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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education and Training
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

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Dear Committee Secretary

On behalf of VALA - Libraries, Technology and the Future Inc., please accept the following submission to the Australian Government's Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools and, in particular, our response to the term of reference that deals with:

- The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.

Background information on VALA

VALA - Libraries, Technology and the Future Inc. http://www.vala.org.au is an independent Australian based not-for-profit organisation that aims to promote the use and understanding of information technology within libraries and the broader information sector. Held every two years in Melbourne, the VALA Biennial Conference is recognised as the premier library and information technology conference for this region. The conference attracts delegates from school, academic, public, health, business, and government libraries from across Australia, New Zealand, Asia, and beyond.

In submitting a response to the Australian Government's Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools, VALA supports the submissions from the Australian School Library Association, the School Library Association of Victoria, and the Australian Library and Information Association.

Introduction

With the all-pervasive uptake of digital content and technologies in society, the role and nature of teacher librarians, as well as the role and structure of physical libraries in schools, is radically changing. This is having a direct impact on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians. However, despite these changes the focus and role of school librarians remains the same:

- Supporting the curriculum and student learning outcomes

- Supporting a culture of learning within a school

- Supporting a culture of reading and literacy within a school

- Encouraging students to develop a questioning and analytical mind.

Following is a response to the impact of digital technology on library collections, library spaces, learning, and the librarians' skills and competencies.

Library Collections

The impact of digital technologies means that school libraries have moved from primarily collecting books to facilitating access to a broad range of online and physical content.

1. As a result, school libraries use databases, best-of-web, streaming video, learning objects, audio books, and now ebooks, as well as more traditional print-based collections.

2. Quality learning requires access to authoritative and accurate information. In themselves, search engines such as Google and the free web do not provide access to all the online resources students need to support their learning. The shift towards more quality online content has an impact on library budgets.

3. Schools that do not fund access to the necessary online resources, and that rely primarily on free online resources, run the risk of falling behind.

4. This includes failing to ensure their students have the research and enquiry skills they will need if they intend to go on to tertiary education and then a profession that relies on research, analytical, and problem solving skills.

5. As identified at the recent VALA2010 conference in Melbourne, a growing number of libraries are introducing next generation discovery platforms to enable their students to search across a rich and targeted set of resources.

6. Access to consortia such as ERA (http://era.nla.gov.au) needs to expand beyond text content to audio visual and discovery services to allow equitable access for all schools.

Librarian Skills and Competencies

1. While digital technologies have changed the whole nature of collecting and disseminating information within a school, the fundamental skills of the teacher librarian have remained the same: to ensure students and staff have easy access to the most authoritative and accurate information. This supports learning and literacy within their school communities.

2. In this new world of integrated online and physical collections, librarians need to know as much about database licensing, online authentication, cyber safety, and online collaborative content building with students and staff, as they know about building and supporting traditional print based collections.

3. Teacher librarians need to re-think their role in engaging with students and facilitating access to online content. In response to these changes in digital technologies, many librarians have already embraced Learning 2.0 / social web programs; re-skilled themselves, and started to reposition the structure and formats of their collections and services within their schools.

4. Due to the rapid and ongoing nature of changes to digital technology, in order to fulfil their roles, librarians continually need to acquire new competencies. This must be recognised and resourced to help ensure librarians can continue to implement the most effective and efficient use of digital content and learning in a school setting, despite the fact that the technology continues to change at a rapid rate.

Library Spaces

The impact of digital technology means that the school's online eLibrary is as important as the school's physical library.

1. Students learn in three environments: the home, at school and the third space in-between, cafes, sports grounds, work experience placements, public places and spaces, shopping malls etc. Within the school environment, the classroom and the library are no longer the solitary realms of learning. Students require different spaces for differing tasks, quiet learning, group discussion, role play etc. Digital technologies and wireless mobility empower the student to learn where they are, when they are, and, as they require.

2. Therefore, the school's online library needs to be fully integrated with the physical library so the school can provide a coherent and coordinated learning framework.

3. The impact of digital technology means that the school eLibraries are open 24/7. With the uptake in Personal Digital Assistants such as iPhones, school eLibraries are increasingly available wherever students and staff happen to be. This has an impact on the delivery of learning and students' expectations, as well as the physical library spaces.

4. As with their university counterparts, the impact of digital technologies in schools is changing the nature of physical libraries. School libraries are moving away from being spaces full of books to flexible learning commons that support interactive and collaborative learning.

5. As a result, school libraries are becoming the most wired and connected buildings within a school. To quote the Principal of Bialik College in Melbourne, "the new school library building (which is funded by the Australian Government's "Building the Education Revolution" Project) is to be an exciting and interactive space for collaborative as well as individual learning; it is to be a playground of learning that inspires and engages directly with students".

Learning

1. Changes in the nature of collections, as well as online and physical libraries, are also tied directly to changes in learning. With the rise of web 2.0 or the social web, students are active producers of information as well as passive consumers of information. More than ever, school libraries, library collections, and teacher librarianship are about collaborative partnerships with students and staff.

2. Teacher librarians are therefore using Learning 2.0 programs to rethink the way they deliver learning to students. One example is the "Wider Reading Project" that used wiki technology to involve year 10 students at Melbourne High School and Melbourne Girls' College. This project was very successful in engaging students in reading. As these students did not previously know each other, they also learned good online communication and 'netiquette' skills, giving them the tools to become good digital citizens.

3. Schools therefore require access to curriculum specialists who connect resources with pedagogy, media specialists who connect technology with pedagogy, and technical expertise to maintain and support physical and virtual content and spaces.

Rather than diminish the role of librarians and libraries in schools, the growth and changes in digital technologies has enhanced the role of school libraries, librarians and media specialists. However, for schools to maximise the effectiveness of digital technology, teacher librarians need to be skilled in the use and application of this technology. Physical libraries also need to be flexible, wired, interactive, and inspirational spaces.

We thank the Committee for considering our submission, and we look forward to being of assistance in any way the Committee sees fit.

Bart Rutherford   David Feighan
President   VALA2010 Programme Chair