

The Media Center: Technology Builds Community Connections

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FOR READOUT AFTER TITLE:

During the past decade media centers have become school-wide media programs. It is now time to extend the reach to the community. There's great potential in all of our greater learning communities.

It's late afternoon; classes are over. A group of students and senior citizens who reside at a care center are using the media center's computers during CommuniKids, an intergenerational activity organized by the school psychologist. That evening the executive director of the city's Quality Council is working in the labs with business partners, introducing them to an online collaborative tool. In another Minnesota district adults are using the school's computers for an investment club meeting. And, in a Georgia district an elementary media center's lab is used by parents studying for their GED. Unusual? Not at all. Quite likely the media center would be empty without the presence of technology. Technology's power lies in its function as a relationship-building tool. Let's look at other real examples of how technology helps forge relationships between the media program, the school, and the greater learning community.

Expectations and Implications of Extended Facility Use for Students

The need to access technology has accelerated the demand for extended media center hours. Expanded hours are great PR for a media center and school district as well as being part of the obvious solution for reducing inequities between the technology haves and have-nots.

Expanded hours staffing is a mix of professionals, teachers, and volunteers. A volunteer who helps staff our media center during extended hours enthusiastically said, "This is the way I believe school should be, so I had to volunteer!" In Plano, Texas, high schools are even open on Sundays; anyone in the community can use

technology and production equipment. Community members are charged for printing and other consumables. (LM_NET Archives, January 16, 2001)

Elementary schools also offer extended hours and community access. A Kansas City media specialist opened an elementary media center one night a week for students and their parents, saying: “It was a new building and the parents loved bringing their children just for relaxing and reading or learning the new programs on the computers. I also taught parents classes on our new technology.” Now in a new school in Chaska, Minnesota, she is receiving the same wonderful response. “The community built my school and I love sharing it with them.” (Bonnie Lewis, personal e-mail, September 30, 02) Winona Middle School’s Family Reading Night was established to strengthen family ties and home-school connections through the common reading and discussion of a young adult novel, but the events are also a time to share information about the school’s media/technology program with parents.

Community access is an important consideration when new media centers are built or older ones remodeled. It’s best if the media center can be accessed without opening the entire school. In new schools media centers and labs are often placed right by the front entrance for convenient public access. Some districts share labs with technical or community colleges, a win-win situation for everyone.

Rollingstone Community School in my district was built in 1996 and planned for community use. The city clerk, mayor, and other officials share an office suite with the principal and even share the school’s fax machine and other technologies. The community provided the initial funding for technology and has continued to support the school’s technology needs. The media center has an outside door and is open one evening a week for public use.

But technology and media centers are more than shared space and a lure for activities. Technology can help forge a wide array of collaborative partnerships.

Local History Partnerships

An exciting partnership is our ongoing work with the Winona County Historical Society. With funding from a local foundation, Winona Middle School staff and the Society educator developed Winona’s Changing Demographics—a Web site on some of the ethnic groups that settled Winona.

<<http://www.rschooltoday.com/demographics/index.html>> One segment of the project became a vehicle for students who are new immigrants to tell their stories, and the site has generated global connections. The Society educator and I also

collaborated to produce “Wabasha’s Prairie to Winona,” <http://www.winona.msus.edu/historicalandsociety/sesqui/> about the early history of Winona. A grant from the State Historical Society funded our work, which includes teaching activities.

Technology also has a key role in a third local history project. Because local information is often difficult to access, we applied for a grant from a regional multitype library agency to create a local history corner in the media center. The Society purchased a printer and supplies to reproduce historical photographs, which are displayed in poster size frames on the display cases. Other dollars are used to pay the costs of staff time needed to create a database that indexes the hundreds of local history articles published in commemorative newspapers. Grant money is also used to fund “Local History on the Web” staff development classes.

The Dakota Conflict Web site

<http://www.isd77.k12.mn.us/schools/dakota/conflict/history.htm> created by students and teachers at Mankato, Minnesota’s Dakota Meadows Middle School is another example of school media program and historical society collaboration. The award-winning site documents the 1862 conflict between Dakota Indians and white settlers. Like the Winona demographics project, it demonstrates a school’s support of community history and interest in understanding ethnic diversity.

