

Making a Literacy Plan

Developing an Integrated Curriculum that Meets Your School's Needs

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Literacy doesn't happen in a single lesson or course—no matter what ability you're

trying to develop. There are no shortcuts to gaining mastery over a skill set, whether it's reading literacy, information literacy and research skills, online literacy and digital citizenship, or visual literacy. You have to be able to practice and apply the skills in different contexts, usually over the course of many years. School librarians' unique role in literacy building is bringing a school together to work toward common goals and build student competence and mastery over time. Easier said than done.

School librarians dream about a perfect integrated curriculum: there's ample time for collaboration and a library presence in every class; teachers, school librarians, and administrators work toward common goals in developing student skills; and students get individual support to reach the targets set out for them. Yet even the most resourced and highest functioning school libraries sometimes suffer from papers and projects with no skills collaboration, one-shot instruction with too much information crammed in and minimal assessment or follow-up, and weekly library or research classes with only surface-level classroom integration. We may have difficulty making coherent progress on one core literacy skill set, much less the myriad new literacies that we and our schools are excited to tackle.

This article outlines a six-step process that school librarians can use to start building focused, long-term student literacy in any given skill set. The preparation begins with identifying the essential

skills that the school's students need to work on, and then developing consensus and excitement around goals related to improving these essential skills. The process includes creating an action plan that makes the literacy goals present and visible within the school and figuring out where and how they fit into existing curriculum. And of course, there is plenty of on-the-ground planning, mapping, and reflecting with teachers about how to strengthen instruction and improve students' skills.



Step 1: Be the leader.

Every new initiative needs someone who's willing to lead.

Being a leader could mean you're owning the project by coming up

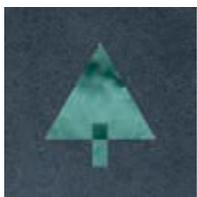
with the initial plans and ideas and pushing for adoption, or it could mean you're the convener, calling everyone to the table, helping to ask the right questions, and delegating tasks. How you choose to lead will depend on your time, strengths, and the school culture.

About five years ago, I started my very first school library job midyear at the school where I'm now the library director. I was fresh out of library school with almost no teaching experience and only hypothetical notions about how to develop curriculum. A couple months in, I was asked to present (at a meeting happening the next day) about how the school should be addressing information literacy in grades 5–12. I was lucky in two regards: an administrator had already selected a group of school stakeholders to participate in this

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initial meeting, and I didn't have enough time to overthink or try to craft the perfect proposal. What I ended up presenting was essentially a modified version of Mike Eisenberg and Bob Berkowitz's Big6 Skills, which later morphed into our school's "Six Steps of the Research Process."

I learned some incredibly important lessons from this first leadership experience. First, having teachers or department heads at the meeting from every discipline, including English, history, science, math, and foreign languages, was critical to building the interdisciplinary collaboration that would follow. Second, providing the group something to look at, a starting point—even if it underwent strenuous revision—helped everyone better understand what was possible. And lastly, I could successfully counterbalance my lack of seniority and experience with enthusiasm for the topic and a willingness to listen and build consensus.



Step 2: Know what you can and can't control.

Once you have a plan, the next stage is to start figuring out how to implement it. It's easy to come up with reasons why a new curriculum-development plan won't work, particularly when you're contending with already overscheduled teachers and curricula. Success at this stage requires focus on what you do have influence over within the school. For example, you probably have no influence over subject-level curriculum, frequency or existence of regular library classes, or teachers' commitment to the skills identified. But you can articulate and share a vision for the literacy skills across grade levels and

disciplines, alter the curriculum in library classes, and reach out to teachers in a more intentional way.

The biggest lesson I learned in my first year of building a new information-literacy curriculum was to focus on what I could do on my own without asking others to change for me. For example, I was able to create all new lesson plans for our weekly fifth- and sixth-grade library classes. This was exciting, even if thirty-five minutes was barely enough time to allow for students' book selection and check out, plus, maybe, a book talk, never mind substantive skill development. The classes were such a success in the first year, however, that the middle-school director was open in year two to expanding the existing classes to forty-five minutes and even adding another half-year class in seventh grade.



