

Reframing the Library Media Specialist as a Learning Specialist

by Allison Zmuda and Violet H. Harada

Preparing students to meet the challenges of the 21st century has solidified the need for information literacy and technology as meaningful components of curriculum designs and instructional practices. The survey report *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* states that, when polled, voters rank the following areas as high priorities for schools (2007):

- computer and technology skills
- critical thinking and problem solving skills
- ethics and social responsibility
- written and oral communications
- teamwork and collaboration
- lifelong learning and self-direction
- leadership
- creativity and innovation
- media literacy
- global awareness

In today's schools, a host of learning specialists joins classroom teachers in working with students. These specialists have no formal classroom assignments, but they provide instruction for students, and, frequently, training for teachers. They range from library media specialists and reading resource teachers to technology coordinators and math coaches. As learning specialists, library media specialists, because of their deep content expertise about the nature of inquiry and the construction of knowledge, are uniquely suited to develop 21st-century student learning skills. What would it look like if learners could determine their information needs, solve problems, read for pleasure, effectively and ethically use in-

formation and ideas, debate merits of a point of view, and create quality written and oral communications?

Such clarification of what the learners must do to achieve mission goals defines for all staff what good business looks like in the library media center. Good business is work (instructional activities and assessments) that develops student learning around the goals that are most important (again as defined by the mission). The recently published *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* requires students to construct knowledge through the exploration and analysis of ideas, information, and point of view, and to communicate their learning through authentic, transfer-oriented tasks (AASL 2007). In his research of student learning in Ohio, Ross Todd found strong evidence that:

Students unequivocally recognize that when school librarians have a clearly defined role as an information literacy specialist, their opportunities for learning are enhanced. This role is a very active, learning-centered role where school librarians actively contribute their expertise to that of the classroom teachers to enable students to transform infor-

Allison G. Zmuda is an education consultant who has worked with schools throughout the United States and Canada. Email: zmuda@competentclassroom.com

Violet H. Harada is a professor in the University of Hawaii's Library and Information Science Program. Email: vharada@hawaii.edu

mation into personal knowledge (Todd, 2006).

Bad business is work that is irrelevant, tangential, or counter-productive. These activities or assessments require students to collect information or resources in the library media center and then leave. The superficiality of this acquisition is doomed to fail. Students will not become wiser, more skillful, or more strategic; they will not become more prolific or powerful as communicators; they will not become more mindful of the validity of alternate points of view or the persuasive use of data. Bad business takes up precious resources of the library media specialist because of the time it takes to prepare and organize the resources as well as the orchestration and oversight of the experience. Major features of bad and good business practices are delineated in Table 1.

There is no upside to library media specialists collaborating with classroom teachers on tasks that

are bad business. If library media specialists participate in the design and orchestration of these types of tasks, even though they know that it is “bad business,” they become accomplices in the assignment of yet another task that dilutes inquiry to the level of answering the questions on a worksheet, reduces deep reading to counting the number of pages read, and prostitutes construction of knowledge to a cut-and-paste exercise. The library media specialist must insist that every learning experience in the library-classroom aligns with the learning goals of both the classroom teacher’s curriculum and the library media curriculum. The key to depersonalizing this transformation of “bad business” to “good business” comes from the continued insistence that this isn’t about what the teacher or library media specialist prefers, but what the learner requires. The mission statement and AASL *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* should be prominently

featured in all aspects of the learning environment—physically hung on the walls, judiciously placed in curriculum binders and planning materials, and prominently displayed on the school and library media websites. The library media specialist also should use the learning goals as a touchstone in every conversation with staff. Such relentless consistency both models and reinforces to staff that the focus on the goals of learning is a “disciplined mindset” that ensures that what students are asked to do on a daily basis is challenging and worthy of the attempt.

How the 21st-Century Mission Affects the Job Description of the Library Media Specialist

In their upcoming book, *Librarians as Learning Specialists: Meeting the Learning Imperative for the 21st Century*, Zmuda and Harada contend that library media specialists must refocus their job descriptions and their daily practice so that they target direct contributions to improve the achievement of all learners on defined curricular goals. The job description of a library media specialist predictably includes key components that appear in those of many other learning specialists employed in schools. A comparative analysis of reading, technology, mathematics and librarian job descriptions is shown in Table 2 (see page 44).

