Schools reading the future

Kris Johnstone, president, ALIA Schools Section

Preceding the biennial conference, the ALIA schools section organised a schools day, focussed on several of the issues directing developments in school libraries — networking, outcomes education and collection management.

Networking technology in schools

In this panel session Bruce Rigby, manager of the Network Learning Projects for the Victorian Department of Education posed the question 'Where do libraries fit in the big picture of technology in schools?' and inspired us with his answers. He believes technology leads to more adaptable and authentic educational experiences with increase collaboration and a greater focus on the learner rather than information transfer — a concept not unfamiliar to teacher-librarians.

Bronwen Parsons, who has extensive experience in Victorian School librarianship, posed a number of pertinent questions about the curriculum context of technology. These included how do we shape teaching and learning? How are we going to teach students to be discriminate users of information? What kind of resources do we want students to use? How do we assess student progress? Do we need to change the way we operate organisationally? How do we manage our systems? How do we evaluate our progress?

Pru Mitchell, head of the library at La Salle College, shared her experiences of introducing technology into her school and outlined the educational and management issues raised. It is imperative that the curriculum drives the technology, and much emphasis has been given to collection mapping to determine which subjects will incorporate which information technology skills into their programs. Hardware had been upgraded and redistributed through classrooms, a technician employed and curriculum packages developed over several years.

In our second session, a panel of Michelle Ellis, senior curriculum adviser, Library and Information Literacy; Ross Todd, lecturer at University of Technology, Sydney; and Chris Perry, lecturer at Deakin University, provided perspectives on outcomes education — the link to the curriculum. Libraries have been successful because they have focused on core business — student outcomes. Outcomes are the observable measurable differences we make to student learning (Ross Todd). They must be posited in terms of student learning. Michelle called upon us to conduct action research to define these outcomes and to evaluate our programs. She directed us to the work of Prusak and Matarazzo and stressed the need to demonstrate that the inputs of technology, skills processes and organised resources make a positive and observable difference to student outcomes. Ross believes our credibility as individual educators and the longevity of our profession hinges on this. Hearteningly emerging research indicates that school libraries do make a difference.

In focussing on process we must consider different styles of learning. Chris Perry believes that learners express preferences for styles of learning at a young age. To cater for these we must give students control over their own learning, teach them appropriate learning skills and develop strategies to assess that learning.

Another common theme was the need for research to evaluate the effect of the current changes. We must be more opportunistic, investigative and evaluative in our approach.

Collection management in school libraries

Shelda Dobowski, a lecturer at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, explored the view that collection management should be linked to the technological processes used in a school library if we are to adequately 'read the future' need of our users. She argued that our collection management can be significantly improved if we effectively integrate new technologies into our daily practices. Shelda outlined the advantages of this for selection, ordering, financial management, marketing and lobbying, collection evaluation and mapping. Teacher-librarians can turn technology to advantage by streamlining and sharing. In Shelda's words we must be 'technologically innovative and prominent!'

The day provided a broad range of interesting insights, gave participants much food for thought and provided a jumping off point for further professional development. The message of the day was clearly that we must use technology to our advantage, we must be clear in our desired outcomes and above all we should evaluate what we do by talking with our users. To sum up the day in Ross Todd's words — we must dialogue, diagnose, document and disseminate!