moving forward

School Library Experiences beyond the Expected

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If you stopped by and visited our school library here in Eminence, Kentucky, for an entire day, it would be difficult to predict everything you might see and experience. You might see first-grade students browsing and finding books to check out, a ninth-grade student using a compound miter saw to prepare parts for a project in an engineering class, a fifth-grade class receiving instruction and practice in research best practices, or maybe even a seventh-grade student using vector-based design software and a laser engraver to create a model of a black hole.

Walk upstairs, and you may see a group of students recording a video against the green-screen wall in the studio, students maintaining the hydroponics tower garden, a class taking a field trip using virtual reality viewers, or a group of students working on a storyboard using detachable dry erase panels. Obviously, these things are not all happening at exactly the same moment, but an extensive variety of experiences that occur in one day can be guaranteed. The unpredictability of what might be going on in our space every day is perhaps my favorite part of being a school librarian in our kindergarten through twelfth-grade public school.

Eminence Independent is a small public school district. The city of Eminence is the center of a rural community on the railroad line between Lexington and Louisville. Student enrollment for the 2015–2016 school year was 805 students. The elementary is considered Title I eligible schoolwide (Kentucky Dept. of Ed. 2016). The entire district, kindergarten through twelfth grade, is housed in one building. In the EDhub (the acronym given to our library space: Experimental Da Vinci Hybrid Ultra Bibliotheca), we have two full-time school librarians (including myself).

There are no classified assistants, but we work closely with our district technology coordinator and one of our assistant elementary principals who is also a former shop teacher.

Ten or fifteen years ago I would never have predicted a day looking like this, not even close. So when I think about the implications of what "Beyond the Horizon" means to school libraries, I'm a little scared but extremely excited. When I began my tenure as an elementary school librarian in 2003 I found myself trying to replicate and continue the existing program as closely as I could. It took me quite a while—longer than I like to admit—to realize that our school library program could (and should) change and evolve. Shifting the focus of the school library program and broadening the range of resources and experiences available to learners seemed at times to have happened rapidly. However, for the most part, from my perspective the transformation has happened gradually, organically, and in close connection with the changing needs of our students and teachers. My goal now is to make sure our school library provides students with fun, unique, and individualized opportunities and learning experiences that they otherwise would not have.

Developments in technology have definitely shaped and will continue to shape the evolution of school libraries, but I believe that some other areas will also have a huge impact on how we serve our patrons. I will discuss some of these areas that are transforming my own school library program, but they all have a common connection: our students.

Increased Focus on Student-Centered Learning

Increased focus on and development of student voice, choice, and agency are giving our students more control over their own learning. This shift provides challenges—but also opportunities—for the school library. We have traditionally been in the business of supporting both students and teachers across many content areas, but when students begin to choose content that they would like to explore in small groups or individually, we have an opportunity to help guide them in their search for information, resources, and tools.

One way that our current program supports student-centered learning is through a genius hour class. In our model, high school students meet daily for one hour to work on individual and group student-driven projects. These have included collaborative group projects like the construction of a Rube Goldberg machine, entrepreneurial projects, and school-improvement projects. Individual work has included exploring robotics, hydroponic gardening, creating an original role-playing game, 3-D modeling design, and vector modeling design. One of the aspects of this class that makes me proud is that it is led and directed by one of our school librarians Jen Gilbert. Her students are fortunate in that they can meet daily in our space and become experts at many of the tools and resources we have available. Jen does not dictate projects or topics, but helps foster her students' individual interests and goals. One high school senior

recently told our school leadership team during his exit interview that, thanks to the genius hour class, he had decided to pursue an engineering degree. He described to me what this class and the opportunities that our library provided meant to him. He said, "This class and our library allowed me a chance to explore and learn about things I probably wouldn't have considered on my own."

Another opportunity our school library program has for supporting unique student learning is through our school-wide "passion project" week. Currently the topics of these projects come from our teachers, but our students can vote for projects in which they would like to participate. During this week, two hours a day for four days in the elementary grades, and three hours a day for four days in seventh through twelfth grades, students meet and develop a product, learn a skill, and/or provide a service. Projects this past year included the building of a food pantry, creating a pollinating garden on the school grounds, building a hoverboard that is accessible for one of our elementary students who has a disability, conducting a service at the cemetery, and many others. Students also documented their week through writing, photos, and videos, and shared these artifacts as a culminating event at a "presentation of learning night." Moving forward, we hope students will take these slightly more-structured experiences and start developing independent projects focused on their own passions. One of my favorite parts of our passion project week is that many of the projects relied on the design and making capabilities of our school library, the information expertise of our staff, and true collaboration between students and teachers.

The unpredictability of what might be going on in our space every day is perhaps my favorite part of being a school librarian in our kindergarten through twelfth-grade public school.

