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Being a School Librarian in France: How to Take Advantage of Peer Networking for Professional Development

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Abstract:

French teacher-librarians are library professionals, both managers of the school library and teachers for students. They need to keep informed about evolving library skills in order to respond to the needs of teachers and students. Indeed, their mission statements require them to broaden their library skills through professional development. This paper describes the personal strategies of the author as a young professional, advancing professional skills through peer networking. Three paths will be described: district meetings, professional days, and social media.

Keywords: Peer networking, professional development, school libraries, social networks

Introduction

The French public education system created the position of “teacher-librarian” in 1989, and established at the same time a national competitive examination and diploma (the CAPES) for this position. As library professionals, as both managers of the school library and teachers for the students, French teacher-librarians need to keep informed about evolving library skills in order to respond to the needs of teachers and students. Indeed, their mission statements require them to augment their library skills through professional development activities. Teacher-librarians often work alone in the school library and thus there is a great need for professional development through interaction with colleagues. Many opportunities are available to achieve this. This paper describes the personal strategies of the author, as a young professional, to enhance and gain school library skills through peer networking. The paper focuses on three paths: first, an institutional programme of “district meetings”, secondly, the role of the national school library association with “professional days” and finally, the importance of social media and the use of Twitter.

Institutional program: district meetings

One of three ways of developing school library skills for professional advancement is to regularly attend districts meetings organised by the Académie de Créteil, a local authority

representing the French Ministry of Education. This initiative is local, not national, although generally district meetings are held in almost every academy in the country.

At the Académie de Créteil this initiative is called “3D”, which stands for “Developing Documentation in the District” (in French *Développer la Documentation dans les Districts*). The goal is to develop a professional network among teacher-librarians from the same geographical area, incorporating several municipalities. The 3D initiative at the Académie covers three departments containing ten districts each in Seine-St-Denis and Val-de-Marne, and 12 in Seine-et-Marne. Each district brings together 30 to 40 colleagues on average.

“Developing Documentation in the Districts” is intended for all teacher-librarians working in middle schools or high schools, whether they are permanent or temporary employees. In each district, there is a meeting facilitator. His/her role is to organize the programme for the year by contacting the colleagues’ districts; to conduct meetings; and to interact with the local authorities, that is to say the school inspectors and the departmental coordinators (e.g., arranging training meetings and writing reports). The institution recognizes the duties of facilitators officially and they are entitled to receive annual compensation at the end of the school year. Each year, the meeting facilitators can renew their position or resign and give way to another colleague of the district to volunteer for this position.

There are six annual 3-hour meetings to be arranged at the beginning of the school year during the first meeting with the colleagues’ district. The first meeting is usually set by the meeting facilitator during the month of October, before school holidays in November, and takes place at the meeting facilitator’s school, in general in the school library. The meeting facilitator contacts the teacher-librarians of the district by telephone and email in order to inform them of the date. Colleagues then decide the dates and venues of the five other meetings according to their availability. The dates of the meetings are arranged in order to meet regularly, that is to say at least once between two school holiday periods (on average every six to eight weeks). Meetings usually take place in the schools of colleagues that propose to host the meetings. A list of scheduled meeting dates is then emailed to colleagues’ district in order to keep colleagues informed of the events. These meetings are however not compulsory. An authorization from the headmaster is required in order to take the time off from work and some colleagues never make the effort to attend.

The first meeting aims to put colleagues, especially newcomers, in contact with each other, and also to consider the programme for the year. At the end of each meeting the meeting facilitator drafts a report stating whether the objectives of the meeting have been reached; she/he also specifies the delegation of tasks to be achieved and the activities between meetings, and makes any pertinent observations.

The objective of these meetings is to choose one theme proposed by the institution and to flesh out subtopics of this theme. The meetings, scheduled throughout the school year, are thus dedicated to the elaboration of the final publication as defined by the group. This publication can take different forms (e.g. a report, a teaching aid such as a paper or a blog, and so on). Meeting facilitators make proposals such as a speaker who is an expert on a topic, or a visit to a cultural centre relevant to the topic chosen by each group.

All district meetings in each department are written up in reports intended for teacher-librarians. The departmental coordinator also writes up an annual report of the proceedings in each department. These departmental reports and the final publications of each district are

then put online on the teacher-librarians website of the Académie de Créteil, called “Point.Doc”.

To explain how the 3D network operates an example is given below of the 3D meetings organized during the 2013/2014 school year in the author’s own district.

