

The Non-Librarian Supervisor of Library Services: A Self-Study and Exploration of Characteristics

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Abstract

In school districts, the library supervisor is not always a librarian. As the author became instructional technology coordinator for one of the largest school districts in Texas, he gained responsibility for library services. In this and many other cases, the district library supervisor has no library experience or certification. This paper is a self-study of an instructional technology coordinator taking on the challenge of supervising library services. The story of an individual's growth in knowledge and development of relationships, this paper is about beginning to build a district program from a collection of school programs. While largely a self-study, this paper benefits from survey responses used to describe characteristics of effective library supervisors. Identified characteristics of effective supervisors are used within the context of self-study methodology to create a framework against which the author and other non-librarian supervisors of library services can be compared.

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This paper started as an idea, as a semi-personal reflection. It was meant to look at what librarians identified as the characteristics of effective library supervisors and how I measured up to those characteristics. Along the way, the identification of externally defined characteristics became less important. They will be addressed to some extent here, but I have returned to my methodological roots. My focus has shifted toward a much deeper reflection; indeed, this is now much more a paper about me and what my experience can offer other supervisors of library services. Rather than identify the ideal to which I should aspire, I have re-conceptualized this paper as an exploration of my own beliefs and practices. To the extent I am a successful library services supervisor, these beliefs and practices can benefit others similarly situated.

I begin with an anecdote from a journal of I have keep of my work with librarians in my district:

Before I even began as coordinator, I took over for district wide staff development for librarians. This meeting was August 2011, and the previous coordinator of instructional technology had already left the district. Like me, the previous coordinator had no experience as a librarian. She had given me some warning that the librarians were difficult to work with. Others within the district had shared the same warning. As I prepared for the August 2011 staff development, I was essentially working from the previous coordinator's plan. As a district, everyone had to share information on the transition from TAKS to STAAR. This was a comfortable task for me because I had been on the STAAR trainer-of-trainers team.

Beyond that, there were two big tasks for the day: 1) identifying which databases to renew with newly reduced funding, and 2) discussing the proposed revisions to the librarian job description. The selection of databases was a relatively easy task. Discussion of the revised job description was decidedly less than easy. I was under the impression that all librarians had seen the document, or had at least known about the on-going revision process. This was not the case. As it turned out, the previous coordinator had hand-picked the revisers. Everyone was not in the loop about the revision process.

DWSD 2011 turned into a very interesting experience for me. I spent a great deal of time navigating hurt feelings, anger, and competing interests. (Author's Journal, September 15, 2012)

The experience described here is formative. It was my initial interaction with my district's librarians as a group, and my performance in this meeting has laid the foundation for my interactions with librarians since.

There is quite a lot to unpack in this initial meeting. The truly instructive part, however, is the notion that “the librarians were difficult to work with” and my reaction to it. Having now worked with librarians in my district for nearly two years, I know that the sentiment expressed by my predecessor is a relatively common one within my district. The librarians I work with are a passionate and vocal group of educators. They hold tightly to their beliefs, and they are certain of the value of libraries in the educational process. My reaction, rather than one of challenge, is to honor the collective expertise of the group. To be sure, I have objectives I am working to accomplish. Always, though, I work toward those objectives in collaboration with my librarians—not in opposition to them. My approach is relatively simple, but it resulted in comments like those below from librarians:

[A] HUGE Thank You for leading our meeting yesterday. I am sure you had no idea what you were walking into. As you see there are a wide variety of services that we all provide. I so appreciate you keeping us on track and listening to all the comments. (M. Podzielinski, personal communication, August 17, 2011).

I know we can be a handful, but I think you showed a great deal of insight when you said we are passionate about what we do. Your positive demeanor, respect, and understanding gave many of us a great deal of hope for the future of the districts [sic] libraries. (R. Moore, personal communication, August 19, 2011).

A Personal Approach to Working with Others

The question that arises from this initial meeting and the response to it runs thus: What beliefs and practices do I exhibit that lead to whatever success I have had as a supervisor of library services? To be sure, I was not in my current position at the time of the August library staff development session, but the interaction I had with librarians at that meeting are characteristic of my continuing interactions.

