

Looking Toward the Future: Competences for 21st-Century Teacher-Librarians

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What are the core competences required by teacher-librarians for developing exemplary school library programs in 21st-century schools? This article reports on a study that explored the experiences and attitudes of graduates from the Teacher Librarianship by Distance Learning program at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Key findings from this study of teacher-librarians indicate that technology and leadership issues are the most pressing needs. These graduates also indicated that their “traditional roles and responsibilities” are changing as they are responsible for promoting new literacies and evaluating, selecting, organizing, and managing diverse learning resources.

Quelles sont les compétences de base dont ont besoin les professeurs-bibliothécaires pour développer des programmes de bibliothèque exemplaires pour les écoles du 21^e siècle? Cet article décrit une étude qui a exploré les expériences et les attitudes des étudiants diplômés du programme en bibliothéconomie par apprentissage à distance à la University of Alberta à Edmonton. Les principales conclusions découlant de cette étude sur les professeurs-bibliothécaires révèlent que les enjeux relatifs à la technologie et au leadership constituent les besoins les plus immédiats. Les diplômés ont également indiqué que leurs « rôles et responsabilités traditionnels » évoluent puisqu'ils sont responsables de la promotion de nouveaux modes d'alphabétisation, ainsi que de l'évaluation, la sélection, l'organisation et la gestion de diverses ressources d'apprentissage.

What are the core competences required by teacher-librarians for developing exemplary school library programs in 21st-century schools? This question was the impetus for a study that explored the experiences and attitudes of graduates from the Teacher Librarianship by Distance Learning (TLDL) program at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. It is critical that programs that educate teacher-librarians be responsive to the needs of both students and the profession, and one way to ensure this is to gather feedback from former students of the program. This study, therefore, sought a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of students who had recently graduated with a Master of Education (MEd) degree from the TLDL program. These experiences and perceptions are crucial to understanding the role of the 21st-century teacher-librarian. They can also be extrapolated to inform other teacher librarianship/school librarianship programs involved in curricular reform.

The TLDL program has been in existence at the University of Alberta for more than 10 years in an online format and for more than 40 years altogether. Over this time, it has grown to include more than 55 students in the MEd program and 25 students in the Diploma program. The program currently includes 14 online courses that are available to students who live across

Canada and around the world.

The purpose of this research was twofold. First, we investigated former MEd students' experiences with and attitudes about the TLDL program. Second, because the TLDL program is now more than 10 years old, it was time to ask graduates of the MEd program from the past five years to look back and reflect on what topics, issues, and content seemed to be missing from the program and to suggest new topics or issues that should be addressed. Another question asked former students to tell more about what topics were no longer relevant or should be given a lesser or different focus. This kind of information had not previously been collected from graduating students, but was valuable for gaining insight into students' experiences of completing the program. Survey data continue to inform program planning, curriculum revisions, course development, and the support systems available to current students in the program.

Review of the Literature

This study, conducted by the coordinator of the TLDL program and a TLDL instructor, sought a better understanding of how students experienced their MEd program and how it prepared them for work in 21st-century schools and libraries. No other studies were found that broadly investigated students' reflections about and experiences with a graduate teacher-librarianship program. Although there is no research on this topic, the vast number of professional standards, documents, and handbooks that guide teacher-librarians are an indication of current and future trends affecting teacher-librarian education.

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL, 2007) published *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*, which describes a set of common beliefs about students' learning experiences. For example, the document suggests that

Reading is a window to the world, inquiry provides a framework for learning, ethical behavior in the use of information must be taught, technology skills are crucial for future employment needs, learning has a social context, and school libraries are essential to the development of learning skills. (pp. 2-3)

These standards emphasize that students of all ages should be able to use skills, resources, and tools to

- inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge
- draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge
- share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society, and
- pursue personal and aesthetic growth. (p. 3)

By recognizing that the school library has an important role to play in the development of these skills, the AASL standards document highlights the importance of teacher-librarian education programs that emphasize the teaching, technology, and leadership skills that teacher-librarians will need to facilitate this kind of learning for students and their teachers.

