

Coteaching: A Strategic Evidence-Based Practice for Collaborating School Librarians

Three ways to build a strong library program—What’s your model?

The collaborative classroom teacher–school librarian model can take various forms. Educators can co-develop a library collection aligned with the classroom curriculum. They can co-plan schoolwide literacy events or promotions such as *Love of Reading Week*, *Poetry Day*, or the book fair. Educators can collaborate to plan for a makerspace or technology purchases. They can collaborate to develop strategies for integrating technology tools and resources into students’ learning. They can also coteach by co-planning, co-implementing, and co-assessing standards-based lessons and units of instruction. Of all of these collaborative possibilities, **coteaching**, has been shown to make a measurable difference in student learning outcomes.

In *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (2009), AASL identified the instructional partner as the most critical role for the future of the profession. It is through coteaching that school librarians can demonstrate how their teaching contributes to classroom teacher and colleagues’ priorities for student learning. In this current age of accountability in which all faculty members must pull their weight, the importance of school librarians collecting solid evidence of the impact of their teaching cannot be overestimated. School librarians who follow trends and research in librarianship will note three interrelated initiatives that can help build effective school library programs: The learning commons (LC) mode; evidence-based practice (EBP); and coteaching.

Learning Commons

The LC is a school-wide approach to envisioning, organizing, and facilitating learning in the library’s physical and virtual spaces. It involves engaging students, faculty, administrators, families, and community in using library resources and prioritizing the work of the school librarian. David Loertscher and Carol Koechlin (2014) describe the four main characteristics of a successful LC as being:

1. Characterized by a collaborative physical and virtual environment that invites and ignites participatory learning;
2. Fueled by a responsive dynamic that is invested in school-wide improvement through an evidence process of design, modify, rethink, redesign, and rework;
3. Supported and led by professionals who can successfully lead out front, or lead from the middle, or push from behind;
4. Focused on participatory learning through excellent instructional design, using the best resources and technologies, and building personal expertise and collaborative knowledge (E4-E9).

With all students, educators, and administrators actively involved, the LC becomes the site for authentic, participatory learning experiences for youth as well as adults. The LC can be the “hub of learning” that school librarians have long envisioned. It is logical that school improvement efforts would be focused in the LC where educators are designing instruction and students are taking leaps in learning. School librarians can be the professional who leads out front, or from the middle, or pushes from behind in the LC. With access to the best print and electronic resources and tools in the largest classroom in their schools, school librarians can develop their instructional expertise while they collaborate with all LC stakeholders to build new knowledge. They can be the leaders the school librarian profession needs.

Evidence-based Practice

The LC is the ideal environment in which to engage in evidence-based practice (EBP). Ross Todd (2009) described the model as drawing on “three integrated dimensions of evidence: evidence *for* practice, evidence *in* practice, and evidence *of* practice.” Evidence *for* practice is scholarly research on which school librarians can build their practice. This could be any aspect of librarianship that has been studied and reported on by library science, education, or technology researchers. In the context of this article, this evidence is research related to classroom-library collaboration and coteaching. School librarians can apply EBP in their collaborative work with classroom teachers and specialists. They can gather data or evidence *in* practice that indicates how students and educators benefited from this instructional delivery method. In order to achieve evidence *of* practice, the collaborators analyze the results of their collaboration to identify successes or areas for needed improvement. They then apply this

evidence in subsequent teaching interventions and disseminate their successes so that colleagues and administrators are aware of their effort to monitor and improve student learning outcomes.

School librarians can practice EBP by gathering evidence of their “library” teaching in isolation from their classroom teacher colleagues. However, if teaching skills in isolation is less effective than integrating skills at the point of need, it is much more powerful in terms of student learning outcomes and spreading best practices throughout the school when EBP is practiced through classroom-library coteaching. Through attention to instructional design, coteachers seek to provide the best possible learning opportunities for students. When they collect evidence and use it to modify or rethink their teaching, they are making informed instructional decisions. Coteachers continue to refine their teaching as students, curriculum, resources, and tools change and evolve. When school librarians who make every effort to co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess student learning with as many individual teachers, grade levels, or departments as possible over the course of an academic year, EBP aligns with the LC goal of investing in school-wide improvement.

Evidence-Based Practice through Collaboration and Coteaching

There is a growing body of research that suggests school librarians who collaborate and coteach with other educators improve student learning outcomes. Debra Kachel and library science graduate students at Mansfield University (2011) summarized the research findings of the School Library Impact Studies (<http://www.lrs.org/data-tools/school-libraries/impact-studies>) and identified a positive correlation between classroom-library collaboration for instruction and increased student achievement in fifteen out of the twenty-one studies they reviewed. In a study of school library science collections and the collaborative behaviors of school librarians, Marcia Mardis and Ellen Hoffman (2010) found that in schools where school librarians “collaborate with science teachers frequently, student achievement in science tends to be higher” (15). Classroom-library collaboration improves student learning.

In her study of classroom teachers who engaged in sustained collaboration with school librarians, Sue Kimmel (2012) found that during coplanning “the school librarian was particularly key in connecting resources to unit objectives...The librarian also made connections with other grade levels or with school-wide events such as assemblies, author visits to the school, or a Poetry Day” (11). Kirsty Williamson, Alyson Archibald, and Joy McGregor (2010) conducted a study about how students learned to avoid plagiarism. What these researchers learned was that strong collaborative relationships among the educators and a shared commitment to the topic of plagiarism resulted in increased student learning and determined the success of the entire project.

Both classroom teachers and school librarians benefit from coteaching. David Loertscher (2014) conducted a recent study in which classroom teachers who had experience coteaching with their school librarian compared student learning outcomes when they taught alone to those when they cotaught with their school librarians. These collaborating teachers reported that when they coteach, student learning outcomes improve between twenty and fifty percent compared to when they teach alone (11). It is important to note that the school librarians in this study also reported they are less effective when they teach alone.

Shaping a Culture of Collaboration

Developing an LC model provides the ideal context for EBP through collaboration and coteaching. The LC is conceived and supported as a “collaborative space” for students and for educators. Project-based, problem-based, and inquiry learning is facilitated in the LC. These instructional designs require effective planning, differentiation, and facilitation. When engaged in deep and sustained learning, students are best supported by multiple educators rather than the solo teacher working in isolation.

For school librarians, “collaboration is the single professional behavior that most affects student achievement” (Haycock 2007, 32). School librarians can collaborate with colleagues to plan or facilitate learning in the LC. Progressive school librarians will go the additional step and collaborate with their colleagues from the planning stages, to coteaching, through assessing student learning outcomes and the effectiveness of the lesson or unit of instruction. School librarians who engage in EBP through coteaching in the LC have made a strategic decision to align their priorities with those of their colleagues and administrators. Their commitment to school-wide improvement will increase the school librarian’s own job satisfaction while it increases the value colleagues and administrators place on the librarian’s work.

To sum up: LC + EBP through Coteaching = Win, win, win!

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