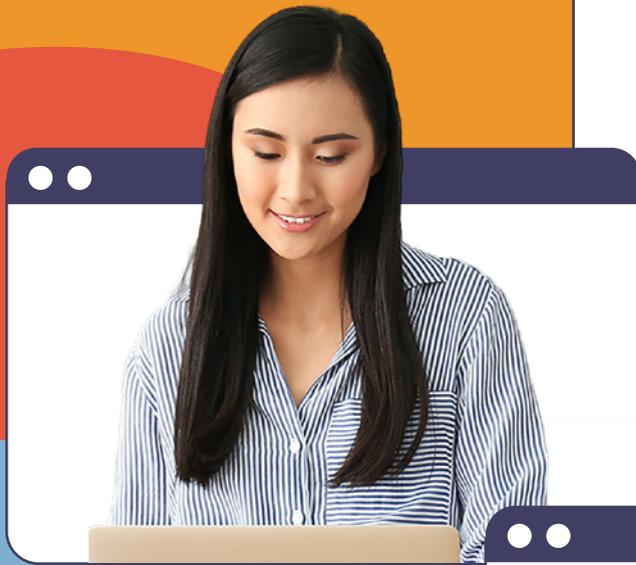# CREATING A SPACE FOR VIRTUALLY ANYONE

Karina Quilantan-Garza

cuethelibrarian@gmail.com

Grab a piece of paper, a writing instrument, and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do you love about school librarianship?

2. What motivates you to be a better educator?

3. What scares you?

When I asked fellow librarians the last question at a workshop in October 2020, the most common answers were budget cuts, illness, and uncertainty. Many of these answers were a response to the pandemic and current state of affairs, and rarely did the answers reflect responses to the first two questions.

Consider this: There was a life prior to the pandemic and the strengths and skills that equipped you for the field of librarianship are what will help you move forward post-pandemic.

So, in the spirit of self-reflection and introspection, think about the before and make a list of everything you love about your school library. I can almost guarantee that the majority of the activities you have outlined are dependent on the physical space and its contents. Readers advisory? Books and bookshelves. Technology lessons? Computer lab. Makerspaces? Tinker area. Clubs? Tables and chairs. Patrons? The school library.

When I sat down to reflect on my own practice after our school shut down, I wondered if my experiences in the physical library could possibly

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transfer to a completely virtual environment. Spoiler alert—they did! After a bit of hyperventilation about the upcoming changes that my district announced during school closures, I asked myself:

1. How is my district responding to online learning and community ordinances?

2. What will my school need to know about online learning?

3. Which technology applications will we use the most?

4. Which tools do we already know, and how many tutorial recordings do I need to create?

5. How can I reach both students and staff while also respecting their time?

I recorded my answers during this exercise and began to work on a plan of action that would assist my students, parents, teachers, and administrators during our transition to a fully online learning environment. As a middle school librarian who serves high percentages of at-risk students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, one of my practices is to strategically assess the needs of my students on a regular basis. I often reference the Future Ready Librarians Framework (<https://futureready.org/thenetwork/strands/future-ready-librarians/>), the AASL *National School Library Standards*, and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards (<www.iste.org/standards>) to help me identify gaps in my library programming. This ongoing practice allowed me to set a foundation of digital inclusion that made the transition to a virtual library seamless.

While many of the digital tools and pedagogical tactics I learned prior to the pandemic offered me insight into the successful implementation of a library's resources, the question of how I would leverage our library's services has evolved into opportunities of reevaluation, growth, and transformation during a global pandemic. My role within my school's community influenced the preparation needed to take our classes fully online during our district-wide shutdown. Fortunately, the professional development opportunities that I sought during the pandemic extended my skill set and gave me the foresight necessary to evaluate the systemic obstacles that we would encounter through virtual learning.

