

# Crossing the Road Without the Lollipop Lady: Some thoughts on safely navigating information traffic in a school library

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**Summary** - *Reflecting on the use of e-resources in schools, this article outlines some of the challenges and opportunities schools face when engaging with the digital world. We look at how we have used e-resources within this setting and conclude by considering some new opportunities to explore in the coming year.*

*The following thoughts on using digital resources in schools arose from a discussion reflecting on Amy's first year in her new post as Librarian at Wimbledon High School. Throughout the discussion we considered what has worked well, the challenges we are currently facing and looked ahead to possible new opportunities and developments. Having previously worked together, we then thought about our current different working contexts and changes over the last year, which reinforced the importance of adapting our service to the specifics of each organisation.*

## **Context and Challenges**

Working with digital resources in a school setting presents a particular portfolio of challenges and opportunities. We both work in independent girls' schools with students who are bright and keen to succeed and we have shaped our work with e-resources to reflect their particular information needs.

As in many sectors of librarianship, our job is no longer to simply provide access to information, as staff and students can do much of this by themselves, and indeed, it is our job to empower them to do so. As a service, we understand our role to be one of 'adding value' to information for the end user, for example by bookmarking relevant websites, embedding resources into VLE pages and offering advice on how to keep track of research and referencing it accurately.

In our work, we try to keep abreast of developments in educational IT and look beyond the school environment to ensure that we are casting our net wide and then pulling in the right 'catch' for our users. The work that we do in this area is underpinned by understanding how the library fits into the wider life of the school and recognising whole

school priorities, as defined by our school development plans. The process of choosing, collating, promoting and using e-resources is an ongoing one that requires regular evaluation to ensure we are using the best tool for the job and that we remain up-to-date in a rapidly changing landscape.

Although it is important to begin embedding digital skills early, much of the work we have undertaken in this area is with older students (aged 16-18). In our particular schools, we predominantly prepare students for the demands of higher education and so much of the work we do here reflects that of colleagues based in universities.

Our students are 'in-betweeners', both in terms of their age and also, in terms of their information needs. They are high achieving, intellectually curious and academically able, but have not yet developed high-level research skills, nor have they gained the experience or depth of subject knowledge to critically engage with the online world without an element of guidance.

Therefore, the age and skill-set of our readers can make working with online resources in a school setting difficult, not least because there is a deep rooted paradox that we feel simultaneously overwhelmed by the quantity of information available and yet at the same time by the paucity of high-quality, level-appropriate resources on offer. Providers are increasing their online portfolio offerings to schools, but they are of course nowhere near the levels available in Higher Education. The lack of specialist staff in a school and the constant pulls on time (reading for pleasure, pastoral work, teaching), alongside differing school priorities can also mean that e-resources are simply not top of the list, or if they are, there's not always the confidence and/or expertise to ensure they can be integrated effectively.

In addition, working with children means that social media presents its own particular challenges, especially on the pastoral front. With a recent BBC Learning Poll reporting that '72% of 14-16 year olds had experienced or witnessed online bullying' and 'nearly one in 10' signing up to 'websites or services not meant for their age group' (BBC, 2015), it is unsurprising that educators have reservations engaging with this media as an information source. Moreover, in a time-pressured environment, digital media comes under close scrutiny to demonstrate that it can provide a real benefit to teaching and learning and not merely a distraction. And yet, social media can be a powerful engagement tool for reluctant learners and provides real-time, on-the-ground information about important political and social topics. Therefore, from the library's point of view, we are trying to find the appropriate balance, where the benefits of using these resources for academic study and knowledge sharing outweigh the negatives, often associated with wellbeing and pastoral concerns.

Our teaching colleagues are also an important audience and indispensable allies in promoting take-up from students and we are continually thinking of ways to engage with them. We have found that running small training sessions for staff and working closely with them on projects to encourage a 'cascade' model of dissemination has been effective in promoting library resources. As solo librarians, or working in very small teams, it is

particularly important to create a sustainable approach to e-resources and having teachers who can promote the library's work to students is vital to its ongoing success.

However, for teachers there is always a balance to be struck between innovation and the status quo. In a busy and demanding working environment, it can be difficult to find the time and space to reflect and be open to new innovations when current practice works and indeed, reinventing the wheel for no reason isn't to be encouraged. However, part of the 'value added' service we can deliver is to highlight new resources to teachers and encourage them to experiment with new digital tools. Throughout the school year we have looked for various openings and opportunities and found these to be most effective when we work within the natural rhythms of the academic calendar to pick out those moments when people are most open to change:

- At times of the year when exam classes have left and teachers are looking ahead to the next year
- When there are changes to syllabi and curriculum e.g. a department may change exam board, or at times of more wholesale change, such as the new A-level curriculum to start in September 2015
- During periods of staff turnover, be that when new members of staff join a department and bring their own ideas, or are simply looking to build up their network and so may be more receptive to working with the library. Likewise, as a new librarian you can harness your enthusiasm and newness for the job to forge teams

### Examples of our work with e-resources

So how have we engaged with e-resources in our own schools and what have been the outcomes?