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2008) published the *National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers* (NETS-T). These standards have implications

for teacher-librarians and for current and future practices in school librarianship education. For example, the NETS-T encourage teachers, and by extension teacher-librarians, to “model digital-age work and learning” by demonstrating fluency in technology systems and collaborating with and communicating information and ideas to colleagues, students, parents, and community members using varied digital technologies. Similarly, the standards require teachers to

- design digital-age learning experiences,
- promote and model digital citizenship and responsibility, and
- engage in professional growth and leadership.

This final statement about professional growth and leadership indicates that teachers and teacher-librarians should “continuously improve their professional practice, model lifelong learning, and exhibit leadership in their school and professional community by promoting and demonstrating the effective use of digital tools and resources” (para. 5). For teacher-librarians, participating in professional learning networks with colleagues at local, national, and international levels is made easier with the advent of online social networking sites that promote conversation and collaboration. Education for teacher-librarians should continue to promote this kind of communication and collaboration while also focusing on “current research and professional practice . . . to make effective use of existing and emerging tools and resources” (para. 5).

One Canadian document written in the 1990s by the Association for Teacher-Librarianship in Canada (ATLC) and the Canadian School Library Association (CSLA, 1997) was also found. This document, *Students’ Information Literacy Needs for the 21st Century: Competencies for Teacher Librarians*, has not been updated since then.

Another publication provides some insight into the trends that may affect school libraries in the future. The purpose of Rosenfeld and Loertscher’s (2007) *Toward a 21st-Century School Library Media Program* is to support teacher-librarians as they “move [the] school library’s program forward so that it serves the needs of 21st-century students” (p. vii). This book is a compilation of articles, mostly from *Teacher Librarian*, and serves as a guide to some of the key issues and themes emerging from this respected professional journal about the role of the teacher-librarian. The book is divided into seven sections with the key theme being leadership in each area. The topics selected by the editors are (a) collaboration, (b) curriculum design and assessment, (c) technology integration, (d) 21st-century skills, (e) literacy and reading, (f) partnerships, and (g) issues and management.

The themes emerging from these professional documents and standards include the need for teacher-librarians to develop both personal and professional competences. Personal competences include developing dispositions including (a) the desire to engage in lifelong learning opportunities; (b) the ability to communicate effectively with a wide variety of stakeholders; (c) an interest in building partnerships; and (d) the ability to see the big picture and to ground one’s school library program in a larger school, district, and regional context. Clearly the role of the teacher-librarian is diverse, and teacher-librarians are leaders in their schools and districts.

Professional competences include (a) an understanding of the role of technology, (b) willingness continually to explore emerging technologies, and (c) the ability to think critically about one’s place in teaching and learning. Teacher-librarians are called on to collaborate with

teachers and students, model instructional strategies, and be curriculum leaders. The traditional roles of teacher-librarians also continue to play a central role in school library programs. Teacher-librarians are responsible for evaluating, selecting, managing, and organizing a diverse collection of resources to meet the needs of their school community. They also are literacy leaders and promote both traditional and new literacies.

Method

Data collection for this study involved surveying students who had graduated with an MEd in teacher-librarianship from the TLDL program between 2003 and 2008. Information letters were sent to graduates of the TLDL program in spring 2008, explaining the research project and asking them to complete the online survey. We sent out a total of 30 invitations to participate. The survey was available through *SurveyMonkey*, a software program that creates surveys and then collates the responses. It consisted of a series of open-ended questions asking about (a) the students' motivation for enrolling in the program; (b) current position; (c) experiences in the program; (d) advice for new students; (e) suggestions for topics in the program that were particularly useful, outdated, or irrelevant; (f) reactions to online learning experiences; and (g) suggestions for specific support to help with online learning. The survey also asked students to write about the issues, topics, and challenges that they felt were going to be important in their work as teacher-librarians for the next 10 years.

Twenty-eight of the 30 graduates of the TLDL program participated in the survey. After data collection was complete, reports based on each open-ended question were generated and printed. We then read each report recursively, looking for themes and trends that emerged within and across questions. The data from the surveys were analyzed for common patterns and themes related to the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998).

