"A School Library Built for the Digital Age":
A Summary and Discussion of Key Conference Themes from IASL 2016, Tokyo

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I was awarded the UKeiG Early Career Award in 2015 and authored the SLA Guideline _Digital Decisions: Selecting and Using e-resources in the Secondary School Library_, which was published in early 2016.

Introduction
From 21st-26th August 2016, I attended the IASL (International Association of School Librarians) Conference in Tokyo. This event enables school librarians and academics from across the globe to come together and share their research and best practice. Delegates attended from over thirty countries including America, Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Saudi Arabia. The theme of the 2016 conference was 'A School Library Built for the Digital Age'. My trip was funded by UKeiG (through their Early Career Award) and funding secured from the John Campbell Bursary Trust. A summary of this article can be found on their website. I am very grateful to both of these organisations for supporting my trip.

Preparing for the Conference
The aims of the conference were set out on the IASL website, and whilst upbeat in tone, recognised the challenges facing school librarians and the evolving nature of their role. Masami Zeniya (President, Japan School Library Association) wrote,

"We hope that the presented research outcomes of the forum will elucidate the tasks facing the school libraries, and will give us the opportunity to think together about arriving at solutions. These days, school libraries are reaching beyond their traditional boundaries and growing into hubs that interconnect schools and the world at large."

After reading comments from the conference organisers, I identified my own aims for attending IASL:

- To enhance my understanding of current trends in educational technology and consider how it could be used in libraries and classrooms in the UK
- To be able to develop and create resources using a range of digital tools showcased at the conference
- To reflect on how educational/country context influences digital strategies in school
- To gain an international perspective on trends in digital librarianship and share best practice with colleagues from different countries and different educational settings

After an amazing week of sightseeing, which included lots of opportunities to enjoy Japanese culture and wonderful food, the conference began on 21st August against the backdrop of a typhoon.

The Conference

Although there was huge diversity in the conference presentations and workshops, representing different strands of librarianship and current trends and areas of research, four overarching themes emerged and are discussed below.

1. Recognising the Diversity of the School Librarian's Role

The opening speech of the conference, delivered by the Japanese writer Mr Atoda, concluded with the line, "The most important thing for libraries is librarians." This was probably the most striking aspect of the conference for me and reinforced the idea that it's exceptionally difficult to write a job description that adequately describes the diversity of work a school librarian undertakes. It was evident from the conference that colleagues were working on such a diverse portfolio of projects, ranging from promoting reading for pleasure and teaching information literacy to encouraging citizenship skills, partnering with museums and art galleries and opening their library to the community.

One presentation, which captured this diversity, was led by an Australian librarian, Debra Brown, who described the work she had done in the area of citizenship, by establishing a "[Human Library](#)." This event helps foster a culture of empathy and respect and promotes tolerance within the community. In Brown's school only 7% of students come from non-English speaking backgrounds and they are largely from affluent homes. She wanted to create an "empathy experience" for her students where the library was seen as a place that "nurtures values and ethics." In a human library, you borrow a "real person" and have the opportunity to a have a conversation with someone from a different background, to gain an insight into their life and way of thinking. Powerful connections can be made, challenging discussions had and difficult topics explored in this open forum.

Likewise, Per Johansson, a librarian working in Sweden, spoke of the role the library played in integrating refugees into the education system. Schools are often the first port of call for refugee children, but without basic language and digital literacy skills, it can be alienating and overwhelming. Without these basic skills, refugees are at a disadvantage,

which, when compounded with their difficult background, means that this group often face high unemployment, segregation and discrimination.

In Johansson's schools, *Spånga gymnasium* and *Spånga grundskola,* new arrivals are integrated into mainstream classes and then supported with materials in their mother language. The school library supports these children by providing computers, talking books, print collections and a safe, neutral space they can visit. Playing a central role in the reading for pleasure agenda, Johansson noted that it's difficult to support English as an Additional Language (EAL) children, especially as rising numbers are leading to increased costs in getting new materials in other languages. He also spoke about the sensitivity with which he approached reading recommendations, noting that they are very different for these students, "a dystopian world for Swedish readers is a past reality for refugee children."

The job is particularly challenging, however, as there has been no formal training for librarians or teachers to help them support the ever-increasing number of refugees arriving in schools. Johansson explained that actions feel largely reactive rather than proactive, but argued that helping these children doesn't require a plentiful supply of money, but is rather about approach; the "new arrivals" must be seen and treated as children, not as refugees, as this is what will help to ensure they are integrated as smoothly and quickly as possible.