At this point, it is instructive to refer to a previous article I published on the role of the campus instructional technology specialist. While the position it references is different, the approach I take to librarians is the same. In that article, I write that there are five essential traits for effective campus technology specialists: patience, humility, honoring the expertise of others, availability, and recognition that schools exist for students (Lambert, 2011). As I continue on my career's journey, I realize that these traits are not simply for campus technology specialists. They are essential for working with other adults in the educational enterprise. I live by these traits, and I believe that in doing so I empower those around me to do great things.

In brief, here is what I believe these traits to mean. Patience is allowing others to come to their own meaning. I do not finish their sentences or (in the language of a technology specialist) grab their mouse as they try to work. Humility is acknowledging that I do not know everything—that I have something to learn from all those with whom I work. Honoring the expertise of others is, in part, an extension of humility. At its core, this honoring recognizes that those around me have something to share. They are experts in particular areas, and they have experience to share. Availability means that I am responsive. I answer my phone and respond to email; I am on a campus when needed. In short, availability means I respond to those in need when they are in need—not when it is convenient for me. Recognition that schools exist for students means that the needs of students come before the needs of anyone else in the system. The basic level of analysis for anything a school-person wants to do is: Is it good for students?

These are the traits I attempt to foster in myself as I work with others. Because these are the things I believe to be important, I spend a lot of time communicating with librarians. I have made it a priority to visit each librarian in his or her library. I have not gotten to all fifty-six campuses yet, but I have spent time with the majority of my district's librarians. The direction each of these visits takes is really up to the librarian with whom I am visiting. In some cases the

visit lasts fifteen minutes; others have lasted over two hours. The point is: I learn from my librarians. I learn about librarianship, and I learn about each of their particular situations. For me, it is this collegial exploration that makes all the difference. For me (and it seems for at least most of my district's librarians) it makes little difference that I am a non-librarian. What seems to have mattered to this point is not my knowledge of librarianship, but my ability to build relationships, my dedication to learning about the needs and benefits of school libraries, and my focus on supporting librarians. In short, “[s]uccess in the job is about being able to work with people, to make them comfortable, and to lead them to places they did not think they could go” (Lambert, 2011, p. 18).

And the Survey Says

As I began to work on this paper, I posted a survey on two library listservs. I posted the survey to the Texas Library Connection (TLC). In addition, I posted the survey to the Library Special Interest Group (LIB-SIG) of the Texas Computer Education Association (TCEA). Four questions on the survey asked respondents to identify characteristics of effective supervisors of library services. These questions are: 1) Must an effective library services supervisor hold school library certification?; 2) Must an effective library services supervisor have experience as a school librarian?; 3) What personal characteristics are essential for effective school library services supervisors?; and 4) What knowledge base is essential for school library services supervisors?

Of the twenty-three respondents to the survey, nineteen (82.6%) said that an effective library services supervisor must hold school library certification. Only four respondents (17.4%) said the certification was not necessary for an effective supervisor. With regard to experience running a school library, twenty-one (91.3%) said an effective supervisor must have this experience. Only two (8.7%) said experience as a school librarian was not necessary for an effective school library services supervisor. Interestingly, these two respondents are from

districts where the library services supervisor does not hold school librarian certification so presumably has no experience as a school librarian. The question this raises for me, then, is: Are the expectations of effective library services supervisors at least partially dependent on the library services supervisor you know? That, unfortunately, must be a question for another paper.

As the focus of this paper has evolved, the questions that have become more interesting are the more difficult ones to quantify. At some point in the conceptualization of this paper I moved from concern with comparing myself to some idealized supervisor of library services to identifying what makes me effective in the role. As this focus shifted, I become increasingly interested in those characteristics I could identify within myself. I am not certified as a school librarian, and I have no experience as a school librarian. The necessity of these characteristics to effective library services supervisors, therefore, became much less obvious. Those things I could work to capitalize on are the personal and knowledge base characteristics identified in the survey.

