Meeting Review: School Library Association Weekend Course

21-23 June 2013, Hilton Hotel, Belfast

Reviewed by Karen Lilliman

I am a part-time school library assistant and MA student, and this year's course was my first opportunity to attend a School Library Association event. The conference programme included a number of optional sessions; this report outlines my reflection on the workshops that I attended.

A breakfast session led by Joyce Martin from JCS Resources considered government changes to post-16 education and their implications for those of us who work in school libraries. Joyce explained that new funding rules require sixth form students to be in school for a minimum number of hours, and include a duty on teachers to set work that can be studied 'independently'. Such changes increase both the challenges and opportunities facing school librarians. Whilst the changes relate to sixth form, the need to create 'independent learners' applies to all young people and is an issue that Ofsted consider to be of importance. Group discussion followed on how we define 'information literacy' and the skills our students need to become information literate. The speakers in this session argued that librarians should develop students by focusing on research skills from an early age, encourage teachers to be more demanding about referencing and promote an online library that includes a mixture of free and subscription material from trusted sources.

From the main conference programme, I attended a workshop called 'Enriching Reading for Pleasure' led by Joy Court. This session looked at Carnegie book award shadowing, and presented research findings from a project that investigated the impact of the scheme on young people. Joy started the session by introducing the idea of Carnegie shadowing, and then went around the room allowing each person to share their own knowledge and experience of the topic. It was refreshing to hear that every delegate had something unique to offer to the discussion. This

ranged from people who had never taken part (including me!) to others who had led Carnegie sessions for many years. Some librarians chose to use Carnegie with a pre-existing book group, while others used it to create a new group. Workshop discussion included using Carnegie to create a staff-student group that was non-hierarchical. Carnegie allows staff to experience the books as readers and can be a good way of creating a whole school reading culture. I concluded that what works well in one school may not work well in another, although Carnegie is designed to be flexible. Students don't have to read all of the books, and overall the scheme is a very positive thing to be involved in.

My second optional session was called 'Kind-letastic' and was led by school librarian Adam Lancaster. It set out to explain 'how utilising ebooks and new technology can improve reading and writing attainment'. As somebody who has never used ebooks in the workplace, I was very keen to see a successful model of ebook lending. In this respect, my expectations weren't met. What followed, however, was a thought-provoking workshop that left me feeling inspired about the huge potential within the school library profession to have real impact on pupil development.

Adam's presentation described the way in which he uses pre-existing data alongside a year seven survey to measure students' attitudes to reading. The first part of the session was devoted to explaining the 'science of reading' and by using a series of audience participation tasks, Adam explained that reading comprehension relies on an ability to combine ideas in a passage rather than simply accessing each idea on its own. For weak readers, this can be problematic as they struggle to identify ideas in the text and the relationships between them. Adam argued that at secondary school level we should disregard phonics in favour of word recognition, and that this could be achieved through targeted literacy intervention. The remainder of the presentation detailed a ten-week intervention programme that used technology (including ebooks and Nintendo DS) to improve students' reading attainment. The programme appeared very simple in structure, but had produced measurable results. Students were selected and invited to an initial interview followed by a reading and comprehension test. The programme was explained to the pupils before they worked with the librarian to choose a device on which they would read. When the device had been chosen the librarian worked with each student to choose the right book. The students read the books on the devices, one book per student over ten weeks. Use of technology helped to break down barriers and students were challenged to read independently. Many students chose to continue reading at home as they had developed the habit, ability and want to read. All students were assessed at the end of the programme, and the minimum improvement in reading age was 18 months.

The conference ended with a panel debate on the topic: 'Are e-readers the death of the physical book?' On the panel were Duncan Wright (@litforlads), Bev Humprey (@libwithattitude) and Adam Lancaster (@dusty_jacket). A very lively debate took place for over an hour, with many contributions from across the room. As a school librarian who is not using e-readers in the workplace, I was keen to hear from other delegates who have had success with ebooks. In the debate, Adam advocated the use of ebooks, but he was

keen to stress that although he does use Kindles with students, he doesn't loan ebook content. Duncan's contribution to the debate included the invitation for somebody to show him a legal method of ebook lending that was cost-effective for schools. From the lack of responses on the day, I feel that such a method is not yet ready. Bev and others pointed out that school LMS suppliers are currently working on ebook platforms, but for many schools, the platforms available on the market provide more questions than answers. If I purchase your ebook platform, do I own all of the content on it? What are the ongoing subscription costs? What happens to my content if I cancel my subscription? What is the time delay between (physical) book publication and ebook availability? Do ebooks offer value for money? Are ebooks compatible with all devices? I left the debate feeling keen to explore these issues further, but satisfied that any decision not to rush into purchasing ebook content for schools was a decision well made.

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