This diversity in the work of school librarians is, I think, likely to continue and develop in the future as the role of the school library evolves to support broader changes within education and the curriculum.

2. Meaningful Collaboration and Relationship Building

As is usually the case in the UK, school librarians across the world are often solo workers, and therefore partnerships are crucial to successful dissemination of their message and promotion of their work. Alongside internal relationship building (with subject departments), several presentations detailed successful collaboration with universities, charities, local communities and other schools.

A particularly striking example of in-house collaboration was explored by a librarian and English teacher from Meiji High School and Junior High School, Japan. In this school, the close relationship between the English department and the library has enabled students to benefit from an integrated and exciting reading programme (EER- English Extensive Reading). This partnership went beyond teachers encouraging students to read widely from the library, to teachers processing some of the reading stock and also reshelving it. By doing this, pupils saw teachers in the library, so there were lots of opportunities to discuss reading material and teachers gained a genuine familiarity with the books, thus being able to provide more targeted and appropriate advice to students and their colleagues (as a blog was established where teachers could review and discuss books).

Furthermore, an important citizenship initiative, explained by Japanese librarian Yuriko Matsuda, turned the library from a traditional resource centre into the Piccari Café. The aim of the café was to teach important life skills and provide an information service for

students without it feeling as though they were being "taught" in the traditional way. The café opened in the library serving soft drinks and snacks and was immediately popular with students, teachers and alumni, with over 5,000 pupils visiting the library café in 2015. The librarians explained that the project was underpinned by the Japanese concept of "ibasyo", which refers to the physical and emotional space where one can exist. The librarians wanted to create a neutral, non-judgemental space where both students and staff could gather together and feel accepted and listened to. In order to help create this feeling, outside consultants ran the project and visited the school each week.

The project was particularly successful in strengthening ties between adults and students and gave students the opportunity to gather advice, information and support from an adult network who were not parents, family or school staff.

3. The Importance of Context

One of my key reasons for attending the conference was to gain a greater understanding of how context affects organisations' strategies and approaches to embedding digital tools. In the two schools I have worked in, the strategic objectives set by senior leadership and the ever-changing tech landscape very much affected the school's individual approach to how educational technology should be used and embedded. For example, infrastructure upgrades (e.g. improving Wi-Fi signal) and introduction of whole school approaches to Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) or 1-2-1 projects (with e.g. iPads, tablets, laptops) significantly changes how digital tools are being used across the school.

Therefore, the success of smaller, local projects, for example those led by the library, depend on an appreciation and thoughtful interpretation of this overarching strategy. Many of the projects discussed at the conference illustrated that the librarian had identified a need or area of development and had adapted their role and work to suit the particular needs of the school.

The librarian at Seisho-Kaichi School in Japan ran one session, which really reflected the importance of context. This new build school opened to first grade students in April 2014, with a rolling introduction for students in all grades by April 2016. As this was a new-build, senior leaders and architects had the opportunity to design a space that broke down traditional barriers in the Japanese classroom (e.g. rigid room layout, linear organised buildings, separate ICT rooms) to create a space, which encouraged collaboration and reflected the desire for mobility and versatility within the fabric of the building. This flexible and creative space reflected the school's preferred curriculum of "research based learning" and, as a result, the library sits at the heart of this space. So, instead of thinking in terms of building a library within a school, the librarians used the tagline "a school within a library" to emphasise both the physical centrality of the space, and also the pedagogical centrality of the library in supporting students in their independent learning.

Moreover, Dr. Dianne Oberg's keynote speech also alluded to the importance of recognising context when evaluating and assessing the impact of your library service. After introducing the topic of evaluation, and particular difficulties of carrying it out in a school library, (e.g. the library serves the school but purposes are not always well understood by clientele, usually only one in the school, line managed by someone who is not a librarian)

Dr. Oberg went on to discuss the importance of "evidence based practice" and the role context plays in this. She identified three ways in which evidence could be used to illustrate the role of the school library.

Evidence for practice	What the research says?	Where do we get evidence from? Research, standards and guidelines (IFLA, national), library education.
Evidence in practice	What the data from practice says?	Where do we get evidence? OPAC, scheduling reports, instructional planning book.
Evidence of practice	What the outcomes from practice say?	Where do we get evidence? Statistical studies correlating student achievement measures with library inputs, student products, surveys of stakeholders, focus groups of stakeholders.

