"Not My Job": Results of a National Survey of School Librarians' Involvement in Digital Learning

Marcia A. Mardis
School of Library and Information Studies
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL, USA
mmardis@fsu.edu

Nancy Everhart
School of Library and Information Studies
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL, USA
everhart@fsu.edu

Abstract: In 2010, the researchers conducted a nationwide survey of school librarians' technology leadership practices. While the majority of school librarians reported being involved in many levels of technology leadership in their schools and districts, some school librarians responded that aspects of digital learning were considered "Not My Job." This paper presents an analysis of the questions for which respondents noted functions of technology leadership that were outside their purview. These analyses are contextualized in current policy and professional trends, especially concerning digital learning system support.

Overview

Project Leadership-in-Action (LIA), a 2008-2013 Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded project to study leadership practices of school librarians, included a national survey of their technology integration practices. Results of this 2010 survey suggested that the respondents work in well-resourced libraries with personnel assistance as well as numerous computers and devices. The school librarian survey participants reported that they led school technology integration in many areas but also had professional service areas in which they did not engage frequently such as services to special needs learners; participation in student assessment; transferring their leadership success to professional and local communities; school and district technology policy decisions; and digital content management.

School librarian technology leadership was selected as a topic of study because technology integration is an increasingly crucial element of teaching and learning that requires school-based leadership in order to be consistent, relevant, and a connector between various aspects of students' learning experiences. Many theorists and researchers have argued that school librarians are well positioned to assume a leadership role in technology integration (e.g., Everhart & Dresang, 2006; Hanson-Baldauf & Hughes-Hassell, 2009; McCracken, 2001; Shannon, 2002; Vansickle, 2000). School librarians have been continually directed to assume leadership roles in their schools in the professional guidelines of state, national, and international organizations although research-based strategies to successfully exercise technology integration leadership have yet to be developed.

Theoretical Frame

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) (Ajzen, 2012) maintains that human beings are discrete entities capable of considering several different possible courses of action, and deliberately selecting and carrying out (or attempting to carry out) one or more of them. RCT has been used in empirical research in many core social science fields such as sociology, criminology, and studies of religion (Hechter & Kanazawa 1997; Hedström & Bearman, 2009; Voss & Abraham, 2000) and it is an appropriate theory for examining how educators spend their time.

School librarians make hundreds of decisions each day about how they spend their time. For example, one could ask a school librarian: Did you consider the other things you could have done in this amount of time? Could you have done something else that might impact student achievement? How did you make that choice? How did you take into account the consequences of various alternative activities? In the absence of being able to ask these questions, survey responses of "Not My Job" may give insight into what school librarians choose not to do. RCT underpins the motive for the study and will provide a lens for analysis.

This study reports a closer examination of the questions for which they respondents reported that certain duties were "Not my Job," i.e., that the respondents did not undertake certain essential expressions of leadership, mastery, and control in the school library.

Literature Review

The ever-changing and highly technological environment of 21st century schools has significantly impacted and redefined the role of the school librarian. This evolution of the role of the school librarian is present in the standards and guidelines that define and guide their practice. The guidelines from the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) (2009), the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2003), and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (2012), all mention the role of leadership, especially in the area of technology integration, when defining the responsibilities of the school librarian.

The research in this area also supports the contention that school librarians must embrace their leadership role in technology integration. A compilation of recent state studies results (Scholastic, 2008) examined the school librarian and their effect on student achievement and identifies two roles of the school librarian that impact student achievement: leader and technology facilitator. In those studies, school librarians who exhibited leadership were more likely to plan cooperatively with teachers, teach cooperatively with teachers, provide training for teachers, and take responsibility for technology integration (e.g., Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell, 2000). Most importantly noted was the connection between leadership and collaboration, in that classroom teachers were more willing to collaborate with the school librarian if she or he had taken the initiative to become an assertive, involved leader in the school (e.g., Rodney, Lance, & Hamilton-Pennell, 2002).

This collaboration, a "weaving," of technology into teaching and learning, driven by sound pedagogical principles, interdisciplinary perspective on curriculum, and thoughtful and fluent information use, seems to be an obvious area school librarians should assume leadership (Asselin 2005; Vansickle 2000). And despite the numerous mentions of technology leadership in professional preparation and performance standards, some researchers have posited that few school librarians seem to have been prepared to understanding or accept the leadership role (Asselin 2005; Everhart and Dresang 2006; Shannon 2002, 2008; Vansickle 2000). Thwarting this effort is a lack of empirical research about the extent to which school librarians define, perceive and enact technology leadership activities. The study presented here provides this initial attempt to characterize school librarians' technology integration activities in the contexts of what school librarians know, do, and how they grow as professionals.