- Fostering links with other sectors

Although based in schools, we are often looking for opportunities to work with other organisations, be that through their online platforms, or face-to-face events. Being interested in 'bridging the gap' between school and HE, in July 2014 we organised a staff shadowing placement with the library team at Queen Mary University. This insight into Higher Education illustrated how much crossover there is between school and university in this area. By watching sessions run by library staff for EPQ (Extended Project Qualification) students, we were able to integrate some of the teaching practices, such as free-writing and search techniques into our own research sessions.

Alongside these school visits, increasingly organisations are also reaching out to schools via online platforms. Online Guides, such as those prepared for students taking the EPQ, by the [Wellcome Collection](#) and many universities, including [Birmingham](#), [Southampton](#) and [Manchester](#), are excellent accompaniments to our research sessions and can be used independently by students for their own follow-up.

We have also promoted educational websites created by the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries Archives and Museums) sector, such as [The National Archives](#). This website has been a

particularly useful source of information to students embarking on independent research for their History Coursework. Combining huge digital libraries, academic comment and image galleries organised by time period and topic, all free-to-access, this website offers students reliable and well-maintained primary and secondary sources.

- Experimenting with social media

As already discussed, social media remains a very big and real elephant in many (class)rooms and each school adopts its own approach towards how and when it should be used. At Wimbledon High School, using Twitter is encouraged and many departments (including the library, [@Library\\_WHS](#)) have their own Twitter streams. These are embedded into the VLE and school newsletters so parents, teachers and students can share content. This works well as a way of promoting events in the library and is a useful tool for keeping up-to-date with information, but the conversational aspect of the tool has failed to take off, largely because school accounts cannot follow individual student accounts and school-to-student contact on social media is discouraged.

- Promoting audio-visual material

The way in which we seek and consume information has changed significantly in recent years and this has been reflected in the type of information students are accessing. When running research sessions now, we highlight audio-visual material such as lectures, podcasts, [TED Talks](#) (Technology, Entertainment, Design: inspirational presentations that encourage the dissemination of knowledge and ideas) and T.V. programmes and encourage students to show a breadth and variety of resources in their research.

In addition, with changes in pedagogy such as the use of the [‘flipped classroom’](#) becoming more widespread, this sort of content is more naturally being integrated into lessons and homework. Teachers know that the students in their class have access to huge amounts of information and they cannot control what resources they choose to look at in order to prepare for a class. So to borrow an American phrase, an educator has been transformed from a ‘sage on the stage’ to a ‘guide on the side’. The widespread adoption of VLEs also means that sharing and accessing this content is now far easier, with the option of embedding frames within a page and the ability to easily edit multimedia content.

- Expansion of subscription resource portfolios

Ensuring that online resources are used sufficiently to justify the high subscription fees has long been a challenge in a school environment, where students tend to start their research with familiar free-online resources rather than subscription sites. When promoting these resources, we have found that endorsement by teachers is crucial for high take-up amongst students. Over the last couple of years, we have also observed that online collections of ‘known’ resources, such as the e-book collection for *Cambridge Companions* and *The Very Short Introduction* series, have been most popular. Similarly, for journals, popular and well-known magazines such as *New Scientist* have been the most heavily used of our online collection. Students are familiar with these brands, can identify the covers, have looked at the ‘hard-copy’ resources and this seems to give them the confidence to

navigate them online, with a certainty that these sources will deliver the reliable information they need.

### Looking ahead and next steps

So what next? Over the next academic year, reacting to school priorities and changes in the digital landscape we would like to build on our work in the following areas:

- Preparing students for the world of work

As we outlined above, much of our work with online resources has been targeted at sixth formers preparing for university. Increasingly however, we are also considering how to equip students for the world of work and in particular, looking at how to develop transferrable skills needed for employment. With the prediction that, 'some will go straight into employment aged 18 and that will cease to be an unacceptable choice for the very brightest girls' (Farr, 2015), we are keen to foster relationships with employers and explore mutually beneficial opportunities to work together. In particular, we are aware that certain organisations (e.g. NHS) might find it difficult to accept school students for face-to-face work experience placements (due to safeguarding, insurance or health and safety issues) but could produce videos or have online platforms that share information about the jobs on offer. This may become more popular as organisations reach out directly to school leavers as the traditional university model is challenged and students opt to join the workplace at 18.

- Facilitating access to a wide range of appropriate resources in a sustainable way

Increasingly aware of how easy it is to find information, over the coming year we will work on ensuring our online offering is easy to access and highlights the most appropriate resources for staff and students. Aware of pressures on our own time, we are keen to explore ways to disseminate information online and to create additional follow-up material so that students have a permanent point of reference, which they can use when researching independently. With the new A-level curriculum starting in September 2015, it will be a good opportunity to reengage with staff and students and to evaluate our information provision.

### Concluding thoughts

By reflecting on our current practice and looking ahead to new opportunities, it is very apparent that the lollipop lady remains as important as ever. Her role is not simply to help students cross the digital road, but rather to educate, enthuse and empower them, so that they can navigate the increasingly busy online streets independently. By doing this, our school students will be well equipped to embark on the next stage of their journey, be that at university, or increasingly in the workplace.

### Bibliography

BBC [Many children 'taking risks online'](#) 10<sup>th</sup> February 2015. (Accessed: 6<sup>th</sup> August 2015)

Farr, C. [Forget University. It's jobs for the top girls](#) The Sunday Times, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2015. (Accessed: 6<sup>th</sup> August 2015)