Kids Using Libraries: Learning Experience vs. Frustrating Experiences

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Many parents, educators, and librarians acknowledge the library or school library media center as a fertile environment for independent learning. Teachers, wishing to spark intellectual growth and creativity, often design assignments that incorporate library use. In the library, the student can explore beyond the scope of the textbook and can discover new insights and ideas to bring to the classroom. Unfortunately, some learning experiences in the library turn into frustrating experiences for students. The components of the following case are too common.

Johnny and 481 other sixth graders in the school district have just begun the unit on weather. Each of these 482 students must find library materials for assignments due in two to three weeks. Johnny goes with his teacher, Mr. Goodfellow, and 27 classmates to the school library media center. The school library media specialist listens as Mr. Goodfellow outlines the assignment and as the students express their information needs. As she talks with individual students, they are able to locate a dozen or so books on weather and another dozen magazine articles in the collection. In addition, five sets of encyclopedias are available for use in the media center. The class members work on their assignments as they share materials for almost an hour; then they return to their classroom. Johnny and his fellow sixth graders have a big problem that will likely diminish the learning experiences for which the teacher had hoped. Library materials in the school are limited, and lack of planning between the teacher and librarian has reduced the effective use of those resources.

Johnny has concerned parents, and they decide to take him to the public library so he can find the materials needed to complete his assignment. But it’s now two days after the assignment has been given, and at least five of Johnny’s classmates and 40 other sixth graders in the school district have already visited the library. The books have been checked out, and the magazine articles are in use, along with most of the encyclopedias. Actually, Mrs. Goquickly has figured out how to beat the rush. Her sixth-grade Suzie has three older siblings, and Mrs. Goquickly, keeping close watch on Suzie’s educational progress, anticipated the assignment and went to the public library three days before Mr. Goodfellow gave it and selected the best materials for her Suzie to use.
Johnny, like many other sixth graders in the school system, is experiencing frustration. Too many students are seeking the same or similar information in a brief time span. Teachers and librarians have not planned to maximize the resources available. Eager parents have joined the competition. Johnny didn’t create his problem. In fact, these sixth-graders have coerced information needs—that is, they are required to look for information that most would not choose to seek. That condition often changes the psychological motivation of the information seeker. A strong personal interest in the topic may not exist. The student may feel forced. As a result of these factors, the student may use the path of least effort in seeking the information.

With mounting obstacles for the six graders, what should the adults involved in this scenario have done to improve the learning experience? Teachers, parents, and librarians can help the students succeed or at least give them a better chance.

Suggestions for Teachers

Before giving an assignment that requires library use, consult your building-level school library media specialist one to two weeks before beginning the instructional unit. Explain the assignment to her and let her know the number of students who will be completing it. Ask her for a subject bibliography of the books and other materials in the library. Arrange to have critical materials put on reserve with limited circulation so that students can check them out for use overnight. The brief check-out period will give more students access to the information. Working within the copyright laws, the media specialist may also be able to photocopy brief articles or portions of books and place the extra copies on reserve.

Contact the children’s and reference librarians at the public library. A short telephone phone call can greatly benefit your students. If these librarians are aware of assignments, they can plan to have materials available and will be able to give better service to your students. Otherwise, the first few students to visit the public library will likely check out the majority of the materials needed to complete the assignment. Public librarians may also be willing to reserve materials for student use.

Either you or the school library media specialist should teach or review the information-gathering skills needed to effectively use the library and complete the assignment. New resources and technology mean that libraries are constantly changing, and skills should be reviewed and revised regularly. Tell the students that if they have difficulty finding information on their own, they
should ask a librarian for help. Research indicates that over fifty percent of adults who need assistance in using a library will not ask for help. Many do not know that the primary responsibility of reference librarians is to help the library user find information. We must teach our students that help is available in libraries.

The student’s interest in the assignment may be increased by allowing choices. Can the assignment be structured so that the student selects the topic, point of view, or format? Would a model, an illustration, a demonstration, or group activity produce the desired learning outcome? Could the student design his own learning experience in consultation with the teacher? Giving the student some control in the learning process can unleash potential that highly structured assignments would not tap and can bring excitement to the classroom.

Even with detailed oral instructions by the teacher, young people are often unsure about what information they will need and how to approach the assignment. Give written instructions to students including your name, the name of the school, and the date the assignment is due. This written information will help students focus on the task, and parents and librarians understand how they can best help the student. When you contact the school and public librarians, share the written instructions for the assignment with them.

To reduce the demand on limited library resources, consider re-sequencing topics in the curriculum time table. As a secondary English teacher, I quickly learned to schedule my English literature units at times when other teachers in the school district were not teaching the same topic. Thirty students seeking information on the lives and works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries are more likely to be successful than 500 students.

At the beginning or end of the school year, review your curriculum, noting topics for which you would like to have more information in the school library media center. Give that list to the library media specialist and ask her to select titles to add to the collection. If you have identified books that your students need, share those titles with her. Remember that lead time is critical in acquiring new library materials. Book orders usually require six to ten weeks to process, and the library media specialist may have restrictions on when she can order materials.