Data from two of the survey questions are presented here using representative quotes to support the patterns and themes. Throughout this article, we refer to the participants in this study as teacher-librarians (which is the job title most school librarians use in Canada). However, not all were working in school libraries as teacher-librarians when they responded to the survey questions.

Findings

We focus on recent graduates' responses to two broad questions from the survey. The first was, "As you think about your work for the next 10 years, what issues/topics/challenges do you see needing to learn more about? Could or should these be offered in some way in the TLDL program? Please explain."

The responses can be categorized into a variety of themes. First, the teacher-librarians who responded strongly indicated the need to continue to learn more about emerging technologies. One teacher-librarian stated,

Technology! I feel inadequate in this area, yet I am completely cognizant of its importance in the 21st century. I think that this is ongoing but know that many districts do not offer ProD [professional development] that is helpful for most of us.

Another commented, "Technology seems to play a larger and larger role in teacher-

librarianship, with inquiry learning being bound up in literacy with information and communication technology.”

In particular, teacher-librarians wanted to know more about Web 2.0. “I wished I could have taken the technology course now because I really want some direction when it comes to Web 2.0.” This quote refers to the fact that a recently created *Exploration of Web 2.0 for Teaching and Learning* course has taken the place of another technology course that focused on older technology (de Groot & Branch, 2008). Another teacher-librarian also expressed a need to know more about “all things Web 2.0 and how to integrate them into teaching.” One commented, “Social networking, virtual worlds, and mobile computing are issues I’m seeing in my library on a daily basis.” The teacher-librarians also indicated that they wanted to know more about evaluating, selecting, and searching databases and Web pages, because as one respondent commented, “Building Web pages was useful, but now we have gone beyond that into Web 2.0—help could be given to navigate the confusing array of choices.”

Another need identified by a number of the TLDL graduates was to learn more about creating electronic pathfinders, which are useful to help students and teachers gain access to the variety of resources available both in print and online. As one teacher-librarian commented, “Students will need to know how to access, manage and evaluate information from a multitude of resources.” Teacher-librarians also indicated that they needed to know more about specific hardware such as interactive whiteboards (e.g., Smartboards) or handheld devices (e.g., ipods and e-book readers) and the software that goes with this hardware.

Along with learning more about specific new and emerging technologies, teacher-librarians indicated that they also needed to know more about issues related to technology and integration of technology in schools. These issues included (a) digital citizenship, (b) copyright, (c) privacy, (d) intellectual property, and (e) electronic publishing.

The second theme that emerged from the responses was about issues in the leadership role of the teacher-librarian. These indicated that teacher-librarians needed to know more about change, future trends in teacher-librarianship, and advocacy. Interest was also expressed in learning more about action research and evidence-based practice. One teacher-librarian wrote, “Encouragement for continued research in school librarianship such as action research/evidence-based practice should be included either as part of regular coursework or in continuing education.”

Another area of need for one teacher-librarian was assessment for learning: “I would like to see courses in assessment for learning offered in the future, as I think this [is] something that most districts are really focusing on and an area where teacher-librarians could take a leadership role.” Teacher-librarians also indicated they would like to know more about supervising support staff in the library, working with teachers, and moving them forward in their thinking. There is a need in the program to learn more about literacy in general and new literacies in particular. One teacher-librarian wrote,

Perhaps a course could be developed on “literacy and literacies” but focusing on basic literacy—as a lot of teacher-librarians, especially in elementary schools, are literacy leaders for their school and need to have a strong underpinning on how students become literate.

Teacher-librarians also indicated that they were interested in continuing education and asked about taking courses that were not part of their program or taking some of the newly developed courses to keep current on topics related to school libraries. One comment was,

“Staying abreast of the latest research into school librarianship is a challenge. Perhaps continuing education courses could be offered for graduates of the program at a reduced rate (lower than regular tuition).” Another teacher-librarian asked, “Can graduates continue to take courses in Open Studies?”

