Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Peter Albion, Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland for his advice in the writing of this article.

Introduction

New demands on the professional development of teacher librarians have resulted from the continuing changes to the role in schools (Australian Council of Libraries and Information Services, 1996; Simpson, 1996; White, 1999). In addition to the demands and stresses already placed on them by virtue of their professional isolation (there is usually a maximum of one teacher librarian per school), teacher librarians have struggled to cope with wide-ranging system level changes and a raft of new responsibilities in the 'self-managing school.'

In particular, teacher librarians have been forced to reconsider their roles in the light of issues associated with the adoption, implementation and integration of various information and communication technologies (ICTs) in administration and in teaching and learning. These issues include the provision of access to remote electronic sources and services, participation in school technology planning and the requirement to cater to a wider than ever range of user information needs, both client generated and curriculum driven. The expansion of the role in concert with a broader array of responsibilities within the school corresponds with an increase in teacher librarians' needs for professional information especially as systemic support structures contract or disappear. The library has become the school's gateway to the global information environment. As the school's 'information expert', the challenge for teacher librarians is to be at the cutting edge of issues and innovations which are set to impact on their school communities.

For teacher librarians and educators of teacher librarians this situation constitutes a major challenge. Now more than ever teacher librarians need support and guidance in their quest for professional information. They cannot hope to satisfy all of their own or other teachers' professional information needs from within the school. It is therefore essential that teacher librarians take advantage of the range of external sources available to them to service the professional information needs of teachers including themselves. One important source of professional information for teacher librarians in Australia is the national listserv for the profession, OZTL_NET.

Professional development and the changing context of schooling

Recent school reform movements such as Schools Renewal in New South Wales and Schools of the Future in Victoria emphasised the managerial and economic aspects of education and de-emphasised the professional aspects. In this context, some teachers have viewed the infusion of information technologies as an unfortunate by-product of the process of school reform. For others, the introduction of the 'new' technologies was part of an educational system prone to 'faddism.' This perceived link of the increased availability of ICTs at the school level to the school reform movement may have provided some teachers with a convenient reason to resist or even ignore their potential for teaching and learning much less for professional development.

The adoption of new models of teacher professional development is central to the successful integration of ICTs into student learning. Williams (1997) argues that merely providing these technologies to schools in increasing quantities is not a sufficient pre-condition for adoption by teachers and that existing forms of professional development which focus on 'keystroke and menu training' are not only ineffective but potentially dangerous as teachers may mimic them in their own teaching practice. The situation is exacerbated when this kind of training is conducted on a broad scale by educational systems.

Teachers need to be more concerned about the quality of access they have to ICTs and how they use them when they have access. This has implications for the expectations that teachers have of the Internet since '...what people online do is more important than what they look up' (Williams, 1997). If Internet use by teachers is restricted only to the individual
pursuit of subject content or curriculum materials, for example, then the potential for real professional growth may be limited since such an approach underestimates the value of collaborative involvement with colleagues in online communities as an important form of school-based professional development.

**Changing conceptions of professional development**

Little has changed in the way that much professional development has been conducted over the past 30 years. The ‘hypodermic’ model of professional development still predominates. In this model, typically, an outside ‘expert’ is commissioned to ‘deliver the goods’ to teachers. Owston (1998) calls this the ‘delivery’ mode of professional development. Quite often the teachers concerned have little or no voice in the selection of topic, or of presenter and, inevitably, much of what is imparted is forgotten once the teacher returns to the realities of the classroom and its concomitant set of demands. Furthermore, Owston (1998, p. x) argues that:

> Underlying the delivery mode of professional development is the assumption that the expert’s knowledge is more valid than yours, as an individual teacher; that you are not really capable of growing professionally on your own; and that outsiders generally know better what kind of professional development you need.

This situation is exacerbated when only one teacher from a school attends the ‘one-shot’ seminar or workshop, especially if that teacher is a specialist within the school. In these circumstances, teacher librarians for example, return to their schools and act as advocates on behalf of an innovation. It would be reasonable to conclude that no matter how useful teachers found these kinds of professional development activities, it is highly unlikely that much of what they had ‘learnt’ would be adopted much less implemented in their schools, except, perhaps, where the new ideas were championed by a persistent and very energetic ‘evangelist’ of the innovation.