Step 3: Make the goals visible and generate excitement.

If you want teachers and students at your school to work toward a common goal, they must understand the goal and be motivated to reach it. Every school will have different venues and methods for getting the message out. Make a list of your stakeholders and then brainstorm the best ways to reach each group.

During our first year with the new information-literacy initiative, the other librarians and I identified students, teachers, department chairs, and parents as the most important groups to get involved. We made professional-quality posters of our "Six Steps of the Research Process" for teachers to hang in their classrooms as a daily

reminder of the skills. At the start of the school year in a full faculty meeting, we presented the process we went through to select the skills and develop the research process. We followed up by asking each chair if we could attend a department meeting to talk about what the school library could do for the teachers in his or her department. We reached out to parents by making presentations at parent coffees with school administrators.

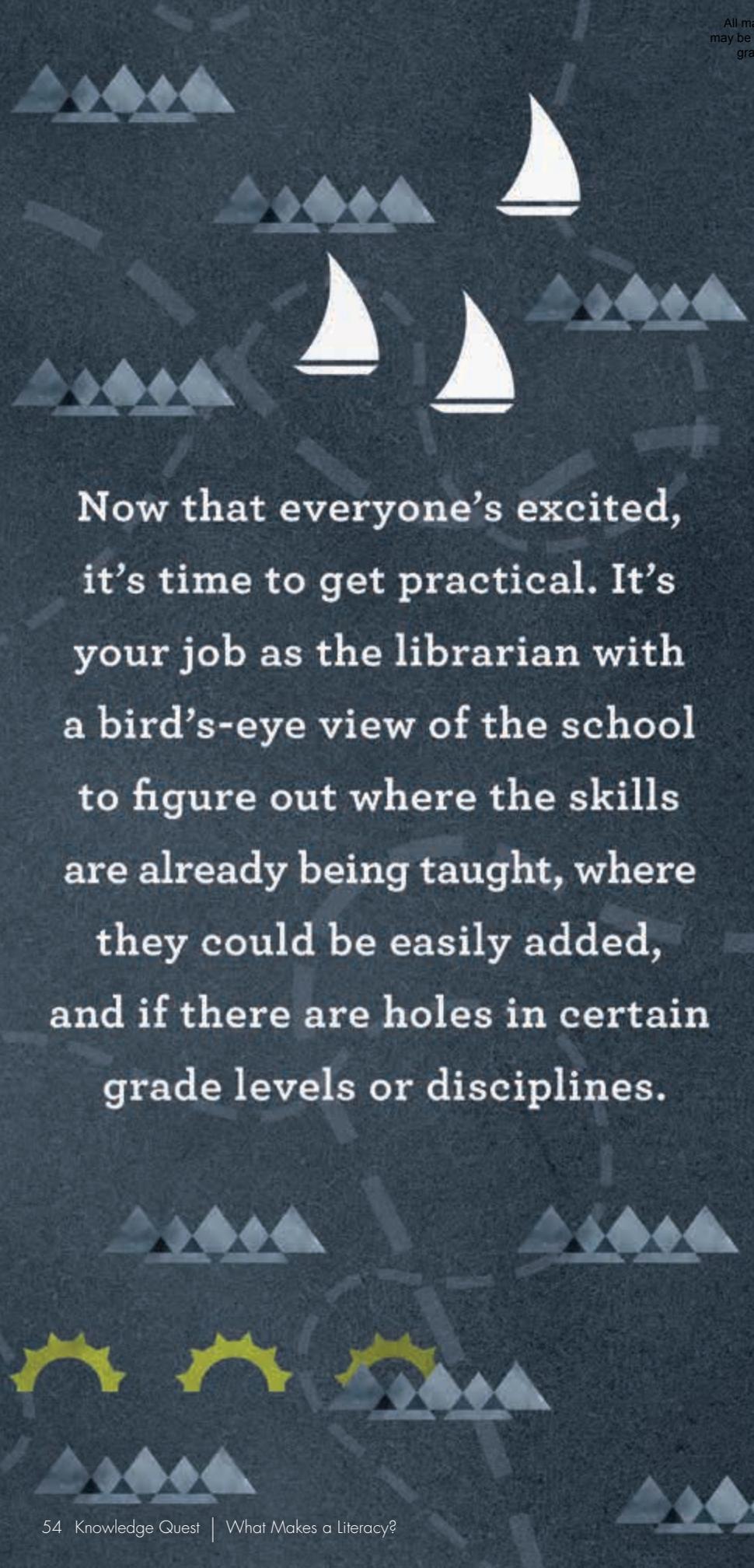


Step 4: Determine where the skills will fit.

Now that everyone's excited, it's time to get practical. It's your job as the librarian with a bird's-eye view of the school to figure out where the skills are already being taught, where they could be easily added, and if there are holes in certain grade levels or disciplines. The goal here should be to build a big-picture view of how the skills could be taught so that everyone can see what's happening across grades and departments.

When I began our curriculum development, I made a big grid for myself. Along one side I listed all of the skills that we had decided we wanted students to be learning and practicing, and at the top I listed each class. I began filling in the grid with what I already knew or could find out by reading the subject-level maps in our online curriculum-mapping software. I took this grid with me and showed it to each of the teachers and asked about any other projects or assignments in which the teacher incorporated research skills.

Meeting with every teacher was one of the most time-consuming but also rewarding things that I did during my first year of



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developing our new information-literacy curriculum. Even the most reluctant teachers were willing to talk to me for twenty minutes. Every conversation sparked ideas for ways that we could work together. And at the end, I had an amazing product that was immensely helpful to every teacher at the school.



Step 5: Plan, plan, plan.