The main topic for the year, chosen by the Academy, was “Practices and didactics of digital cultures”, from which five sub-topics were outlined:

1. Online collaboration: students’ training and professional network
2. Digital citizenship: digital identity, e-reputation, rights and duties
3. Critical reading and information production: tools (all medias and all formats) and educational measures (media classes and others pedagogical projects)
4. Serious games: what are the practices in schools?
5. Learning and use of digital reading and writing: a lever for educational pedagogy.

The district of the author chose to work on the second sub-topic “Digital citizenship”. The topic was further refined as “Digital identities: those that I create, those that are created for me ... How to deal with them?” The reason for choosing this subject was that specific cases of difficulties and questions were encountered in the daily work of teacher-librarians with the students.

The impact of student interaction with internet and social media on professional practice was considered, in order to find avenues and answers for the teacher-librarians, and also for the possibility of setting up classroom sessions encouraging student awareness. Classroom sessions were devised for the middle and high schools to encourage awareness and responsible use of the Internet and social networks in particular.

The table below reflects a synthesis of working meetings:

Meetings	Meeting objectives	Observations
1st	First contact between teacher-librarians of the district and discussion of the annual project.	
2 nd	Examination and development of the work topic in view of its utility for teacher-librarians at work. Elaboration of subtopics and possible forms for these classroom sessions: the opportunity for writing several classroom sessions about several sub-topics in order to target middle high school and high school more effectively. We chose to work on grade levels.	
3rd	Outlining of classroom sessions to be further fleshed out. Presentation from an expert at the Centre for Liaison Between Teaching and Information Media (CLEMI) for a training session.	
4th	Writing of a set of classroom sessions about digital identity, at different three levels, two for the four years of middle school and one for the first two years of high school so that these pedagogical tools can be tested and used in our school district.	Classroom sessions must then be tested in our relative schools.
5	Assessment of classroom test sessions in our schools and improvement if necessary.	
6	Finalization of the annual publication and assessment of the year’s work on this project.	

These meetings really allow colleagues to share knowledge in the form of ideas, debates, external contribution, and to create affiliation between peers. Despite the formal aspect of these meetings there is an informal side where colleagues can exchange their daily preoccupations about teaching skills and school library management (library software, documentary policy and so on).

The role of professional associations: the example of the professional days held by the Federation of French Teacher-Librarians (FADBEN)

These professional days are organized at a local level by the local division of the FADBEN called ADBEN. They aim at promoting the association but are also opportunities for professional reflection around themes and problems linked to the teacher-librarian profession. These professional days are part of colleagues' continuing education.

The target audience is, first of all, the members of FABEN, but these professional days are also open to all colleagues, whether from public or private schools. Each local ADBEN organizes, on average, one professional day a year, or every two years, and this is usually held on Wednesday (schools are usually closed on this day) in the middle of the year (March-April). Cultural places such as museums or libraries are often preferred as well as the schools themselves. The professional day is organized around a theme chosen by the board of the ADBEN and focuses on talks from speakers. These can take place in various forms: workshops, round tables, and presentations. A time for informal social and professional exchange is also included. The goal is to facilitate teacher-librarian professional development around specific themes. Speakers can be ADBEN members, members of the FADBEN board of directors, academics, school inspectors or even professionals from various institutions such as CLEMI or the Centre for Pedagogical Education (Canopé) who may contribute an alternative view on the proposed theme.

As an example this paper describes the professional day organized by the ADBEN of Versailles in partnership with Paris and Créteil. ADBEN was held for teacher-librarians of the greater Paris area on Wednesday 2nd April 2014 at the lycée Janson de Sailly in Paris (where the first school library was created in a French school in 1958) and the theme was 'Media and information literacy: a new challenge for teacher-librarians?'

The day was divided into two parts. After an opening and an introduction by the head of the high school, the president of the Versailles ADBEN and the school inspector of the Académie de Versailles, the morning was dedicated to two presentations followed by discussions. The morning ended with an informal gathering of colleagues. The afternoon consisted of a lecture and panel debate as well as a round table discussion.

Three university professors conducted a lecture and panel debate about innovative approaches to media and information literacy. Hervé Le Crosnier (2013) presented his point of view about digital literacy in education; Anne Cordier (2011) showed the results of her investigation about students' information practices and pedagogical practices; Sophie Jéhel (2011) spoke about critical thinking and media culture in media and information literacy. These three points of view around computing, student practices, and media, offered a theoretical framework backed up by practical examples.

