

Three in one: teacher, information specialist, leader



Alinda Sheerman

Biography

Alinda Sheerman, Australian Teacher Librarian of the Year 2012 Award winner, is the Head of Information Services at Broughton Anglican College, a co-educational, Preparatory to Year 12 Anglican school, in Menangle Park, between Campbelltown and Camden, New South Wales.

The teacher librarian (TL) holds an important yet rarely understood role in the school community. A TL's primary role is that of an information specialist, trained in the teaching and integration of information literacy skills and inquiry skills across the curriculum, as well as being a library collection manager. Because TLs are curriculum specialists with a breadth of knowledge right across all curricula, they can go beyond teaching information literacy skills and even inquiry skills ... they can lead in inquiry learning and pedagogical change in this area.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers applies equally to TLs, with fully qualified TLs able to work at the Highly Accomplished or Lead level.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008, p. 8) made at a meeting of all Australian Education Ministers contains a number of goals set down for Australian students. Goal 2 states:

All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens.



Successful learners:

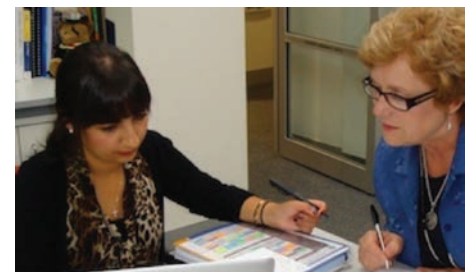
- *develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning*
- *have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy and are creative and productive users of technology, especially ICT, as a foundation for success in all learning areas*
- *are able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way as the result of studying fundamental disciplines*
- *are creative, innovative and resourceful, and are able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines*
- *are able to plan activities independently, collaborate, work in teams and communicate ideas*
- *are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are*
- *are on a pathway towards continued success in further education, training or employment, and acquire the skills to make informed learning and employment decisions throughout their lives*
- *are motivated to reach their full potential.*

Through undertaking action research into the use of Guided Inquiry at Broughton we have observed that, with the support of the TL to assist in teaching integrated

information literacy skills and digital literacy skills, and through the scaffolds provided for personalised inquiry learning, students can take control of their own learning experiences and become resourceful, independent learners able to apply their learning in new disciplines and situations.

It has been apparent that students engage and become focused on the task when they are at the centre of their own learning experience. The personalisation of learning is the engaging factor and this leads to deeper understanding and application. Searching for information on a path of inquiry, students need support from teachers and TLs to enable them to construct deep questions in order to find answers and construct meaning, which leads to personal action or a new investigation of personal importance to them.

According to Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari (2012, p. 32) students learn best when they are in what is called a 'Third Space merger'. The First Space is the student-centred,





personal space. The curricular, teacher-centred space is the Second and these merge in the Third Space, which is learner-centred.

It is important for educators to help students use their cultural knowledge and experience from everyday life to help them understand curriculum content. A core tenant of social constructivist learning is that students construct their understandings out of what they know about their world. (p. 32)

In this 'learning-centred space', teachers and students come together to look for answers to questions that neither knows and, together, one is constructed.

Through using the Guided Inquiry research approach, students learn how to undertake 'authentic research in a discipline — the central questions; how disciplinary inquiry is undertaken to build knowledge' (Todd 2007, p. 29)

One of our history teachers observed, at the end of a unit of Guided Inquiry on ancient Egypt, 'I discovered that I was not the "font of all knowledge" but the facilitator of the students' learning experience'.

When learning takes place outside the sphere of the teacher's experience, student and teacher become partners in learning and the support offered by the teacher is meaningful and appreciated. It was in this realm that teachers have noticed the greatest benefits — students become very engaged in their learning, going well beyond 'fact gathering'.

Teachers who have been supported by the TL in learning about and implementing a unit of Guided Inquiry have testified that it has changed their teaching style in many of their other classes, where they found they could implement aspects of inquiry with the subsequent differentiation of students' learning experiences in many of their lessons.

When using Guided Inquiry as a pathway from information to knowledge, instructional interventions are planned to investigate students' information literacy needs and to support these with scaffolds. Each step of the

process is a 'potential zone of instructional intervention in the school library to develop deep knowledge and understanding' (Todd 2007, p. 29).

