

ARTICLE

IMPROVING CATALOG SEARCH SKILLS THROUGH QUEST-BASED ACTIVITY IN THE LIBRARY

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As school librarians, we enthusiastically teach many lessons, but at our library we actually dreaded the annual stale and boring library orientation and catalog search lesson. Located in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire, our school library serves two small schools both located in the same building: a middle school of 110 students in grades six through eight, and a high school of 150 students in grades nine through twelve. Our collection is not separated by school. We collaborate with teachers at all grade levels within our building, and we often help the elementary school librarian in the building across the street as well.

At the beginning of every school year, we would welcome classes of students in the library so that they could see how the facility was organized. We would present how to access and search the catalog to retrieve resources for projects or for pleasure reading. Next, we would walk through the process of checking out books. This activity is unfortunately familiar to many school librarians (Mulch 2014). With this library orientation, we would check off the box on our to-do list for the AASL Standards' Curate Shared Foundation Learner Competency IV.A.2, which refers to identifying sources of information (AASL 2018). However we would do it again the following year with the same students, and most of them did not remember

this lesson, thereby demonstrating that they had not actually developed the competency.

We didn't feel satisfied that our students had actually learned anything, and we certainly didn't learn anything about them. We might do reinforcement of catalog search skills with individual students, but we did not visit classrooms to assess whether our students had learned the skills we wanted them to know. We didn't feel as though we had demonstrated the Curate Shared Foundation's School Librarian Competency IV.A.2, which refers to designing opportunities for learners to explore possible information sources. Furthermore, we did not learn anything about our students' reading preferences and interests, making it more difficult to provide appropriate reader's advisory services to assist the readers select their next fiction title to read, similar to the reference services provided for nonfiction titles (May et al. 2000). We decided it was time for a change.

Quest-Based Learning

We adopted a quest-based approach to teaching catalog skills and getting to learn more about our students' reading interests. Quest-based activities are meaningful and can be quite engaging, not to mention entertaining and stimulating (Snelson 2022). They provide choice and differentiate the learning

experience, as well as multiple pathways to get to the end goals (Farber 2018). Quest-based activities present the opportunity for students to open learning pathways based on the choices that they make (Isaacs 2017), individualizing the learning.

During this activity, students explored our catalog as well as several tools to find a next read. They developed information-location skills, and they provided us with suggestions to add to our collection. Students practiced Curate Learner Competency IV.A. 2, but also were able to practice Curate competencies IV.C.2 and IV.C.3 by accessing crowdsourced sites, and comparing and contrasting information from a crowdsourced site with information from a commercial database. Students also practiced Explore Learner Competency V.A.1 as they read widely. For our part, we learned about our students' reading habits and interests, and compiled an extensive list of books to add to our consideration file.

We created a game-like environment in which students had a main task to complete, along with the possibility of completing side tasks. Their main task was to provide book suggestions for one of a royal family's members to purchase before their upcoming trip to the seasonal palace, where there are no book stores, Internet is unreliable, and shipping is nonexistent.

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Our Process and Project

We built a Google Form that guided students through the quest. Each section of the Google Form corresponded to a different activity for the quest and contained both instruction and questions students needed to answer. Students would complete one section and—depending on choices they made—would be directed to a new section. Each section focused on one specific aspect of a database or website for students to explore. In this way, students experienced multiple ways of locating books, while

providing us with a great selection of titles for books we didn't already have.

We created our own illustrations. We peppered them throughout the quest, much to students' delight and snickering. (A sample of our artistic prowess is in figure 1!) No one was indifferent to the images, and many students tried the other paths so they could see our handiwork. The quest featured eight different fictional characters: the Queen, the King Consort, and their six children. All of them, aside from the Queen and Sixth Child, had specific genres of books they were interested in. The

Queen, an avid reader, likes all books, while Sixth Child, a non-reader, doesn't know what he likes. These characters allowed students to pick the genre of books they wanted to explore.

Having selected a character, all students examined NoveList Plus, a database that provides reader's advisory recommendations and reviews to librarians (EBSCO 2022). Students looked at a genre of books they enjoyed. They examined the definition of their genre and determined whether they agreed or disagreed with how NoveList Plus explained their book genre. They then located titles in their selected



Figure 1. Characters in the quest.



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genres that they had not read. However, before learners worked independently, we modeled how we would approach and complete this task. We then circulated to work with students at their individual paces, and students were encouraged to continue ahead while we assisted other students. An overview of the characters and the work flow during the activity is in figure 2.