School Librarians and Digital Learning

One imminent area of technology integration and collaboration where school librarians can advantage their multi-faceted expertise and provide leadership in the early phases of adoption is in digital learning. This year, many states enacted legislation that ranged from planning some form of online education initiative in an unstated time frame to immediately implementing a comprehensive digital learning mandate. Eight states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Virginia) currently have state-wide mandatory implementation plans (Watson et al. 2012), but the online learning in K-12 is becoming increasingly prevalent. In the U. S., several million K-12 students (over 5%) participate in different types of digital learning programs (Watson et al. 2012). In 2010, 55% of public school districts reported having students enrolled in distance education courses. Districts had an estimated 1,816,400 enrolments in distance education courses for 2009–10 school year and school administrators reported that student enrolled in online learning courses for credit recovery; dual college/high school enrolment; Advanced Placement; career and technical education; and other types of academic courses not offered at

their schools. About 74% of the districts with distance education enrolments in 2009–10 indicated that they planned to expand the number of distance education courses offered in the next three years (Queen & Lewis, 2011), with rural school districts increasingly turning to online learning to make up for teacher shortages and low enrolments that limit their offerings (Picciano & Seaman, 2007).

However, digital learning implementation is not a linear, well-supported process (for example, most courses are offered asynchronously, so students do not have access to real-time instructor assistance), as evidenced by the citizens of Idaho who repealed the state initiative passed in 2011. While the introduction of digital learning programs that include online learning options stirs up significant political conversation and the improvement in student outcomes remains elusive (Cavanaugh, Gilley, Kromey, & Blomeyer, 2004), schools are likely to continue adopt and expand online learning options to save costs (Picciano & Seaman, 2007; Queen & Lewis, 2011).

Students engaging in any kind of digital learning require face-to-face support to be the most successful (Watson, 2005), but to date, this responsibility is often unclaimed in schools (Watson, et al, 2012). School librarians currently hold many nationally recognized professional roles including information specialist, teacher, instructional partner, and program leader (AASL, 2009). They are the only educators tasked with building and maintaining the school's learning resource base and collaboratively choosing resources for teachers' curricula. School librarians can guide and lead innovation by: 1) teaching students to develop digital learning products; 2) providing professional development and technical support for digital learning; 3) developing management policies to ensure accessibility; 4) helping administrators analyze student learning data in relation to digital resources to improve student achievement; and 5) supporting the teachers and students in full or hybrid/blended virtual instruction (AASL, 2010).

Method

The intent of this investigation was to take what is known about school librarians' leadership role in technology and place it in the context of what school librarians chose to do and, more importantly, what they chose not to do. The researchers' position is that there in value in documenting not only what is done, but what it not done, therefore the researchers were guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. Which areas did school librarians report as outside of their job scope?
RQ2. How do these areas compare to national educational trends and national professional guidelines?

The responses to each of these questions are presented in the Conclusions section of this report.

Data Collection

A research team consisting of two professors, two doctoral students, and a statistical consultant developed, administered, and analyzed a web-based nationwide survey that characterized the dominant technology integration activities of school librarians. The survey instrument, based on national professional standards (AASL, 2009; ISTE, 2008; NBPTS, 2001; AASL & NCATE, 2003), consisted of three sections:

1. Thirty demographic questions covering areas such as staffing levels, education and experience of the school librarian, and Internet access;
2. Seventy statements related to levels of technology integration activities where respondents were asked to categorize the activity on a Likert scale of choices which included: 0=Not my job; 1=Not involved; 2=Rarely involved; 3=Partially involved; 4=Substantially involved; 5=Fully involved. These questions were also weighted for the complexity of the leadership activity: 3=Transformative (most complex); 2=Adaptive; and 1=Entry (least complex); and
3. Three free response questions that asked respondents to discuss 1) barriers; 2) enablers; and 3) other factors that influenced their leadership practices.

After obtaining appropriate Institutional Review Board approval, respondents were solicited via postings on national and state school librarian email lists and relevant Facebook groups.

Data Analysis

A stratified random sample of 1183 cases representing elementary, middle, and high schools was constructed from the survey responses. While respondent names were not included in the results, respondents' U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics-assigned school identification codes were used as unique identifiers to ensure unique case selection and stratification.

Survey data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in order to determine the most prevalent leadership roles of school librarians in technology integration. This research report includes frequency analyses of statements relating to technology integration activity where the response of "Not my Job" represented the majority of overall question responses.

