MANAGING THE SCHOOL LIBRARY WITH TECHNOLOGY: WE'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY!

By Kathleen Kerner

The time and energy that technology saves for us is precious time that we can spend in face to face interaction with students and teachers, assisting readers, and working collaboratively.

The saying “I don’t know how I ever lived without it” has been applied to many innovations over the decades: indoor plumbing, sliced bread, microwave ovens, smartphones, on-demand video. Yet never was that adage truer than when applied to technology as a management tool in the library media center. This article highlights some ways technology facilitates our work.

REFLECTING ON “THE OLD DAYS”

While working on my Master of Library Science degree in the days before library automation, I researched how computers were being used for management purposes in school library media centers. What I learned was that computers were not being used much at all. At that time, there were a few programs available to create and print catalog cards, but the integrated (catalog and circulation) library automation systems that we know and love today were just being developed. Several years later, our school library was online with its first public access catalog. Today, the old card catalog with its drawers and rods is a relic. The drawer I kept as an artifact is a curiosity to children who have never seen one before, let alone used one.

A MULTITOOL OF OUR OWN

Today’s integrated library management systems are the multitool of a librarian’s management toolbox. They do an amazing array of tasks to facilitate our work as library media specialists in the 21st century. On a daily basis our library management system manages our most basic function—circulation. Books are checked in and out quickly and efficiently with a scanner or even a smartphone. Because our system also works with our student information system, we can quickly integrate new students into our patron database and remove students who have left our school. This integration even supplies a photo of each student so that our substitutes can quickly verify they are checking books out to the correct student. We are able to create an overdue book report for each class as they visit the library media center and individual reminders for students with overdue books while they are still in the media center. Bills for lost and damaged books, as well as receipts for payment, can be generated with just a few clicks. Reports for all of these transactions can be created in the “back office” later, if needed.

WORKING THE SYSTEM TO MEET USER NEEDS

Along with circulation, the most important function of the online catalog is to provide access to the collection. Cataloging new items is a task that leaves many school librarians feeling inept. Fortunately, integrated library management systems make cataloging as easy as downloading a file or searching the ISBN in a database and importing the bibliographic record. Today’s catalog software makes it easy for us to customize a bibliographic record created elsewhere to meet our needs. If necessary, we can change a call number or add a note to our local record. In the rare instance that a bib record is not found at all, the cataloging module offers a fill in the blanks, user-friendly template that provides, at the very least, the bibliographic data needed to find that item in the catalog and then on the shelf.

Speaking of shelves, not all our materials are found on a shelf anymore. Our integrated library system software is regularly updated to incorporate and manage new material formats. In the case of e-books, patrons can not only search for but open and read e-books from within the catalog—and not only from a library computer but from any device that can access the Internet. All ordering can be done online as well, and a busy librarian makes good use of vendors’ online collection analysis tools and lists to keep track of different orders (e.g., replacements, state award program books, etc.). Vendor websites are also very useful for finding book reviews and making purchase decisions.

ADDING LEXILES AND BUILDING GOODWILL

Supporting teachers and the school’s curriculum is a significant part of our daily work, and again, technology makes it possible for me to work efficiently. As mentioned, it is possible to add data to a book’s catalog record. When our teachers began asking about Lexiles, we searched our holdings...
on the Lexile.com website and added that information to our catalog records. (Newer downloaded records may already include the Lexile measure.) The beautiful thing is that our catalog allows us to search by reading level and specifically by Lexile range. It was an investment of our time, but it provided our teachers and students with important information. Moreover, it raised their perception of our ability and willingness to support them, creating priceless goodwill and strengthening our professional partnership.

Our catalog software also allows us to create resource lists that our patrons can access right from the catalog search page. We can easily create and update lists for individual teachers, topics, grade level themes, and student assignments while searching the catalog. With a click, I can add items to a new list or update an existing list that the teacher can then access from her classroom or home computer. Creating time-consuming and quickly outdated bibliographies and booklists is a thing of the past. In addition, our library management software is a single platform for providing links to online resources for teachers and students. We use our catalog “home page” tab to group those links by type (subscription databases, websites), user (teacher or student), or by grade level. We teach all students how to access and use the home page as their go-to source for high quality resources and homework help.

FRONT AND CENTER WITH A PLN

While our library management software is my primary technology tool, I use technology in other ways. My principal communicates information every morning on our school’s portal, so checking that is at the top of my daily to-do list. My voice messages go directly to my inbox where I can listen to them online. My Personal Learning Network (PLN) on Twitter helps me stay attuned to trends, new resources, and best practices being implemented by leading educators and innovators. When I find myself looking at a particular blog repeatedly, such as Richard Byrne’s iPad Apps for School and Educational Media and Mobile Learning, I subscribe to it via RSS so I don’t miss anything they post. Twitter has become my favorite place to learn about new educational apps, follow authors and publishers, and develop professionally. Advances in video conferencing technology have increased the number of educational and library media-related webinars, giving me opportunities for improving my knowledge and skills on a schedule that works for me.

TECHNOLOGY AND WORKING SMARTER

The power of technology is always at work in our library media center. Technology helps us with a wide range of management tasks that help our library function smoothly and efficiently. The time and energy that technology saves for us is precious time and energy that we can better spend in face to face interaction with students and teachers, assisting readers, and working collaboratively. Now, if only someone would invent a robot that could shelve books! Think what we could accomplish!

The future is also a direct impact on library media center usage. Last year I began sharing my media center schedule with teachers using Google Drive. They are then able to reserve my available time for research, booktalks, or special projects that we collaborate on. Teachers can view my updated schedule at any time, so we can work together spontaneously as teachable moments arise. Use of the media center has risen significantly since I began sharing my schedule electronically. Technology also drives and permeates my teaching responsibilities. My lesson plans, presentations, and documents are all created using Google Drive technology, so that I can easily access, share, and project them anywhere. Even my artifact file for my teacher evaluation last year was created and shared with my principal using Google Docs and Google Drive.

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Kathleen Kerner is a library media specialist at Walden Elementary School in Deerfield, Illinois.