Made in the EDhub
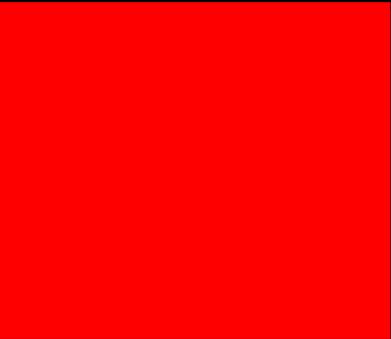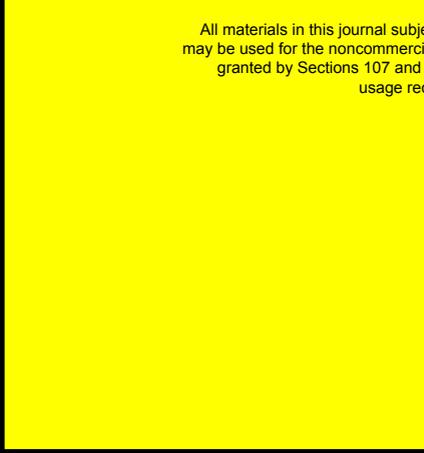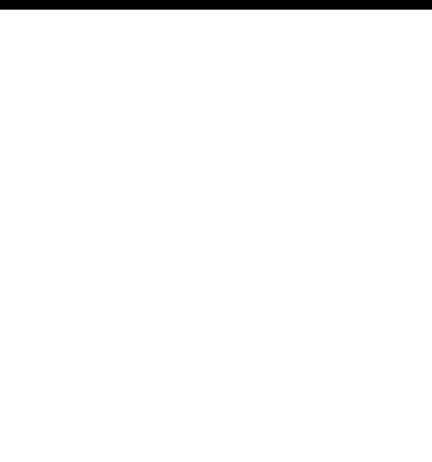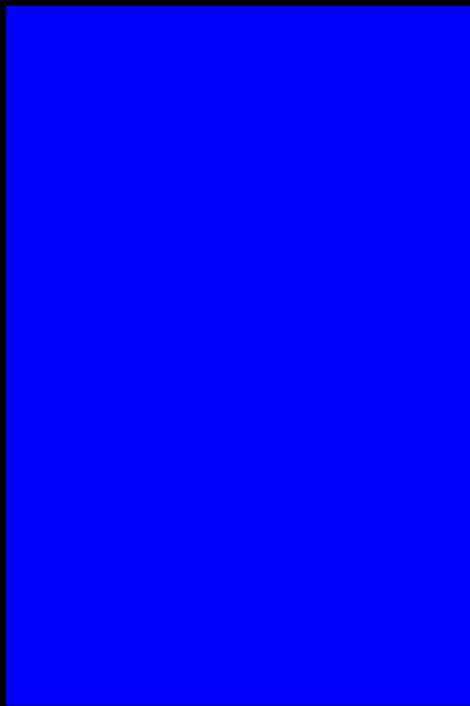
More Project–Based Learning

Many of our regular classroom teachers are beginning to weave more and more project-based learning (PBL) and design-thinking opportunities into their instruction. Implementation of these two concepts, PBL and design thinking, are perfect opportunities for our school library to support teachers and students. One of our fifth-grade teachers Donnie Piercey has embedded "twenty percent time," a concept similar to genius hour, into his classes. Students have used this 20 percent of instructional time and our library to explore the creation of video games, and created 2-D and 3-D designs to create prototypes on our CNC (i.e., programmable) lathe and laser cutter. One student even created a custom virtual Breakout EDU game in Minecraft.

Another one of our teachers Kerri Holder facilitates both language arts classes and Project Lead the Way programs for kindergarten through eighth grade. She gives her students numerous opportunities to demonstrate their learning in their own ways. I love that her classroom is close by and students can use our library resources to research, design, and build truly anything they can dream up. Kerri gave me and our library program one of the best compliments this year. One afternoon she told me, "In my previous schools I thought some things just were not possible or feasible. But here, I feel like I can come to you all, and you can make anything happen!"

The successful evolution of school libraries will not involve simply adding e-books or makerspaces, or implementing other individual ideas in isolation. Instead, successful evolution of school libraries will involve a continual evolution of perspectives and mindsets of students, other educators, and ourselves.

Factors Contributing to Success

Our supportive school leadership and our collaboration with teachers are two elements that allow all of this to work and help us provide unique and powerful experiences for students. Another important key to our current, but evolving, school library is the space itself. It is still very new, and we continue to adjust, but one of its best features is how flexible it can be. The furniture, many of the walls, and all shelving that isn't against a wall can be moved easily. In my previous schools we were pretty much stuck with the layout of the library. Having the ability to transform our space in minutes allows us to meet more needs of students and teachers. We have a space for print materials and a self-checkout kiosk. A large open space can be used for seating, studying, reading, or presentations. This space has a small stage with a sound system and a large nine-screen array of HD flat-panel displays. We also have three rooms that can be combined to create one large meeting space, as well as eight smaller and flexible lab spaces that can be opened into four larger rooms. All the collapsible walls are floor-to-ceiling magnetic white boards. Each individual space also has its own touch-panel display linked to its own Google Calendar. The display shows if the room is booked; if the room is open, it can be reserved on the spot.

I will not attempt to predict exactly what school libraries will look like in ten or fifteen years, but I believe there are some things we can do to make sure school libraries still exist. With work and planning, school librarians are well equipped to be prepared, flexible, and nimble in our ability to support our students and teachers. Some of this flexibility will also likely involve some evolution of physical spaces and access to specific resources. I don't feel we all need to have exactly the same kind of school library or program; however, I do believe that the definition and perceptions of our roles must evolve if we are to be successful in serving our patrons as they—and we—move toward the next horizon.

It is easier than ever for us to connect, collaborate, share, and learn with each other as school librarians, but, at the same time, it could be easy to forget all the other perspectives that exist out there. If you are reading this you likely love libraries and have had some great experiences with them, but many of our teaching colleagues, school leaders, parents, and many students may not have had such great experiences. The successful evolution of school libraries will not involve simply adding e-books or makerspaces, or implementing other individual ideas in isolation. Instead, successful evolution of school libraries will involve a continual evolution of perspectives and mindsets of students, other educators, and ourselves.

We can help students confidently and empathetically interpret the world around them. They will need a wide and varied set of skills to be successful, thoughtful, productive, and kind adults. In fifteen more years, when we all look back at how our profession and spaces have changed, we will, I hope, be able to say that school libraries are still an essential and powerful force in education.

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Work Cited:

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