

READING THE ROOM

Sustaining Our Libraries by Identifying
and Responding to the Needs of Our Communities



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Like many school librarians, I love to read. But this past year, doom-scrolling Twitter and refreshing news feeds aside, I have had far less capacity to read as much as I typically do. When our school first closed in March 2020, I packed up stacks of books to help fill my quarantine time. As it turned out, I could not focus on reading books at all, and yet as I reflect on this past year, I did engage in plenty of reading of a different sort: reading the room.

What Do I Mean by Reading the Room?

This year, I also started teaching school library professionals through San José State University's School of Information. I had the opportunity to engage with new and aspiring school librarians as they figured out their role under wholly unprecedented circumstances. As a new school librarian, it can be hard enough to establish new collaborations, but working with other educators is made extra challenging with distance learning. I recall some library school students expressing frustration that they did not have many people at their sites reaching out during this time, but this did not surprise me. Why? Below are a few reasons I shared from my personal experiences:

- **People are busy.** Most educators have more to do than time to do it. Even if we believe that our collaboration may lessen workloads, others may feel that the idea of collaboration is one more thing that will require extra time and effort. And, this is often the case when it comes to substantive collaboration, which takes an investment work-wise in order to create higher-quality learning experiences for students.

It comes down to me observing others in my community, identifying what they need, and then figuring out what I can do from my position to help meet those needs.

- **People don't want to impose.** When I say that people are busy, that includes school library professionals. Teachers at my school are sensitive to the many responsibilities that I juggle and have reached out to me on numerous occasions, opening with, "I'm sorry to bother you..." I remind them that they are never a bother, that I love hearing

from them anytime, and that I prioritize opportunities to work with them.

- **It's on us.** A lot of my workload is not generated from outside the school library but from within. I do not assume others will think of the school library. I cannot wait for others to reach out. It comes down to me observing others in my community, identifying what they need, and then figuring out what I can do from my position to help meet those needs. To me, this is what reading the room is all about. It's about constantly asking myself, "What does my community need now and how can I uniquely contribute?"

Implications of Room Reading

When introducing the concept of reading the room, Rebecca Knight writes:

In every conversation at work, there's the explicit discussion happening—the words being spoken out loud—and the tacit one. To be successful in most organizations, it's important to understand the underlying conversations and reactions that people in the room are having. (2018)

Along these lines, reading the room to identify the needs of our community means figuring out what underlying needs exist, even when people may not explicitly articulate or formally request help. In fact, I think it's common that people may not have consciously identified needs or may lack the language to label them. Sometimes it's hard to know what's missing when it doesn't exist!

Successful room reading also requires that we examine our assumptions. In "Here's the Right Way to Read a Room," Ted Leonhardt reminds us, "While you're busy checking out what everybody else is doing, you project your own experiences (replete with all your personal and cultural biases) onto your perceptions, which could be dead wrong" (2016).

Thus, it is critical that when we believe we have identified what others need, we mindfully test the accuracy of our assessments. After all, to read the room implies that we are in fact noticing and decoding what others are telling us, just indirectly. This demands we interrogate our interpretations to ensure the power dynamic is not about us deciding what others need for them but sensitively receiving signals that reveal needs. It's about intentionally centering others.

A casual framework I find helpful is the Platinum Rule. Countering the Golden Rule to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," the Platinum Rule urges us to "treat others the way they want to be treated" (Rutgers n.d.). In other words, is this a need we think they have or one they indeed have? Is our response one that we want to provide or one that they in fact want?

An obvious way to check ourselves is to invite direct conversation and feedback. Another way is to

gauge reactions and note changes in behavior and attitudes. When encouraging sustainable thinking for libraries, Rebekkah Smith Aldrich explains that if we "really listen to communities and hear what it is communities are either struggling with or dreaming of" and if we make sure to align our programming and services accordingly, we will see a shift in their support, because "they'll invest when they see their own goals reflected" (Thomas 2018, 4:02-4:19). We can ask ourselves: Do we have their support? Are they invested?

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Room Reading versus Strategic Planning

Identifying and meeting needs are not new. Under normal circumstances, this is just the type of thing we do when strategic planning for our school libraries. We set goals based on our school and library missions, and these goals are informed by the needs of our community. We may normally have a mix of short-term (e.g., quarterly, semester) and long-term (e.g., annual, five-year) goals, but with the pandemic, it's sometimes felt like goals have been set day to day or even minute to minute. With the rapidly changing environment, room reading has meant being less planned out and more attuned to



Table 1. Identified community needs and responses.