While some of the survey respondents mentioned the necessity of having a master of library science degree in order to have the requisite knowledge base to supervise library services, two responses in particular spoke to me. With an increasingly introspective focus, I have begun to look more at what I can do to improve my effectiveness. To that end, it is beneficial to reflect on the following responses to the knowledge base question on the survey:

I can't imagine trying to supervise effectively something I was not very familiar with...so I believe basic managerial skills are essential coupled with what it takes to run a library. The budget, the time constraints, the knowledge of books and technology, an ever-changing field.

knowledge of instructional best practices, knowledge of state accountability requirements, children's/ya literature, vision for the future of school libraries, cataloging and processing, knowledge of purchasing and bid procedures, knowledge of library and educational technology

While it would be preferable to know all of these things prior to taking over supervision of library services, the knowledge and skills identified here can be learned.

In addition to these knowledge base characteristics, respondents identified a number of personal characteristics necessary for effective library services supervisors. The most frequently mentioned personal characteristics included: organization (39%), leadership (26%), personability (26%), flexibility (22%), and communication ability (22%). Intelligence, vision, ability to inspire, and life-long learning were also mentioned multiple times. In short, it would seem that effective library supervisors need to be something akin to Coelho's (1993) alchemists: "That's what alchemists do. They show that, when we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better" (p. 150).

A Personal Reflection on the Survey

What, then, do these survey results mean for me as someone striving to be an effective supervisor of library services? I entered the position with no library experience except that of a patron and as a teacher of students who used the school library. Looking back now, I realize that I did not fully use the school library with my students or for myself as a teacher. Given that, what qualifies me to "be in charge" of libraries in a school district? On the face of it, nothing.

The closed-response questions on the survey would tend to support the position that I have no business supervising library services. I do not hold school library certification, and I have no experience as a school librarian. The vast majority of survey respondents saw those as necessary characteristics of supervisors. The open-ended responses, however, left an opening for the possibility of a non-librarian as the supervisor of library services. It is certainly possible (more likely probable) that the survey respondents generally assumed that their responses to the open-ended questions understood a certified, experienced library services supervisor. I acknowledge that likelihood, but I believe it beneficial to explore the implications of the personal and knowledge characteristics in their own light.

I begin with the knowledge characteristics. Some of these (managerial skill, knowledge of budget, and knowledge of purchasing and bid procedures) are often gained after entering a

supervisory role (whether be library services, human resources, instructional technology, or mathematics). Many librarians would come to the supervisory role with budgeting and purchasing experience, but that is not always the case. This requisite knowledge base would be equally alien to the librarian or the non-librarian supervisor of library services. Knowledge of books, young adult literature, a vision of the future of libraries, and cataloging/processing are clearly a knowledge base more prevalent in librarians than non-librarians. I believe, though, I came to the position better equipped in these areas than other non-librarian supervisors of library services. I am an avid reader of young adult literature. I was a language arts and social studies teacher, and I enjoy including children's and young adult literature in my staff development sessions generally. Clearly, though, cataloging and processing were alien to me. I had no vision for the future of school libraries.

I am a quick study, and I am tenacious when I set my mind to becoming good at something. That is what I did with regard to libraries. Some may say that I spend too much of my time working with libraries and librarians in my district. If I am going to do something, though, I want to do it well. I make it a point to read about libraries. I visit my librarians in their libraries, and I talk to them about what they want libraries to be. I want to know what I can do to support school libraries as they support teaching and learning. That is the key. I want to support libraries and librarians for the benefit of students. As I read, study, and talk, I am always looking for what the future of libraries might be. As I have done this, I have begun to develop a clear vision of what school libraries should be. (More on that later.)

As I have continued my library education, I have sat with librarians to learn about cataloging and processing. I have discussed weeding procedures, the pros/cons of eBooks, the processes for arranging author visits, and the joys and pains of running book fairs. I have talked about the many roles librarians take, and I have shared these stories and experiences with principals, district administrators, other librarians, and pretty much anyone who will listen. I have

become an advocate for libraries and librarians. I share the joy of books and a passion for libraries that are the heart and soul of a school. In all of this, I believe I exhibit many of the personal characteristics identified as important for effective library supervisors.

Indeed, the characteristics mentioned by survey respondents relate back to the five traits I mentioned earlier in this paper. Patience made the list of personal characteristics in its own right. Humility is reflected in the respondents' assertions that library services supervisors must be willing to listen, be personable, and be life-long learners. Honoring the expertise of others is reflected in responses that argued for supervisors who are fair managers of people, good listeners, and advocates/cheerleaders for libraries. Availability is seen in survey responses that call for listeners and personable leaders. Recognition that schools exist for students, I assert, is a function of effective leadership of school library supervisors with a coherent vision for the future of school libraries.

