

Influencing Public Education: A "Window of Opportunity" Through School Library Media Centers

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Abstract. How can the field of instructional technology (IT) have an impact on public education when their philosophies and strategies are so different? Most suggestions in the literature place instructional technology professionals in the role of external change agents to the schools. This article suggests that a new opportunity is on the horizon for modeling IT theory and practice *within* each school through the school library media center. Viewed primarily as support centers in the past, technological developments and the growing interest in information literacy have brought school library media centers to prominence among educators. The computerization of library systems is also finally making it possible for school library media specialists to devote a major portion of their time to instructional matters. A true change in the role of the school library media specialist, however, hinges on high quality training for these professionals. IT professionals are asked to carefully consider this avenue as a way to influence public education.

Introduction

Pondering the problems of public education and the (seemingly obvious) solutions offered by instructional technology (IT) is a favorite pastime wherever IT professionals congregate. While enjoyable, these discussions inevitably run into a major clash of philosophies. The prevailing model in public education, after all, holds individual teachers almost solely responsible for the outcomes of education.

Despite back-to-back classes, high enrollments, students with widely varying levels of ability and maturity, and limited planning time and resources, teachers are expected to be subject matter experts *and* experts in planning, designing, delivering, and evaluating instruction. They also serve as counselors, stand-in parents, accountants, and clerks. In other words, teachers are viewed as one-person instructional systems. As a result, when there are concerns about the quality of public education, the typical response is to focus almost exclusively on upgrading the quality of teaching. Tuckman (1985) notes that:

States have built tests to screen teachers and to evaluate the training of teachers. Models have been developed to describe and presumably yield effective teaching and teacher merit plans, and career ladders have been implemented to reward the "better" teachers. In short, "education" has been presented as "teaching" and improving education, therefore, as improving teaching.
(p. 36)

Instructional technology, on the other hand, focuses on the improvement of "performance" which may or may not call for "teaching" in the traditional sense. IT theory calls for systematic planning to assess what types of strategies and media can best address the task, learner, and environmental requirements for a particular instructional unit. Many of the analysis procedures that are emphasized in IT (e.g. needs assessment, task analysis, media selection/production decision-making) seem irrelevant to classroom teachers who (wisely) recognize their lack of time and resources for such endeavors. It is no surprise, then, that many educators view instructional technology as fine for industrial and

military training, but unsuitable for the schools.

Despite such glaring differences, IT literature periodically presents strategies for involvement with public education. Jorgensen (1981) seeks "mutually beneficial collaborations" between IT and classroom teaching. She recommends that IT professionals (a) attempt to adapt instructional design practices to be more responsive to the needs of classroom instructors, (b) play a more intelligent role in teacher education, and (c) participate in more collaborative school-based research.

Heinich (1984), on the other hand, calls for moving from the "craft" of teaching to the technology of instruction. He has no hesitancy in describing the dramatic changes this would entail:

Instructional technology can take over much of what teachers traditionally do. The extent of the takeover is a function of subject, grade level, nature of the students (for example, normal, handicapped), etc. There is no question that the ratio of professional and paraprofessional personnel to students can be changed drastically. (p. 81)

Both writers are responding to Tuckman's (1985) lament that "two decades of work on instructional systems [is being] ignored" (p. 36) in the public schools. Although their approaches are very different, both see the value in applying IT theory and practice to the classroom. Notice that both also assume an "us-them" distinction, i.e. IT professionals are portrayed as change agents and public education as the client (although Jorgensen advocates a much closer relationship). This is hardly surprising. Teachers and administrators rarely study instructional systems design in their preparation programs; very few schools have positions for instructional designers to

assist teachers (and the few that do reserve them as career ladder opportunities for senior teachers). Therefore, any attempt to introduce alternatives to the "teaching" as "education" model must seemingly come from outside the system.

Diffusion theory, of course, maintains the importance of generating support for innovative practices within the client system. Rogers (1983) discusses the value of "homophily" (the similarity among the sender and receiver of messages) in the adoption of innovation; Havelock (1973), after listing the advantages and disadvantages of both internal and external consultants, suggests the "inside-outside team" (p. 53) as the best strategy. The problem is identifying a professional within the system suitable for playing the role of an instructional technology change agent. If teachers and administrators are excluded (for reasons previously mentioned), the only other candidate is the school library media specialist.

