

# The hyperlinked school library: engage, explore, celebrate

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*Dr Michael Stephens delivered the Dr Laurel Anne Clyde Memorial Keynote Address at the ASLA XXI Biennial Conference, held in Perth, Western Australia, from 29 September to 2 October 2009.*

The evolving Web is an open and social place. The Web has changed everything. Its impact on every facet of our lives — home, work and school — would be difficult to measure but the 'always on, always available' Internet is certainly a game changer. Can you recall the first time you realised that the Internet would change your job? Your school? Your students?

Dr Laurel Anne Clyde recognised the power and potential for emerging technologies in schools and spent time exploring the implications. As technology evolved, so did her research. Her work examining weblogs was one of the first scholarly endeavours with emerging Web 2.0 tools. Now many of us study and move in a world of hyperconnected spaces: Facebook, WordPress Multi-User Blog communities (WordPress MU), Flickr and any number of socially enabled sites.

What a world Dr Clyde would see today!

Sadly, this world includes the fact that many libraries are suffering financial setbacks. The recent news that Australian school libraries are in dire need of support all too well illustrates that changes are needed. The press release from the Australian School Library Association (ASLA 2009) detailed the findings of a 2007 study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), including:

*That means ensuring there are enough qualified teacher librarians as*

*well as maintaining and improving infrastructure. Having a new or refurbished school library is important, but the full potential of these resources cannot be realised without a qualified teacher librarian in place as well.*

This fact cannot be ignored. Schools need qualified librarians. And in this Web-enhanced world, the qualifications and skill sets required are many.

Today's teacher librarian (TL) must master foundational skills built on our core values, understand the importance of a strong and useful collection of materials and resources AND be knowledgeable in the emerging world of online social engagement. Exploring emerging tools and trends should be part of every qualified TL's duties. Dr Clyde wrote (2004) about the use of blogs in the library setting:

*By not taking advantage of this simple medium (and doing it well), libraries will be the losers.*

This sentiment could easily be expanded to include many new tools and technologies to enhance learning in that 'always on' way. The potential for fostering connected learning and inquiry is broad.

As technology continues to evolve so quickly, TLs are faced with many challenges: providing resources, supporting the curriculum and guiding access. What can we do to ensure we are best meeting the needs of our students and their learning in times of change and challenge?

## Embrace the 21st century learner

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'... learners are "born with the chip" and the world they are growing up in is different from that of the previous generation of learners ...!'

generation of learners. There has been useful research about the so-called 'Google Generation' and it can help us understand how to meet their needs. Recent findings include:

These young people **use** the social Web. A recent study by the Australian Communications and Media Authority reported that:

*children aged eight to 11 years are spending 1.3 hours a day online, while 12- to 17-year-olds average 2.9 hours ... among older teenagers that shifted to using social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook (The Age 2009).*

These young people **write** — a lot! Pew Internet & American Life Project found that:

*85% of teens aged 12–17 engage at least occasionally in some form of electronic personal communication, which includes text messaging, sending e-mail or instant messages or posting comments on social networking sites (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2008).*

These young people **learn** differently. Pew also noted in an earlier report that young people's learning is shaped by technology and collaboration. Although this is US data, the connection between technology, collaboration and learning for Australian youth who have access to the tools would surely be similar.

These young people **integrate** technology into their lives. Mine the report entitled *Listening to Student Voices* for more about student perception and use of technology and ponder the answer to this question: Are we forcing our students into a decidedly text-based school environment when their world

is a hyperlinked, digital space? Key components of the report include:

- Technology is not an extra.
- Computers and the Internet are communication tools first.
- Students want challenging, technology-oriented instructional activities.
- Technology has caused students to approach life differently; to adults nothing has changed.

These young people **are living** in a decidedly different world. University of California, Irvine, researcher Mizuko Ito conducted interviews with 800 youth and young adults and performed 5000 hours of online observations for another groundbreaking study in the US. The America-centric findings are telling and could illuminate Australian viewpoints as well. Findings included:

- New media forms have altered how youth socialise and learn and raise a new set of issues that educators, parents and policymakers should consider.
- To stay relevant in the 21st century, education institutions need to keep pace with the rapid changes introduced by digital media.
- Interest-driven participation can lead to learning opportunities from peers and those who are more experienced.

What emerges from this scan of recent research is a focus on the new digital realities of our learners and the need to help them understand new digital literacies. Don't be fooled, however; young people demonstrate time and

time again that they understand the basics of privacy and sharing in a connected world. Don't miss interviews with Australian teens in a recent Herald Sun exposé (Herald Sun 2009) for more.

## Explore emerging tools

What tools could you use to extend the reach and potential of your library services? The simple power of blogs, the 'simple medium' Dr Clyde noted could be used to great effect, has now given way to wikis, Web-based chat, Flickr, Twitter, Skype, virtual worlds and much more. Many of these tools are open source — meaning they're free to use and enhance. Use a **blog** to encourage student writing. WordPress MU allows for multiple blogs via one installation, allowing a teacher to create a virtual community for a class where everyone can customise their own blogspace and practise writing and linking. This could be done within a school firewall or outside on the open Web (WordPress MU see <http://wpmu.org/wordpress-as-a-learning-management-system-move-over-blackboard>).

