



The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities

The Federal Government has recently funded the building of school libraries across Australia (BER), thus emphasizing the importance placed on the existence of libraries in schools. However as there has been no word on the staffing of these structures, it has left Teacher Librarians in a strangely invidious position.

How are Teacher Librarians valued as teachers and as librarians in the “Information Age”? I have **exactly the same** qualifications as my brother, Geoff. We went to the same tertiary institution. We were both awarded the same qualification.

Geoff Strempele is currently the [Associate Director, Public Library Services](#) (PLS), State Library of SA. In this role he is responsible for providing leadership, support and services to the States’ 130+ public libraries including the provision of over \$5M of public library materials and free public Internet access.

If Geoff, as a Teacher Librarian, who has left teaching and used his qualifications to such a degree, surely the position of Teacher Librarian in schools deserves a closer look. They play a unique, important and often overlooked role in education.

Teacher Librarians ARE Librarians. Teacher Librarians ARE Teachers.

However...Teacher Librarians are not JUST Librarians. Teacher Librarians are not JUST Teachers.

As a teacher, Teacher Librarians have a good overall view of the school curriculum, the programs being run and the student body in different year levels. They have been trained, as teachers, in all the skills and understand the body of knowledge about education, which the other teachers have. They are all “on the same page”. As such Teacher Librarians can and do offer information to one group of staff members about what another is doing. For example, the Science and SOSE faculty may be looking at volcanoes, independently, often researching current and past occurrences through research in the library. They are brought together by the Teacher Librarian to enhance each other’s teaching. Teacher Librarians tailor the information they supply to students according to their needs (year level, course, time restraints...). They are the teachers which students turn to when they need extra information, or when they are struggling to keep up with the demands of their subjects.

What I love about being a Teacher Librarian is that I supply information to students upon request. I am not delivering curriculum, wanted or not. I am fulfilling a perceived need which the student has, and showing that student (or group of students) how to access the information. And that is a very, VERY different role to the traditional classroom teacher.

Australian schools have been impacted by the supply of digital “units” (laptops etc.) as part of the Digital Education Revolution (DER). To meet the true potential of the DER, specialists who have an intimate understanding of the curriculum, the expectations of the school, the capabilities of the students and the intricacies of digital learning are essential to the process. Teacher Librarians (“TLs”) are uniquely placed to offer this “bridge to learning”, and are working hard and smart in the pursuit of excellence in education.

The DER has also brought Internet wireless networks to schools. Teacher Librarians welcome the opportunity to use this powerful tool. They actively promote [Inquiry Learning](#), [Resource Based Learning](#), and similar styles of research to ensure the Internet is incorporated into the learning process. TLs have a long and continuing history of teaching the [steps of inquiry: Define; Locate; \(Analyse;\) Select; Organise; Present; Evaluate](#). Far from displacing and sidelining TLs, the Net vindicates their role as research teacher. TLs instruct students to evaluate [website validity](#). TLs teach the correct use of [Bibliographic details](#) and actively stress the avoidance of [plagiarism](#). As a matter of course, all of these aspects of research skills are incorporated into the units which TLs construct, teach and assess. Often they are the only teachers who have an overview and excellent grasp of these skills. They are often instrumental in skilling other teachers in the process, and in Professional Development sessions.

The recent inflow of digital technology into schools, without the TL's guidance, could very easily become simply a meaningless transfer of old habits to a new environment, without any skill refinement. The old habits of meaningless 'copy and paste', of photocopying images, sticking them onto card, colouring the background, rubbing in a little coffee and burning the edge of the page still constitute acceptable and rewarded processes in some (non TL) quarters.

Who else but the Teacher Librarian has a handle on the research process? "IT" coordinators are concerned more with hardware and software usage. A majority of teachers unfortunately accept URLs as a bibliography, and Administrative staff administer. Although there are individuals who are up to the task, there is no single group of educators in schools which pay such close attention to the information literacy process.