I worked diligently during the summer and early fall of 2020 to earn many digital certifications including Google, Microsoft, Newsela, and Clever Trainer credentials because they were the most popular applications used in our district when we transitioned to distance learning. I turned to technology to teach me what I felt I needed to know to help me craft the message that my school library was ready to equip our campus with the training and resources needed to survive a school year with many uncertainties. With checklists in hand, a computer, and a stable internet connection I was ready to begin a new endeavor and venture into a new realm of possibility.

Getting Organized

Planning for the week usually depends on the needs of my students and staff. If I notice a trend in help questions or in circulation statistics, I try to offer my services to target those areas to the best of my ability. At the moment, the majority of my time is dedicated to major responsibilities such as monthly programming events, curation, tutorials,

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webinars, lessons, and technical assistance. I divide these activities into separate days throughout the week so I know that I am targeting each area of librarianship that I feel will contribute to the success of my students and teachers, all the while maintaining my sanity and stamina.

I created an interactive library planner on Google Slides for staff members in case they want to view the school library's available time slots prior to requesting a day and time for virtual visits. On the days that work best for library management tasks, I use the time to update the library's online databases, record book-talks, plan online events, and answer questions queued in the library's help desk forum. Each task is carefully considered and, if necessary, recorded for students and staff to view at a later time on the library's YouTube channel or social media pages.

The simplicity of an idea such as schedules may have organizational advantages, but it is ultimately a method of accountability, a demonstration of my commitment to advancing the school library's initiatives, and a form of documentation

of the continued services that could possibly benefit a post-pandemic library.

Personalized Learning

I began personalizing curated resources. I sent a survey to my students on my school library's social media channels asking which devices they use to access their online classes and student e-mail. The survey results revealed that the majority of my student population were working on mobile devices with limited access to the internet. This information provided insight needed to create personalized tutorials for my students. In my tutorials on how to navigate the learning management system or e-mail, I would need to include side-by-side reflections of how their platforms would be viewed on a desktop computer or mobile device. This accommodation enabled me to reach a variety of students and cater to their individual technological needs. It also proved to be helpful when modeling positive digital behaviors during library orientation and ongoing digital citizenship lessons.

I then focused on my teachers and their professional development to build a foundation for our online transitions. I sent out opportunities for lunch-and-learn webinars for teachers that preferred to learn during their lunch period and appy hour sessions for those that preferred after-school hours. Sessions highlight one application that our district utilizes, and I sent a follow-up to teachers after the session with how-to tutorials for quick reference. For example, at the beginning of our school closure period the majority of our training covered how to organize their virtual assignments on Google Classroom and the functionalities of Google for Education tools. These segments were no longer than half an hour and included a digital badge incentive

system to motivate educators to explore the various features of the platforms we would use throughout the year.

While I felt that these initiatives were successful, I did not dismiss the need for feedback and reflection. Every session was followed by a feedback survey and responses that guided the topic, pace, and strategy for future learning opportunities.

Meaningful Partnerships

I created a Library Ambassadors program with a group of students to help me promote library programming events in the hopes of giving them a voice in policy creation and ownership over their school library. The purpose of the program was to include at least two to four students from each grade level to help me come up with ideas on how to best reach our student audience when promoting library programming ideas. In the past, this included creating student book-talks and promotional materials for events, learning the library's book circulation procedures, and learning the library's media to help troubleshoot

technical issues when students visited the computer lab for research.

Now that our library is fully online, the Library Ambassadors record book-talks to promote our e-books, vote on virtual events they would like to see on our social media channels, and record student-made tech tutorials for their peers. Engagement and feedback have increased in our library's Google Classroom when posts include information about book club meetings, virtual makerspace events, and our library's Mote help desk forum.

In addition, I invited teachers to collaborate on classroom projects using the library's resources. We meet during their planning time once or twice a week (days of the week vary) and decide on a skill that the students would benefit from learning. The content of each lesson depends on the unit of study and the library resources that best align to their curriculum. I then schedule a time slot during the week to visit classes on Google Meet to cover a specific technology application or a live demonstration of a craft activity that complements their content topic of the week.