When I came to the role of library services supervisor nearly two years ago, it was in a round-about way. I am fortunate that I came to the position with a willingness to learn and an eagerness to adapt my skills to the unexpected role.

How I Came to Library Supervision

I imagine my story is not unlike many other non-librarian supervisors of library services. I had no idea I would take on this role. I did not apply to be coordinator of library services. Instead, I applied for the job of instructional technology coordinator. When I started, the assistant superintendent for technology "bequeathed" the librarians to me. They had been his responsibility. Apparently there had been a library services coordinator in the past. When she retired, the position was not filled. No one was going to take on the job of supervising library services, but the assistant superintendent decided to take on the responsibility.

When I started in my position, the assistant superintendent had already retired but was working again half-time. So, he turned over most of the management of library services to me.

Within the year, the assistant superintendent resigned and all of library services fell to me. This is not to say I did not want the role. At one point, I could have ceded responsibility for libraries to my new supervisor—one of the two newly minted directors of the Technology Department. By this point, I did not want to give up responsibility for library services. That being said, I must admit libraries are a time consuming part of my job. At least one-third of my time is spent working with some aspect of library services.

What this unexpected journey boils down to is this: for whatever reason I was brought to this position. There is a great deal to do and unbelievable possibilities. In my journal, I sum it up this way: “I have to say that I love working with libraries and librarians. I think there is a great deal of potential in these people and spaces. The reality is, though, that I am utterly overwhelmed by everything that needs to be done for libraries—especially considering I am also responsible for instructional technology” (Author's Journal, October 18, 2012). I am brought to this daunting task, and I work everyday to live up to it. As I think and read and visit and talk, I develop my vision for the future of school libraries.

A Vision for School Libraries

And so we come to the point that is the later where I discuss my vision of the future of school libraries. I believe that libraries should be the heart and the soul of a school. They should be the places faculties meet, the places students and teachers seek help, and the places where the joy of intellectual pursuit is found. I believe that librarians should be a central piece of the academic puzzle in schools. They should be conceptualized as (to use the language of my school district) instructional coaches. Zmuda and Harada (2008) term them learning specialists.

Central to this understanding of school libraries and librarians are two notions proposed by Malone (2003) and Wisner (2000). Malone describes a point in her academic life this way: “I was beginning to discover that learning has to do not only with facts but also with ideas, and that there is such a thing as an intellectual life” (p. 40-41). Wisner speaks specifically to the role

of libraries and research: "I believe we must be cautious of the actual intellectual value, not only of what students are retrieving but of the increasing isolation in which they are retrieving it" (p. 51). These two statements lay a very clear foundation for the role of librarian as instructional coach. This is not to say that I really want to change the role of school librarian all that much; rather, I want librarians to be central to teaching and learning.

Rather than being routinely on the rotation, I believe librarians can be central to teaching and learning in all classrooms. By providing resources, knowing each content's curriculum, and partnering with teachers to design instruction, librarians can influence the education of all students and support the professional development of all teachers. Zmuda and Harada (2008) assert that, "Library media specialists can be valuable partners in several critical dimensions of differentiation: providing resources, assisting in the construction of products, and teaching critical thinking processes" (p. 62). It is as partners of this sort that librarians can make all the difference in a school.

As my vision for the future of school libraries evolves, I am in a position to help put it into place. This putting into place can only be done in collaboration with principals and librarians, but I am beginning to have real opportunities for such collaboration. As I was working on one campus to prepare for an upcoming staff development session, the assistant principal pulled me aside to talk about her vision for the library on that campus. It is a start, but it is a very good start. She and her principal have secured funding from the school's Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) to help make changes to the library. In another instance, we are opening a new elementary school. I have had the opportunity to make some structural changes to the library on this new campus by working with the assistant superintendent for elementary education. Now, we are working to develop the opening day collection, and I am working with three elementary librarians and the newly named principal of the campus. Because of the site-

based nature of my district, these are the kinds of collaborations that are necessary to make changes to the nature of school libraries.