The informal gathering included Florian Reynaud, president of FADBEN and member of Versailles ADBEN, the presidents of the Créteil and Paris ADBEN and the president of the Regional Association of French teacher-librarians in private schools (ARDEP) of Ile de

France. The meeting allowed exchanges between these officials and colleagues (members or non-members) about the role, actions and positions of FADBEN on the current issues of the profession, for example the development of the relationship between French school libraries and cultural and learning centres in the community (called “3C”). Under the auspices of Marine Ernould, teacher-librarian and past president of FADBEN, the round table brought together the vice-president and president of FADBEN, Françoise Chapron, an academic, and Sylvain Joseph, CLEMI coordinator for the Académie de Versailles, around the theme of students’ digital culture and the pedagogical role of teacher-librarians. Lesson plans with concrete examples about media and information literacy as well as institutional online resources were presented in order to give to teacher-librarians pedagogical leads.

This day was thus both an occasion to consider developing professional activities thanks to the contribution of these academics and, a place for exchanges between professionals from various perspectives and, finally the opportunity to ground the theme proposed by the academy in concrete reality.

A personal perspective

My participation in the activities offered by my national school library association, such as professional days, allows me to step back from my professional practice. The presentations given by researchers enable me to renew my theoretical knowledge in information and documentation science and to apply it to my professional practice. Indeed, the field of information and documentation knowledge evolves quickly and it is important to update my knowledge because as a teacher-librarian one part of my job is to train students. On the other hand, the presentation of concrete examples of lesson plans facilitates the application of theoretical notions described by researchers. Finally, the discussion time makes it possible to obtain concrete answers to my questions about current issues for the profession, since the board members are able to answer us with certainty because they are linked to institutions such as the French ministry of education and so on.

Development of school library skills through social networks: a personal account of the use of Twitter

The third means of developing personal school library skills is the use of Twitter. Indeed, the interest of this tool lies in the fact that this is a social network that makes it possible to interact with people and create links with a remote professional community. The principle of Twitter is to subscribe to accounts (people, institutions, associations) in order to receive ‘tweets’ on the homepage. This flow of information, which is continually updating, allows one to stay in the forefront of the latest news.

As a teacher-librarian I created a professional account in 2013 to monitor the profession and found Twitter to be a most appropriate tool to reach this goal. The principal aim of my Twitter account is to monitor news and evolution in the educational, pedagogical and technological fields and their evolution.

I first subscribed to several Twitter accounts of institutions associated with the teacher-librarian profession, such as CLEMI and the Canopé of the Académie de Créteil. I added accounts such as “InterCDI”, the main reference journal for profession; “Savoirs CDI”, the main reference website for the profession, and professional association accounts such as that of FADBEN. Starting from these subscriptions, I explored subscribers’ lists of institutional accounts. In this way I found teacher-librarians’ accounts suggested by Twitter, which made

possible the extension of my professional network. Furthermore, thanks to this networking system, colleagues and institutions increasingly follow my account.

I check my Twitter account several times a week because the news feed fills up very fast. In addition to my own tweets I also receive “retweets” which inform me of the latest news of the accounts I follow. On my part, when I receive relevant information I retweet in order to forward it to my followers. Responding to tweets enhances interaction with colleagues.

Skills required for the use of Twitter professionally are a matter, first, of wide knowledge and the selection of professional sources. The skills acquired in the end, though, are mainly those of sorting information. Although the sources are targeted to my professional objectives, I feel I need to select a great deal from the posted tweets; this selection is more concerned with personal accounts because some tweets are not relevant to my field. Some are also retweeted several times and overload the tweet flow.

I can stay in the forefront of the latest news related to the profession of teacher-librarian in the educational, pedagogical and technological fields. Using a Twitter account to do professional outreach makes this task more rational, less time-consuming and more pleasant thanks to the social side. Following professional accounts allows me to stay in touch with and widen my professional community in France and abroad around mutual professional interests.

The use of Twitter is also an enriching experience because one can subscribe to varied sources, such as associations, institutions or professionals and in this way identify different points of view, an exercise that I do regularly with my high school students, and which is necessary to develop critical thinking. In a certain way, the use of Twitter enhances the development of professional reflection. Twitter is also an excellent means by which to learn and extend one’s personal knowledge and it is an excellent filter for the enormous flow of information from different sources. The economy of language of a tweet (only 140 characters) is in fact an asset: one can read a large number of tweets quickly, and select the most pertinent and interesting. The key is to find people on Twitter who follow topics which are of the most interest to a teacher-librarian. From a personal point of view Twitter is actually a most appropriate tool for professional monitoring and for staying in touch with one’s professional community; at present there appears to be no better tool to do this.

Conclusion

The three means described above (meetings, professional days and social networks), offer the opportunity to develop professional skills by sharing information between peers. Information sharing of this kind focuses on professional development as well as specific tools and practices. My personal strategy is varied and complementary, including meetings both face-to-face and remote. Such a personal strategy relies on peers and can be said to be a mutual sharing experience, personally and for colleagues.

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