

From teacher-librarian to information specialist: the need for new signposts

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In the latter half of the 1980s, the ideas of co-operative program planning and teaching (CPPT) inspired the community of teacher-librarians in this country. Professional life was vigorous and enthusiastic and important ground was gained in supporting changes in the schools away from teacher-directed learning to student-centred approaches.

There were, however, weaknesses in CPPT as preached in Australia. The chief of these was the concept of equal partnership aimed at by many teacher-librarians and its endorsement as a permanent, long-term goal. Equal partnership was not perceived as equality of respect between teaching professionals, but a requirement that the teacher-librarian teach a substantial part of the unit of work planned with the classroom teacher. Teaching by the teacher-librarian was not seen to stop at the planning of the use of learning resources into a classroom teacher's program and the supervision by the teacher-librarian of students work with the resources in the library.

There was a good argument for teacher-librarians to teach substantial parts of a unit of work with a teacher as an initial step in developing a planning partnership, so that the teacher-librarian could model for the classroom teacher the possibilities for exploiting information resources, where the classroom teacher sought such support. But to many, it appeared that the teacher-librarian was not practising CPPT properly unless he or she was engaged in sharing the classroom teacher's teaching. Very few, if any, ever achieved this ideal state, but it did reign for many as an ideal.

There were many problems with such a conceptualisation of CPPT. It was self-defeating as a goal towards which all teacher-librarians should aim. In the first place, it was impractical for most. Few school libraries were so staffed that the teacher-librarian could afford to be working on such programs on any scale without neglecting fundamental services. In school libraries with limited staffing, it became a much bigger problem. As staffing in schools has dwindled, so the problems have been magnified. There is no point in teaching students to retrieve information if the systems they are using are poorly organised. Many part-time librarians were automatically doomed to failure if measured against such grandiose goals. This extreme view of CPPT was also impractical

in that school organisation had to be adapted to make it possible. Such adaptation required the teacher-librarian to win the support of the administration. Some did, but where others did not, they were cast as failed change agents.

The distortion of CPPT to emphasise sharing the teacher's work was also damaging in that while teacher-librarians asked teachers for professional respect for themselves, CPPT intruded into the professional expertise of the teacher. It implied that the teacher could not master resource-based learning once shown it, but needed the teacher-librarian to work with him or her on a continuing basis. It cast teachers into groups of good teachers who were prepared to work with the teacher-librarian, or bad teachers who were not. Many teacher-librarians also fell into the mistake often made by general librarians of assuming that information literacy is a matter of identifying, locating and using library resources. Many also assumed that resource-based learning could only occur in libraries or by using library materials. The first step forward for the rest of this decade is to acknowledge the narrowness and failings of such views.

Teacher-librarians are needed now more than ever as information specialists who understand the multiplying range of information sources and the intricacies of their different formats. Computing experts know many of these too, but teachers need information specialists who can talk to them of the educational potential and weakness of such sources and cooperatively plan the availability and use of them. Thus teacher-librarians are still needed to provide physical access to information and the initial intellectual access students require. Teacher-librarians need to acknowledge, however, that as students progress up the classes from Year 1 to Year 12, they become more dependent on their classroom teachers for some skills of information literacy, as information literacy is highly context specific. The evaluation of content in resources must be judged principally by subject criteria in the senior high school, not by library ones.

In writing this brief overview, I have concentrated on the concept of CPPT as it appeared in the literature. By the ideal we set ourselves, many of us failed. In reality, many went on quietly making a substantial contribution as they judged fit. Ideals, however, are important. It is time to re-examine ours honestly, modify them and move forward. ■

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