We also focus on a second question from the survey that was sent to recent graduates of the TLDL program. This asked the recent graduates to “Think about the courses you took as part of the program. What were the topics or issues covered in these courses that have been particularly helpful to you as a 21st-century teacher-librarian? What topics or issues seem outdated or irrelevant as a 21st-century teacher-librarian?” The responses are broken down into several broad categories.

First, teacher-librarians indicated that several specific courses/topics were of use and needed to continue to be a part of the program. These included:

- Graphic novels and comic books,
- Canadian children’s literature,
- Intellectual freedom and social responsibility, and
- Inquiry-based instruction.

Several teacher-librarians indicated that inquiry-based instruction was an important course, and one commented that there was a continuing need for understanding “inquiry-based learning that infuses critical thinking throughout” the curriculum. Another commented, “The inquiry process is highly valuable. This is what we should be practicing in schools.”

Teacher-librarians were also clear about what was no longer relevant. A focus on traditional print reference sources seems outdated. One teacher-librarian commented,

The physical collection—the research portion [reference], not the fiction section, is becoming obsolete. Rarely do I see classes use books for their research any more. This is not something we should oppose, but instead embrace and move with the population. If teachers and students don’t see a need for books, then we need to help them with what they do use.

Another comment was,

From my direct experience, print reference materials are going the way of the dodo. I was raised on print reference, but even I go online for reference. You may want to consider having a course that deals with database acquisition, use, and promotion.

Another area that teacher-librarians felt was irrelevant or needed a change of focus was cataloguing, classification, and organization of materials. One wrote,

I think some of the students in the cataloguing course could not seem to see the broader issues. I think the professor could have used her position of authority to push them a bit more, to confront the “I need to catalogue the books myself and how software is designed is beyond my job description.”

Another student commented,

I have never had to create a MARC record, and probably never will. I think that a full course in cataloguing is more than enough. In fact, I would revamp that course to focus less on cataloguing

books and more on searching in library catalogues (or on teaching students to search in library catalogues)—a skill that is very different from searching the Internet.

Teacher-librarians also commented on the approach to teaching leadership in the program. One graduate commented, “Many times teacher-librarians become educational leaders or administrators after they leave the library—teachers with those kinds of aspirations could benefit from an entire course in educational leadership and educational change theory.”

Discussion

Although no research specifically explores recent graduates’ experiences in teacher-librarianship education programs, extant professional documents indicate that personal and professional competences are required for developing exemplary school library personnel. This research found that teacher-librarians see technology as an integral part of their schools and feel that this needs to be reflected in their education. Recent graduates identified technology in general and Web 2.0 in particular as key issues. The variety of technologies, both hardware (e.g., Smartboards, data readers, ipods, and other handheld devices) and software (e.g., Web pages, electronic finders, databases, and e-books), were of concern to many recent graduates. They recognized that the changing nature of information and communication technology required that courses needed to evolve. As one student indicated, a technology course “will need to be constantly revamped as technologies change almost every year.”

Recent graduates also indicated that they needed more opportunities in their education to explore and discuss the issues arising from the proliferation of new technologies. These issues included (a) digital citizenship, (b) copyright, (c) privacy, (d) intellectual property, and (e) electronic publishing. Although courses can offer students opportunities to discuss a variety of issues, this also leads us to believe that teacher-librarians need continuing education. This may also explain in part why professional learning networks and social networking for teachers and teacher-librarians are growing. These findings support the direction of the *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (AASL, 2007) and the ISTE (2008) *NETS for Teachers*.

Another theme that emerged was that teacher-librarians are taking on a leadership role in schools, and recent graduates felt that this needed to be reflected in their education. Teacher-librarians want opportunities to explore, discuss, and reflect on issues such as change, school reform, assessment, advocacy, action research, and evidence-based practice. Teacher-librarians also indicated that they were taking on leadership roles in the area of literacy and needed the background theory to support this role. As leaders in their schools, teacher-librarians often provide professional development and training for other teachers, administrators, and support staff. In this role as adult educators, teacher-librarians would benefit from an introduction to the background theory and practice of andragogy. Teacher-librarians’ leadership role needs to be infused across all courses in teacher-librarianship education. *Toward a 21st-Century School Library Media Program* (Rosenfeld & Loertscher, 2007) suggests this by focusing on learning leadership for each topic in their collection.

