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Leveraging Collaboration in an Evolving Learning Environment

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I think we can all agree that 2020 has been a memorable year. A global pandemic, protests, quarantines, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, facial coverings, and the abrupt change to virtual teaching and learning challenged all of us. Hopefully the safeguards we adopted to protect our health are now embedded into our daily routines. While they might be inconvenient, they are still extremely necessary. Trial and error, start and restart, disappointment and insight were driving forces over the past 12 months. All of us have been impacted by the events over the past year, especially our learners; and yet we continue to collaborate and work together to meet the vast needs of our learners within a constantly changing learning environment.

School librarians understand the importance of staying connected and working together, so regardless of recent events and changes in our work environments, we have found ways to make collaboration work. Collaboration by its very definition in the AASL Standards Framework for Learners asks people to “work effectively with others to broaden perspectives and work toward common goals” (2018). Through blogs, forums, and other platforms, we devised ways to best serve our learning communities. We are stronger and more effective when we work together.

As information specialists, we do our best to stay abreast of the latest technology, yet the human connection should never be underestimated. Recent events and quarantines have shown us that isolation is not conducive to our well-

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being. We are at our best when we can collaborate and interact with others, regardless of the format.

This past year everyone was forced to hone their virtual skills. Now it is time to leverage these skills in new and creative ways. We took ownership of our virtual collaborations and customized them to best serve our individual and school community’s needs. Some configuration of video conferencing, virtual canvases such as Padlet and Flipgrid, and other digital resources will remain a part of our educational landscape even when the virus becomes a historic footnote.

Going forward, collaboration will involve a hybrid of in-person, digital, and virtual reality experiences. We will partner with other stakeholders across the room and around the world. As we move into a new year, we need to embrace the principles of collaboration for our learners, ourselves, and our school communities. Collaborating with other stakeholders needs to be an ongoing process.

Our role is to motivate learners to leverage these vast networks to share and expand their knowledge. We should model how to work productively with others to solve problems.

“Whether you are collaborating with another educator to team-teach, working hand in hand with other adults such as the school’s administration or parents, or are encouraging the students themselves to learn together, collaboration in education can benefit everyone who has a stake in the school setting” (Loop 2017).

We must help learners identify collaborative opportunities to broaden and deepen their learning. Our role is to motivate learners to leverage these vast networks to share and expand their knowledge. We should model how to work productively with others to solve problems. The new hybrid for collaboration will require enhanced listening skills, patience for diverse perspectives, and a willingness to provide honest, respectful feedback in a profusion of formats. The best results always come from diverse perspectives and areas of expertise.

We have constantly demonstrated our belief in collaboration and sense of community, but this has been especially evident in AASL’s town halls. They have been a professional lifeline for many of us, especially in the early days of the shutdown. AASL’s town halls continue into the new school year and are a source of information and support for participants. They enable our school library colleagues to showcase their professional expertise, ingenuity, and humanity. They are filled with important information and ideas, but they are also a place to receive support and encouragement. It is collaboration at its best. (To view past town halls and read the chats, visit <www.ala.org/aasl/about/townhall>.)

In 2020 school closings and social distancing abruptly shifted how many of us define collaboration. Yet necessity is the mother of invention, and it is through creative collaborations that solutions are discovered. What may have started as necessity is quickly flourishing into a collaborative reinvention, and school librarians, as always, are at the forefront of this education movement. Learning is a social experience, and it is our responsibility to make time for collaboration and to foster relationships with members of our learning communities. Online learning continues to evolve, but as it grows, collaboration must be at the forefront of the evolution.

Now more than ever, our fellow educators, administrators, parents, and the community at large depend on us to provide our expertise and leadership in teaching and learning. We have also discovered that collaborating with others challenges, encourages, and inspires us to be stronger leaders and educators. So, let’s all continue to work together and get ready for 2021. I am certain it will be an interesting year.

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