

5 Lessons Learned

BY A 29 YEAR VETERAN TEACHER-LIBRARIAN

As I retired in June 2013, after being the teacher-librarian at St Andrews Public School in Scarborough, Ontario for 29 years, I realized that I had some wisdom to share with the teacher-librarian community. I hope that my years of experience will be of use to someone else reaching for success in this field.

1. The Library is about people first and foremost

My rookie mistake was to put all of my efforts into attaining and maintaining the resources – ‘Make a well stocked library and they will come and check out resources.’ They didn’t always come, and when they came, they didn’t always check out resources. Developing relationships was the key to success.

2. Get to know your patrons

Get to the staffroom for breaks and lunch. Stop to chat in the hallway. Make a point of visiting the classrooms. Get out into the playground and initiate conversations. Don’t be stuck behind the check out desk. Get out there and ask questions. Listen to really hear what your patrons are doing, to what they want, and to what they need.

3. Find resources based on the needs of your patrons

Do not assume that you know what people want or need. Ask them! This can lead to very surprising results. Each individual has particular needs. My personal mission statement is ‘All will receive what they need to achieve.’ Years ago, I started the tradition of having each classroom fill out a Wish List before I went resource shopping. This created much excitement, thought, and anticipation. Over the years, those Wish Lists got longer and longer, and more and more sophisticated. Vendors often commented on the surprising, and excellent choices on the wish lists.

4. Collect the resources YOU really want to collect

This sounds simple, but it takes much thought and planning.

Going to a vendor resource fair has its good points in getting to know a variety of sources, but it is what it is: a selection of resources that have been chosen by the vendor, not by you.

I made a horrifying discovery at an area teacher-librarian meeting a few years back. Many of the teacher-librarians thought that they had to buy all of their resources at the Board advertised vendor fair! What a hair-raising thought!!!

The definition of frustration is trying to buy to a classroom wish list at a vendor fair from the limited vendor-selected resources presented! And what about finding resources to fill in the holes that you know you have in your collection? Next to impossible!

Getting to know the vendors, and visiting their showrooms or shops is a far superior method for purchasing resources. My vendors of choice would assign someone to help me to fill my wish lists. A good vendor will assist you with finding what you need, and will make new, interesting suggestions that will fulfill the needs of your patrons. A good vendor is like a teacher-librarian’s librarian. They will take the time to get to know you and what you need.

5. Get the resources into the hands of your patrons

A teacher-librarian has the power to grant wishes. When an item that someone has wished for arrives, get it into the hands of that person as soon as humanly possible. This creates trust. Your patrons know that you really care about them and what they want and need. This is very personal and extremely important. A person that trusts you is more likely to come back to you for more, and to tell others about what you have done for them. Others will want to have a similar experience. The library becomes a great place to be, and a key resource in the school. The items in the library come to represent the people in the school.

The library is, after all, about people first and foremost.

These are lessons that I learned over many years, and the statistics collected by the Toronto District School Board speak for themselves as to their effectiveness. The checkouts per student, per month in the St Andrews Public School library remained almost twice as many as the average school in the Board for many years. ■