

The Library in Education

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I should like to take as the theme of this paper the role of the library — and the librarian — in education.

Specifically, I intend to consider the role of the library, its location, layout and management and the importance of library education, training students in its use. I speak as a former college librarian but the points I wish to make are equally valid at all levels of education.

I would argue that the role of the library is a central role since libraries are repositories of knowledge and the primary function of education is the transfer of knowledge. By this definition the teacher's role is that of a facilitator of learning and so in many ways is the librarian's, since our primary function is that of intermediary between people and information.

The library is still not seen as having a central role to play in education however. The reason for this is rooted in attitude. Libraries are seen as an additional facility to be mentioned in promotional literature like a "careers adviser" or a "computer room". Thus they tend to be regarded as little more than classrooms with books and they are uninspired in both form and content.

The librarian has an uphill struggle when confronted with this attitude in an educational establishment, whether school or college. The library is given low priority, even though this may not be openly admitted. What can we do to change this attitude?

We should make sure that the library is as "visible" as possible and that it is as attractive as we can make it so that it is a place that students will want to come to in their free time.

Ideally the library should be easily accessible, not on the top floor (with no lift) or down the end of a long corridor away from the mainstream of student traffic. It should also be large enough to allow for new materials to be added and to provide adequate seating and study facilities.

Good clear signposting to help library users find their way about,

the choice of materials, or on teaching programmes.

Because of the clerical nature of much library work its professional nature is often unrecognised, particularly here in Cyprus, and a professional librarian is not appointed. At best one gets a teacher in charge of the library — hopefully one who has some enthusiasm for the work and is not merely interested in getting out of the way — but that situation is far from perfect as teachers do not have the specialised training and knowledge nor do they have the time to devote to the reader that the professional librarian has.

One way to cope with the problem of routine clerical work particularly in school libraries, is to co-opt some of the students as “library prefects/monitors” to help with book processing, shelving and so on. In this way, they not only help the librarian but also learn some useful skills — filing is excellent practice in using numerical and alphabetical skills — and gain an insight into the work of the librarian. Who knows, we could be training our successors.

In the UK there are now a number of tutor-librarians with dual qualifications in both teaching and librarianship and one of the largest educational authorities has a policy of ensuring that there are professional librarians in all its secondary school libraries as possible. The image of the librarian in education is therefore improving slowly.

An enthusiastic librarian can and should involve himself/herself as much as possible with the general work of the school or college. We should work with teaching staff to create a programme in which the library is integrated into the teaching schedule. At the most basic level this should be a library lesson in the use of the library; what it contains and how to find material (basic locational, numerical and alphabetical skills).

Working with the teaching staff to introduce information skills teaching in the library is a much more positive approach since the library is then meeting a genuine need and more importantly is seen by the students to be meeting that need. Often it has to be somewhat artificial at first - the teacher may set a class some project work to do but deliberately not provide all the information they need to complete it so that they have to make use of the library's materials - but once the student has been persuaded that the library can help him, he will come back again when he needs help in the future.

I am not an advocate of library lessons as a slot in the timetables which simply transfer the students from the classroom to the library as this reduces the library to the level of a studyroom. It becomes the only time the students have the opportunity or need to be in the library so that all too often they are taught to locate and handle books but not given the immediate opportunity to put these skills to a useful purpose.

Equally the "Library Lessons" do not have to be taught in the library - I have taught reading and notetaking skills and dictionary usage just as effectively in the classroom. The point is that the library is recognised as an information source and that the students are convinced that library staff are there to help guide and advise them.

At what stage should library education be taking place? I would argue that library use should begin in the primary school thus forming a foundation to be consolidated in secondary school and college. I know of too many students who did not discover until they went to university or college that there were other ways of finding books than by wandering hopefully around the shelves.

Initially library education will probably take the form of convincing the young student that libraries are a good thing, promoting books and reading as an attraction to compete with computers, video, TV, etc. Many homes today have fewer books and more video cassettes. Librarians and teachers should therefore combine to show children the pleasures of reading and make them want to use the libraries available to them, so that later courses of instruction in library use will be seen as a key to open the door to a world that the child wants to enter. Otherwise, they will see no point in attempting to make sense of the bewildering maze of letters and numbers in front of them and they won't try. Librarians and teaching staff will be seen as a barrier, bureaucrats who lock the library door at 12 precisely, say 'ssh' and 'don't touch that' rather than as people who help the student to enjoy the library and make the most of it.

It is not enough simply to make books available or perhaps I should say to make information available. I do not intend to discuss the relative merits of different media here - my personal view is that libraries are in the information business, that information comes in many forms and that, as librarians, we should be prepared to handle it in any form, be it floppy disk, magazine, film, cassette record, computer print-out or whatever and that we should therefore encourage the use of all media in the library situation.

Once the materials are available, the library should be involved in formulating activities which will help to produce active independent problem-solvers and discriminating readers equipped to cope with the demands of a rapidly changing world.

I hope I have indicated some of the ways in which the library can do this. To summarise therefore: libraries are an essential tool in education and as such they should have a central location which acknowledges their central role and be properly stocked, financed and staffed. Equally important is the way that they are run - we librarians should not sit back passively and wait for people to come to us. We must be dynamic and take a full and active part in the life of the school or college,

not merely satisfying the demands made on us but also stimulating them.

Library education, therefore is a vital part of education and I submit that the quality of learning in a school will depend on the extent to which all those in it stop regarding the library merely as a room for storing books and instead promote it as the centre for learning and enjoyment.