Results

Analyses of the 70 survey questions that related to leadership practices revealed that "Not My Job" was the most frequent response to Question 35 and Question 36. These two questions asked respondents to rate their levels of involvement with learning management systems (LMSs). For the purposes of this survey, LMSs were defined as systems for distributing online or blended/hybrid courses over the internet. Moodle[1] and Blackboard Learn[2] were given as examples of LMSs.

Question 35: "I ensure that the content in district's learning management system meets student needs"

This question was classified as an Adaptive level question. As Figure 1 illustrates, of the 1170 responses received, 329 or 28% of the responses reflects that school librarians reported that this activity was "Not my job," as opposed to "Not involved" (n=226 or 19%); "Rarely involved" (n=211 or 18%); "Partially involved" (n=200 or 17%); "Substantially involved," (n=131 or 11%); or the least frequent response, "Fully involved" (n=73 or 6%).
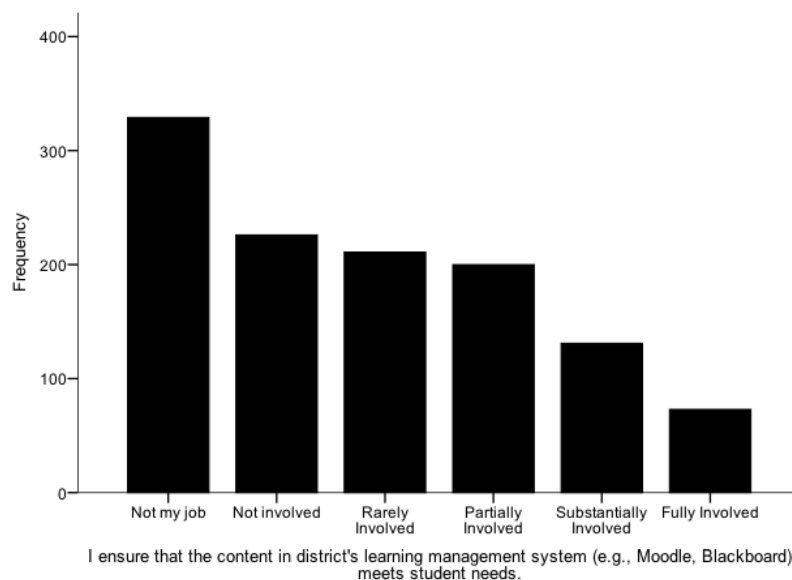

Figure 1. Results of Question 35. "I ensure that the content in district's learning management system meets student needs" (N=1170)

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[1] More information about Moodle is available at http://moodle.com

[2] More information about Blackboard Learn in available at http://www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Learn/Overview.aspx

As the figure shows, the frequencies of respondents' responses were in inverse proportion to the degree of involvement with the highest level of involvement being the most infrequent response.

Question 36: "I develop content for the school's learning management system"

This question was classified as a Transformative level question. As Figure 2 illustrates, of the 1169 responses received, 362 or 31% of the responses reflects that school librarians reported that this activity was "Not my job," as opposed to "Not involved" (n=279 or 24%); "Rarely involved" (n=208 or 19%); "Partially involved" (n=171 or 15%); "Substantially involved," (n=88 or 7%); or the least frequent response, "Fully involved" (n=61 or 5%).
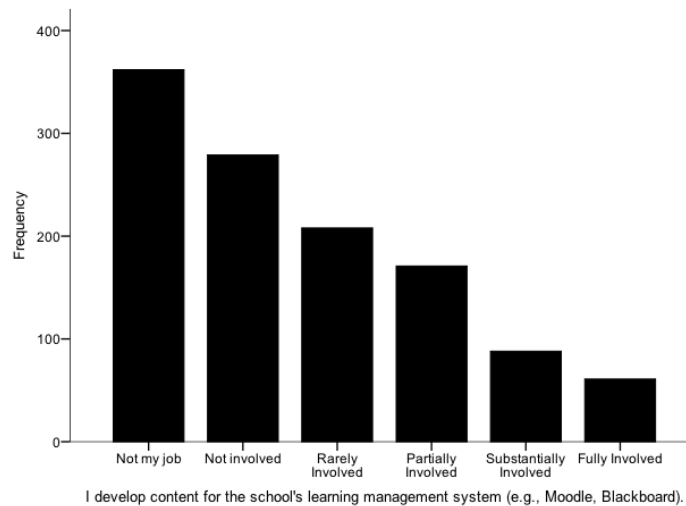

Figure 2. Results of Question 36. "I develop content for the school's learning management system" (N=1169)

Again the figure shows that the frequencies of respondents' responses were in inverse proportion to the degree of involvement with the highest level of involvement being the most infrequent response.