I also built a virtual space for my staff where they could find resources related to their own learning and queries. For example, I created a virtual information literacy center for staff and included information about upcoming webinars, training recordings, curated reading lists, technology application guides, and an online calendar where they could request virtual library visits. Students and staff interact with each other on the discussion board streams, post private messages to ask for assistance, and answer daily polls or questions. These virtual classrooms act as a localized center for exploration, inquiry, communication, and camaraderie.

While I feel like a superhero on most days, there are instances when I need my own technical support. I implore librarians to connect with their library department peers, instructional technology departments, and IT network administrators if they exist in their districts. In my experience, the partnership with my district's network administrator of software (through online messaging and e-mail) has provided me with insight on how to troubleshoot e-mail systems, desktops, software, hardware, security tools, and essential IT operations that were, in the past, outside of my expertise. The lesson I learned was that although I was teaching my school community how to navigate their virtual realities, my reality also called for adaptation, resourcefulness, and resilience.

A Social Library

My first year as a school librarian in 2015 was isolating. There was clearly a misunderstanding of what it meant to have a great school library, and I knew I had to document the changes that reflected inclusive programming, technology integration, and student-led projects. I needed to find a way to
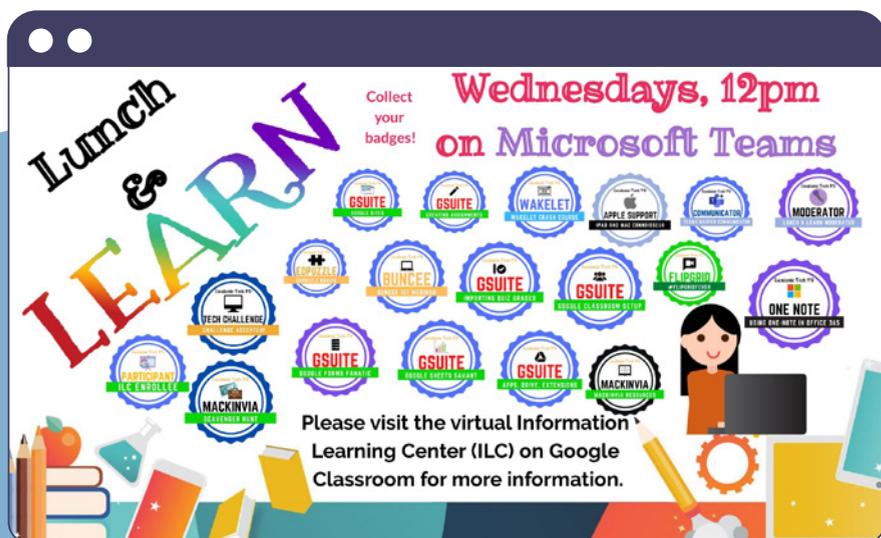
reach multiple audiences through a specific mode of communication. As part of a district-wide library services initiative, our library publishes an e-newsletter every marking period to share on the campus, district, and library websites or social media channels. This practice quickly evolved into an integral method of communication and an everlasting factor toward our department's advocacy practices. The acclaim from our district's stakeholders has shaped how our community views the significant and critical role of a certified school librarian.

In 2015, our school library considered social media a tool to document the library's impact on students, staff, and parents. Prior to creating a social media page for my school library, I first communicated with my district's public relations department for district approval and usage guidelines. This resulted in my piloting the first Instagram library account for our district. Since then, the school library has seen an increase in patron interaction and activity. Authors, librarians, students, and educators from around the globe have reached out via our Instagram account to gain insight to certain events, techniques, or ideas. Currently the platform is used to announce important information regarding school closures, COVID-19 testing sites, online club meetings, contests, book recommendations, and visual collages that highlight student work and achievements.

