frequently seen in school libraries, include features that we have come to expect in web search interfaces, including relevancy ranking, better basic and advanced search functionality, faceting results by format, author, subject and a myriad of other descriptors, spell checking, similar searches, access to reviews, and user tagging and rating systems. Catalogues now have the capacity to be personalized experiences – something that Amazon figured out a decade ago. The library catalogue can also be a social experience, where users share preferences and converse about their reading. These possibilities should, one would think, generate a great deal of excitement about their relevance to a learning commons approach in the school library, but that conversation is just not taking place.

Demanding schedules, technological naivety and isolation continue to be significant barriers for school library practitioners in building library websites. Lack of knowledge and challenges of the broader context of school life exacerbate the problem.

As one teacher-librarian put it, "I continue to work on my website, with little knowledge on how to do this." (Brooks Kirkland, 2011). These are very significant problems, complicated by the wildly varying staffing models in Canada's school libraries and the consequent confusion about our most basic mission. Yet if we cannot deliver the most basic library services, which in 2012 must certainly include a consistent and usable web presence, it weakens our ability to deliver a meaningful program. Models exist for larger administrative and program units seeing the provision of the library's web presence as being as important as providing catalogue access and other online services. Some major school districts have created central library websites, and created an infrastructure where the website is visible and used at every school in the district. Today's technology can facilitate seamless integration of system-wide content with the local content desirable to customize the library learning experience at the school level. Well-designed, rich, and usable websites enrich the library learning experience.

School Library Standards for the 21st Century

As we develop new standards for school library programs in Canada, the connection between infrastructure and organizational standards and the advancement of the learning agenda must be very clear. If we envision online engagement as a desirable context for learning, then we need to set standards for the bricks and mortar of the virtual learning space, the library website. Standards need to recognize the interrelationship between all library online systems so that the library website truly is a powerful entry point into resources, services and learning spaces. Guidelines need to consider the limited capacity of individual schools to design and support these complex capacities. Central technical support for school libraries needs to move beyond the Integrated Library System and the catalogue to a broader vision of online library services. Standards should also make the case for supported and customizable collaborative online learning spaces, scaffolded by a powerful, meaningful and useful virtual library learning environment.

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