With that introduction section of the Google Form completed, students then had a choice. They could continue exploring NoveList Plus for additional information on books in the genre they had identified in the introduction section. Students taking this path found a book they had recently read within that genre. They examined professional reviews about their book, before identifying read-alikes. After reading summaries of those read-alikes, they justified whether or not they would recommend them to their character. We had rich conversations with students about using the opinions of others to inform one's own choices.

They could also take the second path, which was looking at Goodreads, a crowd-sourced reading advisory tool (Goodreads 2022). Students on this path first looked up a book they had recently read. Students then examined the descriptions of those

specific books on Goodreads and reviewed the ratings. They read a five-star review and a one-star review before being asked to comment on whether they agreed or disagreed with what they read, and why. Some students were offended by the ratings. One student noted that their book had a 4.10: "243,275 people have rated this book. Would think it would be closer to a 5 star rating than a 4.10. This is one of the best books (if not the best book) I've ever read." They then surveyed suggested titles related to their book as recommended by the Goodreads algorithm. We had rich discussions with students about the power of crowds to rate a book and the design of algorithms. We took the opportunity to review how averages worked. Many students who took this path were thrilled to learn about Goodreads, and one student indicated later that they had independently started leaving reviews of books they were reading.

Each path also contained a side quest that students were free to complete or ignore. For NoveList Plus, they were asked to judge a book by its cover, while the side quest for Goodreads asked them to find the highest-rated book that was suggested by Goodreads's algorithm and determine, after looking at the reviews, if they would feel comfortable

recommending this book to their character. Students also had the opportunity to attempt the other path before completing a side quest.

What We Learned Following Our First Quest-Based Activity

As a trial, we first performed this activity with students in ninth grade in September 2021. Twenty-nine students participated, and they identified thirteen books that were not in the library collection. We promptly purchased these. The feedback the ninth-graders provided during the evaluation of this activity helped us refine the form. We eliminated redundant questions, and transformed some of the short-answer questions into multiple-choice questions to standardize our analysis.

We showed students they could look at the elementary school's catalog to find more books. Students indicated they didn't know they could still check out books from the elementary school by requesting them from their librarian—great for those who read behind grade level or have younger interests. Many enjoyed finishing a series they had started in elementary school, or being able to read a choice novel that was both interesting and accessible during in-class reading time. They also weren't aware that they could suggest

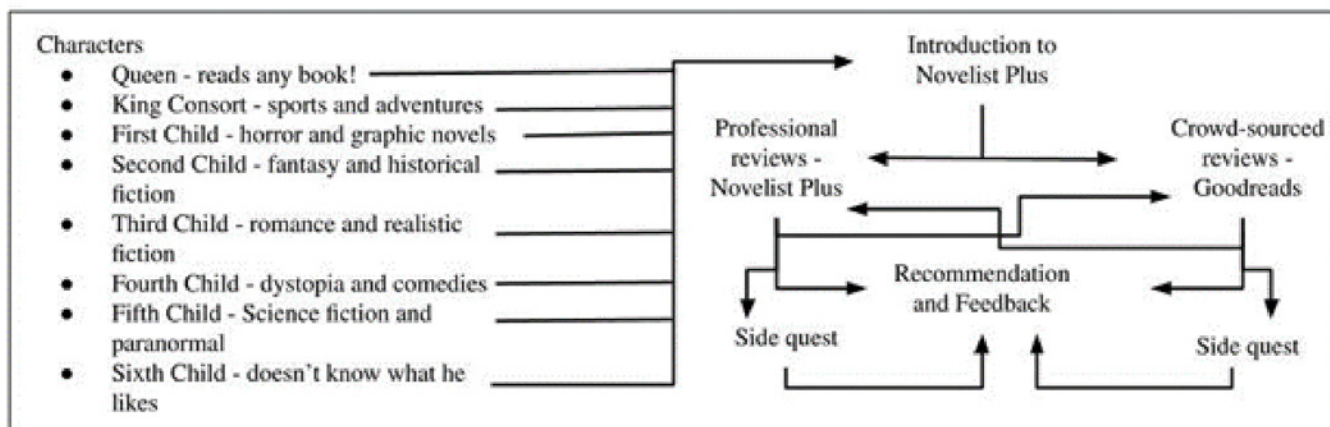


Figure 2. Quest characters and introduction work flow.