The School Library Media Specialist as Change Agent

The 1975 edition of *Media Programs: District and School* (ALA and AECT,

with the teacher to design and develop instruction. (p. 114)

Anyone familiar with the demands placed on school library media specialists, however, knows that their role as instructional consultants is vastly overshadowed by the management and clerical responsibilities required to keep a resource center operating smoothly. The tendency to schedule school library media centers with classes most of the day (Jay, 1986) bites into most of the remaining time that might allow for instructional design activities. Furthermore, school library media specialists have generally not been trained in instructional design skills (note the "hopefully" in Moore's quote above) beyond those required for media production. This renders them inadequately prepared (a) to be instructional design consultants to teachers as well as (b) to model solid learning and design principles in their own curricular units. Markuson (1986) lists four common instructional problems related to the teaching of reference skills in school library media centers:

1. Research and reference skills, both concrete and abstract, are taught without sufficient regard for

cific needs. (p. 38)

While some of these problems may result from enforced scheduling, they also indicate an inadequate background in learning theory and design.

One other factor that inhibits school library media specialists from serving as instructional consultants in their schools is the attitude of teachers. The notion of working with other professionals to improve instructional practice is as foreign to teachers as it is to most college and university professors. Only someone well trained in diffusion theory will have the patience and arsenal of subtle "guerrilla warfare" tactics to gradually win teachers over to a new way of doing things.

For these and other reasons, many IT professionals view the school library media specialist as simply a support role within the traditional educational model—something quite different from an instructional designer trained in the systems approach. This may be particularly true of instructional technology graduate programs for which "instructional systems design" is the primary focus. These programs are far less likely to have a program track for school library media specialists than are those that list "media" or "school library media" as their primary focus (Schiffman and Gansneder, 1987). The former programs have become almost exclusively aligned with business and industry, with little or no involvement in public education.

Dramatic changes in education, libraries, and society, however, call for a reassessment of the role school library media centers can play in modeling and promoting instructional technology theory and practice in the schools. The remainder of this paper will provide support for the verity of the following hypothesis:

School library media centers represent a viable means of gradually infusing IT theory and practice into public education.

A "Window of Opportunity"

Several obvious factors make the school library media center (SLMC) an appropriate base for influencing public education. First, it is the only part of a school that cuts across all discipline

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1975), the professional guidelines for school library media specialists, stated that school library media specialists should work "as a member of curriculum committees, textbook committees, and other instructional groups" (p. 31) within their schools. About the same time, Moore (1976), among others, wrote of the potential for this role:

The media specialist because of his access to support materials e.g., media, and hopefully his skill in instructional design may also become the logical team member

the developmental levels of the students.

2. Such skills are introduced, taught in one or at most a few sessions, with too little attention paid to sustained repetition or practice.

3. Librarian/student contact time is too infrequent, precluding efficient recall or retention over the long term.

4. Lessons are often ill prepared with too little attention paid to teaching strategies and learning styles: specific tools are taught to meet spe-

areas. School library media specialists have contact with all teachers and administrators, unlike most others in instructional roles. The SLMC is already the repository and distributor of instructional media for the schools. Nation-wide, they are also increasingly becoming the centers for computer technology, as administrators and teachers realize the difficulty in maintaining the hardware and software originally placed in classrooms. This factor has begun to give the school library media specialist more "power", for in the schools, as in other institutions, the person who controls the computers is considered an influential figure.

Recent technological and societal changes, however, offer additional, compelling evidence for reassessing the role of school library media specialists.

Automated Library Systems

For the first time in the history of librarianship, circulation, cataloging, overdue notices, inventory, and other clerical and management functions that have perennially monopolized the time of library professionals can now be performed by "someone" else: the computer! Although the transformation to totally automated school libraries won't happen overnight, the basic ingredients are already in use. Systems for networking academic, public, and school libraries to facilitate communication and sharing resources are also being pursued in many states (Griffiths and Strain, 1985). The effect of this revolution must not be underemphasized. It represents the first *true* opportunity to reshape the role of the school library media specialist; all previous calls to redefine the role have merely added another layer of responsibilities to an already overloaded position.

Once the agonies of conversion to computerization are completed, librarians report a definite change in the character of their work. Decreasing time spent on clerical functions makes increasing the instructional services of the school library media center a genuine possibility. Anticipating this, the latest professional standards of AALS

and AECT, scheduled for publication in 1988, call for (a) moving as quickly as possible into library automation and (b) determining the number of positions in school media centers based partially on the number of services the center offers to the school (rather than solely on school enrollment). Thus, the guidelines will provide national-level support for justifying additional positions for specialized design and technology services.