The Digital Education Revolution has provided the potential to change the way by which the upcoming generation becomes digitally literate. Teacher Librarians have embraced this paradigm shift as they have previously. Teacher Librarians have a history of incorporating technology into the learning process. They have welcomed the tape recorder, the cassette recorder, the 16 mm projectors, the video, the DVD, "Clickview", digital cameras, "flip cams", databases, computers and the internet. They absorb and use technology, and promulgate its inclusion in educational usage. I am currently resourcing a bundle of "New SACE" Home Economics units with URLs, to assist the students to go straight to some excellent sites relevant to the research required. The teachers are extremely appreciative, and the students are too.

Some may suggest that the "DER" and "Google" have already replaced libraries and rendered the Teacher Librarian superseded and outmoded. Such a proposition is analogous to stating that emails, digital conferencing and Skype have made the phenomena of politicians gathering in Parliament House redundant. It is comparable to a belief that "Google" has made parliamentary researchers superfluous. One may enhance the other, but to state that it replaces it is a nonsense.

Teacher Librarians across Australia do not work in isolation, but are in constant contact with their fellow professionals by means of a national (and state) "[listserv](#)". They have adapted the internet to their own purposes, like no other teachers or school educators. Whilst the stereotype of the bespectacled, hair-in-a-bun, shushing old maid may have some ready to consign the Teacher Librarian to the 'dustbin of history', TLs have long since transformed into 'tech savvy' information specialists.

There is an unfortunate creep by Principals to replace the TL with technicians, or untrained others. Yet **study after study**, mainly in the USA, has shown the link between increased academic results and a fully trained Teacher (School) Librarian working in a well-resourced library.

Where do Principals turn for guidelines on the Teacher Librarian's expertise and crucial role? In a school setting, where the Teacher Librarian works alongside administrators, coordinators and other staff, they often present a lone voice in defining and even defending their role in terms of Information Literacy skills.

Perhaps this inquiry could inform Principals of the crucial role which TLs play in Twenty First Century education?

In recent years, schools have had to take on a larger share of the fiscal burden, including in South Australia at least, the cost of Work Cover. With policies like these in place, it is little wonder that Principals are looking to cut costs – even to the detriment of educational excellence. Where do they turn, guided by the “Google has replaced the library” myth? They begin with the one role in the school which is so well adapted to the digital age, but where the employee is in some respects the most isolated. Although often a member of Curriculum, Finance, Governing Council, and other important committees, the TL belongs to no faculty, no year level, and is often outside of the Administration team. The TL is extremely vulnerable to cost cutting measures, which is why they need the protection of the House of Representative subcommittee, to ensure their noble work proceeds unhindered by fiscal trimming.

In the South Australian school environment, Teacher Librarians (and Student Counsellors) are assigned to schools separately from other teaching staff. However, Principals have long paid lip service to the staffing formula, by employing non-TLs, and by loading TLs with tasks outside their library role. This has sometimes meant that TLs have been asked to teach subjects for which they have had no training, or have been assigned other tasks which have taken them away from the library. Then they have been backfilled by untrained, unsuitable staff. Teacher Librarians are often asked to take a teaching load, which again takes them out of the School Library and their field of expertise. I have had personal experience of all of these manoeuvres. The opportunity cost? It has left me unable to engage at my in my area of expertise at a professional level with staff and students in the library. When the long term gains are overturned by short sighted decision making, it's anything but a win-win situation.

Now is the time to acknowledge the specialist niche which Teacher Librarians so adequately fill. Now is the time to work towards more information specialist Teacher Librarians in our schools.

In this the Digital Age, we need more, many more teachers who have the passion and the skills to enhance the digital learning, the Information Literacy of our upcoming generation. We need our schools overflowing with teachers who have the skills of Teacher Librarians. Of all the staff in all the schools, it's the Teacher Librarians who are leading the way in educating for the 21st century.