No wonder then that a number of strong arguments for the need to reconceptualise teacher professional development have recently been mounted (Bellanca, 1995; Brody and Davidson, 1998; McKenzie, 1999; Sparks and Hirsh, 1997). In particular, schools need to overcome the narrow view of professional development analysed as the ‘hypodermic’ model discussed above. While participation in a range of professional development activities is desirable, online communities can provide an effective means of continuous professional development because they provide school-based, individualised point-of-need access to teachers’ most sought after source of professional information, teaching colleagues (Dillon, 1997; Juchau, 1980).

In this model, professional development not only takes place within schools but also between and among them as teachers support each other in their pursuit of new knowledge and skills. The existence of a link between the degree to which educational reforms are successful and the adoption by teachers and educational systems of new forms of professional development less inclined toward expository lectures by ‘experts’ and more focused on within-school learning supplemented by carefully selected, timely and effective out-of-school activities, needs to be investigated in depth.

If schools are to become genuine learning communities, then a basic shift in school culture or climate needs to be achieved (Johnson, 1999). Schools cannot become, or more accurately, move toward becoming learning communities unless teacher professional development is reconceptualised and restructured to incorporate new models of professional learning among the staff. Once again, the focus is on within-school development of cooperation and collaboration. These principles can also be usefully deployed in the creation of formal and informal support structures between professionals in disparate schools where a culture of learning can be nurtured. Online communities such as listservs provide one mechanism by which this goal can be achieved.

**Professional development online**

Harasim et.al. (1995) proffer the concept of ‘learning networks’ as a means for people to learn at the ‘time, place and pace’ that best suits them. Asynchronous forms of CMC are particularly suited to teacher involvement in online professional communities as they not only provide the means for bringing together people separated by time and distance, they also provide teachers with the flexibility to schedule their involvement around professional and personal commitments. Examples of successful Australian professional communities of this kind include oz-TeacherNet, QSITE-Community and, specifically for teacher librarians, OZTL_NET.

This is not to say that teacher participation in synchronous forms of online professional development such as MOOs and IRC is not also desirable. It does mean, however, that the imperative of real time participation would require teachers to schedule their availability in the same way they would for more traditional forms of professional development.

In terms of teacher professional development merely having available the ‘avenue of communication’ is not in itself enough. If teachers are to benefit professionally from their involvement in learning networks then their level of involvement needs to extend beyond the posting of anecdotes and the asking of questions. They need to be encouraged to argue and debate issues, to partake in the kind of substantive discussion that is central to shared learning and characteristic of productive online communities. Such a ‘deep’ level of learner-centred, self-paced involvement leads to a raft of rich and satisfying opportunities for exchanges of ideas and information with others and ultimately to enhanced teacher collegiality. Additionally, there exists great potential for the cross-fertilisation of ideas between online communities and for opportunities to break down some of the faculty and discipline barriers that so often hamper real teacher collaboration; a condition that Hargreaves (1992) describes as ‘balkanization.’

**Listservs and professional development**

While recognising that there are some circumstances under which the ‘delivery model’ may be appropriate (dissemination of new curriculum information, for example), Owston (1998, p. x) argues strongly for a model whereby teachers take more responsibility for their
own professional development by taking advantage of the opportunities available to them via the Internet.

Without a collegial environment, individual initiative will be curtailed... The obstacles of accessing resources and finding an interested professional community all but disappear with the Internet... Not only is the Internet a vehicle for professional learning and growth, but arguably, it is the single most effective tool available today to help you improve professionally.

Owston focuses here on two of the great strengths of the Internet for teacher professional development: resource access and opportunities for teacher collegiality. At the same time, many of the perceived and actual barriers to teacher use of the Internet have been removed. Access to the Internet in schools and homes has increased dramatically, there is so much available that a wide range of professional information needs can be satisfied, and the advent of the WWW has resulted in a transformation of the Internet from a 'hostile environment' to a 'friendly inviting world.'

Listserv as virtual communities

Underpinning the notion that teachers develop individual 'action plans' and take greater responsibility for their own professional development is the idea that professional development should be viewed as an ongoing part of professional growth. Rather than a series of 'stop-start' activities and serendipitous learning opportunities with colleagues within the school, professional development action plans integrate professional learning into the professional lives of teachers so that it is no longer an 'add on' but an embedded part of responsible professional practice. Such an integrated approach underpins the eminently desirable notion of teachers as models of lifelong learning. Good teachers are good learners also.

