

Vertical File or Virtual File in a School Library: Why Not Both?

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"Smart people use the right technology at the right time."

- (McKenzie, 2006, November)

The Dilemma

With the advent of the Internet, keeping a vertical file has turned into a very small part of a busy teacher-librarian's role. Dow (2003) questions "whether vertical files are still a relevant resource, or whether their functions are superseded by the Internet" (p. 325). I discovered quite a unique situation when I recently began my responsibilities as teacher-librarian at the Winnipeg Adult Education Center (WAEC) Library. I found a fantastic, fully catalogued and up-to-date vertical file - and the students are using it. So I have quite a dilemma on my hands; do I toss it or tend it?

Reasons to Toss It

Stevenson (2005) describes how she made a library more welcoming by doing some interior decorating and "moved long-ignored vertical files into storage" (p.46). As well as redecorating, I could use the space taken up by the three upright filing cabinets currently housing the vertical file collection. Space is truly a scarce commodity both within the WAEC library and the school.

Our students have good access to the Internet and the World Wide Web including a premium subscription to a collection of

information databases through EBSCO Publishing. In other secondary schools in my school division vertical files have either diminished or disappeared altogether. Those that are left only include school archival information, local information and maps. This is not surprising given the weeding guidelines published by the Library Support Services, which state:

"Vertical and Pamphlet Files: Keep only current information not found in other available sources." (Winnipeg School Division, 1982, p. 4). I was advised by colleagues that they are too time-consuming to maintain and not worth the effort. Anderson (2002) makes the point that quite often there are too few library staff and volunteers and that "the vertical file can be an extremely high-maintenance operation" (p. 36). One colleague said she dismantled the vertical file on the recommendation of a library consultant on the assumption that everything in the vertical file was or would be available on the Internet.

I want to keep a keen eye towards the trends and future reality of information literacy. The image of me as a keeper of a dusty looking vertical file just doesn't fit with my preferred self-image as an innovative technologically-savvy teacher-librarian.

Reasons to Tend It

Right now students are using the vertical file. Why are they using it? The Internet is not reliable and can be up or down several times in a day or even down for whole days at a time. Also, the school division's filtering software is too restrictive. Many sites on controversial issues commonly studied at WAEC such as addictions or euthanasia are blocked. Some students at WAEC are not yet digitally savvy and still prefer paper over digital files. Those who are comfortable enough to search the online catalog holdings of the library will see their topic listed when they do subject searches with VF as the call number. A student recently searching the library catalog for items on animal rights noticed a listing entitled "Animal Rights" with the call number VF. Since he didn't know what that meant, I explained that VF stood for vertical file and pointed him in the right direction. He later came back to tell me he found four articles that he would use and cite in his persuasive speech on animal rights. Some students already know what VF means from the introductory talk I do with most classes on how to do research at WAEC.

Recently, the vertical file came in handy in an incidental way. A teacher assigned the students the task of finding advertisements from the year 1993 for an English assignment.

Many students chose to visit the newspaper archives at the Winnipeg Millennium Library. Some students asked to look through our vertical files and found several articles written in 1993 with advertisements on the backs or sides of the intended article.

Because files are carefully collected and kept to support the curriculum at the school, it is easier to search for relevant information through the vertical file than through our subscription information database. For example when a class recently searched for information on "Sue Rodriguez" (quotes included in Search field) to support a popular teaching unit on the debate about euthanasia in Canada, only 20 newspaper results were found; and the first relevant article was tenth on the results list when sorted by date. Some students were frustrated with reading through the first several abstracts and gave up by the tenth. For those of the students who continued to look through all 20 abstracts, they found four articles which actually deal with the Sue Rodriguez case. Many of the articles were about the made-for-TV movie or to the actress who played Sue Rodriguez in the movie. Of the four articles found through the school's database subscription there was little more than a passing reference to the Sue Rodriguez story. The full details of the case however are available at the students' finger tips

in the carefully tended vertical file under the subject heading Euthanasia. Three full original clippings detailing Sue Rodriguez' battle with Lou Gehrig's disease and valiant fight for the right to end her life with dignity are in the euthanasia folder. Twenty-eight newspaper clippings which document the Robert Latimer case and other articles dealing with the issue of euthanasia are also included. As well, nine pamphlets from diverse organizations such as the Euthanasia Educational Council and The Right to Life Coalition representing both sides of the debate are also in the folder.