Suggestions for Parents

Resources in the school library media center are collected to support the curriculum, but these resources are limited and your child may not be able to
complete the assignment using only materials from school. Parents should provide the time and transportation for their younger children to use public libraries and high school aged students to use public and academic libraries. Academic libraries are found in community colleges, undergraduate colleges, and universities.

Academic libraries often have more complicated information and technology than school or public libraries. A student who uses his local school and public libraries with ease may not have the information-gathering skills to use the college library independently. Don’t assume that an elementary school child can find reading-level and ability-level materials in an academic library. Although most academic libraries provide children’s materials for elementary education majors to use in their studies, the mission of academic libraries is to serve undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty.

At the library, let your child locate the information needed to complete the assignment. Information-gathering skills are more and more valuable for lifelong learning in our complex and rapidly changing society. You and the librarian should guide the student in the pursuit of materials, but learning to locate, evaluate, and use information is a set of critical skills that need to be taught to and not taken away from the young student.

If the child needs assistance in finding the information, allow him or her to communicate that need to the librarian. The temptation for some parents is to expedite the search by explaining the assignment to the librarian. Encouraging the child to talk with the librarian develops the young person’s communication skills and permits the youth to see the librarian as an adult helper.

Use the library to find information that you need. Library resources can be used to help with planning vacations, running businesses, managing personal finances, pursuing hobbies, learning about almost anything, and for recreational reading. Just as with reading, if you model the behavior, your children are more likely to be successful in their use of libraries.

Suggestions for School Media Specialists and Public Librarians

School media specialists and librarians must anticipate the information needs of students. The state-wide core curriculum for public schools is a helpful resource in identifying topics studied at each grade level. School districts often have developed core curriculums. This information is extremely
useful in collection development. Copies of the core curricula can usually be obtained through state departments of education and local school district offices.

Librarians need to take the initiative in networking with teachers and other librarians. You know the difficulties young people face in the information-seeking process. You see the disappointment and frustration when students are not successful in finding information. As a school library media specialist, you can use faculty meetings to discuss with the teachers the library media services, and explain how you can assist them and their students.

When a student brings a reading list or written instructions for an assignment to the library, copy it and place it in a file that is accessible to all librarians. The library staff will be ready for students who forgot or did not know to bring those items.

As you negotiate reference questions with young people, be approachable, make eye contact, smile, and use positive nonverbal communication. Avoid judgments about the information request. Ask open questions to get students talking about their information needs. Respect privacy in regard to the information sought. Determine the amount and format of the information. Remember that young people often have limited vocabularies and experiences to express their needs. The inquirer has the task of describing that which he or she does not know. Be empathic. Encourage feedback from students by comments at the end of the reference interview such as, "Does this completely answer your question?" or "If you don't find what you need, please let me know and we'll look for more information."

Be a strong advocate for the student information seeker. If the needed information is not found, complete a notification form (see Figure 1) for the student to take to the teacher. This will likely reduce some of the student's anxiety because it verifies that the student attempted to find the information, and it may help the teacher recognize the need to work with librarians to maximize the learning experience of students.

Some public library staffs do not provide information on assignment-related questions over the telephone. Although some questions cannot be adequately answered by telephone, brief questions should be. Students may not have the transportation to travel to the library--especially during the afternoon hours when parents are often at work.
Epilogue

What about Johnny? Sunday dinner at Grandmother and Grandpa Smith provided the answer. Aunt Emily, who teaches elementary education at the local college, noticed Johnny wasn’t acting himself. She coaxed the problem from him, and Johnny discovered that she was a meteorological enthusiast. Em, also a bibliophile of children’s books, hurried Johnny to her condominium and upstairs to the study with its shelves and shelves of pristine books. Along side her autographed copies of Newbery and Caldecott winners were McVey’s *The Sierra Club Book of Weatherwisdom*, Wilson’s *The Weather Pop-up Book*, and Ramsey’s *Weather Forecasting: A Young Meteorologist’s Guide*. Assignment accomplished. Thank heaven for Auntie Em.

Yes, I’m a sucker for tritely happy endings, but this conclusion is not entirely blissful. Johnny’s fortune in locating the needed information was a coincidence, and serendipity should not determine whether or not learning is successful. The adults in this scenario should have done advanced planning, shared information, and cooperated to enhance the learning experiences of all 482 sixth-grade students in the school district. A few additional minutes of preparation by librarians and teachers can significantly reduce the anxiety level of students using libraries. Parents should support and guide their children in the search for information but should not compete with other students for access to assignment-related information. Adult cooperation is a key determinant in successful learning for students in libraries.
HAPPY VALLEY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Dear Teacher:

____ came to the library today to find information for a school assignment. We were unable to fill the request for ________ because:

1. All books on the subject have been checked out.
2. Materials on the subject must be used in the library.
3. Materials on the subject are in heavy use by other students.
4. A search of the collection has failed to locate suitable material.
5. Further clarification of the assignment or topic is needed.
6. Time limits do not permit interlibrary loan of materials.
7. Other

Please contact us in advance of assignments that require library use so that we may better serve the students. We welcome telephone calls or visits from teachers.

Librarian

Telephone