In her discussion of the concept of a 'community of practice', Williams (1997, p. 3) makes the following observation which goes directly to the heart of online communities for teacher professional development:

‘talk’ is the essential ingredient of professional communities. Talk and participation, is the expression of the spirit of professionalism that sets one professional community apart from another... Teachers close the door on their classrooms at 9.00am and have so few opportunities to participate in professional dialogue. I would like to propose that participating in the community of practice is not only right, but also a responsibility of being a contemporary educator - it is part of the work ethic of being an educator.

Serim (1996) makes explicit a link between teacher professional development in online environments and the potential value such a model has for teachers as lifelong learners. In addition to the benefits of professional growth, teachers as lifelong learners are also great models for their students in information literate school communities:

Already we see the beginnings of an international resolution, motivated by the vision of free-flowing knowledge, people taking responsibility for their own learning, and grand-scale collaborations that embrace the innovations of networking, enabling us to exchange new types of communications and experiences to build human and informational resources that address common problems in a spirit of community... What this means to you and me and our mutual interest in lifelong learning is that soon after access to advanced networking becomes commonplace, learning will be liberated from locality, and anyone so motivated will be able to take responsibility for placing themselves at the center of their own learning. (Serim, 1996, p. 4).

The school reform movement has demanded a new set of teacher skills and online professional communities provide a mechanism for teachers in their quest to adapt and cope with these demands. In fact, they provide a ‘shared space for reflection [which] is something teachers have never before had’ (Serim, 1996). Another important link made by Serim is between the idea of information need and the potential for various forms of online professional development to satisfy a very broad range of needs that may otherwise remain unmet.

OZTL_NET: The Australian listserv for teacher librarians

The OZTL_NET listserv has been developed specifically for Australian teacher librarians. The service began operation in 1995 and is provided by the Centre for Studies in Teacher Librarianship within the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University. The purpose of OZTL_NET is:

• to provide an online communication forum to support the professional information needs of Australian teacher librarians
• to provide a means for regular professional communication and exchange between all members of the Australian teacher librarianship community, thus overcoming the professional isolation of teacher librarians; and
• to create an online professional community of Australian teacher librarians which could potentially unite all parties interested in teacher librarianship issues. (Adapted from Hay and Dillon, 1998, p. 273)

At the time of writing (August 2000) the membership of OZTL_NET was 2057, 1372 of who subscribed to the regular list and 685 of whom subscribed to the digest version. Anecdotal evidence in the form of feedback to the co-administrators and comments made directly to the listserv points to the central role that OZTL_NET plays in the professional lives of many members of the teacher librarianship community. Four years on, there exists a need for extensive research into just how important the listserv is for teacher librarians.

Early indications are that the role played by OZTL_NET can be divided into five broad areas:

1. OZTL_NET as community: an asynchronous forum in which ideas, experiences, resources, advice and problems and their solutions, can be shared and where the twin impediments of time and distance can be overcome. This is a supportive community, tolerant of 'newbies', many of whom have 'cut their online teeth' here. It is a national listserv which cuts across regional, state, national and international boundaries.

2. OZTL_NET as mentor: supports preservice as well as inservice professional development of practitioners by providing access to the collective knowledge of the teacher librarianship community. Has been particularly useful in the development of teacher librarians’ skills in the adoption, implementation and integration of ICTs.
3. **OZTL_NET as advocate**: has helped in the formation of goals for individuals and the profession and stimulated debate about future directions for the role and the positioning of the teacher librarian in school communities. Promoted the leadership role of teacher librarians in schools and in the profession.

4. **OZTL_NET as conduit**: provides links between teacher librarians and other educators, between theory and practice, between school libraries and other elements of the broader information environment.

5. **OZTL_NET as research**: provides an avenue for research, a subject for research and a forum for the notification, dissemination and/or publishing of research.

(Adapted from Hay and Dillon, 1998, pp. 273-274)

Much of the success of the **OZTL_NET listserv** can be attributed to its alignment with many of the characteristics of effective forms of online professional development. Individualised school (or home) based assistance is available at the point of need, drawing on the combined wisdom of a large number of people. A culture of support and tolerance has developed in an open forum (OZTL_NET is an unmoderated list) where healthy and vigorous debate is encouraged. Through the implementation of school reform, a combination of economic, political and managerial imperatives have combined such that new forms of professional development need to be established and promoted. Online professional communities like OZTL_NET play a critical central role in providing meaningful professional development for teacher librarians. If teacher librarians remain professionally active via their involvement in online professional communities like OZTL_NET, then they learn and grow professionally. Such an outcome can only have positive results for improved practice. The OZTL_NET listserv should be an integral part of the professional lives of all Australian teacher librarians.

**Bibliography**


