

# The Library (R)evolution

*By Erica Hamlin*

When I came to Seattle eight years ago, I had never used a cell phone, and thus couldn't find the buttons on the one U Prep provided for me. (Who knew that little clamshell opened up?) I still struggle with multiple remote controls, and am recognized by the tech team at school as the ultimate Beta-testing site – if a new software program or an innovative piece of hardware can be broken or screwed up, Erica can do it fastest. So I have just learned to use what I need, and have stayed well behind the sleek curve of developing technology.

But I have finally been lured into the digital fray by the myriad conversations flying around (both electronically and in hard copy) about the contemporary roles of books and libraries. Who's talking, or passionately arguing? Publishers and authors, readers and software giants, librarians, educators, lawyers and, not surprisingly, Wall Street. Fascinating stuff!

What's the deal, and where's the relevance to U Prep? Earlier this year we began to think about what our school library should be like, how it could best serve students and teachers in a time of information excess and a decade in which electronic tools are developed so fast they're obsolete before they come onto the market. Nicely enough, given all the media attention on this very topic, we're not alone in this dialog.

Let's start with the question, "What about books?" When most of us think about a library, we picture rows of shelved tomes and perhaps a characteristic bookish aroma. But Google is twelve million tomes into digitizing "all the world's books." (Yes, there are some interesting intellectual property rights under discussion, but I think the electronic outcome is inevitable.) What if a student could download any book free and in a matter of seconds from Google's library? Why look for it on a shelf? The major publishing houses are negotiating with Amazon and Google (and their lawyers), trying to figure out how to take economic advantage of the digital purveying of print materials. They're also wondering if they can afford to publish hard copy in the face of an increasing market for electronic books that can be created at a fraction of the cost. No profit margin, no more hard copy. No more bookstores?

Consider "POD," or "print on demand." Want or need a three-dimensional book? Just go to a nearby kiosk that looks a lot like a glass-fronted snack vending machine, select from Google's list, pay \$8.00, and your book will be printed and assembled right in front of your very eyes, down to the pages being cut and the spine glued. Then it gets spit out like a granola bar. These exist now. Why then would libraries keep millions of books on hand "just in case" someone needed a particular copy if you could glue one together in fifteen minutes? Libraries inhabit spaces that have to be heated, cooled, furnished, and staffed. They're expensive!

But aren't libraries and librarians about the acquisition, flow and evaluation of information? Absolutely, but today it seems even more likely that the repository of all that knowledge, culture, art, politics, etc., will be digital and that the management of the flow will require more tech savvy than it will the Dewey Decimal System.

Do libraries then actually need a physical space? And is the future of librarians limited to a keyboard? My opinion: Yes, to the first and no to the latter. The consensus seems to be that libraries have huge value as social spaces for learning. However we need to re-envision them: No longer will they be hushed sanctuaries in which the loudest sound is the turning of pages. Rather, imagine a bright open space with students clumped around tables in animated conversation, with laptops, notebooks, iPads, or whatever, open in front of them. Are there books and periodicals? Surely, but fewer and more peripheral to the action.

Imagine librarians guiding students to navigate this wild virtual world and find the knowledge they seek, then teaching them to evaluate – distilling truth from disinformation, dismissing the ridiculous in favor of the sublime. And when students leave that convivial space, envision their library traveling with them in a

backpack or even a pocket. How very extraordinary.

We can achieve this vibrant 21st century vision at U Prep relatively easily because so much of the preparatory infrastructure is already in place. We have librarians who are proficient not only in technology, but also in information literacy. We have an amazing tech staff and a digitally savvy faculty. Everything's ready to go, so go we shall. And we'll keep you posted.

Yet I most sincerely hope that much summer reading will still happen under a shady tree, behind the curve, book in hand.