An Initial, Immediate Need: Connecting our community to information and technology resources

Ways We Responded:

- Developing a district-wide “Distance Learning Library Site” with an “Ask A Librarian” Google Form: [<guhdslibraries.weebly.com >](https://guhdslibraries.weebly.com)
- Offering a distance librarian help line, forwarding my work phone to a dedicated Google Voice number, and offering video-conferencing appointments
- Creating a distance learning hub of information resources and links for students and parents: [<bit.ly/whhs-hub >](https://bit.ly/whhs-hub)
- Creating and crowd-sourcing help guides and tutorials and then sharing them in a searchable Awesome Table embeddable on any district website: [<bit.ly/guhsd-tutorials >](https://bit.ly/guhsd-tutorials)
- Creating a distance learning launchpad template to help students organize class links and information: [<bit.ly/whhs-launch >](https://bit.ly/whhs-launch)
- Providing curbside library book and technology services until libraries re-opened for in-person service
- Expanding and promoting digital reading resources: [<bit.ly/guhsd-ereading >](https://bit.ly/guhsd-ereading)
- Stepping up existing social media with use of Instagram Stories and Live (@westhillslib) and creating “Tech Tok” TikTok tutorials: [<bit.ly/guhsd-techtok >](https://bit.ly/guhsd-techtok)

An Emergent Need: Connecting people to build community in new ways

Ways We Responded: As individual site school librarians collaborated with classroom teachers as usual, a new development was the introduction of two major district-wide initiatives.

Initiative #1: Our first district-wide summer reading program “Growing Readers”

- We created a gamified program using the [<https://gameful.me/>](https://gameful.me/) platform designed by two district teachers Mike Skocko and Mick McMurray.
- The program offered a variety of reading-related quests for students to complete in order to earn points, level up, and buy prizes.
- School librarians monitored and responded to student submissions and hosted other activities such as book discussions.

Initiative #2: Our first district-wide “one book” read

- We became a partner with San Diego County’s One Book, One San Diego. The 2020 title selection was George Takei’s *They Called Us Enemy*.
- Our county library system offered e-book checkout to the title without wait, which we easily promoted thanks to our district’s integration of Sora that allows students single sign-on access to the county’s digital collection using their school Google account.
- In addition to promoting county-wide one book events, we hosted an online discussion specifically for our district, and students, staff members, and administrators across sites attended.

A Persistent, Underlying Need: Connecting efforts to work toward systemic changes related to equity, diversity, and inclusion

Ways We Responded: In addition to the pandemic, 2020 has also highlighted the critical need for our whole society, including our schools, to improve in the area of equity, diversity, and inclusion. As our district engages in this important work, we as school librarians have found our roles particularly well-matched for contributing to efforts to update curriculum.

- We started by creating and sharing a resource “Updating Our Classroom Texts: Developing as Culturally Responsive Educators” ([<bit.ly/rst-texts >](https://bit.ly/rst-texts)).
- Our district’s Diversify Our Narrative ([<www.diversifyournarrative.com >](https://www.diversifyournarrative.com)) student chapter organizers reached out to us, and we have been meeting weekly to coordinate efforts.
- Collaborating with our district’s English language arts curriculum specialist, we helped analyze what English classroom texts are being taught: [<bit.ly/guhsd-texts-taught >](https://bit.ly/guhsd-texts-taught).
- We have been applying for grant funds to overcome the barrier of lack of funds to purchase new texts.
- With support from the district office, we are hosting our first professional development book study offered as a paid opportunity for teachers. The title we are starting with is *The Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States for Young People*.
- As our district works on implementing more systemic changes, including a “Course Representative Analysis Workshop Series,” we plan to actively participate in this work alongside and in collaboration with classroom teachers.

the current moment. I have had to set aside existing agendas, nimbly shifting and reinventing the way I work based on ever-changing circumstances and needs.

Reassuringly, even with all the pivoting, the driving mission for my school library has withstood all of the changes. Perhaps more of a tagline, but underpinning all my work nonetheless is the unifying idea: We Connect Here. My adoption of this three-word mission was initially inspired by advice from Aldrich regarding library sustainability. When she posed the challenge to consider “why we do what we do instead of the specifics of what we’re doing” (Thomas 2018, 26:06-26:18), I reflected on the big “why” behind my work and landed on connection-building. (Check out my library vision video: <https://youtu.be/k87KfYDCg5Q>.)

