School and Community Connections for Collaboration and Coteaching

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True collaborations involve varied partnerships with shared planning and responsibilities.

School librarians new and seasoned should consistently build relationships to foster collaborative work. For eight years I have been building the library program at Maryvale High School (grades 9–12, 2600+ students). My district is inner-city, low socioeconomic status, and primarily Hispanic. We once had low achievement test scores and high dropout rates, but with everyone working very hard, these numbers, in recent years, have greatly improved. The district mission is “Preparing Every Student for Success in College, Career and Life.” What better mission could a school librarian want?

Building Collaboration

For the school librarian, collaboration begins with both the business side of the library and personal interactions. I was shocked when I arrived at a 1950s-like library with a couple of old computers, dusty books, and little foot traffic. Besides cleanup and a promotion to get funding for modernization, which was provided, I needed to get the support of teachers and to create an environment and atmosphere that students were eager to visit. Marketing the product takes work, but getting the brand recognized is crucial. I held every sort of reading or writing contest, put up displays for school-wide programs, and sent out announcements about the library almost daily on the intercom, via e-mail, and in print.

On the personal side, I introduced myself to staff throughout the school. During these conversations, I learned about instructional units and offered my assistance to teachers. When I found websites of interest, I emailed members of a department even if I didn’t know the teachers personally. Weeding materials and purchasing new books including graphic novels, plus having chess and checkers games available during lunchtime increased student traffic while I built relationships to encourage teachers to send students to the school library. For example, just a brief chat with a Spanish teacher led to a scavenger hunt in the school library, which I set up using library terms in Spanish from a chapter in their textbook and continued to co-teach in subsequent years. This shared teaching experience was a great beginning. The classroom teacher taught the chapter lesson and vocabulary practice while I provided the reinforcement of vocabulary with library signs, and wrote and directed the scavenger hunt.
Building a Customer Base

Lunchtime, staff parking lot, and wait-time conversations at the copy machine led to friendships and discoveries of shared interests in books, teaching, and learning. I held staff book discussions. I learned the curricula and became valued for knowing materials to enhance various classroom lessons.

“For the early childhood teacher Mrs. Kilker assisted her with storytelling. For the culinary teacher she gave her tips on menu designs. For my fashion class, she gave us information on how to find the history of fashion. She has taught us research skills on finding scholarships. Also, she is knowledgeable about computer technology and is going to teach my classes how to make PowerPoint presentations.”

—Phyllis Harper, family and consumer science teacher

After I explain the system, pairs of students find books on the shelves in a scavenger hunt. Next, each table group has a cart of scrambled books and races to shelve the cart correctly. Later, the math teacher and I developed a library-centered lesson about increasing and reducing fractions using cookbooks. We select the books, co-teach, monitor students’ work, and clarify concepts throughout the lesson.

“Multiple times I have collaborated with our librarian in order for my students to view one of my lesson plans in a different way”

—Lauren Mortenson, child development teacher

Collaboration Basics

“Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than the one where they sprang up.”

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

While some school libraries use electronic sign up, I prefer face-to-face interaction with teachers to work collaboratively. This way we share ideas and develop new ideas to create a rich learning environment for our students. We decide how we will structure our co-teaching. For computer research, school library use, or projects I have collaboration forms, which we fill out together (see figure 2).

The first three questions on the form are about the content teacher’s explanation of the lesson, standards, and outcome. Questions four and five are my contribution to standards, materials, student activities, and outcomes. I suggest Web 2.0 tools for student products. By showing students how to use innovative tools, the teachers learn to infuse technology. Often these suggestions

Figure 1. Author (at left) co-teaching with Meg Koch (English and yearbook teacher) as students do research for a unit on The Odyssey.
for technology use are new to the teacher and lead me to provide one-to-one personal tutoring or I develop and present an in-service training session. As word travels through the departments about these opportunities, more teachers seek out collaboration.

The instruction in the school library matches the syllabus of the content area. Since classroom teachers are always present with their students, every session in the library can be a co-teaching experience. For example, the content teacher outlines the assignment for the students, and I explain how it will be carried out. Both of us monitor progress, give examples, direct learning, and reinforce the outcome rubric. With most teachers, this collaboration has become a seamless partnership. I know the students and their abilities, encourage and critique, and proofread student work along with the content teacher. Fortunately, I am not tied to the physical library because of space, bell schedules, or other constraints. I am able to go to classrooms to co-teach selected segments of lessons.

