

SLLC Snapshot: Task 11

Defining the Space and Practitioner

The School Library learning Commons (SLLC) program of the focus of this project resides within a middle and high school in a rural community in north western Alberta. For the duration of this report, the school will be named Terry Fox School. The head Teacher Librarian at this school will be documented as Mary Letandre. The school serves a variety of surrounding communities, as most students are bused in. Some students are required to take the bus up to an hour and a half each way, a three hour round trip. Student population in the school ranges from 220-250, depending on the year. Many students attending Terry Fox School self-identify as Indigenous, with nearly 57% of the school's total population identifying as Indigenous in the 2018-19 school year (unpublished data, as noted by the principal in a staff meeting in September 2018). The other 43% of the student population is made up of students of primarily European descent. The town's population, according to the 2016 census was 565, down from the 2011 census of 609. Terry Fox School is a grades 5-12, English speaking school which uses French as a mandatory second language course until grade 9, when it becomes optional. The school offers courses in Automotive Mechanics, Carpentry, Computers, and Fine Arts. The primary reason a number of students who choose to leave their reserve school and attend Terry Fox School is due to the Automotive Mechanics program, led by a respected individual in the community.

Letandre identifies as being of European descent and has lived in the community for over 35 years and worked in a variety of capacities within the school. She has fulfilled roles as the Home Economics teacher, an English teacher, and the Social Studies teacher before settling into the Teacher Librarian position she is in now. Letandre knows many of the students in the school

by having taught their parents, and has greeted and rejoiced with former students as they are now becoming grandparents.

As the needs of the school have changed, the role and description of the Teacher-Librarian has significantly changed. The school (and it's staff) believe that the role of the Teacher-Librarian is to assist students with technology, aid research, make available current and relevant books and magazines, to mentor students, to listen to middle years students read, to make copies of literary resources for teachers, to keep stock of the book room, to run the Scholastic books program and host book fairs, to select and recommend books to both staff and students, to tape, label, and document books where necessary, to supervise students who have been sent out of the classroom, and to fill in for Educational Assistants when they call in sick. It seems as though the role of the Teacher-Librarian in Terry Fox School is not recognized as a Teacher, but simply a Librarian in charge of the SLLC. This idea is further engrained in the staff as the Vice-Principal and Resource teacher share an office with windows which are attached to and look into the SLLC. Letandre finds the situation frustrating, as she holds more teaching experience, years attending University, and more degrees than both the Vice-Principal and Resource teacher. She pointed out that she has not once complained to anyone on staff, and her colleagues are the only ones who mention that the situation could be uncomfortable for her.

The function of the SLLC in Terry Fox School is to allow students a space to work where noise is limited. Students often spend their spares in the SLLC, or request access to the SLLC during class time to have a quieter, more comfortable space to work. According to Letandre, the SLLC is unable to cater to students of all needs, and often students choose to work in the cafeteria or the hallways during spares. Part of the struggles Terry Fox School encounters is student accountability during their spares. Since some students do not have access to town

services readily in their community (they may live on a farm, or not have access to a bank), students often use their spares to run errands or have fun in the community. This poses a problem for administration because during the day, students are the responsibility of the school. Members of the community have come into the school and complained about loitering and sometimes theft or vandalism. In previous years, there was some talk about having Letandre keep track of who was in the library during each period and reporting it to administration, however it was quickly discovered that the system of keeping track of who was in the SLLC at all times was unmanageable.

School libraries in the wider library context

The Terry Fox School SLLC is viewed in the community as being the only library. There is a public library a few blocks down from Terry Fox School, but with minimal operating hours. The Librarian in the public library in the community goes to work at a different library each day in the region. At any given time, no one in the community knows when or if the library will be open. According to Letandre, many people who wish to access the library simply are not able to because the hours of operation change with the seasons. Letandre has offered to work with the public library to host programs and author visits, and often refers students to the public library, but with such narrow hours of operation, and the fact that most students are bused to and from school, the public library does not receive much foot traffic from students. In years past, the public library had a book mobile program which travelled to the various schools in the region to encourage students to use the public library. After a number of years of having less than stellar turnout, the book mobile was reduced to running only in the summer. After a brief period of very little success, the book mobile was retired.

In terms of relationships between the Teacher-Librarian, school, and book vendors, the relationships are fairly strong. Often, book vendors send packages of books for purchase to the schools in the community who purchase the books they would like and send back the rest. This system works out well because Letandre is able to get into the classrooms to discuss text needs with teachers. Other vendors include Scholastic, which sends out flyers and offers to help host book fairs. During the book fairs, the SLLC closes down temporarily and invites the classes in. Letandre stated that the middle years students (grades 5-8) are often the only students who make purchases. Letandre attends the Scholastic Warehouse sale twice yearly, drives quite a distance to her local Indigo Chapters, and often makes purchases on Amazon. A significant portion of Letandre's recent purchases for the SLLC come at the recommendation or request of other staff.