In her 2002 journal article Anderson listed several compelling reasons to keep a vertical file. One reason was to catalog and make available the primary resources and archival information that most libraries have a responsibility to keep and maintain. Anderson also made the point that resources to support teachers' pet projects may be collected and maintained in the vertical file. "Just thinking of tossing those treasures might be a dangerous threat to your library media center public relations plan" (p. 36).

Other libraries that students access keep up-to-date vertical files. Winnipeg's newly renovated Millennium Library which re-opened in 2005 includes a vast vertical file taking up almost one-half of the space on the third floor of the large

four-storied library. It includes newspaper clippings and pamphlets on current city and provincial issues and is sorted into over 1500 subject headings. The nearby University of Winnipeg Library keeps vertical files filled with pamphlets and archival information.

Finally, as many seasoned educators know, we cannot rush into following trends or assume that predictions from learned educational leaders and thinkers will come into fruition in all situations. For example, in 1996 Johnson predicted that the need to purchase hard copies of magazines and newspapers would decline as more magazines and newspapers go on-line. At WAEC the availability of hard copies of magazines and newspapers has increased over the past ten years in response to patron demand despite access to on-line newspapers and the introduction of a comprehensive newspaper and magazine subscription database!

The Verdict

My decision is to keep the vertical files active and viable. This decision rests largely in the *right now reality* that teacher-librarians and students face as opposed to the *reality of the future* that we can only plan for. We need to meet the current needs of our students. I agree with McAbee when she states (1999) "even with multiple electronic sources, the vertical files are an indispensable reference tool" (p. 23).

What's Next?

I'm encouraged by Sitter's position on the vertical file. "There are few rules for vertical files, so there is a lot of room to 'do it your way'" (1992, p. 1).

At present there are 382 subjects filed alphabetically in the WAEC vertical file. Many of the subjects deal with current, popular and controversial topics. After seeing the binder of subject headings at the Winnipeg Millennium library, I've decided to make a similar binder with an alphabetical listing of the vertical file subjects. I plan to "shake off" the dusty image of our vertical file and buy new colourful file folders with laminated tabs to make them more durable and less raggedy. I'll continue to promote the vertical file through orientation sessions to the library. I'll make bulletin board displays of current issues using articles from the vertical file to further promote this resource (Sitter, 1992). For example there are several colourful posters and pamphlets to pull temporarily from the vertical file to display during Additions Awareness Week.

Science teacher Holt (1992) describes "a student activity that connects sequencing, library skills, computer use, and current science topics while helping to recycle old newspapers" (p. 51). He has students create an up to date vertical file on current topics in science for classroom use. I have borrowed

Holt's idea and modified it for the WAEC library by inviting all students who find useful information for class projects from the Internet or any other source to donate their paper resources or print-outs back to the vertical file for the next semester students.

Curts & Reikowsky (2005) describe a situation similar to my own where the list of recommended web sites is expanding rapidly. They considered what they termed an "online virtual file" on the school network to share the web addresses, then decided on a library web site to make the list of favorite links more accessible both inside and outside the school (p. 2). I too have begun a virtual file of important websites by listing research and other Internet resources websites on the library pages of the school website. This list will need to be updated regularly.

McKenzie (2000) envisions a collection of images, data and text files thoughtfully collected in support of the curriculum needs in his forward-thinking educational technology journal. I plan to make the well-used articles currently in the vertical file also available on the school's read-only network drive. The clippings will be scanned, then saved as scrollable read-only PDF files and cross-referenced on the inside flap of the subject

folder in the vertical file. Whole classes will be able to access these virtual vertical files simultaneously.

Copyright permission is required to copy and share news articles across a school intranet. So far I have been granted blanket permission and guidelines to copy and share the information in this limited way by the two local newspaper agencies. I anticipate that other news agencies will be able to provide timely responses to copyright requests if and when I need to share their articles.

When I collaborate with teachers on research lessons using the library resources, I usually do some pre-research to make sure the students will have success. I'll be able to make the most relevant vertical files available on the school network for these classes ahead of time.

Conclusion

Providing the information and services that students need and want has to be more important than what is trendy. As Dran (2006) of the School of Information Studies at the Syracuse University states, "Our aim is to expand human capabilities through information. Whatever we do, we do through information and for people" (p. 2). The vertical file will remain at my school until all students feel confident to use the Internet. It will remain until the Internet or other sources truly fill the

same information need as well or better than the vertical file.

I'm learning to consider the trends in teacher-librarianship,

and at the same time never lose sight of the students' needs.

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The Winnipeg Adult Education Library pages can be found at:

<http://www.wsdl.org/waec/library/Library.htm>