While the parallels are evident in theory, will this “reframing” resonate with library media specialists? The authors tested out the viability

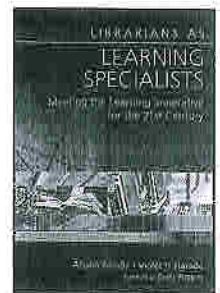


Table 1. Bad and Good Business Practices for Library Media Specialists

Moving away from bad business where...	Moving toward good business where...
Success is defined by the number of staff who collaborate with the library media specialist.	Success is defined by the quality of the work completed in the library media center.
Success is defined by doing whatever is asked in order to be recognized as valuable or important.	Success is defined by investing resources only in those tasks that are central to the library mission.
Success is defined by helping students find what they are looking for.	Success is defined by engaging students in the construction of deep knowledge through the exploration of ideas and information, conducting of investigations, and communication and evaluation of findings.
Success is defined by the number of instructional sessions held in the library media center.	Success is defined by the student learning that resulted from completion of work centered on subject area and information literacy goals.

of the concept through countless conversations with library media specialists and their supervisors throughout the United States. In one such exploratory conversation at a state-level conference, Zmuda asked

over 100 library media specialists to participate in a KWL activity on their ideas, concerns, and insights about being viewed as a learning specialist. This discussion is summarized in Table 3 (see page 45).

How This Affects the Design, Implementation, and Analysis of Student Learning

Instructional designs are always in a state of flux. While there are core practices, strategies, and re-

Table 2. What Learning Specialists Do

Assessment and Instruction (with students)	Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction (with staff)	Program Development, Leadership, and Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide instruction for individuals or small groups of students. Such instruction tends to be supplemental to that provided by the classroom teachers. • Work on short-term basis with targeted students, then provide strategies/processes for classroom teachers to follow. • Provide instruction, using research-supported programs. 	<p>Curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve on curriculum committees. <p>Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in the development of assessment instruments (retelling protocols and running records) and selection of assessment instruments. • Assist in interpretation of test results with teachers and parents. • Share results of assessments with public. <p>Instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss and share ideas with teachers about help for struggling students, and materials and ideas that enhance performance. • Hold collaborative planning sessions to develop lessons and strategies for working with students. These are held either on a systematic, regular basis, as needed, or "on the fly." • Demonstrate strategies for teachers, observe, and provide feedback. • Participate in observations (teachers observing each other) for professional growth. • Provide a "friendly ear" for teachers who want to talk about issues, problems, or ideas that they have about instruction and assessment for their students. 	<p>Development and Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide professional development for teachers as part of the school staff development program; also teach classes that teachers can take for credit. Work with teachers in planning and conducting professional development in the schools. • Work closely with the principal in setting a schedule and making decisions about professional development. • Serve as mentor to new teachers by modeling, providing feedback, and coaching. • Work with special educators and serve on instructional support or pupil personnel teams. • Lead study groups (read a professional book or article and then discuss). • Serve as a resource to allied professionals, parents, other community members, volunteers, and tutors. • Serve as a resource for parents (communicate with parents, providing and accessing information); conduct workshops on how they can work with their children; provide workshops for parents of preschool students. • Work with other school specialists. • Work with volunteers (provide training sessions, coordinate schedules, recruit). <p>Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain center or location for various materials. • Look for and assist in the selection of new materials (including development of criteria for determining quality of those materials); assist in the piloting of new materials. • Coordinate program schedules.

sources that constitute the basis of the learning experiences, teachers and library media specialists must constantly monitor and adjust their work in light of their increased knowledge of the nature of their learners and the learning. This design cycle of construction, analysis, and adjustment is grounded in the

essential question: How do I know if what I did today worked? For an instructional design to “work,” a teacher or library media specialist must investigate:

- Did the instructional experience(s) cause the desired learning for every learner?

- What evidence do I have to that effect?
- Will the learning likely transfer to future learning experiences?

Ross Todd stated in an interview in 2006:

In the current educational climate there is a very clear mandate for a shift from putting our

Table 3. Insights and Issues of Library Media Specialists as Learning Specialists

