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Lessons School Librarians Teach Others

Class: The subject is integrity

by Doug Johnson

The school library media specialist (SLMS) has stepped up to the professional plate as a primary policymaker, staff trainer, and expert on information and technology ethics in our schools.

We place equal or greater importance on the teaching of safe and ethical use of complex technology than on teaching the simple technological “how-tos.” Protecting one’s privacy, guarding one’s property, and stressing the safe use of technologies, especially the Internet, are among the most important ways we “safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions,” as the ALA Code of Ethics suggests. We have accepted that as part of our mission, and take charge of the ethical education of our students and, to some degree, their parents and our fellow educators.

One of our longstanding roles—teacher—has grown in importance; another—watchdog—has grown in complexity. It has always been part of our job to help ensure copyright compliance by both staff and students in our districts—not just through training, but by monitoring as well. This is not a task most of us would choose for

ourselves, but one that is thrust upon us because of the resources we control. Being asked to make unauthorized copies of print and audiovisual materials, to load software on more workstations than permitted by a license, or to set up a showing of a videotape that falls outside of public performance parameters are not uncommon requests. In these cases, we have learned to quietly, politely, and firmly just say “no” and explain how such an action violates not only the law, but our personal and professional ethical values as well.

But the ethical leadership of school library media specialists extends beyond being the copyright cops of our schools. We face five other major ethical challenges on a daily basis.

1. Encouraging intellectual freedom in a filtered environment.

To a large degree, the Children’s Internet Protection Act has taken the decision of whether to use Internet filters out of the hands of local decision-makers. Districts that receive federal funding, including e-rate telecommunications discounts, must install and use Internet blocking software to be in compliance. Nonetheless, a strong commitment to intellectual freedom on the part of the SLMS is possible even in a filtered environment.

Internet blocking software offers a wide spectrum of restrictiveness. Depending on the product, its settings, and the ability to override the filter to permit access to individual sites, filters can either block a high percentage of Internet resources (i.e., specific websites, e-mail,



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chat rooms) or a relatively small number of sites. In our role as proponents of intellectual freedom, we strongly advocate for the least restrictive settings and most generous use of override lists by our school's Internet filter. We make sure that the SLMS has available at least one machine that can access the complete unfiltered Web so that patrons can review questionably blocked sites and, when the contents of those URLs are found to be useful, restore immediate access for staff and students. In turn, when anyone asks that a specific Internet site be blocked, we treat the request like any material challenge.

The SLMS also has the ethical responsibility of helping ensure patrons use the Internet in acceptable ways by:

- Helping write and enforce the district's acceptable use policy.
- Developing and teaching the values needed to be self-regulating Internet users.
- Supervising, and possibly limiting, computers with Internet access and making sure all adults who monitor networked computers are knowledgeable about the Internet.
- Educating and informing parents and the public about school Internet uses and issues.
- Creating learning environments that promote the use of the Internet for accomplishing resource-based activities to meet curricular objectives.

2. Preventing plagiarism, an offense that digital resources make easier than ever to commit.

It's hard to remember, but intellectual-property theft existed prior to electronic cutting and pasting, peer-to-peer music-sharing services, and free term paper sites. It's just that the speed, availability, and ease with which digital property can be copied have all led to greater instances of piracy, plagiarism, and even disdain for copyright laws.

The SLMS teaches students to respect the property of others as well as protect their own property from being abused. Students need to know that copyright law protects their own original work and that they have a right to give or withhold permission for others to use it.

But the major challenge for the SLMS is in helping teachers stem the tide of plagiarism washing through our schools—a trend that has been exacerbated by new technologies. For example, when Rutgers University Business School Professor Don McCabe conducted a 2000–01 survey of 4,500 students at 25 high schools, he found that more than half the respondents admitted to either passing off as their own work a paper they had downloaded from the Internet or to pasting passages found online into their own work without citing the source (www.academicintegrity.org/cai_research.asp).

