

# SYNERGY

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# SYNERGY

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# Making the familiar strange

Dr Carol A. Gordon

Eight year-old Graham went to the school library with his class to look up dinosaurs for a class project. The library aide helped students to use encyclopedias. Graham took notes in his graphic organizer and wrote a report that faithfully summarized facts about dinosaurs.

Three years later, Graham went to the school library with his class to look up rainforests for a class project. The teacher-librarian showed the class how to use the online encyclopedia. Graham took notes on his index cards and wrote a report that faithfully summarized facts about rain forests.

Three years later, Graham went to the library at lunch time to look up a topic of his choice for a research paper assignment. He went to the Internet and printed out copies of four websites, highlighted important facts, and wrote his report.

Does this sound familiar? What conclusions can we draw from this anecdotal evidence? How valid are our 'observations'? Is Graham typical of all our students? As teacher-librarians, we are constantly observing, processing, and making decisions about our teaching and our programs. These decisions might be based on assumptions or conclusions drawn from incomplete or inaccurate data. How would a systematic investigation of the instructional program at Graham's school look?

My colleague, Dr Ross Todd, conducted a study of all 154 school library programs in the state of Delaware. He surveyed library media specialists to examine the contributions school libraries make to student learning in K-12 schools. The research study was commissioned by the Governor's Task Force on School Libraries with the expectation that Dr. Todd would make recommendations for the improvement of Delaware's school libraries. He examined elements of school library programs: budgeting, staffing, administration, library access and instruction, the last of which we will examine.

Dr. Todd defined effective instruction, using national guidelines (AASL & AECT, 1998), as:

*an active agent of learning, rather than merely an agency of information exchange. Central to this learning is the school library media specialist working as an information-learning specialist in shared and collaborative ways with classroom teachers to ensure the effective*

*integration of information literacy skills to enable students to use information efficiently and meaningfully to build their deep understanding and deep knowledge of curriculum content. (Todd, 2004, pp.16-17).*

This definition drives the research: it structures the questions Dr. Todd asks in his survey, as shown in the first column of Table 1. He also draws from the school library literature to identify collaboration, information technology, and reading/writing initiatives as indicators of effectiveness.

The second column of Table 1 illustrates how Dr Todd refined 'collaboration' to determine the degree to which library media specialists interacted with teachers. The definition of 'instruction' for question two establishes a hierarchy of information skills that include mechanical and cognitive skills, as do the activities listed for questions three and four.

Dr. Todd then looked for patterns and trends in the school library media specialists' responses to these survey questions, as shown in Table 2.

How would your school library program compare? How would you answer Dr. Todd's questions? What are the implications of this research for your practice? As research makes the familiar strange, it brings us out of our comfort zone and into a world of uncertainty, but then comes the 'Aha!' moment, when we are transported from the outside, looking in, as it for the first time. It is only through the skillful use of evidence that we can ever be sure that the Grahams in our world are being taught effectively.

## References

- AASL & AECT. (1998) *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, Chicago: ALA.
- Todd, R. J. (2004) *Report of the Delaware School Library Survey 2004*, New Brunswick NJ: CISSL.

**Dr Carol A. Gordon joins Synergy as a regular contributor of this section. We welcome her insights into research results and how these relate to practice. In this article Dr Gordon considers the findings of Dr Ross J. Todd's research into school library programs in Delaware in the United States and challenges us to consider how his work can inform our own practice.**

**Table 1: Research questions and their definitions for the study of instruction by school library media specialists in Delaware**

| Identify survey questions   | Define terminology   |
|---|--|
| <p>1. In what kind of cooperations, coordinations and collaborations do school library media specialists engage?</p>      | <p><b>Cooperation:</b> The teacher and the school library media specialist may communicate informally over a short term project but work independently.</p> <p><b>Coordinations:</b> The teacher and the school library media specialist may meet together to discuss a lesson/unit of study. However, the individual goal setting, learning experience design, teaching, and evaluation are done independently.</p> <p><b>Collaborations:</b> The teacher and the school library media specialist jointly set goals, design learning experiences, teach and evaluate a comprehensive unit of study.</p> |
| <p>2. What is the focus of instruction?</p>   | <p>Knowing about the school library<br/>           Understanding different strategies in doing effective research<br/>           Knowing about different sources and formats of information<br/>           Identifying main ideas in information sources<br/>           Sorting and organizing ideas<br/>           Evaluating information for quality<br/>           Using information ethically<br/>           Creating information products<br/>           Communicating/presenting ideas<br/>           Accommodating differentiated learning styles and abilities</p>                               |
| <p>3. What are instructional activities that center on effective use of information technology with teaching faculty?</p> | <p>Searching strategies for the world wide web<br/>           Evaluating quality of websites<br/>           Using computer programs to do school work<br/>           Using UDLibSearch, other databases/catalogs<br/>           Teaching ethical use of the internet<br/>           Integrating technology in content areas</p>  |
| <p>4. What are foci of reading/writing initiatives?</p>   | <p>Book talks to promote literature for self-selected recreational reading<br/>           Book talks to promote trade books for curriculum related reading<br/>           Author visit<br/>           Literature discussion groups<br/>           Literature displays<br/>           Creative writing activities<br/>           Book clubs<br/>           Storytelling<br/>           Promotion of reading programs at public libraries<br/>           Other reading incentive programs<br/>           Other. Please specify</p>   |
| <p>5. What are significant learning outcomes enabled by your program?</p>   |  |

**Table 2: Patterns and trends emerging from the data**

| Survey questions   | Patterns, trends and findings   |
|--|---|
| 1. In what kind of cooperations, coordinations and collaborations do school library media specialists engage?      | <p>*Schools where cooperations are not taking place are typically elementary schools without certified library media specialists or who do not have a full-time lms in the building.</p> <p>*60% of lms do not engage in formal collaborations to integrate information literacy into the English curriculum, and considerably higher percentages of lms do not collaborate in other curriculum areas.</p>                              |
| 2. What is the focus of instruction?   | <p>*Lower percentages of lms focus on higher order thinking skills (analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, creating) rather than</p> <p>*Given the relatively low levels of coordinations and collaborations, it is assumed that instruction related to information literacy primarily takes place in isolation, without involvement of teachers</p>  |
| 3. What are instructional activities that center on effective use of information technology with teaching faculty? | <p>*Elementary children are missing significant opportunities to learn information and critical skills related to the use of IT tools and software to create information products.</p>  |
| 4. What are foci of reading/writing initiatives?   | <p>*Reading/writing initiatives are more pervasive in elementary schools and decline in frequency through middle and high school</p> <p>*Most reading activities are primarily passive (book displays, book promotions, promotion of reading programs) but do not necessarily engage students.</p> <p>*Activities that foster active engagements (discussion groups, literature circles, book raps) are used much more infrequently</p> |
| 5. What are significant learning outcomes enabled by your program?   | <p>*Lms (library media specialists) appeared to have difficulty articulating the outcomes of library initiatives in terms of curriculum standards and goals.</p> <p>*Many lms had difficulty focusing on student outcomes—rather they articulated what they did, identifying instructional inputs and processes, rather than clarifying outcomes from the perspective of the student.</p>   |