Calls for Information Literacy

Naisbitt's (1984) statement that "we are drowning in information but starved for knowledge" (p.17) has become the rallying cry for information literacy. Access to information has become an equity issue of concern to many educators who, confused about how information literacy skills can be taught in the schools, are turning to libraries for direction. School library media specialists are taking a leadership role in introducing CD-ROM, online, and other computerized reference tools to the school curriculum. School administrators are also beginning to

tioning citizens? How can the regimented schedule and the routinized atmosphere of classrooms prepare students for independence as adults? Not least, how can we produce critical and creative thinking throughout a student's life when we so systematically discourage individuality in the classroom? (p. 147)

Statements like these—from mainstream education organizations, not instructional technology professionals—challenge the traditional model of expecting all learning to take place within the walls of the classroom with materials handed to students by the teacher or the text. They support a view of learning that puts students actively in charge of accessing and synthesizing information for individualized projects—in other words, research, something school library media specialists know something about. Sophisticated information technologies increasingly found in libraries make the research process more interesting and fruitful for students than in the past. Pulling all of these concepts

The time is ripe for developing and marketing the services of the new, information-age school library media center.

see the sound economic sense in massing a large portion of their resources designated for technology in one location in a school, rather than simply scattering them across all discipline areas. The school library media center is the most logical unit for building an information and technology center accessible to *all* teachers and students.

Concurrent with the focus on information literacy, education reform reports increasingly call for making classroom instruction more active. Ernest Boyer (1983), writing for the Carnegie Foundation report *High School*, asks:

How, for example, can the relatively passive and docile roles of students prepare them to participate as informed, active, and ques-

together, EDUCOM, an association which brings together computer, library, and academic discipline specialists, advocates a blurring of the distinction between classrooms and libraries as the form for schools of the future.

In short, the information age and a growing emphasis on life-long, self-directed learning are building support for libraries from diverse areas. The time is ripe for developing and marketing the services of the new, information-age school library media center.

An Existing Link Between IT and the SLMC

One final factor must be mentioned in support of the earlier hypothesis.

Slightly more than a third (35.7%) of the graduates of instructional technology programs take positions as librarians, all but a fraction of these in school library media centers (Schiffman and Gansneder, 1987). (What percentage this is of the total number of school library media specialists placed is unknown.) It is interesting to note that this figure is equal to the number (35.0%) of graduates placed as designers or media specialists in business and industry. Most graduates placed as school library media specialists come from programs that emphasize either "media" or "school library media", while those programs emphasizing "instructional systems design" place mainly designers in business and industry.

These figures make it clear that graduates of IT programs are being strategically positioned within the public education system. The question is, are they entering the schools trained as instructional technologists or as librarians? Have they been trained in learning theory and instructional design principles? Are they trained in consulting skills (including working with teachers as subject matter experts and working in unfamiliar content areas)? In internship experiences, do they practice their design skills, or only maintaining cataloging and circulation systems? Are they knowledgeable of diffusion theory and how to function as a change agent? These skills are absolutely essential to any successful effort at gradually introducing instructional technology thinking to the schools.

Are school library media specialists graduating from instructional technology programs thoroughly competent and confident in the use of computer and information technologies? Are they prepared to spearhead and manage the conversion to total library automation? Are they trained to be instructional leaders in their schools? Are they trained to make polished, persuasive presentations to faculty, administrators, school boards, etc. (perhaps, for example, on the need for flexible rather than rigid scheduling of the SLMC)? School library media specialists with these skills (in addition to li-

brary/media skills) will be well equipped to function as in-house instructional design and technology change agents within their schools.

Conclusion

Much evidence suggests that school library media centers are standing on the threshold of change. Certainly, many elements have come together to make the first true reassessment of school library media centers possible. Someone will play a leadership role in shaping this change. Many traditional library schools, for example, having experienced declining enrollments for a number of years, are retooling their curricula to reflect an instructional and informational technology emphasis (Intner, 1987).

No one has more expertise, though, in procedures which can improve the quality of instruction throughout the schools than do IT professionals. Our skills have been honed through more than 25 years of experience in education and training. We know how even a small staff of creative, competent design and technology experts could assist in making classroom instruction more individualized, efficient, and effective. Nothing will solve all the problems of public education, of course, but gradually chipping away at the "one-person instructional system" model and demonstrating the value of providing design and production assistance to teachers will be a giant step in the right direction. With the school library media specialists working on the inside and instructional technology professionals acting as external consultants and researchers, perhaps we will be able to have an impact on public education. (Could the teetering stock market, which some consider the prelude to an erosion of the training boom, portend now as a good time to turn our attention once again to the schools...and the window of opportunity opening through school library media centers?)

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