<p>K What do we know a learning specialist to be?</p>	<p>W What are we curious or concerned about if the library media specialist is reframed as a learning specialist?</p>	<p>L What have we learned so far about what reframing the library media specialist as a learning specialist will require?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone who believes that all students can be successful learners. • Someone who is up on the latest trends in teaching and learning. • Someone who has work experience in both the classroom and the library media center. • Someone who uses assessment data to determine student strength and weaknesses to inform future instruction. • Someone who can diagnose learning problems and design ways to address them. • Someone with deep content expertise about how people learn. • Someone who works with staff and students. • Someone who constantly reflects on his/her own practice and how to improve. • Someone who is able to break things down into small, manageable pieces. • Someone who is fluent with the curriculum goals across grade levels and subject areas. • Someone who can coach performance (from staff and students) through the design of challenging and motivating tasks. • Someone who seeks out new learning experiences, tools, and resources because of what the learners need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we articulate our role in an effective way so the message is heard? • How do we use professional learning communities to facilitate work? • How much do we really know about how different types of learners learn in the library media center? • How can we earn respect of staff and the larger system as a learning specialist? • How does the learning specialist fit into the hierarchy of the school or district organization? • Who has the authority to make decisions about what instruction will look like in the library media center? • How do we increase the number of teachers who want to collaborate with us in the design, implementation, and evaluation of learning? • How do we hone our leadership skills so that we can improve the effectiveness of our collaborative work with staff? • How do we elevate the quality of instructional and assessment practices in the school/district? • Who are the other learning specialists in the school? What relationship do we have with one another? What relationship should we have? • How do we facilitate learning while running the library media center? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just because it isn't happening in front of us doesn't mean it isn't happening—the teacher's classroom is an extension of the work in the library media center. • We will never be considered learning specialists without collecting evidence of student achievement in our classroom. • Because disengaged learners learn nothing, we have a responsibility to “fix” instructional designs that are low-level, information retrieval tasks. • A learning specialist, like any teacher-leadership position, is an inherently precarious, messy job because it lives somewhere between the administrative ranks and the teaching ranks. • Without a clear job description (on paper and in practice), it is impossible to know whether we are doing the right things. • Staff think that we are what they see us do—if they only watch us organize, sort, manage, and support, they will not see us as learning specialists.

Note: Specific contributions to the KWL chart were made by audience participants at a breakout session facilitated by Allison Zmuda on November 15, 2007, including but not limited to the reflections of: Debra Kay Logan, Hilda Weisburg, Dee Giordan, Linda Piscione, Pat Slemmer, Diane Drayer Beler, Pat VanEs, Christine Lopey, and Dawn Henderson.

emphasis on finding and accessing to knowledge building. It's where education is going. We are talking about standards-based education. We are talking about accountability. We are talking about evidence of achievements. There is incredible emphasis on meeting curriculum standards, knowledge-based outcomes. Our instructional interventions need to put a richer emphasis on those knowledge-based outcomes. How do we pedagogically intervene in the information experience of a child, to enable them to go beyond the amassing of facts to the interrogation of those facts and to develop deep knowledge? That's a very complex task (Kenney 2006).

What makes this inquiry even more complex is the inevitable reality that what "works" for one student does not work for all students. Staff must work to troubleshoot inevitable learning problems so that students have additional opportunities to improve performance through highly focused remediation, extension, and enrichment. Again, library media specialists as learning specialists are uniquely situated to collaborate in this effort through their development and dissemination of resources, curriculum leadership, and participation in professional learning communities. They also possess valuable skills in designing and analyzing instructional activities and assessments tasks, modeling of processes and "best practices," and coaching of improved staff and student performance.

How This Affects Our Short-Term and Long-Term Efforts

A mission-centered mindset

requires a constant analysis of whether the daily practices of the library media specialist are having the desired effects on student achievement. Such analysis will inevitably uncover areas of "misalignment" where significant resources are expended to support the development of work and acquisition of materials that are tangential to established curricular goals. This "misalignment" plagues not only the work of the library media specialist but of all educators. In their seminal work on schooling and leadership, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe state:

One failure of conventional schooling and of school reform in general relates to the deeply held belief that if we just get good people trying hard to do good things, it will all work out. The truth is otherwise: excellence in leadership as well as in teaching is a function of constant and deliberate self-correction, mindful of clear and agreed-upon goals while unflinchingly seeking out feedback and thus dealing with the brutal facts of reality. The school reforms of the past twenty-five years continue—and continue to be needed—because many schools are far from facing the information that cannot be ignored. That information is of two kinds: feedback about how deeply and effectively students are learning and are engaged, and feedback suggesting that many time-honored actions and policies in school are dysfunctional—counter to mission (2007, 179).

Library media specialists who reframe themselves as learning specialists will find the recognition,

respect, and collaboration they seek when they put an end to "bad business" practices that divert focus from the mission. This charge will not be easy. It will be fraught with difficult conversations, political strategizing, repeated modeling, relentless data collection and analysis, and candid feedback. But the rewards of good business will be spectacular: the sound of students engaged in the construction of knowledge and the communication of thinking, the opportunity to see that the investment of resources positively affects student performance on higher-order tasks and staff teaching practices, and the sense of satisfaction that the library media center is the most information-rich, inquiry-rich, resource-rich, pedagogically-rich classroom in the building.

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