My ability to conduct research saves time for teachers. Instead of spending their evenings looking on the Web for reliable sources, they realize that I can find authoritative sites at the appropriate reading level. We are fortunate to have a few subscription databases, but when the topic needs websites, I create a links list, an online pathfinder, on my school library webpage. Each year, teachers ask me to work with their students on a lesson that has been successful in the past, and then more teachers from the same professional learning community (PLC) request the same resource support. As the standards, curriculum, and websites change, I am always in demand.

Figure 2. Maryvale Library Collaborative Project Form.

Collaborative Project Form

Prior to scheduling the lab, teachers must verify that all students have computer access.

TEACHER ____________________ DEPARTMENT ____________________

DATE(S) ____________________ PERIOD(S) ____________________

1. Describe the portion of your lesson that utilizes computer research:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Student Objectives/State Standard:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. Student Product:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. Library Standard:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. Student will use:

Database(s) _______________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Links list _________________________________________________________________

Internet site _______________________________________________________________

Books/Print material _________________________________________________________

Software program or technology _______________________________________________

> Please attach a roster of your class(es) to this form.
> Please attach a completed seating chart to this form.
> Teachers should inform their students of the library/computer rules and enforce all rules.
"Rather than spend hours and days searching the Web, Mrs. Kilker showed us how to conduct our research, modify the wording in our searches, and navigate other databases when we weren’t successful in our research. Her lessons provided us with a solid foundation for our research, which allowed for time saved, quality resources, and research skills that my students can carry with them for the rest of their lives."

— Carrie Deahl, English teacher

**Connections and Collaboration Today**

"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."

— Henry Ford

With a solid basis of leadership and collaboration, I have been fortunate to form great partnerships to advance student learning for all departments in the school. The Common Core Standards are a boon to school librarians. Curricula now specifically include research as a standard that students are to meet; school librarians have the skills to collaborate and teach to those standards while also teaching to AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner.

"Without her guidance, my students would not have the skills to complete class projects. Jean and I are always on the same page when it comes to student expectations."

— Amanda Cooper, culinary arts teacher

Many collaborative efforts become sophisticated, worldly, and
multilayered. A colleague, Dixie Maxwell, the gifted program facilitator and National Honor Society (NHS) sponsor, and I firmly believe that we need to provide our inner-city students with as rich a curriculum as possible. We plan together as active thinkers to go beyond just the basics of what is required. Even small ideas mushroom. When we co-teach in the school library or in her classroom, the students benefit because we keep up a dialogue, adding layers of meaning and suggestions to our explanations and giving students multiple ideas to foster their critical thinking. For outside activities we are willing to share; we are willing to build on an idea. We share the responsibilities and the instruction. We include all students at all levels and from multiple teachers in any activity.

Kelley Jacobson’s special-needs students have technology standards and research projects that require them to learn about and use school library resources. Our planning includes looking at the standards and tasks that her students need to master, and determining which tools are available to meet students’ abilities. My questions to her involve my delivery of instruction. We analyze the lesson for pace and complexity. We discuss student attention, products, and success. To be an effective co-teacher is to also use teaching skills for every type of student in the school.

"My students with disabilities [ranging from Mildly Mentally Retarded to Specific Learning Disability] use the library for learning skills that they will need now and as an adult. The librarian has been a collaborator to help my students learn the basic functions of a computer and also how they can use a computer to do their work. When we were in [the library] to learn about doing research, she used a variety of techniques to help them grasp the concept of citing the author. We used the computer, books, and manipulatives in order to make a difficult topic more understandable to my group of students.”

— Kelley Jacobson,
special education teacher

School-Wide Programs and Community Connections

I organize several book programs during the school year. "The Big Read," a program of the National Endowment for the Arts, is locally hosted by a public entity. NEA provides teaching strategies and audio interviews each year; see <http://nea.gov>. I sign up to receive free copies of the selected book, publicize the program, create lessons as needed, and seek co-teachers; Dixie works with the students to analyze the text. I plan field trips and follow-up activities such as book discussions or contests. For The Maltese Falcon we used school vans to take students to dinner and a screening of the old movie at our city’s renovated classic theater where viewers even dressed in costumes of the era. For Call of the Wild we took students to an art show, and then to a county library for a discussion and oral quiz competition; our students won. For Fahrenheit 451 we (including math teachers) took students to the art museum to meet the author of the graphic novel. The field trips that I plan are mostly in the evenings and on weekends because it is difficult to release students from school, but the teachers and I enjoy the activities, too. Through these activities we create excitement for reading.

