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Participatory Culture in the School Library

Buffy Hamilton  |  buffy.hamilton@gmail.com

Ernie Cox  |  ernest.cox@gmail.com

When we began working on this issue of Knowledge Quest, the first thing we did was cast our nets wide to bring in as many voices and perspectives on the topic of participatory culture as possible. As the table of contents shows, we found a wealth of ideas from people within librarianship and broader K–16 educational settings.

Before you begin browsing the journal we do have a few guiding questions for you as the reader:

• Why consider participatory culture in the context of the school library?
• How does participatory culture matter in the larger educational landscape?
• How can participatory culture and learning bolster implementation of the Common Core standards?

We think every article in this issue can inform your answers to these questions. Of immediate concern to many school librarians is their role in helping students develop skills and attitudes needed to meet the Common Core standards. The Common Core State Standards Initiative is intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of what youth should be expected to learn across the K–12 experience. The initial set of standards for mathematics and English Language Arts were published in the summer of 2010 by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. A majority of states have adopted these standards for implementation as of this writing (www.corestandards.org/in-the-

states). How the standards-based goals are achieved in practice is left to state and local decision makers. In the best situations educators are empowered to design the learning experiences. School librarians are uniquely qualified and positioned to make a school-wide impact.

Reading is identified in the AASL’s Standards for the 21st Century Learner (www.ala.org/aasl/standards) as one our profession’s common beliefs. Reading is also given central importance in the Common Core standards:

...[s]tudents must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements. By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. (NGACBP and CCSSO 2010, 10)

Noticeably absent in the Common Core standards’ concept of complex texts are transmedia texts inhabited by youth culture. Expansion of the concept of literacy is an area for school librarians to mentor
students and teachers alike through the video game environment described in James Gee’s article.

The Common Core writing standards call on educators to provide students with opportunities to write varied types of texts for many purposes while using the power of digital networks to collaborate with and gain awareness of our global society.

Participatory culture can blossom if enough time is devoted to innovative, long-term sustained learning experiences that integrate writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Chopping up the school day into discrete content areas, governed by bells, and bounded by physical classrooms and the random distribution of students to rosters will not accomplish the best outcomes. In this issue, Kristin Fontichiaro’s article describes her experience editing and distributing a crowd-sourced book is a fine example of what the power of distributed intelligence can do to meet the writing standards.

Research is given a central place throughout the content standards. School librarians already know a great deal about this component of the student learning experience. Do we have more to learn about how to integrate this process into a holistic and new context?

Dive into the action research project of Antero Garcia and his students to get the answer. Find out how a classroom becomes vitally connected to learners’ community by producing new knowledge through varied texts, media, and interactions. This author gives educators a roadmap to transform the traditional classroom into an active student-oriented space centered on the personalization of learning.

Standards would mean nothing without the ability to assess student learning in relationship to them. One of the many considerations outlined in Common Core State Standards Initiative documents targets what assessments might look like:

…these standards will ultimately be the basis for an assessment system that would include multiple measures of student performance. Once states agree on the final standards, attention will be turned to creating a high quality system of measurement that would include proper incentives for teachers to teach these standards and a variety of assessments that will reinforce teaching and learning tied to the agreed upon expectations. (n.d., 1)

How will school librarians be part of standards-based assessment in the era of Common Core? How do we invite students to assess their own learning experiences and academic growth? The Common Core will bring a shift in grading practices for many districts. Standards-based grading calls on educators to realize that traditional grading has often bundled content ability, and student behaviors and attitudes into one number or letter grade. Participatory learning offers a rich context to grow the dispositions in action and self-assessment strategies in AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner and the content rigor of the Common Core State Standards.

The articles in this issue present a range of theoretical and practitioner perspectives on participatory culture and learning. The authors offer school librarians many possible starting points for conversations with teachers, students, and administrators; these conversations can help us identify touch-points for change to reshape and improve the educational landscape.

Buffy Hamilton is the librarian at Creekview High School in Canton, Georgia. She is a 2011 Library Journal Mover and Shaker, a 2011 winner of the (ALA) Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) Cutting Edge Library Service Award, the 2010 Georgia Library Media Specialist of the Year, and was included in the 2010 National School Boards Association Technology Leadership Network “20 to Watch.” She blogs at The Unquiet Librarian, <http://theunquietlibrarian.wordpress.com>, winner of the 2011 Salem Press Best School Library Blog Award.

Ernie Cox is the Teacher-Librarian at Prairie Creek Intermediate School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In 2010 he was named one of Library Journal’s 2010 Movers and Shakers. For more about Ernie visit his Prairie Creek Library Blog <http://prairiecreeklibrary.blogspot.com>.

Works Cited
