

# HACKING THE PANDEMIC

## LAUNCHING THIRD SPACE INTO CYBERSPACE

ask a librarian

catalogue

reviews

books of the week

games

learning resources



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It's been over a year and a half of curbside pickups, hand sanitizer stations, and social distancing. Whether teaching students from behind a mask and plexiglass barriers or virtually using slides and prerecorded read-alouds, school librarians are juggling numerous responsibilities. New schedules and split classes have resulted in more time constraints and fewer library lessons; however, school libraries are standing the test of the pandemic because they are essential to the school community.

The *National School Library Standards* stress the importance of the school library as "a third space for learning, a space between the classroom and home" (AASL 2018, 11). As we have seen over the past year and a half, there is no guarantee that the physical school library will be accessible to provide this essential third space for learning. In a world turned more remote, we need to be able to move beyond a school library's physical walls. Revamping the school library website can reap many benefits in a virtual, in-person, or hybrid learning environment. To continue forming relationships, inspiring inquiry, and fostering independent, lifelong learning, a school library's third space must expand into cyberspace.

### Install Your Purpose

Many school libraries have websites or some presence within the school's website. Too often, though, a school library website contains the bare minimum: the library's hours and circulation policies, a short bio of the librarian, a link to the online catalog, and/or a bitmoji smiling above an e-mail address. Just as your physical library exists for your users, so too should your library website. Thinking about your community

and their needs will help guide you in creating a virtual third space that is as attractive, inviting, and informative as the physical school library.

### Manage Your Stacks

The "stack" in a physical library is a "structure of bookshelves," according to Merriam-Webster (2021). In cyberspace, it is a "section of memory in a computer." Collections today consist of both physical and digital stacks that contain resources, from e-books to coding robots. While it might be tempting to spend time organizing only the physical stacks, making sure the school library website is easy to navigate and understand ensures users can find what they need efficiently.

Not all school libraries are effective or user-friendly. The existence of a physical school library does not mean quality service and customer satisfaction will be found inside. The same can be said about websites: time spent online is not always time well spent. How does a physical school library meet its users' needs? The books and materials that are added to the collection are selected, not chosen at random. Book reviews, professional publications, prestigious awards, and librarian blogs are consulted before purchases are made. The same should be true for resources shared in a virtual library. Links should be vetted and kept up-to-date and online experiences evaluated for age-appropriateness, usability, and educational worth.

How do you feel when you visit a business's website and the information you find is lacking, incorrect, or altogether missing? It sends messages about lack of credibility, service, and care. The links provided on a school library website need to be live links, meaning they take users to the

intended sites. A broken link would be the physical library equivalent to a blank book. Additionally, the links provided need to be meaningful for students, inspiring creativity and a motivation to learn. Directing students to sites that are confusing or dated would be the physical library equivalent of providing old and archaic print books.

The school library website should be as user-friendly as the physical space. Managing the stacks means weeding and continually reviewing and evaluating the resources and services provided in the third space, both physical and virtual.

### Power-Up Your Process

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a lot of change at once, but not all of it has been negative. Although it was unexpected and unplanned, it highlighted the virtual tools and resources at our fingertips that can take online learning opportunities to new heights. Jennifer Finch and Renee N. Jefferson analyzed a class that shifted from in-person learning using traditional lectures to online instruction. The shift

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created an opportunity to revamp the assignments and resulted in more meaningful and authentic tasks, which led to greater student achievement (2012).

Revamping your school library website may involve learning a new tool, but you can also use that tool in your lessons as well as your website. For example, how often have you welcomed students into your library with a warm and inviting voice? Use Vocaroo to upload an audio recording of your welcome message to add that personal touch to your website. The virtual third space can remove barriers and provide alternate paths of reaching your community and creating a platform to display your process.

In addition, engaging with your community via a school library website is a powerful way to advocate for your role as the school librarian. Stakeholders will not grasp the value of a school library until they are given concrete evidence. Because advocacy is important for securing relationships, trust, support, and funding, school librarians should prioritize marketing themselves and their instruction because “no one knows or can accurately tell the library story like a school librarian” (Kachel 2020, 61). When the

school library website reflects the physical library in terms of lessons, resources, and empowerment, it doubles as a platform to advocate for the value of the school library and the school librarian.

Of course, stakeholders can't visit the school library website if they don't know about it. You must also market the website. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram can be easily incorporated into the virtual library to broaden those connections with the community and increase website traffic. Creating specific access points or hashtags for your social media posts can ensure your messages reach the targeted audiences, engage students, advocate for the school library, and build a network with other school librarians.

Whether you choose to showcase student work, highlight the collection, or promote awareness of school librarianship, be sure to choose the social media platform that works best for your school's community. For example, an elementary school library might find connecting with parents easier on Twitter, whereas a high school librarian might seek student interest and involvement using TikTok.

## Input Standards, Upload Opportunities

A school library website can easily incorporate the *National School Library Standards*. The following examples illustrate how seamlessly each of the six Shared Foundations can be supported in the virtual third space.