Conclusions

The intent of this study was to explore the areas of professional service that school librarians identify as outside of their scope of their job. Data from a stratified random sample of responses to a 2010 national survey of school librarians (N=1183) suggested that librarians reported that they were successful leading technology efforts in their schools and districts in many areas, but that there were some areas in which they were less successful and some areas in which they were not involved. For two questions, the majority of respondents (over 25%) reported roles that were not part of their jobs. These responses may represent a starting point to understanding what school librarians choose to do in their leadership roles.

RQ1.   Which areas did school librarians report as outside of their job scope?

Decades of research about the leadership roles of school librarians has suggested that there is a gap between what professional guidelines describe as ideal roles and what school librarians are actually able to achieve. The results of this analysis revealed that while school librarians were able to exercise leadership and involvement in many areas of school technology, about 30% of survey respondents reported that activities surrounding LMSs were "Not My Job," or outside of their scope of work.

Although it is not possible to determine from these survey responses whether "Not My Job" represents a response from a librarian in school in which another professional has the responsibility for LMSs or a response from a librarian who did not care to be involved with LMSs, the fact that the majority of survey respondents had no responsibility for LMSs is a cause for concern. Librarians are experts at identifying, collecting, and organizing the best content, free or for a fee, and supporting students in their homework. A move to supporting learning management systems in-house may even free up funds to expand digital learning options. In an age when many school librarians are not sure about the continued relevance of their promotion of reading and love of books, supporting online learning may represent a fresh way to continue advocacy for the importance of information skills as well as for the school librarian's crucial leadership role in technology integration (Loerstcher, Koechlin, & Rosenfeld, 2012; O'Connell, 2012). A possible explanation for school librarians' low engagement with LMSs may be found in Rational Choice Theory—because LMSs have not been situated in the context of traditional librarian responsibilities, some librarians may not have recognized that the trend toward online learning very much includes their identified areas of expertise.

RQ2.   How do these areas compare to national educational trends and national professional guidelines?

The trend toward integrating online learning into K-12 education is swift (Queen & Lewis, 2011). Because students are engaging in virtual learning for a range of reasons and in an asynchronous mode, the role of supporting these learners is often unclaimed (Watson, et al, 2012). However, professional guidelines for school librarians from both the American Association of School Librarians (2009) and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (2010) suggest that ensuring that learners engaging in online courses are successful is within the purview of the leadership role of the school librarian.

In the two instances where "Not my Job" was reported by almost one third of survey participants, those survey questions related to school librarians' involvement with digital learning management systems at the adaptive and transformative levels. In some instances, it could be that learning management systems have yet to be implemented in their schools so there is not yet a role for the school librarian.   However, the number of states that are experimenting with virtual and hybrid learning is growing and it is not clear which members of the school community are tasked with managing learners' access to digital tools and resources. By not recognizing this potential and disenfranchising themselves from imminent technological innovations, school librarians are missing an opportunity to enhance their vital leadership in teaching and learning (Mardis & Everhart, 2010; 2012).

Rational choice theorists would assume that the school librarians in this study have weighed the costs and benefits in making decisions on which activities to perform in their daily conduct. These costs and benefits are not only financial but include physical and emotional well-being, relationships, self-esteem and other factors (Ballantine & Spade, 2009). In the case of when the choice is "not my job" they have concluded that the costs outweigh the benefits.   We can only surmise how the school librarians evaluated the costs and benefits in making their rational choices to not be involved in learning management systems. Due to the pressures on today's educators, they have little time to plan for the future, only time to survive from day to day. Past practice in their schools and districts may have revealed barriers to this type of role – time, exclusion, lack of funding, inadequate staffing, and a climate of competition with other technology personnel (Johnston, 2012). Because these are new activities, there are no current models or guides from which to follow.

Further analyses of the survey results will include a case-by-case examination of "Not My Job" responses of both demographic data and responses to the open-ended survey questions. These follow-up investigations may reveal commonalities relating to age, school location, and other factors of school librarians who do not consider supporting LMSs are part of their job duties. Likewise, the results of this study did reveal that approximately 15% of respondents were substantially or fully involved with LMSs on an adaptive or transformative level. A comparative analysis between librarians who are active in LMS support and those who are not may also yield insight into the choices librarians make about their roles and responsibilities.

National standards and guidelines can help professionals make rational decisions about their responsibility boundaries. In a time of swift technological change, the need for leadership and support within organizations that rely on technology is significant. Additional research into what school librarians perceive as their jobs can help to identify areas in which their leadership can make a necessary contribution.

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