The Role of Librarian in the Digital Age

For 15 years, Bill Bass has demonstrated his commitment to 21st-century learning in everything he does. As the Technology Integration Specialist in the Parkway School District, Bill was heralded for helping teachers and students integrate technology in new and innovative ways. His strong desire to continue to teach and learn is reflected in his “musings on technology and education” on his blog, in his books and on Twitter. Bill’s hard work and devotion to the educational communities in the St. Louis area and beyond have made him one of the most influential educators in the country today.

Q: As 21st-century library programs go, yours is considered a leader. How did you get there and become a leader?

A: Parkway has always had a strong and valued library program, which has been seen as a leader in many realms. Those who came before me positioned the program as one that was service oriented and structured to empower students and teachers to use the tools, content and expertise we provide in meaningful ways. Four years ago, I came into this position just as it was being restructured to combine technology integration, innovation and library media all under one umbrella. That change in focus presented opportunities to think differently about the way libraries were used and the role of the librarian in the digital age. As a district administrator, my role is to set priorities and vision for our program while helping to navigate new challenges. One of the biggest things I can offer to my librarians is to be a constant voice advocating for them as leaders when it comes to literacy, instruction and technology. This means different things in different buildings, and I must constantly listen to and intentionally garner feedback from each piece of the greater community to be effective. In some cases this means school visits or consistent conversations. Most importantly, it means creating multiple opportunities for professional learning for librarians so they can stay in front of trends and be able to provide answers when students, teachers and parents come to them for help and support.
Q: In your opinion, what sets a librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?

A: From the first moment I stepped into my current role, I started asking my librarians, “What does it mean to be a librarian in the digital age?” While it’s definitely a loaded question, it’s also one that doesn’t have a single answer. It depends very much on the community the librarian serves and the environment they have created for students and teachers. However, I think it’s a question every librarian should have an answer to. Maybe it’s not a single answer (and I fully expect that answer to change over time), but grappling with this question and recognizing that we are in a time of great change and transition serves us well. At Parkway, we try to look beyond today’s climate and are constantly planning for what’s next. We used to have a three- to five-year plan, year to plan to implement, and then we’d create another one. That model is no longer feasible, even in education. Instead, we now have a 3-6-9-12 month plan to help us be responsive to our communities as it encompasses the school year. We recognize we are part of a bigger system so we still do longer term planning for budget and other programmatic offerings, but we must be nimble in our approach and model that with our teachers, students and administrators. Finally, another characteristic of modern leaders in library spaces is the desire and commitment to connect beyond any individual library. There is a tendency to be very inward looking and only think about the current state of our programs, but by intentionally looking beyond our own schools and districts, and truly, beyond the profession of librarian, we can find many amazing ways to approach our work and continue to better serve our communities.

Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the aha moment?

A: If I had to pick a time, I think it was when I began connecting with other educators when I was in the classroom. This was before the days of Twitter and social media, but by connecting through message boards and looking beyond my environment, I began to see that there are so many possibilities and opportunities to get involved in something bigger than yourself. The conversations I was having gave me the confidence to try new things and push boundaries in my own work. That confidence brought creativity with it into my classroom that got my students interested in what we were doing. I felt like I was onto something and sought to inspire my colleagues to try new things and look beyond their classrooms and schools. Eventually, I moved to a point where I felt I had something to offer the greater educational community and that I might be able to empower and inspire others. That creative spirit has stuck with me regardless of my role and guides much of my work today.

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?

A: One of the biggest factors in our transformation is the amazing librarians in our program. They are innovative, dedicated professionals who are well respected in our schools. However, we also had to be sure we remained relevant to those who we serve. To do that, we set up structures that brought librarians into the conversation with curriculum, technology, professional development and instructional leaders. We tightly aligned them with our future plans for technology and positioned them as leaders, as the go-to people in their buildings, while offering them professional development and ongoing support. We gave them higher levels of access to online tools to help buildings solve instructional challenges, and we listened to them because we know they are our biggest conduit into building needs and cultures. We were strategic in our approach and connected the library program to other initiatives. We also worked to stop being defensive about our role in our schools. What librarians do is often misunderstood. I think this is because, as adults, we all have had some experiences with libraries and librarians in our past. Whether good or bad, there are stereotypes that are hard to escape. In Parkway, we spent a lot of time and effort justifying our existence in times of cost containment and restructuring. I knew we needed a change in approach and we needed to share the story of our digital-age libraries with our internal and external communities. Modern libraries are a tightly guarded secret that needs to be shared, and our transformation began when we were willing to tell it.
Q: What lessons did you learn from the journey?
A: Throughout our ongoing transformation, I continue to learn about how to be strategic in our approach to positioning the library as one of innovative spaces and professionals. This means that I have to constantly be on the lookout for entry points into helping schools utilize their libraries in meaningful ways, as well as helping librarians tell their story and advocate for their programs. I’ve learned that, in order to lead, I must take risks on the same level that I’m asking my librarians to. I have to lead by example and be willing to try things that may not work. When they don’t work, I try to own that, reflect upon it and then be transparent about my approach so that it’s easy to see that I’m learning along the way as well.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his or her program?
A: First, be strategic. Rather than just coming to an administrator or a building community with problems, come with solutions and be willing to be part of the team to implement those solutions. Look for ways to bring your expertise to classrooms and, most specifically, teachers. You are responsible for both student and adult learning in the digital age, so be the one who can help develop your teachers and introduce them to relevant, instructional practices and tools. Secondly, tell your story. It’s not about bragging or showing how great you are. It’s about showing what you have to offer your community. Even better, encourage students to tell your story by providing them a space on your website or in your building that encourages them to share. The library is a place to explore and discover. Sometimes that can be found in a book, sometimes it’s in an experience such as a Makerspace or by being given an opportunity to create through code. However it happens, celebrate that discovery and exploration by sharing the stories.

Bill Bass is a speaker, writer and professional developer. He earned an ISTE Making IT Happen Award and was named an NSBA 20 to Watch Education Technology Leader. He has held leadership roles in the International Society for Technology Education, the National Council of Teachers of English and Midwest Education Technology Community. His books include From Inspiration to Red Carpet and Digital Reading: What’s Essential in Grades 3-8. Visit billbass.tech.