The possibility for truly fundamental change to an elementary library has only recently come up. At one campus, the principal wants to make a significant change to the way the library functions. As I sat in a technology meeting with the principal, the librarian, and others, the subject came up again. I briefly articulated my vision of the librarian as instructional coach. At the end of the meeting, the librarian and I were tasked with coming up with a plan for what we wanted to do with the library. There was discussion of possible funds for adding technology to the library, but I asked the principal what I believe is the more difficult question: Is there a possibility of taking the library off the rotation? She said that possibility existed, and a couple of days later the librarian and I met to plan what we wanted to do.

It is in the planning of this possible change to a campus library that my vision (one clearly shared by this librarian) of the future of school libraries can be seen. We are very early in the process of changing the function of this library and librarian. After my planning meeting with the librarian, though, we would like to see the library off the rotation. In place of the rotation, we would like to see the librarian collaborate with teachers in the building to develop learning centers that directly relate to what is going on in classrooms.

On this campus, teams meet every Tuesday. We would like the librarian to meet with these teams every time they meet to discuss curriculum and instruction. While meeting with teams, the librarian would function as a resource developer, a co-teacher, and a curriculum expert. On Tuesdays when teams meet for purposes other than planning, the librarian would have the flexibility to do technical support work that is part of her responsibility; she would be available to work with students in the library; and she would be available to co-teach with teachers in their classrooms and in the library. On Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, the librarian would manage learning centers in the library that were developed in

conjunction with classroom teachers. And rather than work with students on the rotation (thus giving teachers their conference periods), the librarian would work with classes while teachers are present. This would provide opportunities for co-teaching, modeling, and job-embedded professional development. The library in this scenario would truly be the heart and soul of the school.

There are components of our planning that ask for technology to be added to the library. The most powerful aspect of this plan, however, is that it does not rely on technology. The shift in thinking is about the instructional character of the library. Adding technology to the library will make certain aspects of the change easier to accomplish. The nature of learning centers in the library might change with the addition of technology, but the fundamental goal does not change based on the availability of technology. The shift is in the character of the interactions between the librarian and teachers. The shift is in the role of the library and the librarian in the instructional process. This is a fundamental change in the nature of the library. Technology can support the change, but it is not a necessary condition for the change.

While I do not take as extreme a position as Wisner (2000), it does warm my heart just a bit to realize that in planning changes to this elementary library we did so in a way that honors the sentiment expressed here: "Redefining librarianship under the aegis not of knowledge, but of information technology, will, I am convinced, assure our end and give away what was best in us" (p. 29).

Conclusion: The Library Experience for the Non-Librarian

I offer this exploration as a singular case. Its immediate applicability is to my situation and the situations of librarians in my school district. That is not, however, to say that the experiences and ideas explored here are without wider application. "In short, case study method involves reaching into a particular case and drawing out truths. The purpose is to learn to see more in the particular" (Mullino Moore, 1991/1998, p. 28). It is the great hope that as the

particulars of my situation are seen in this paper some truths have been drawn out about the characteristics of effective supervisors of library services.

As this paper draws to a close, I must admit that I never thought any part of my career would be spent sitting with a librarian trying to determine the best way to use an elementary library. I honestly never thought I would have much to do with school libraries. Now, I am the district administrator responsible for libraries in my district.

I attended the LIB-SIG meeting at the TCEA convention this year. At every conference I attend, I try to spend at least part of the time learning about libraries and librarians. It is an important part of what I believe my role to be. In each of these situations, I feel just a little out of place. I often wonder if I can truly fit in among of group of librarians in these settings. The question never crosses my mind in meetings with the nearly sixty librarians in my district, but among librarians from other districts I feel just a little like a duck out of water.

As this project began, I thought I would explore what others thought about effective library supervisors. The notion was that I would compare myself to this external standard of effectiveness. Now, though, I am not certain those thoughts are as important as they initially appeared. Certainly others might judge me (or any supervisor) based on these characteristics, but I am growing in the conviction that in my particular situation these characteristics (even if otherwise generalizable) do not matter. What matters are the the opinions of the librarians, principals, and district administrators in my district.

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