One of the most popular events that my students enjoy is our monthly Monday Maker Live that is streamed as an Instagram Live event. All the library's recordings, whether a live event or short recording, are saved and uploaded to our library's Instagram TV, YouTube channel, Microsoft Stream channel, and Google Classroom. Each posting destination makes it possible for multiple audiences to engage with our online content and establish connections. Our library uses a variety of design applications such as PicCollage, Adobe Spark, and Canva to create announcements for our social media feed. The content highlights our students' work and accomplishments. This allowed our students to see themselves in the library's programming and resulted in more participation and engagement in our monthly advertised library events. Our library's Instagram @libraryjems has

garnered more than 1,500 followers and continues to gain recognition at the local, state, and national levels, but most importantly continues to work alongside its library's patrons to shape messages of inclusivity, ingenuity, and community.

Empowering School Librarians

I am a huge proponent of using social media to build professional learning networks (PLNs) and participating in discussions where commonalities in technology interests, pedagogy, and interest groups can be shared. I co-founded and moderated an online PLN named RGV Library Squad for librarians located in the Rio Grande Valley. The group was hosted on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to connect with librarians from across the Rio Grande Valley. Monthly Twitter chats were scheduled and usually centered around library issues, debates, and ideas that seemed to be popular at that point in time.

In June 2020 we decided to launch our own virtual one-day summer camp and used Zoom to schedule five 45-minute webinars that focused on the aforementioned areas of interest.

Once the pandemic hit and based on the conversations on social media, we found that there was a need for free virtual learning opportunities in the areas of libraries and mental health, e-sports, e-book promotions, virtual spaces, and podcasting. In June 2020 we decided to launch our own virtual one-day summer camp and used Zoom to schedule five 45-minute webinars that focused on the aforementioned areas of interest. Participants were given an option to register and reserve their spot prior to the event and were e-mailed the conference links the day of the conference. We

took to social media to advertise and promote it virtually using the hashtag #RGVLibCamp2020. We reached more than 100 librarians from the Rio Grande Valley and across the country. We received phenomenal feedback and we hope to offer future opportunities for school librarians who want to grow their library squad.

Online learning communities have helped expand my own learning and growth and helped me identify where to find information on other certification and workshop sessions. However, learning without a community is counterproductive

so I reach out to my local education services center and state associations for presenting opportunities to help me evolve my skills as a presenter and teacher. Not only has this been a great way to stay abreast of association functions, but it also has served as an extension of my professional family.

Conclusion

There may be an air of uncertainty in any routine you decide to establish in your virtual spaces, but remember that your school library is a key to the fundamental right and pursuit of knowledge. Consider what is important to your patrons' needs, consider your community's culture, and trust in yourself that you are doing the best you can with the resources you have available. If a school librarian's passion for what they do is reflected in the environment they create for their learners, ask yourself what you have yet to learn.

Resources:

Cue the Librarian. <www.cuethelibrarian.com>.

JEMS Library Instagram: <www.instagram.com/libraryjems>.

JEMS Library Webpage: <https://www.psjaisd.us/domain/2285>.

RGV Library Squad Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rgvlibrarysquad>

Microsoft Educator Center's "Innovation in the Library with Microsoft Education & Buncee": <https://education.microsoft.com/en-us/course/d46fe679/0>.

"Tech It Over Webshow and Podcast": <https://techitovershow.weebly.com>.

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Karina Quilantan-Garza *is the library media specialist at Jaime Escalante Middle School/Pharr–San Juan–Alamo ISD in Pharr, Texas. She is a member of AASL, TxASL MVP Committee, TMGNRL Committee, and TCEA Lib–Sig VP. She was awarded the 2019 TxASL MVP Award, 2021 TCEA Library Media Specialist of the Year Finalist Award, 2021 TxASL Branding Iron Award, and the Spirit of PSJA Award in 2019 and 2020. Her blog,* Cue the Librarian, *is available at <www.cuethelibrarian.com>.*