Respondents to this study indicated that the role of the teacher-librarian in the 21st century is evolving quickly and that even an MEd degree is not enough to keep up with the changing demands of the job. As a result, they are actively seeking opportunities for formal and informal continuing education. As leaders in schools, teacher-librarians need to model lifelong learning and should try to seek out personal learning opportunities that complement and expand on their

graduate education. Professional organizations and associations that support the work of teacher-librarians (international, national, regional, local) should be providing *spaces* and *places* for learning experiences that support the needs of their members. Universities can provide continuing education opportunities and networks for teacher-librarians to remain connected and to further their formal learning experiences.

Although only one other teacher-librarian indicated a need for more coursework on new literacies, an increasing number of students' capping papers (a final paper of approximately 25 pages written as a last course in the MEd program at the University of Alberta) have been about new literacies and promoting literacy through the school library. This seems to indicate that students see a need to learn more about literacy and new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) and are choosing to complement their courses with in-depth work in this area for their final projects.

Curriculum, assessment, literacies, instructional strategies, and differentiated instruction are examples of topics that might be of interest to teacher-librarians and might not have been part of their teacher-librarian training or education. As one teacher-librarian stated, "Perhaps it is our responsibility to continue with professional development from other sources." Teacher-librarians need to reach out beyond school librarianship for other learning opportunities. This might include attending library conferences for public and academic librarians, attending assessment workshops, joining a reading specialists group (e.g., National Council of Teachers of English, or the International Reading Association), and/or joining a subject-area (e.g., social studies or science) or special education organization.

Implications and Conclusion

This research is significant for a number of reasons. The results provided the TLDL coordinator and instructors in the program the opportunity to revise course content and focus. It may also provide direction for other teacher-librarianship programs and professional organizations and associations as they support their members.

Based on suggestions from graduates of this program, the coordinator and instructors developed new content and removed/reworked content that was no longer relevant to teacher-librarians working in the field. For example, based on feedback from students, another technology course has been added. The first course allows teacher-librarians to explore new and emerging technologies, and the second focuses on research and issues related to the integration of technology. Similarly, the introduction to teacher-librarianship course has been redesigned to focus more on leadership issues, change and school reform, and action research/evidence-based practice. Both the organization and management of resources course and the inquiry-based learning course have also been redesigned to meet the needs of current and future students more effectively.

This research provides instructors in other programs in Canada and internationally with ideas for thinking about their own curricula. Recent graduates indicated that they continually needed to explore new and emerging technologies and to have the time and space to discuss the issues arising from these new technologies and their use in schools and school libraries. Traditional core values of librarianship emerged here such as privacy, access, intellectual freedom, citizenship, and social responsibility. Teacher-librarians need time to develop into their roles as leaders in the school and require theory and practice in such areas as change management, assessment, collaboration, evidence-based practice, and advocacy. The leadership

role of the teacher-librarian in the area of new literacies and traditional literacy is evolving and needs to be infused throughout teacher-librarianship education programs.

Professional organizations and associations also have an important role to play in providing continuing education opportunities for teacher-librarians. This research can inform their planning for sessions, conferences, webinars, workshops, and working groups. The findings also provide a starting point for members of AASL and other North American and international associations to begin work on developing a curriculum framework for teacher-librarianship/school-librarian education. A framework such as this can be of help to countries just beginning to introduce school libraries and teacher-librarians into their school programs.

The role of the 21st-century teacher-librarian is diverse. In a perfect world, teacher-librarians would be experts in leadership, curriculum, special education, assessment, literacy and new literacies, adult education, evidence-based practice, technology, collaboration, and even librarianship. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and so although the TL-DL program aims to provide an introduction to theory and practice in all these areas, there is a need for further and continuing education, informal and formal networks, and the work of professional organizations and associations to support the lifelong-learning needs of teacher-librarians.

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