

Rethinking Curation

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The *National School Library Standards* define curation as the process of “mak[ing] meaning for oneself and others by collecting, organizing, and sharing resources of personal relevance” (AASL 2018, 96). This vision emphasizes a dynamic and collaborative process, one that happens in dialogue with educators and learners. In school library classes, students are often asked to complete some type of curation assignment to prepare them for this task. They might be asked to create pathfinders for research projects, thematic text sets in a materials course, or conduct a collection analysis that results in lists of materials to select and purchase for collections. However, these assignments often emphasize a product that is created by school librarians for educators and learners, rather than a collaborative process that school librarians do with educators and learners.

As school library educators ourselves, we realized that some of the curation assignments we were asking students to complete in our courses did not accurately reflect or assess the full vision of the Curate Shared Foundation as conceptualized in the AASL Standards. In an effort to consider how we (school library educators) are encouraging a robust curation practice, we conducted a study in several preservice school library education courses that enabled us to rethink the way we approach the instruction of curation in our school library classes and to make recommendations for practicing school librarians.

Method

To study the way school library educators are teaching curation, we engaged in a content analysis of curation assignments in several school library courses (including Collection Development courses and a Resources for Young Adults course). In these courses, students were asked to identify resources that would support instruction about a particular topic or subject (e.g., a pathfinder for student research about climate change). Not only were students asked to select resources, they also were asked to provide an annotation describing why they chose the resources for a particular curated collection. We analyzed each of these annotations to identify themes and patterns about the criteria students used to select resources. Our goal was to identify the main reasons why students might choose a resource and then consider how those reasons reflect an alignment (or lack thereof) with the AASL Standards.

Findings from Our Study

We began by coding every reason why students selected a resource and then counted the number of times each reason appeared. In the first part of our analysis we identified the three most-frequently cited factors that students considered when selecting resources for classroom teachers: text attributes, content, and text complexity. “Text attributes” refers to students’ attempts to find resources in multiple formats. For this reason, the type of text was a significant factor when selecting resources (e.g.,

website, video, poem, etc.). “Content” refers to students’ efforts to find material that matched the subject or topic of the collection they were curating. Finally, “text complexity” refers to the reading level of the resource or the appropriateness of the materials for a specific audience.

On the surface, it is not surprising that students looked for materials that were on topic and in a variety of formats—especially given that most of the research done on curation has emphasized the tool used to share the resources or the ability to provide materials in various modalities (Valenza, Boyer, and Curtis 2014; Robertson 2012). However, we also found that this focus on some of the surface-level aspects of these resources was at the expense of more-complex conceptual connections that the AASL Standards ask educators and learners to make when curating.

The second part of our analysis identified these less-frequently used codes and the types of factors that students were *not* considering (at least not as often). In other words, we identified ways that their curation assignments were not aligned with the definition of curation laid out in the AASL Standards. While students frequently mentioned that resources reflected appropriate content, they rarely made conceptual connections. Conceptual connections are the “big ideas” or overarching and transferable concepts (Erickson 2006) that we ask students to consider when they engage in inquiry, another main focus of the AASL Standards. Another notable absence from the

students' annotations was attention to diversity and multiple perspectives in the resources they were choosing. There are so many conversations happening in the school library community about creating inclusive collections, but we wanted to encourage students to consider and apply these conversations to their curation efforts in other areas as well.

Implications

There are several implications for the work of school librarians as they reconceptualize their own curation practice.

Curation is collaborative. When school librarians prepare a list of resources, create a pathfinder, or pull a cart of books, this process is often one way. The teacher gives the school librarian a topic, and the school librarian responds with resources. This results in a list of resources that can be gleaned from a simple topic search and may not demonstrate (to teachers) the value in working with a school librarian. In fact it does not require educators and learners to "look beyond easily found information resources" (AASL 2018, 97). The AASL Standards emphasize a process that is ongoing and involves conversation with teachers, rather than one

that centers the school librarians' knowledge of the collection and expertise with the content. The school librarian's curation practice can be strengthened through these conversations with teaching partners about what they need and the types of resources that would address their specific learning goals.

Disciplinary literacy. Part of this collaborative endeavor involves developing disciplinary literacy and an in-depth understanding of the specific AASL Standards and literacy skills that are essential for the work teachers are asking learners to engage in. School librarians can go even further to collaborate with discipline-specific experts who can model these disciplinary literacies in context and help identify abstract and transferable concepts within their disciplinary areas.

Conceptual thinking. Our students focused on the content of resources (e.g., American Revolution or climate change) but not always on the "conceptual knowledge networks" (AASL 2018, 94) referred to in the standards and an increasingly important focus of content-area standards as well. Rather, school librarians can teach and model for learners how knowledge is "framed conceptually to facilitate access,

retrieval, and use" (Moje 2015, 272). For example, rather than providing a topical list of resources related to the American Revolution, students might be asked to create a conceptual network that considers nationhood, federalism, or monarchy.

Incorporating multiple perspectives. There is no shortage of conversations in the collection development sphere about diversifying and making school library collections more inclusive, but the inclusion of multiple perspectives must be considered when curating resources as well. School librarians need to consider what diverse and multiple perspectives might look like within a particular subject area. This includes paying attention to the various stakeholder groups who have knowledge about a particular topic, and the multiple perspectives of those writing about certain subjects.

Works Cited:

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