HOMEPAGE

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The Heart of the Game

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"Devour the moose," shouts coach Bill Ressler to his high school girls' team in *The Heart of the Game*, a documentary about an overweight tax professor with a passion for basketball (Serrill 2006). A quirky coach engages teens by having them imagine themselves as hurricanes, lions, or wolves. "Teeth to the neck!" he shouts. "Draw blood!" they respond as they break from a huddle. In off-court interviews, the girls admit to being somewhat mystified by these ferocious-sounding motivational slogans, but when coupled with changes in offensive strategy, rigorous fitness drills, and practice in making physical contact on the court, the slogans help their team move up from the bottom of the division, and the members begin to think of themselves as WNBA material. Indeed, a compelling phrase can change our view of ourselves in the highly focused environment of a well-drilled team.

In a national context, the game is more complicated, and success can't be gauged from a scoreboard. We are defined, characterized, and circumscribed by *everything* that we do and say. Whether we're embattled school librarians or a military force trying to gain support in a beleaguered foreign country, every action, message, and decision shapes the opinions of others about us (Helmus, Paul, and Glenn 2007). When thousands of individuals all over the country are involved, the challenge becomes, in marketing terms, unity. Are we ready to advocate with one voice?

A brand is an idea in the mind of your constituents that is created by what you say and do. AASL describes itself as a "professional membership organization, serving the needs of 10,000 school library media specialists in the United States, Canada, and around the world" (AASL 2006a). Our newly revised, ambitious mission is "to advocate excellence, facilitate change, and develop leaders in the school library media field" (AASL 2006b). To that end, we list our goals as ensuring:

> that all members of the school library media field collaborate to:
>
> - provide leadership in the total education program
> - participate as active partners in the teaching/learning process
> - connect learners with ideas and information, and
> - prepare students for life-long learning, informed decision-making, a love of reading, and the use of information technologies. (AASL 2006b)

A brand is successful if it is well-defined, delivers what you claim, and offers what people want. How do we know if our brand represents the approximately 66,000 full- and part-time certified library media specialists from the more than 95,000 schools in the United States (U.S. Dept. of Education 2006)? Because these tough times for school libraries are occurring during a golden age of grassroots involvement, we have a rare opportunity to build an inclusive participatory culture. Will we invite contributions broadly in order to pool the collective wisdom of our profession and to develop the national—or perhaps global—unity needed to advocate for common goals?

Symptomatic of the public's confusion about our role and value is our own disagreement about what we should be called (Abilock 2004). The quandary is larger than a professional title; it is embedded in our choices and actions and in the words we use. For example, if we say our goals are reading comprehension and motivation, what distinguishes us from reading coaches and English teachers? If we position ourselves as key promoters of emerging technology integration or, even more generally, as leaders in the effective use of technology in education, how do we differentiate ourselves from computer teachers and technology administrators? If we want to be seen as teacher-librarians, will we lose our administrative role as program directors with fiscal responsibilities?

Collaboration is on every school librarian's lips. The heart of collaboration is the belief that all partners will benefit from it, as well as develop a mutual understanding and respect for how each discipline operates, its norms and values, and its expectations for student learning (Mattessich, Murray-Close, Monsey 2001). *The Handy 5* (Blume 2007), an information skills instruction model, is unique in attempting to develop a common language based on the language of each discipline. Understandable by every subject-area teacher, this tool aligns the library media teachers' objectives with those of every teacher. By integrating the planning, teaching, and assessing of information skills in every subject area, we can achieve the common ground that is at the heart of effective advocacy.

However, other good ideas seem to move us further from the center. Over the last ten years, professional groups and well-respected leaders have proposed numerous alternative terms to "information literacy," among them information competence, information fluency, information mastery, and information inquiry. Their well-meaning defense of one term or another is guided by the legitimate desire to "create a 'higher than the standards' philosophy of teaching" (Harris and Millet 2006, 527) and distinguishing low-level, stepwise teaching of a hierarchical process from the coaching of an integrated inquiry-learning performance that combines information literacy, technical computer skills, and critical thinking. Harris and Millet argue brilliantly that focusing on the perfect terminology for information literacy (instead of making student learning outcomes the center of attention) is misguided. We can become polarized by a proliferation of jargon.

For example, at first glance I was attracted to the term "information fluency," as it seems to suggest mastery rather than the attainment of basic skills. But in a defining moment, while leafing through two recent books about fluency instruction (Rasinski, Blachowicz, and Lems 2006; Moskal and Blachowicz 2006), I was struck by the danger of using the term "fluency." It sends the wrong message. In literacy education, fluency is described as "*the ability to do a task automatically without halting to think about it* [my emphasis]" (Ravitch 2007, 96). As with teaching a teen to drive a car, the emphasis is on providing repeated practice. Specifically, in fluency teaching, the emphasis is on learning to decode and read, often orally. Just as the driver will eventually gain the experience to go from here to there under different weather and road conditions, literacy educators believe that the reader's comprehension will follow—but that's for later. The fluency instructor is concerned with automaticity, defined as initially *demonstrating ease, speed, and accuracy,* but not necessarily comprehension. In contrast, the more general term "literate" is "a descriptor of students who can read and write at the level expected for their age and grade; in general a descriptor of an educated person, able to read and write and possessing an extensive vocabulary and a rich fund of knowledge about important aspects of society and the world" (Ravitch 2007, 136). For our colleagues and partners in literacy instruction—elementary school teachers, reading specialists, literacy coaches, and reading tutors—"information fluency" is likely to be categorized with *procedural knowledge.* The term does not convey the conscious, skillful deployment of a host of affective and metacognitive skills in the service of what Marzano and Kendall (2007, 35) label "systems of thinking," educational objectives aligned with what we call retrieving, comprehending, analyzing, and using knowledge.

In short, decades of research in sociology, psychology, linguistics, and communication tell us that if we want to be understood, we need to present our case to an audience in a way that resonates with how they already understand the world. Educators have begun to echo what we are advocating. Some describe school librarians as part of a collaborative literacy team, "indispensable guides for children's research efforts . . . (helping) them think through their ideas, the information they peruse, and articulate more of what it means" (Ogle 2007, 125). Administrators looking to hire in ways that will increase the leadership capacity in the school and build the collaborative learning culture are advised to follow the example of one principle, who hired the right librarian because he saw a "seminal opportunity to influence all parts of the culture of the school" and strengthen existing literacy and technology programs (Kohm and Nance 2007, 260). Our unified efforts are paying off.

Jim Collins identifies the common elements of success among eleven Fortune 500 businesses that had sustained market leadership for fifteen years or more. He calls one of these success factors the "hedgehog concept"—the ability of the organization "to attain piercing clarity about how to produce the best long-term results, and then exercising the relentless discipline to say 'No thank you' to opportunities that fail the hedgehog test" (Collins 2005, 17; as quoted in Gibbons 2007, 5). Every action, message, and decision either adds to or detracts from our success as an organization.

Are we committed to bringing our entire profession to the table? Can we marshal the resources to support a reliable Web 2.0 infrastructure with distributed coherence? Are we able to move beyond discussing perfect terminology to "devouring the moose?" A strong offensive strategy and committed teammates are at the heart of this game. Beyond that, we will need to nourish a participatory culture and sustained innovation in order to advance the authority and credibility of our entire profession.

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