Use free applications such as Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>) to **record and edit podcasts** based on curriculum or students' creative projects. Students could be 'roving reporters', creating news stories about school events, projects and so on.

Grab a **digital camera** and enable your students to practise their visual skills. Tell a story via images, stored on blogs or sites like Flickr, if available.

Expand this creativity to **short video segments** produced with any of the various low-cost, hand-held video camcorders available. What could a class do with a Flip

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Video (<http://www.theflip.com/en-au>) to show off their learning and creativity? Book reports? Mini-movies illustrating curriculum?

Utilise **Skype to connect your classroom** to the world. Find a class nearby or across the country and Skype in for a group-learning module. Connect and let students interact, while blogging the experience. For a real world example of this in action, please see <http://learningismessy.com/blog/?p=191>

Create a **school social network with Ning** to promote connected collaboration. This DIY tool does all the dirty work. Visit ASLA Online's Ning to see the site in action.

These are just a few ideas for bringing technology into the classroom. All of them take the idea of a 'simple medium' and expand the tool into digital learning modules. What else would you add?

## Celebrate the potential for 21st century learning

Many have said this is the best time to be a librarian. The challenges are there, but so are the means to make change, to make a difference, to make an impact on the lives of our students. Open source options, connected communities of online support that span the globe and shared practice via the Web are all low-cost or no-cost ways to implement some of these changes. Stop for a moment amidst all of your work, take a breath and celebrate how far we've come.

And ponder then how we might move forward? What traits are important for these new channels of learning? I would argue that the following characteristics are key to creating an effective 21st

century learning experience:

**Curiosity:** Be curious with your students. Promote curiosity as a means of learning with teachers and administrators.

**Exploration:** Give students the necessary ideas and the tools to work with, then step back and let them explore. Stand by as a guide as they navigate new waters.

**Transparency and openness:** Work to build a library within your school that's open and transparent. Involve everyone in decisions and keep them informed. Start that *From the teacher librarian's desk blog* for your students, teachers and parents.

**Creativity:** Offer as many outlets for student creativity as possible. Provide tools and space and let imaginations soar. Share the results with everyone as well.

**Flexibility:** Rigid rules and overly structured procedures dampen the creativity and 'just in time' nature of our work. Be flexible with students and teachers and encourage the same from them.

**Play = learning:** Make space and allow time for 'play' in your library. It might be interactive gaming on a Wii, an online scavenger hunt centered on science or maths or a problem-solving contest built around information literacy. Launch a *23 things* for your teachers and administration as well — then expand to students and parents. Let students help create the modules for their parents!

## Continuing the journey

At the ASLA XXI Biennial Conference, I spoke about these topics and interacted for the day with some

excited librarians from all over Australia. We sat in the conference centre lobby after my presentations and discussed how to proceed. I was reminded of the slide in my talks of a road disappearing into the horizon. How do we move forward into an unknown future?

**Break down barriers:** What roadblocks have you encountered? Money? Access? Strict rules about content? Work within your school's structure to educate teachers and administrators about the value of emerging technologies. Perform a 'kindness audit' of your library space to see what your students see. Posted rules made up of 'No this' and 'No that' are not encouraging to the young learner's heart.

**Develop your own personal learning network (PLN):** Find the online spaces — a virtual community for TLs, blog networks, Twitter friends in the profession — and learn from them. Constantly update your PLN with new and opposing voices to encourage your own critical thinking. This will guide your growth as you bring about change.

**Use evidence:** Use studies noted above, books like *Born Digital* and supporting materials, blog posts or tweets from your PLN to demonstrate the power and potential of online collaboration. Research concerning Australian youth — including Indigenous youth — would be timely and telling. Seek it out or do some yourself. Report to all of us.

**Explore play for yourself:** If you haven't had a chance to participate in a *23 things* or Learning 2.0 program, find one online and DIY! Set aside 20–30 minutes of professional development time weekly during the school year or break to be curious about some

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of the tools you might not have used. Or band together with other TLs in your area, state or nationally to offer a program for everyone.

**Be selective:** Use what fits best with your library and students. A focus on writing might include student blogging opportunities via a WordPress MU installation onsite. A focus on creativity might include a small, inexpensive video camera and editing software so your students can explore digital storytelling or reporting.

**Know it's okay to fail:** One impact of the gaming generation is the mindset that it's okay to make a mistake, learn from it and go on with new knowledge in a different direction. Talk about these 'failures' within your PLN and share what you've learned. Others may have insights or may benefit.

**Don't be afraid to change:** The way it's always been done does not have to be the way it will always be done. The biggest change right now is not technology but of mindset. Set an example. 'Bring it on.'

**Be persistent:** Keep doing all of the above to hone your craft and add to your storehouse of evidence, facts and proven results. Meet resistance with a kind but firm push the other way. Educate everyone every chance you get: administrators, governing bodies, parents and so on.

The potential is there for a great future for the school library. Recently, I was asked to describe my vision of the role libraries will play for learners. I imagine the school library, public library and academic library forming a connected web of support and service for learners as they grow. Learning will happen everywhere in collaborative spaces and online.

Successes will be shared. Learning from failures will be shared as well. It will truly be a celebration.

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## Additional resources

- <http://tametheweb.com/2009/10/29/the-hyperlinked-library-adapted-for-anangu-people>