

Chapter 13

Simplifying and Expanding Collaboration through Collaborative Websites: Using Technology Wisely

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ABSTRACT

For many years, school librarians have recognized the importance of collaborating with teachers to integrate inquiry into student work but have met with varying degrees of success in achieving this goal. Traditional teaching methods, attitudes and expectations, lack of understanding of the role of the school librarian, staffing multiple schools, communication roadblocks, and scheduling have all contributed to the difficulties of creating truly collaborative units for students. Technology can provide a creative strategy for encouraging and supporting collaboration with teachers. At the same time, it is vital to involve students in the creation of their own knowledge through collaboration and communication with others. The use of LibGuides is examined as a framework and tool for both these purposes.

INTERACTION, LEARNING, AND INQUIRY

Librarians know the importance of collaborating with teachers to focus student work on inquiry but have met with varying degrees of success. At the same time, it is vital to involve students

in the creation of their own knowledge through collaboration and communication with others. Traditional teaching methods, expectations, lack of understanding of the librarian's role, staffing multiple schools, communication roadblocks, and scheduling, all obstruct cooperative development of truly collaborative learning environments for

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students. Technology can offer a creative strategy for encouraging and supporting collaboration among teachers and librarians. At the same time, students and teachers can engage in developing and continually modifying the library's resources and Website as they pursue inquiry. Use of Lib-Guides will be examined as a framework and tool for all these purposes. The challenges of the 21st century require a redefinition of how schools support learning, the concept of literacy required by young people, and the role of the librarian. Literacy needs to be redefined as the capability to "become" or Scheffler's idea of high literacy (1975). All children need to develop high literacy if they are to learn, contribute, innovate and adapt flexibly in a knowledge economy. High literacy requires domain knowledge, reasoning, problem solving, communication, making connections between disparate knowledge, and the ability to work with others across domains. Further, it requires self-organized, self-directed, and self-evaluated learning. It demands that schools move to a deeper recognition of how students learn and develop new knowledge and consequent redesign of learning experiences.

Students learn by constructing their own understanding as they engage experiences and ideas, building on their prior knowledge. "Education is not an affair of telling and being told but an active and constructive process" (Dewey, 1915, p. 158). Kane describes the goals of participatory learning as encouraging independent critical thinking, developing personal responsibility for learning, building on prior knowledge, engaging actively in a variety of open-ended activities, and focusing on both the process and product of learning (Kane, 2004).

Dewey argued that "transformative interactions are generated by "setting up problematic situations that students, working collaboratively, must resolve" (Cunningham, 2009, p. 49). As students go through the stages of solving these problems by conceptualizing the situation and anticipating potential solutions, collecting information to

define or clarify the problem, reasoning, taking action on the idea, and reflecting on the activity, they gain greater understanding of their own ideas (Kuhlthau, 2004).

Other philosophers have theorized the importance of social interaction during the learning process. Vygotsky saw learning as a socially constructed experience where meaning is developed through interaction. Much of a child's learning occurs through social interaction with a more knowledgeable other (e.g., teacher or more knowledgeable student) who models behaviors or provides instructions (i.e., co-operative or collaborative dialog) (Vygotsky, 1978). Pask proposed that knowledge develops through conversation. People find points of agreement and disagreement and modify their own conceptual framework to build new knowledge (Pask, 1976). Mitra has demonstrated that, even without a teacher, children learn from each other through collaboration and conversation (Mitra, 2010). All they need is a consuming curiosity about something of interest to them, access to information and engagement with their peers; they will engage in inquiry and knowledge building naturally.

Traditionally, finding information for a school assignment has been a solo activity often focusing on just finding facts, with students' only audience being the teacher, "Inquiry is an approach to learning whereby students find and use a variety of sources of information and ideas to increase their understanding of a problem, topic, or issue" by engaging students and challenging them "to connect their world with the curriculum" and to develop new knowledge (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007, p. 2). By collaborating with teachers to expand the notion of inquiry and facilitating student interaction in groups, librarians can help move the curriculum of the school toward a more active, participatory learning environment, where students collaborate as they seek answers to higher-level questions of interest to them through discriminating use of information and conversations with others.

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