More importantly, however, the activity allowed us to build a list of books students were interested in but that were not part of the library collection. We purchased most of those books and were able to present them during subsequent book talks. Students were ecstatic when they realized that their input was valued and had led to our purchasing titles they had suggested.



books for us to purchase. One student reported: "I enjoyed looking at books again because it lit my fire that can only be fed with books!"

The Google Form asked them to search for a book they recently read, and many students indicated that their most recently read book was the obligatory assigned summer reading. We were dismayed to learn this as we circulated throughout the room and engaged with students. Many students noted they did not have the time to read, while others expressed a lack of interest in reading for pleasure. Some could not remember a book they read before that assigned title.

Our Second Attempt Went Much Better

Armed with this feedback, in January 2022 we improved our Google Form. We made it shorter by removing redundant questions. We provided more choices and differentiated paths to completion. We created more illustrations. We then presented our much-improved

quest-based activity to all our middle school students, and eighty-six participated. In our experience as school librarians, middle-schoolers tend to read more than elementary or high school students. Why? They have better reading abilities than elementary students, and more time than high school students because middle-schoolers are too young to drive and have jobs.

The revised form worked well to collect accurate data. Instructions were included in every section of the Google Form explicitly identifying

how to successfully complete the section. We were surprised that 31.5 percent of our students were into realistic fiction, with horror a distant second at 19.6 percent. Our realistic fiction collection was aged and fragmented into different subsets that were not easily accessible for students. Based on this data we increased purchases in this area throughout the year to add more items of interest to learners. Of the 158 NoveList read-alikes students identified, 52 were already in the collection, 96 were not, and 10 were too vaguely described to identify. Surprisingly for us, only two of the 158 books students identified were duplicates. Students identified 63 Goodreads read-alikes, and recommended 53 titles. Of those, 35 were not in the collection, but 18 already were. Overall, this activity yielded 131 recommended book purchases (see table 1).

After participating in this activity, 52 percent of students mentioned that they were able to find new books to read. Students noted: "I learned more about books that I might want to read, and I am not a huge reader so it was nice to find books I would actually read and have a say in it," and that "it was fun and you got to explore new books that you probably wouldn't see otherwise." Many students reported that recommending books to be purchased by the library was really motivating!

	NOVELIST PLUS	GOODREADS	TOTAL
READ-ALIKES RECOMMENDED	158	53	211
ALREADY IN THE COLLECTION	52	18	70
NOT IN THE COLLECTION	96	35	131
DESCRIPTION TOO VAGUE TO IDENTIFY	10	0	10
DUPLICATES	2	0	2

Table 1. Read-alikes recommended by students.

How We Knew We Were Successful

Quest-based learning activities are effective if they demonstrate that the learning goal has been achieved (Snelson 2022). We received confirmation that our learning goal of teaching learners how to find books for pleasure reading had been achieved when, months later, students still came to the library with book titles from NoveList Plus and Goodreads that they had located by themselves. A minority of them did not take the next step of looking at our catalog to determine if we had the books, but we were thrilled to see that they were using some of the skills we had taught them. In subsequent lessons we did emphasize the important link between discovering interesting books and finding out if they were available.

After performing this activity with several classes, we realized we could improve two major elements. First, only one of our four classroom teachers truly engaged with the activity. A second started the activity but did not complete it. The other two promptly disappeared once we had taken charge of their students. Going forward, we will encourage

teachers to do the activity with us, and to circulate among their students to learn more about learners' reading interests. We recognized that we—librarians and classroom teachers—need to use consistent language when talking about and locating books. After all, we're trying to connect students to reading material, but we're also trying to connect teachers with what their students like to read!

Second, we used two class periods for this activity, but it would be more beneficial to spread it out over four days while using only half the class period instead of the whole time. This change would allow students more time to focus on the activity and explore recommended books. Many students reported that they needed more time: "I really like thinking deeply about my books, so I fell behind." This would also allow students who want to go back and take another path time to explore.

What We Learned

For us, this quest-based learning activity addressed several issues. First we taught students how to access the catalog and determine if books are available in our library—and

they demonstrated they could use the skills. Second, it allowed us to integrate reader advisory tools that students previously did not know existed. More importantly, however, the activity allowed us to build a list of books students were interested in but that were not part of the library collection. We purchased most of those books and were able to present them during subsequent book talks. Students were ecstatic when they realized that their input was valued and had led to our purchasing titles they had suggested. And we now have a much more robust school library collection with books our students are interested in checking out and reading! If you want to see our form, e-mail us, and we will be happy to share it with you.

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