In Canada, this evidence is then measured against five progress markers:

- Exploring
- Emerging
- Evolving
- Established
- Leading into the future

However, Dr. Oberg was keen to stress that despite these important frameworks, the take home message from the session was that this evidence needs to be interpreted within the particular context of the library. Drawing on the example of her home country, Canada, Dr. Oberg explained that education is not managed nationally but rather policies are set by individual provinces and territories. As a result, there is significant variation in practice and provision and there's no statutory requirement to have a school librarian.

- More information about the building of Seisho-Kaichi school can be found on the Steelcase Website
- More information about the evaluation frameworks outline above can be found in *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada (2014)*

4. Teaching Digital Literacies and Getting Students "Work Ready"

The fourth overarching theme of the conference was the relationship between education and the world of work. In the UK press recently we have seen a number of headlines highlighting the digital skills gap and the increased pressure on universities who are accused of having "analogue academics" who are "failing to inspire students of the digital

age[1]" (Hurst, 2016). Acutely aware of the changing digital landscape, librarians are well placed to support the digital skills agenda in schools.

An interesting approach to teaching digital literacies was explored by Ross Todd and Virgilio Medina. They had been working on a project auditing students' digital literacy skills and began by asking the questions, "What is stopping pupils from achieving their potential?" and "What digital skills do they need to do so?" Their project acknowledged from the outset that educators may not know how or why students engage with the digital world and how they understand their own competences in this area.

When gathering data, they used questions developed by The Open University's "Being digital: skills for life online." "Being digital" is a collection of short, easy to follow activities designed to help students evaluate their skills in the following areas: searching efficiently; critically evaluating information; communicating and sharing online; and selecting the right online tool for their particular needs. Carrying out this sort of audit encourages students to be reflective learners, and practitioners to base interventions on evidence based practice. From the students' responses, Todd and Medina were able to identify a few common difficulties and challenges:

- Students struggle to evaluate information and engage with it critically
- Students were unsure of whether websites were safe and had difficulty managing digital disruptions and transfers
- Students found it difficult to organise and synthesise information once they'd found it online

By looking at student responses, a competency framework was developed to reflect the students' concerns. This framework contained advice and information about:

- Intellectual property
- Information organisation and synthesis
- Digital reading
- Effective research processes
- Internet safety

By auditing students' skills, a more focussed and relevant digital literary programme was developed with targeted interventions. This approach is one way of adapting more traditional information literacy training, based around a more rigid and linear programme of skills development. Initial evaluations of the scheme suggest it has been successful and Todd and Medina are continuing trials over the coming year.

In addition, Liselott Drejstam, a school librarian working in a primary school in Sweden, presented on a number of digital projects being implemented to develop students' digital skills from an early age. Drejstam explained that all educators in her area were encouraged to use digital tools in a variety of ways including for subject development, write to read tasks and to develop computational thinking. There is also widespread

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[1] Hurst, G., 2016. Analogue academics "are failing to inspire students of the digital age." The Times, 26th September 2016.

recognition that school libraries and librarians are an important resource in schools becoming more digitally literate and confident.

One of the key projects Drejstam spoke about, was the establishment of the platform *SkolArena*, a website where you can search across databases and upload student work to curate digital collections. This had been particularly successful because access to resources became much easier, and it also allowed the school to more readily share students' work with parents and the wider school community.

The presentations addressing digital literacy encouraged me to think about forming partnerships with school careers teams and employers to ensure students are well equipped to enter the increasingly competitive and digitally reliant workplace.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, IASL 2016 offered a varied and engaging programme that brought together practitioners and librarians from across the world. Coming back to the aims I outlined at the start of the article, the conference more than met my expectations. Throughout the four days, I noted several examples of best practice and heard lots of case studies I would like to share with educators in the UK including:

- Ways of successful partnership building both internally in schools and with external agencies
- An insight into global practice in the field of school librarianship and the challenges and opportunities facing colleagues
- Recognising the role of the library in digital skills auditing and developing targeted information literacy training
- Examples of how local policies set at country/district/school level influence approaches to creating a school library fit for a digital age

Alongside the formal conference, the welcome reception, school visits and gala dinner gave delegates the opportunity to network and share the best of Japanese culture and cuisine! A huge thanks you to the organising committee and colleagues from Japan who gave us such a warm welcome.

For anyone interested in attending the conference, I would whole-heartedly recommend it and information about IASL2017, which is being held in California, can be found at https://iaslconf2017.org/