At each step, students are observed and supported by the combined efforts of class teacher and TL. The discussions between students and teacher and also between teachers as they analyse student learning add to both learning and social support. When adding information communication technologies (ICTs) into the experience, students also support each other through wiki (or other collaborative software) comments throughout the inquiry experience and this adds to learning engagement and performance.

Guided Inquiry goes hand in hand with the integration of ICTs and the learning of information literacy skills at the point of need. Each step of the Information Search Process can apply these skills or can afford opportunities for their application.

Applying and integrating ICTs into learning was an important factor in the implementation of Guided Inquiry at Broughton. Teachers and students were taught how to use wikis for shared learning. This enabled all the students in each class to investigate their own area of interest but at the same time learn about other aspects of the topic through peer observation and review.

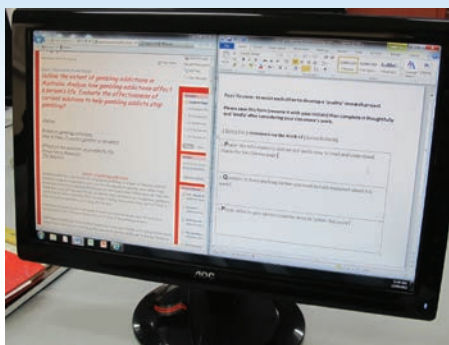
Fullan (1999, p. 32), in writing about the development of professional learning communities, says that these teachers, through collaboration with each other in the discussion of teaching practice and in the designing of formative and summative assessment, are forming a professional learning community. This has been apparent at Broughton as ongoing discussions, learning and the spread of Guided Inquiry as a learning process has proved. Through learning communities, real change has been implemented.

However, merely introducing and using a new research process is not enough to bring about lasting change to pedagogical practice in a school. For a new process to be widely accepted, it is important that it be assessed and evidence of success and failure be recorded for discussion, evaluation and improvement.

Action research carried out regularly in a cyclical fashion has ensured that the program activities, technology and support needs are considered and alterations are made to improve pedagogy and maintain relevance to outcomes and the curriculum.

As Ross Todd says: 'This evidence-centered cycle of development and reflection will clearly convey that learning outcomes are continuing to improve, and inform the process of their continued improvement' (2003, p. 9).





It was through the assessment of Guided Inquiry as a process by teachers and students, the analysis and documentation of information skills learned and applied, the qualitative data of students, teachers and parents about their experience and the sharing of all of this publicly to the rest of the school community that pedagogical change was brought about at Broughton.

School executive role in supporting the TL

Simply put, new and different working relationships need to be established between teachers and administrators in order for any new leadership role to make a positive and lasting contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning in a given setting (Patricia Wasley as cited in Crowther, p. 36).

TLs have broad curricula knowledge and can partner in learning and pedagogical change across all year levels. Loertscher (2003, p. 37), says that the school executive plays an important role in enabling this by:

- making or changing organisational structures so that TLs have the necessary time to collaboratively plan and teach
- ensuring that there are enough support personnel in the library to give the TL time for collaborative planning and teaching
- providing professional development sharing opportunities for the TL to demonstrate to teachers that the TL's collaborative teaching program is effective.

Since 2007, all three of these have been implemented at Broughton.

- Only qualified, Certificate 3 Library Assistants have always been employed at Broughton.
- In 2007, the TL was allocated time in staff professional development meetings to introduce concepts and practical aspects of inquiry learning and the 'Thinking Curriculum'. Practical applications of ICTs have become an ongoing workshop every year.
- Since 2008, the TL's load of 'relief from face-to-face' teaching has been

removed to free up time for collaborative programming and teaching.

- As the TL carried out action research into Guided Inquiry, time was allocated for sharing the results and testimonials of the students and teachers involved at full K-12 staff meetings.

Guided Inquiry at Broughton — a personal history of learning and sharing

In 2007, the principal wanted staff professional development within the school to be centred on aspects of the 'Thinking Curriculum' with inquiry learning as a focus. I was asked to present a session on thinking skills and inquiry learning. The preparation required extra reading and learning on my part.

During that year, I also went to a conference to hear Dr Ross Todd teaching on Guided Inquiry, which is based on Carol Kuhlthau's Information Search Process. During the afternoon session, Lee Fitzgerald, TL, demonstrated and showed evidence of her first implementation of Guided Inquiry with a history class at her school, where she had worked collaboratively with the teacher to guide the class on their personal investigations.