Creating a grid of where students were already learning—or could be learning—information-literacy skills helped give us a big-picture view of how courses could work together to build student understanding. Creating the grid also provided me with all the information I needed to create a literacy map for the grade level—one where student understanding could grow and build throughout the school year rather than happening in isolated pockets across the school. I used the literacy map to create a plan for how we could move students logically through learning all the skills during the course of the year without any one teacher or course shouldering the whole load.

Ninth grade at our school is a great example of how this collaborative planning worked. We started our information-literacy work in biology classes in October, teaching students about how to find, use, and cite databases and websites for their first lab. A week later, we went into history classes, first to talk about how to evaluate digital sources in conjunction with students' first history project, and then to work on using background reading to develop topics and research questions. In November we brought these skills together in an English research paper and added instruction and practice with

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basic and advanced search-term strategies. This type of collaborative work continued throughout the year, creating a curriculum arc that made information-literacy development more explicit and coherent for every student in ninth grade.



Step 6: Assess, rinse, repeat.

The end of the year is a time to celebrate and reflect. Map out what you and the

teachers in each grade accomplished during the year, as well as anything you intended to work on together and didn't. Share this information with teachers and talk about what you want to do again next year and what you would change or add. At the start of the next school year, contact teachers again with a reminder about the plan and offer to help in the commitments you all made together.

This work needs constant tending to keep alive. We were so excited about our ninth-grade success after the first year, but that summer we learned that the history classes would be getting a new textbook, and the English classes were going to have to cut their research paper. The news was a bit frustrating, but the mapped out plans we already had developed made it easier for us to come up with new ways that we could collaborate going forward.



Conclusion

Developing student mastery over any given set of skills takes years of intentional

effort. So does the work of planning and implementing the instruction that will teach those skills. By the end of my fifth school year this June, our school will *almost* have an integrated information-literacy

curriculum that spans grades K–10. We didn't try to tackle every grade at once. We started with the big-picture structures and then slowly developed concrete plans and maps for a few grade levels each year. The biggest hurdle to getting our information-literacy curriculum off the ground may have been my own fears about not knowing where or how to start. What I learned is that you just have to dive in. It's overwhelming to take that first step, but you'll be glad you did.



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