**Inquire.** The inquiry process is driven by the learner and guided by the instructor; it begins with a meaningful question or problem. Conditions for inquiry are right when students have the time to delve into a topic, the resources necessary to seek out meaningful answers, and the inspiration and motivation to do so. Opportunities for online inquiry can exist when curating resources using tools such as Wakelet. Parts of the process and products can be shared using podcasts or journal entries on a student-centered blog. Whether face-to-face or virtual, “choice and a voice will ensure learners are invested in the process and products of their own learning” (Moreillon 2016, 5).

**Include.** The library website can be created and maintained to include all users. Weeding and diversifying the physical shelves can often take a while due to limited funding, time, and resources. In only a few clicks, resources can be added to a school library's virtual space that engage multiple perspectives and cultures. Inviting students to share connections or reactions to books and lessons on Flipgrid provides increased opportunities to practice empathy and reflect on others' differing views.

**Collaborate.** As we have experienced first-hand over the past year and a half, it is possible to collaborate toward common goals virtually and to do so effectively. The valuable time we share with our students during school library lessons or classroom collaborations should not be viewed

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as isolated experiences; rather they should be thought of as jumping-off points to foster deeper and more meaningful learning. Pose questions during class time and extend the conversations virtually on the school website. Spark the conversation and nurture its growth online.

**Curate.** The virtual world opens up new experiences including, but not limited to, 3D tours, interactive field trips, digital scavenger hunts, and online escape rooms. Choose to curate resources that foster these experiences for your users by using tools such as Symbaloo or pre-made choice boards, such as those created by blogger-librarian Shannon McClintock Miller (2021). Gamify the process of gathering information with online scavenger hunts to extend learning about searching, organizing, and evaluating information while increasing motivation.

**Explore.** What is needed for in-depth exploration? Time. Whether immersed in a story, engaged in discussion, or even tinkering in the makerspace, giving students extra time to explore is not always feasible during school hours. Extending learning beyond the physical walls of the school library keeps even makerspace opportunities accessible. Coding websites like MakeCode Arcade and Hour of Code can incorporate STEAM skills within an online makerspace. Online resources can even spark interest in explorations offline. CS Unplugged provides ideas for students to practice and explore twenty-first-century skills at home without screens.

**Engage.** Simply providing portals to the world of information through the library website is not enough. Students need to know how to engage with the information. Online games, like Google's



Interland, get students practicing the digital literacy skills necessary to make informed decisions about online behaviors. Create a collaborative board on Padlet where students can practice giving attribution when they share about books they've read or interesting information they've learned. Visit Kathy Schrock's *Guide to Everything* blog for resources on evaluating websites, using primary sources, and copyright.

### Debug Your Doubts

For any change to be successful, you must adapt your thinking and behavior to align with your goal. Maybe taking a different perspective will help you remove barriers to your own learning.

Instead of: "I don't even have a website."

Think: "It's 2021 and almost everything is online now. It's time I talk to my administrator about getting a website."

If the school library is the heart of the school and the school has a

website, shouldn't the school library have a website, too?

Instead of: "My students already have access to e-books and databases."

Think: "My students deserve increased access to more high-quality resources that have been curated to meet their unique needs."

Just because students have access to multiple databases does not mean they are utilizing them or doing so effectively. Creating a school library website does not take away from what is already available; it enhances it.

Instead of: "Many of my families don't have access to the internet so they wouldn't even visit my website."

Think: "My website is the first step towards advocating for increased internet access for the families and students I serve. I can use it as my platform and springboard for change."

What better way to argue for resources your community needs

than showing what is possible with those resources?

Instead of: "This will take too much of my time."

Think: "Spending time developing a useful and purposeful website will help me and my users in the long run."

A meaningful online space for your students will be an investment into their learning and your impact. It is time worth taking.

Instead of: "I already do too much. I don't get paid enough for all of this."

Think: "None of my stakeholders who control my funding will know what I do until I market myself and my library."

The school library website can be the tool to advocate for what your community needs and allow you to advocate for what your position needs.

## Plug In and Sign On

As school librarians and future-ready leaders we must evolve our definition of third space and raise our expectations of the virtual library. "Traditional libraries strive to foster service, social equality, and the appreciation of human individuality and virtual libraries should try to do the same" (Lawson 2004, 12). Designing an online presence for the learning community is mutually beneficial to the learners and the school librarian. Greater access to resources and extended learning opportunities results in greater advocacy for the role of the school librarian. To be part of the future, it is imperative that the school library remain an "essential part of the learning community" (AASL 2018, 11). As school librarians, we must continue to evolve our practice just as our third spaces must also evolve. Whatever your worries or

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doubts, keep the five laws of third spaces in mind:

- Third spaces are for use.
- Every learner, their third space.
- Every third space, its learner.
- Save the time of the learner.
- The third space is a growing organism.

(adapted from Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science*).



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## LOOKING FOR MORE INSPIRATION?

Check out these excellent examples of school library websites:

Makalapa Elementary School Library's website features student-created e-book trailers, a Padlet of book recommendations, and a digital makerspace: <<https://makalapalibrary.weebly.com>>.

Mashpee Middle High School's Janice M. Mills Library Learning Commons displays linked book covers in virtual library scenes for student access, the library's Twitter feed, and virtual field trips titled "Armchair Adventures": <<https://mmhslmc.wordpress.com>>.