Late in 2007 our then deputy curriculum, Don O'Connor, applied for a grant from the Association of Independent Schools (AIS) to undertake action research and asked me if I would be able to investigate the use of Guided Inquiry to bring about pedagogical change. I was keen to fully investigate and evaluate Guided Inquiry so accepted the challenge to use the grant for this.

Since my master's studies at Charles Sturt University, I have been very interested in the application of ICTs into the curriculum. As more tools were developed, I took an interest in their application and so decided to implement the use of wikis into Guided Inquiry units of work, considering that this might allow teachers to better support



students at a personal level. The use of a wiki would allow the whole class to observe the work of their peers, giving them access to many different aspects of the topic and a broader knowledge. I added the incorporation of ICTs into Guided Inquiry for the action research study.

During 2008, one class and one teacher entered into this investigation. I was the TL who taught and led this new method of studying Ancient Egypt, which focused on each student researching and constructing a differentiated question in his or her personally selected area of interest within the topic.

Based on the initial, very positive results of the first round of action research I applied for another grant for 2009 to enable me to undertake a second cycle of action research but this time with the four teachers and four classes of Year 7 students. Once again, we had positive action research results and both students and teachers showed great enthusiasm — to the point that they agreed to demonstrate and share their teaching and learning experience with the whole staff. After they shared their experience more teachers wanted to be involved.

This practice of TL collaboration and support has continued and grown and is only held back by the time available as I attend all possible lessons to support the teacher and students.

Action research has continued to be undertaken. This allows the class teacher and TL, working as a team, to plan together, 'act' together and to reflect on the practice together and make changes according to student needs and reflections ready for the next application of Guided Inquiry incorporating ICTs.

Added to this, opportunities have arisen to share the results of action research into Guided Inquiry as a teaching pedagogy to the wider TL community through journal articles and conference invitations.



As TL, my role in the collaboratively planned unit of Guided Inquiry is to conduct questionnaires at three stages of the Guided Inquiry process (Student Learning through Inquiry Measure toolkit — SLIM), enabling me to discover and support specific individual student needs or whole class needs in aspects such as information search skills, writing bibliographies, note taking skills, finding and selecting authoritative material, citing and referencing, reading and using tables and charts and much more. I share the results of these questionnaires with the class teacher and we work as a team. Because a wiki is used to record work students can be observed at all times and support given at the point of need.

Certain 'scaffolds' are used at various stages of Guided Inquiry to support difficult aspects such as formulating questions or gathering information. Because two teachers are involved, monitoring of each student's needs can take place and interventions be given.

After five years of action research into the collaboration of TL and classroom teacher, plenty of evidence has been gathered so that it is now possible to share the reaction of students, teachers and parents to this team-teaching, research project approach to learning.

Parent quote:

This research task brought out an interest in my son to a level I have not seen before. He took on his project with an ownership and pride and above all enjoyed researching and presenting his findings (Patrick's parent).

Teacher reflective quote:

The high level of engagement of students meant that I could spend time with individuals in a more student-centred environment. The commitment of time and support made by the head of information services/teacher librarian facilitated the effective delivery of both the related teaching and learning activities and professional development to achieve the syllabus outcomes for these units (Lyn Beattie).

Student reflective quote:

I learned how to get information and transform it even further into my own words. I learned how to take facts and use these facts to find the answers to different questions. I learned how to get the final information I have gathered and use it in the context that is needed (Year 10 student).

Because TLs have been trained in the use of ICTs and information literacy skills, opportunities to share this knowledge means other staff members can gain professional learning in their own workplace.

I have been involved at many levels to share and apply skills in information literacy, Guided Inquiry and the use of ICTs. The primary section of the school recently undertook a workshop on Guided Inquiry and all teachers took part in working their way through a unit including the scaffolds involved. After this training, many teachers felt they could apply certain aspects of inquiry learning, using a selection of the scaffolds, even if they did not begin with a full Guided Inquiry project. Plans are under

way to have a number of units supported in collaborative planning and execution later in the year.

Examples of action research and testimonials are linked to the Guided Inquiry menu on the library's blog <http://bacirc.edublogs.org>

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