"The community-librarian connection is key in promoting the arts. Mrs. Kilker’s community partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts provides teachers with free resources and books for that year’s book of choice. Last year, my honors English students and I were given access to The Call of the Wild by Jack London, which allowed us to explore a well-loved classic and turned my students on to London’s other work, White Fang. Later in the year, some students chose a dog breed for their research project”

— Carrie Deahl, English teacher

I chair the teen selection committee for the Arizona Library Association’s Grand Canyon Reader’s Award books, which are the featured YA books of the year. When I first started this project, I introduced this list to my school through book talks to students and kept at it until word spread throughout the school about a great list of teen reads. Now the English teachers use the titles for suggested summer reading. I work with the teachers by explaining themes and giving lesson ideas.

OneBookAZ is a program that encourages everyone in the state to read the same book at the same time. Organized through the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records, current selections have been chosen to celebrate Arizona’s Centennial; see <www.lib.az.us>. Our exploration of the 2010 title, The Trunk Murderess: Winnie Ruth Judd by Jana Bommersbach, is an example of a multilayered collaboration. I received copies of the book, and several English teachers used it with their classes, plus I was able to put together a group of students in the
school library to read the book with me. I planned to take our students to see the mental hospital where Winnie Ruth Judd was incarcerated. When I mentioned this trip at the OneBookAZ committee meeting, the author, Ms. Bommersbach, said that five buildings still exist and she would come along to narrate. The school administration agreed to pay for a bus for this fabulous opportunity and allowed students to miss the last hour of the school day. The historic courtroom is still in use as a federal court, and the judge holding a trial offered to recess for the afternoon so the students could visit the courtroom. Ms. Bommersbach came on our tour and dramatically presented the events at each stop (see figures 3 and 4). The trip was wildly successful. Afterward, the book continued to be heavily circulated as other students learned about it.

A co-teacher is expected to share in all aspects of students’ learning. To be a valued partner includes sharing the work that goes into effective teaching. The school librarian must be notable for teaching classes, preparing lessons, and working with students to an extent that matches the content teacher. Arranging the program for OneBookAZ is an example. While co-teaching classes all day, I also needed to prepare and organize the field trip, choose standards, create the introductory and follow-up lessons.

“The school-librarian—community connection is also key in building literacy. A librarian who attends local, state, and national meetings and conferences as professional development is the type of librarian I build a close relationship with. This librarian is an invaluable resource to the school site and community as he/she keeps students and faculty informed about public library events, changes in library hours, and updates in search engines, and literacy trends”

—Carrie Deahl, English teacher

Reach Out

School librarians can always find opportunities to collaborate and enhance lessons. Brainstorm with colleagues, join committees and organizations outside of school, and do what we love best, read. I find connections through all of these. When I offered to build keypal correspondence for Dixie Maxwell’s language arts students who were studying Japan, I contacted Phoenix Sister Cities and found an American teacher in Japan. It was a fabulous adventure for our students to share superstitions with students in rural Japan.

“To increase student achievement, our eighteen English teachers actively work with Jean on a variety of collaborative endeavors to engage students as fully as possible. In addition to being directly involved in the planning and delivery of instruction, Jean creates enrichment opportunities by bringing authors to campus for book talks and creates partnerships with local universities to bring college students to campus to increase students’ creative writing skills”

—Alaina Adams, English Department chair

Just say “yes” at any opportunity. Teachers want great lessons for their students. They appreciate the support of the school librarian and the addition of more ideas through co-planning, and will promote the success of our collaborative work. In this era of school districts dropping librarian positions, my classroom teachers and specialist colleagues and I work extra hard to promote the school library
and let our enthusiasm for student learning escalate. Connecting classrooms, school library, school, and community is one sure way to build instructional partnerships. Working together we achieve success!

Further Reading:


Jean Kilker, NBPTS, is a teacher–librarian at Maryvale High School in Phoenix, Arizona. She also serves as cochair of the Teacher-Librarian Division, Arizona Library Association and as chair of City of Phoenix Public Library Advisory Board. She is the author of reading guides for Five Star Publishing titles, including Arizona Way Out West and Witty by Conrad J. Storad and Linda Exley is the ONEBookAZ for Kids for 2012.

Get Involved

Small Contributions Add Up

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