While we need to acknowledge that this is a serious problem, educators often spend too much effort trying to catch plagiarism in student work. The best SLMS plans

with teachers to find ways of preventing plagiarism before it happens, such as:

- Teaching what plagiarism is, when and why to paraphrase, when using another's words is appropriate, and how to cite sources in all formats.
- Instituting a school or districtwide cheating policy that includes the definition of and consequences for plagiarism.
- Brainstorming with faculty on creating assignments worth doing: work that is relevant to students' lives, that demands creativity and originality, and that is assessed in thoughtful ways.

3. Protecting privacy and confidentiality in an increasingly networked information environment.

School librarians help students become knowledgeable about technology issues related to privacy so that they can both protect their own privacy and honor the privacy of others. Students need to understand that businesses and organizations use information to market products, and that information is often gathered electronically, both overtly and covertly. They need to remember that a stranger is a stranger, whether met on the playground or on the Internet, and that personal information shared with a stranger may put themselves and their families at risk. Students

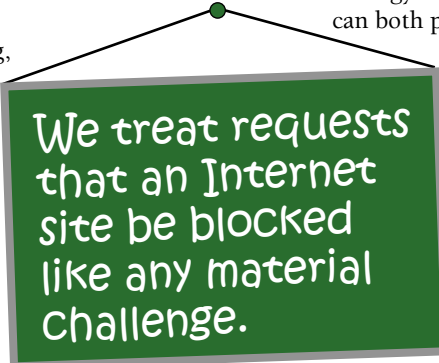
need to be aware that schools have the right to search the electronic files they create and store on school-owned hardware. Students need to be taught to respect the privacy of others: that just because information is displayed on a computer screen doesn't make it public, and that it is inappropriate to view information just because it was inadvertently left accessible.

We help the school set good guidelines. Helen Adams's booklet *The Internet Invasion: Is Privacy at Risk?* (Follett, Professional Development Articles, 2002) lists specific school topics related to privacy, and the SLMS should understand the privacy issues surrounding each and be able to help make good school policy related to them.

4. Imparting information evaluation skills of materials on the free Internet.

The Internet and online services have given us access to an unimaginable spectrum of opinions, now readily available to students and staff in even the smallest of school library media centers. Everyone from scholars and 7th-graders to pundits and crazies can—and do—publish “information” online, often indistinguishable in appearance from reliable information. The information presented by businesses, nonprofits, think tanks, and others may be accurate but heavily biased.

The availability of misinformation or biased opinions is often confusing at best; at worst it can lead students, and even researchers, to make choices or reach embar-



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rassingly misguided conclusions. Increasingly, students are using the Internet to meet personal needs as well as to research school assignments that ask them to solve genuine problems. Making good consumer choices, health decisions, and career choices are a part of many districts' curricula. Gaining historical background and perspectives on social, scientific, and political issues through research is a common task expected by many teachers.

We teach our library users to be able to evaluate information for themselves. Were I the Grand Panjandrum of Libraries, I would instantly add Johnson's IXth Statement to ALA's Code of Ethics: *We teach our library users to be critical users of information.*

Established guidelines for the accuracy and reliability of information, understandable by even our youngest students, include the concepts of authority, age of the information, verifiability, and bias.

5. Closing the ongoing digital divide.

The SLMS advocates for liberal access to electronic resources for all students in a school. But home and public library access to information technologies alone will not close the digital divide. We serve on building technology teams and advocate for access to technology for all stu-

dents. Too often, technologies are acquired by individual departments, grade levels, or teachers within schools, only to be sequestered by them. As the equity counterweight, the SLMS voices the need for library access to information technologies that are available before, during, and after school hours. Our profession's "whole-school"

view puts us in a unique position of knowing which children are getting technology skills and access in our buildings.

The professional mission of the school library media specialist remains constant even as it constantly evolves, as contradictory as that may sound. Information technologies offer new tools, opportunities, and challenges that those of us who did not grow up with technology

may find confusing or frightening. But as a professional, the SLMS remains committed to making sure the students in our charge are effective, ethical, and safe users of information and ideas that can help them solve real problems and answer genuine questions.

We will remain the "teachers of teachers."

We will remain committed to the ideals of intellectual freedom in all formats.

And most of all, we will remain committed advocates for all children. ❖

We teach our library users to evaluate information for themselves.

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