What has remained constant throughout this turbulent year is my aim to connect those in my community, whether it has been connecting them with resources or with one another.

Room Reading in Practice

Given that I did not share physical space with others at my school for a lot of this past year, what did reading the room look like in practice? Two concrete strategies that I use are: 1) using questions as clues and 2) accepting frustration as feedback.

1) Using questions as clues: Just yesterday, I received several e-mails from teachers needing help resetting passwords for their students. I responded to each of the e-mails, but while doing so, I connected the dots that these questions stemmed from

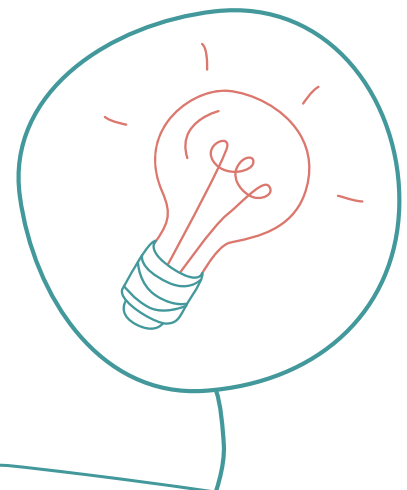
a new change that the district made now requiring students to complete attendance check-ins through our student information system. This change exposed how not all students know how to log into their accounts.

I forced myself to stop what I was working on and invest time in creating a comprehensive help resource (bit.ly/guhsd-ichelp) that could be shared out to teachers, parents, and students across our district. It is ideal to proactively anticipate these kinds of needs, but short of that, I was able to use questions as clues to address wider-scale needs as I became aware of them.

Worth noting, the questions are not always ones that I field directly. I learn a lot through casual conversations that I have with other staff



What has remained constant throughout this turbulent year is my aim to **CONNECT** those in my community, whether it has been connecting them with resources or with one another.



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members, including teachers as well as our front office staff, administrators, and counseling department. In all these cases, I reflect on whether questions are indicative of a more common need and if there is something I can do to respond to that need.

2) Accepting frustration as feedback: During the pandemic, spotting frustration has been unavoidable. There have been moments of colleagues breaking down in tears, informal venting occurring on Zooms before or after the official agenda or via the chat, and people vulnerably sharing concerns on their personal Facebook feeds. Sometimes the issues have been beyond the scope of my work (e.g., working in the midst of a worldwide pandemic for starters), but I am always looking out for opportunities to contribute from my unique skill set and position.

For example, when students first started distance learning, an immediate major frustration was their inability to successfully join Zoom meetings. This generated a lot of complaints from students and their families for teachers and administrators. While I could have observed the frustration from the sidelines, the need was one I could help address. In addition to working with our technology department to pinpoint issues and confirm common best practices, I worked

with other school librarians to create tutorials, set up help lines, and offer screensharing sessions to walk students through troubleshooting. Already used to directly helping students in our physical school libraries, this digital transfer of services was seamless and natural.

Reflecting on Need Trends

Reflecting on the past year, I realize that my efforts have shifted over time as the needs of my community have evolved. There was the period in spring and early fall 2020 when all the needs were immediate and concrete, most often of the tech-related variety. But, as students and teachers adjusted to new systems and routines, I was given more time and space to address other emergent needs, as well as those of a more persistent, underlying nature, and my responses have become my work.

Earlier in this article, I wrote that it can be hard to know what's missing when it doesn't exist. But, each time that we step up to meet the genuine needs of our communities, I like to think that we bring into existence services and programs that people come to depend upon and would indeed miss if gone. If our work in fact sustains our communities, hopefully our programs will endure and thrive as well. So, as we start thinking about the next school year, let us consider: What will I bring into the rooms that I read?



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She became a San José State University iSchool lecturer in the fall 2020. She was a 2015–16 ALA Spectrum Scholar, 2016 California School Library Association Leadership for Diversity Scholar, 2017 school site Golden Apple Teacher of the Year, and 2018–19 AASL Induction Program member. She authored the May/June 2017 Knowledge Quest article "Practical User Experience Design for School Libraries," co-authored the chapter on intellectual freedom for Core Values in School Librarianship (2021) edited by Judi Moreillon, and regularly contributes to School Library Connection.

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