Media Program Web Sites

A media center Web site can and should be much more than a resource portal. Media specialists can capitalize on “looking up information” visits to use the site for program advocacy. Examples include highlighting program activity, media specialist/teacher collaborative activity, standards, research about school media programs, and any other information that will strengthen community support and understanding. The Baltimore County Public Schools Web site is an excellent example of an extensive collection of links about standards and research about school media programs. <http://www.bcpl.net/~dcurtis/libraryfacts/>

School Web Sites

Media specialists are often the Webmasters for their buildings or districts. In this capacity they can provide a significant service to the school or district as Web sites mature into sophisticated tools aimed at improving home-school connections. Ray Dretzke, vice president of eProfessional Association, a nonprofit dedicated to helping schools and government organizations make efficient use of the Web to facilitate their objectives www.eProfessionalAssoc.org notes:

Accountability is now in the forefront for administrators and thus will also be for teachers. Administrators, and to only slightly a lesser degree teachers, must understand that they must become their own public relations agents in communicating and celebrating the work and successes that they are achieving in their schools. Until they realize this, the skepticism and questions will continue. Some understand this and ... “get” that the Web is the lowest cost, most instantaneous, and most pervasive method for communicating to their communities.

Judy Arnold, Media Specialist at Fridley High School in Minnesota is a school Webmaster who is helping the school create a parent portal on the Fridley Web site.

<<http://www.rschooldtoday.com/se3bin/clientschool.cgi?schoolname=school30>>

Parents “will be able to view their children’s attendance, discipline, and health history along with their class schedule, transcript information, [and] view class assignments. Arnold explained, “We started with health, attendance, discipline, and transcript info for first trimester.” She noted the initial attendance for demonstrations was disappointing, but as a new communications vehicle it can be expected to take a while to catch on.

Fridley High School’s Web site is one that communities are beginning to expect. This past summer while our own district site was being migrated to a new server we received many e-mails and calls from people looking for the information they had been accustomed to finding on our site.

Bumpy Paths

Not all of our visualized and planned possibilities for school-community technology connections have lived up to their initial expectations.

Our middle school students had a wonderful shared learning experience with our community hospital via interactive television, but most discussions about collaboration and learning via distance learning lead to very little. Until all the players have access to quality equipment, someone to help them, and time to coordinate the events, those successes will be few. The people who were introduced to collaborative software didn’t make much use of it. And, the CommuniKids project died a quiet death because only a few students found that communicating with others via e-mail was exciting. As Web sites become more sophisticated there will be increased expectations of what should be on the site. Media specialists who are Webmasters will see their roles shifting even more. (MMS writer Trevor Shaw offers a thoughtful look at this topic in his Making IT

Work for Learning column “The School Web Site: A Servant to Many Masters,” *Multimedia Schools*, October 2002.)

A Little Collaboration Here, More Work There

Working with volunteer community groups adds to the workload. It takes time to schedule and train volunteers, jobs that media center staff absorb as part of the workload. It takes time to think through policy issues and other intricacies of collaborative relationships. It also takes time to schedule and supply the audiovisual and computer equipment that speakers and groups need. Sometimes requests are unclear, necessitating an extra phone call or two to verify needs. Occasionally we run into hardware incompatibility issues. We often have to juggle equipment to meet needs. A request from one group for three slide projectors struck me as strange in this era of PowerPoint, but we were able to accommodate the request. Our facilities scheduler notes the “the biggest technology hurdle we run into is the sound and light board in the auditorium! There’s no on-site expert.” And it’s not unheard of for a speaker to accidentally walk off with a projector cable or other item. Outside groups are charged rent. Labs rent for \$25, overheads and other small equipments cost \$5, but that money is not returned to the media center’s budget.

Worth Every Minute It Takes

But ... supporting these endeavors is well worth every minute it takes. Last year our district’s buildings and facilities were used the same number of hours after school by school and non-school groups as they were for day-time K-12 instruction. Forty-nine non-school groups used the district’s facilities for a total of 2,030 hours. (Robyn Keiffer, Winona Area Public Schools)

Working with our greater learning community builds support and understanding of media programs and schools. Collaboration with community leaders can also generate physical and monetary resources from business and community leaders who value technology.

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PULLQUOTE

Technology’s power lies in its function as a relationship-building tool. Let’s look at other real examples of how technology helps forge relationships between the media program, the school, and the greater learning community.

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