

Chapter 18

Interview with a Librarian: The Collaborative Process as a Journey Rather than a Destination

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ABSTRACT

Current teacher evaluation systems place value on collaborative relationships between educators. Common Core Standards strongly suggest interdisciplinary units of study and make several references to reading and literacy in all subject areas. While current trends in education point to collaboration and a more holistic approach to learning, the practice remains a hit-or-miss exercise. The school librarian is in the unique position of being able to see connections among the different subject areas by virtue of his or her expertise on the resources available to each of these areas. When he or she is able to assist in the creation of curricular units that incorporate a variety of subjects into lesson plans, students are free to make connections that may have eluded them in single-subject studies. This chapter discusses one librarian's approach to collaboration that focuses on relationships, connections, and creativity.

MY BACKGROUND

Picture in your mind a college classroom that had no desks or traditional seating. The space around the walls was stuffed with all manner of odd things: mannequins, tin foil, feathers, beads, canvases, paints, and more. Students sat on bean bag chairs in a circle with two professors sitting amongst them. Each class was a little different from the one before. Sometimes we were given paper and told to create a piece of art without using a brush, crayon, pencil, or any other traditional tool for putting an image on a surface. Sometimes we were given enigmatic photographs and asked to

create a story based on the images. Regardless of what we were assigned, we were all taken outside our comfort zones and required to think differently about how we expressed ourselves. Without question, the most important college class I took (and the one with the most far-reaching applicability) was the one described above called "Creativity 101." Almost 40 years later, I still use the discoveries I made during that class.

This creative training, coupled with my technical training has made me unique in my profession. That I have always been an avid reader is icing on the cake. I have also embodied the journey that young people are now expected to take as

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4361-1.ch018

the job market and technologies continue to shift. While unusual for someone in my generation, it will be relatively common for today's students to ultimately switch careers multiple times as they seek out work that is personally fulfilling over putting in time to move up through the ranks of a single company or career path (Fisher, 2009). There's one more point I want to share: I was not a good K-12 student. I came dangerously close to failing the 8th grade and would have done so had my family not moved from northern Virginia to suburban North Carolina where I essentially repeated the 8th grade in my 9th grade year. I relate to the disengaged student in a very personal way because that was me until I was motivated to learn as a means to an end.

RELATIONSHIPS

In every school in which I have worked I have put relationships with my colleagues at the top of my focus. I believe that while you can be an expert on curriculum and savvy about technology, if you aren't equally adept at building relationships that foster respect and the mutual exchange of ideas you will sit idly in your media center. The simple act of being interested in what teachers are doing in their classrooms with an equally enthusiastic sense of service and assistance has lead me to cultivate quality relationships within my building. Sometimes, all it takes is being an active listener when someone comes to me with a problem (personal or professional). At other times it takes a light touch to the arm and an expression of empathy. That said, I have never waited for a colleague to seek me out to ask for my services. Instead, I have always taken a proactive approach to pushing out information, resources, and ideas when I know my fellow educators may need them (and sometimes in anticipation of need). In fact, I feel I have been very successful at what has been called "A Radical Alternative" to collaboration:

It is sometimes possible to jump from cooperation straight to collaboration. If the LMS receives a request for assistance just as the project or unit is beginning – especially a brand new project or unit – the suggestion of a full collaboration is sometimes prudent. In that case, the unit would be team-planned, team-taught, and team-assessed. Sometimes, the offer of a collaborative partnership is the perfect response to a simple cooperative request. (Buzzeo, 2008)

One example of this partnership that resulted from a simple request for resources is a unit in which I worked with our TAG (honors) English-Language Arts teacher on a "hero" unit. This had been a standard unit used over the years by this teacher where students researched a person using biography resources and then wrote a paper on their chosen "hero." While there was some novelty in the project in that students could come up with their own conclusions as to why this person was indeed a hero, it was still essentially a cut-and-paste research assignment with a written report as the final product. When the teacher came to the media center, I was in my first year at the school. We had never worked together and I was still a newbie within that school climate and culture. She asked me to set aside some library time so her students could come in and look at the biographies. I launched into what some would call the *reference interview* by asking about the unit, how it had been done in the past, what kinds of technologies she envisioned her students using, and how the previous school librarian had been involved. I then asked her how she felt about the resulting papers. Her response was lukewarm – she felt it was a useful exercise but admitted that the level of creativity and novelty was low.

As it happened, I was in the process of building a graphic novel collection in my middle school library and the positive response had been overwhelming. While this teacher was telling me about students writing about a hero I thought about the heroes in comics: Superman, Batman, and Blue

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