

Reviving my inner librarian

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As teacher-librarians we often work in isolation. OPAL recognises the isolation and subsequent needs of a professional working alone, but schools rarely do. Often a teacher-librarian works in isolation and, in my experience, because all their colleagues in the immediate workplace are teachers not librarians, the professional talk is about students and curriculum, not best library practice. So the demands of the job mean that TLs focus primarily on the teaching side of it all – after all that is the focus of their work – relating library services to curriculum issues.

As a secondary school teacher-librarian, I found the skills of the librarian were becoming less important than the skills of the teacher so I jumped at the chance to refresh them at two ALIA conferences and an ALIA-Info lit forum. My eyes were opened to the 'other' library world. That, and a short stint in a public library, has reinvigorated the librarian in my professional life.

At the 2004 ALIA conference here in Brisbane, I huddled around hoping for anonymity amongst all the higher education and TAFE librarians and those from state or overseas libraries. Imagine admitting to working as a school librarian there! What a conversation stopper!! I listened, chatted hesitantly, realised how hugely relevant 'real-world' librarianship could be to schools, and rushed back to my school to try out some ideas. If those very interesting speakers from the British medical library system ever knew that I put the evidence-based librarianship skills I learnt from them to really good use in a Year 8 Ancient History class, they would no doubt see them in quite a different light! The world of medicine may be important, but nothing beats the enthusiasm generated by a group of noisy twelve year olds when they realise the library can give shape to their research about Egyptian artefacts while they are still excavating them from a pile of crumbling bricks.

The ALIA infolite forum was an interesting one – it was here I realised that as librarians we all meet the challenge of information skills in different ways. Higher Ed, TAFE librarians and me – one of only two teacher-librarians in the audience – listened to the similarities in the challenges we face as library professionals. Again, I picked up some good ideas, but this time, I was able to contribute a few ideas too. At Click06, again I was one of only two teacher-librarians there, but by this time I was used to being a novelty! This conference was full of ideas, information sharing and contacts that gave the profession of teacher-LIBRARIAN a new perspective. The pre-conference tour of libraries in and around Perth opened my eyes to the huge range of library work and the different ways we put skills to good use in our respective areas. I returned to my school full of enthusiasm and vigour with a new perspective on old problems. For me, hitherto a TEACHER-librarian, it was a new and enlightening process. So much of the professional knowledge of the librarian world gets bogged down in the demands of teaching. Taking time out to rediscover this world has been a strong professional highlight for me.

Brisbane City Council library has about 4 million books and is the

second largest town council library in the world after California. I jumped at the chance to get some work experience there. How did they handle the problems of a huge library, the library management system, overdue loans and grumpy customers? (With great aplomb, I discovered. Give me a classroom of thirty teenagers over one grumpy old man any day! At least I can tell the teenagers to mind their manners... my hat goes off to public librarians everywhere!)

Dabbling in the world of libraries outside the school system is an energising experience. It has changed the way I look at my practice. I can see the connections between the practices of library and the practices of teacher with far more clarity than before and I have become a better teacher-librarian because of it. I thoroughly recommend you try it.



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