POINT/COUNTERPOINT

# Do Schools Still Need Brick-and-Mortar Libraries?

## Yes

Do *all* schools need brick-and-mortar libraries? NOPE! Some schools don't need library facilities or programs or librarians. These schools' teachers and administrators:

- Feel no need for a collaborative learning space. Classrooms and quiet study halls are the only places deemed appropriate for learning.
- Feel the ability to process and communicate information in formats other than print is unnecessary. Students in these schools use standard written term papers as the sole means of communicating the results of research. The use of word-processing software is proof of "technology integration." Asking students to communicate with audio, video, photographic, or graphic productions is dismissed as irrelevant to preparing them for college. Whereas students who are learning to use a variety of technologies need a place where both the technologies

Doug Johnson

## No

Schools simply need places to hold words and ideas and a way to get at these words and ideas as efficiently as possible. Hard drives are far more economical, in every sense of the word, than a massive space holding bound volumes.

In Act 2, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*, the title character responds to Polonius' question, "What do you read, my lord?" with the famous quote, "Words, words, words." In the context of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet's answer suggests that the words are meaningless. Of course, recently seeing your father's ghost is one sure-fire way to inhibit comprehension. My bet, though, is that Hamlet would have responded in kind whether reading from a book or from a computer screen. The point is that words are words, whether read in a book or on a computer. The mode of delivery means nothing as long as there's comprehension in the mind toward which those words are directed.

One day teaching in Harlem, I knelt next to a student struggling to comprehend a

Keith Mastrion

and the necessary expertise is available, term-paper writers just need a computer lab.

- View voluntary reading as a waste of time. Strict adherence to basal readers and skill-building software results in acceptable scores on standardized tests, so administration is reluctant to mess with success. Developing a desire to read and learn isn't part of the district's strategic plan.
- Are content to provide only textbook- and test-driven instruction. Given the number of standards in state-mandated curricula and test-based accountability requirements, staff have no time for in-depth study, problem-based teaching, or authentic assessment—all pedagogies enhanced by a quality library that combines print and digital resources with a librarian who knows how to use them. In schools where a

**In schools where a single textbook meets teacher needs, a library will go unused anyway.**

single textbook meets teacher needs, a library will go unused anyway.

- Are unconcerned about providing quality information sources to staff and students. Administrators feel that edited sources of information are unnecessary when "everything is free on the Internet." Questions of information reliability and authority are deemed irrelevant.
- Believe students and staff can locate information without assistance. Citing students' ability to do a Google search, teachers dismiss the need for more sophisticated strategies and tools. Kids can always change their topics if they don't find what they need with Google.
- Believe differentiated instruction is just babying the slackers. Providing materials at a variety of levels in

multiple formats to meet the needs of learners with divergent abilities, interests, and learning styles is a low priority. One book, one reading level, and one POV is good enough!

Don't waste the taxpayers' money putting 21st-century libraries in 20th-century schools. Small classroom book collections that supplement the reading series and a word-processing lab with access to Google are all that such schools require.

Of course, I would not send my own children to such a school, but I guess it's the differences that make a horse race.

*Doug Johnson is the director of media and technology for the Mankato (Minnesota) Public Schools and the author of four books, columns and articles in more than 40 books and periodicals, and the Blue Skunk Blog.*

---

passage about Mars. He re-read the words to me. Then I said, "OK, Mark, close your eyes and try to make a mind-movie about what you just read. Now, tell me what you see." He looked up at me with his eyes still closed and blurted, "I see black!"

If we'd had just one functioning computer, connected to the entire world—and in this case, to the universe—in that classroom, within literally a minute Mark would have attained multimodal comprehension. Sure, we had a big library upstairs, but I couldn't leave the rest of my class to take Mark on a Mars quest. So the librarian sat, probably alone, in her information monarchy.

Some might cry, "But what about curling up with a good book?" I'll respond to this with two more stories: Years ago, my 3-year-old niece loved to sleep with her books scattered around her. I explained to her worried mother that she wasn't curling up with

**The mode of delivery means nothing as long as there's comprehension in the mind toward which those words are directed.**

books; she was curling up with the characters in them. Now I'm teaching my own son to read. On my laptop and with a digital camera, I've created several age-appropriate digital books for him. And just two weeks ago, it warmed my father/teacher heart when he insisted on sleeping with his arm around that laptop.

I read *Hamlet* 20 years ago, as an undergraduate at the University of Virginia. About all I remembered from the play was the "Words, words, words" quote, but with five minutes of digitally assisted research, I was well on my way toward writing this, with the world at my fingertips. Did you think I remembered the context of that quote on my own? I'm not that smart, but that's exactly the democratization of information that Mark and I needed so desperately that day in

Harlem. With it, we've all got a fighting chance.

Now, as a graduate fellow in the Curry Center for Technology and Teacher Education, I'm thrilled beyond words that Virginia's Curry School is leading the trend toward digitization by eliminating its physical library nearly in its entirety. With Google digitizing 50,000 volumes, and with so much physical and virtual space now available, our creativity is our only limit.

*Keith Mastrion was the 1998 National Teacher of the Year. His "The Way I See It #181" quote recently appeared on 5 million Starbuck's venti cups in North America. He's currently pursuing a doctorate in instructional technology.*

**Add your voice to the discussion at www.iste-community.org/group/landl.**