Crafting SLLC Policy

The written policy for the SLLC in Terry Fox School does not exist anywhere in the staff handbook, or on site with the exception of the checkout counter. When asked about it, Letandre stated, "there was no policy when I started. I had to come up with my own. No one has questioned it, no one really knows it is there, but I refer students to it all of the time." Upon observation of the policy, most items seem to be typical: clean up, be respectful, use technology appropriately (according to the school technology use policy), and bring checked out items back in a timely manner. There is also no limit to the amount of books a student may check out, which Letandre believes is important in developing a reading community. Letandre does not have a written philosophy for the SLLC, nor does the school. When asked what her philosophy for it is, she said, "the student library learning commons is simply a place for students to work in an environment where they can have most of their questions answered in a variety of ways. It also

serves as a collaborative space for both staff and students.” When asked if staff knew this is what she thought about the SLLC, she laughed and said “I hope so.”

The Clientele: Staff, Students and Administrators

Outside of school, Letandre has an open door policy, people in the community are forever dropping by and staying for coffee. In school, Letandre has continued to cultivate this same feeling in the SLLC. She keeps a stock of tea, coffee, and snacks for both staff and students. She has a number of different kinds of seating in her office which appeal to a variety of people she serves. Both students and staff often come in for a cup of coffee, candy, or a granola bar. The SLLC itself is made of warm colours, soft fabrics, and tables at a variety of heights. The computers are both desktops, laptops, and chromebooks and a printer is available for students to print to. Letandre has earned most of the students’ respect from their parents who know her. New families to the community find it easy to get along with Letandre so earning their respect is not hard. Letandre has a fairly easy-going attitude, who speaks bluntly and has an excellent sense of humour. Many students who otherwise feel ostracized by others seek out her approval. Since the principal has a very hands-off approach in dealing with staff and the SLLC, the principal does not come into the SLLC often, but hears reports from the Vice-Principal whose office looks into the SLLC. Again, the relationship between the Vice-Principal and Letandre is strained, at least according to Letandre.

Image Management

In terms of image management, Terry Fox School advertises book fairs over the daily announcements, and often uses space in the school’s monthly newsletter to families to advertise new books or volunteer opportunities. Letandre does not currently use an online cataloguing system, but the school district has purchased one, no training or other information has been

provided at the time of this interview. Letandre makes an effort to make herself seen in classrooms, especially at the beginning of the year. She purposely brings textbooks to classes, stops in to say hello, and interacts with students in the hallways. Letandre says that she knows that some students may come from a SLLC where there strict rules about what students were not allowed to do, and she desires to break that mould. In attempting to break the mould, Letandre identifies student preferences and has older students help her decide which books to put on display. Letandre has one eye-level rack which houses all of the newly purchased books. Recently, three large bookshelves were purchased for the SLLC and Letandre arranges books so that on every other shelf the cover faces out instead of the spine. While Letandre is sometimes frustrated that students judge a book based on how colourful or artistic the cover is, she says she must change how she displays books to appeal to those first impressions. Housing books with the cover facing out may be a poor space choice, but Letandre is convinced that those books end up being checked out more than others with only their spines facing out.

Budget Management

The budget for Terry Fox School's SLLC is largely the same from year to year. Letandre is in charge of her own budget and claims to be quite frugal. She often shops during Scholastic Warehouse sales and Teacher Appreciation days at Indigo Chapters. In previous years, whenever Letandre has thought about making a large purchase, she has gone to the administration before making it. While the school often likes for purchases to be made using purchase orders, it is not always possible. Purchase order forms are available from the secretary, and once filled out is given to administration for approval. There are also reimbursement forms, which Letandre uses for Scholastic Warehouse sales and Amazon orders. While using a reimbursement form, Letandre makes the initial purchase and then is reimbursed by the school. Letandre often keeps a

close eye on her budget, but asks her colleagues for input and suggestions of books to order. Often, when more than Letandre is asking for a particular text, the administration approval is immediate. If books are not selected or recommended by staff in the building, Letandre asks the students. In previous years, she has hand-picked students to survey their peers to ask them about their preferences. Letandre often works closely with the middle years students to identify their interests and asks those students what they might like to read.

Resource Management

Each year, Letandre goes through the stacks during the first few weeks to weed out books in disrepair and not in use. Letandre's personal policy is that if no student has checked out a book in four years (the average number of years students attend Terry Fox School), it must be donated. The only exception to her rule is if the book is written by someone in the community, or is a book only teachers check out. Letandre justifies this by saying that she can always repurchase a book if the need arises. Letandre also enlists the help of the high school English teacher to help weed the collection. Usually, the English teacher has a good handle on what students are interested in and which books have the potential to be used throughout the year. This also serves as a reminder to the English teacher about which books are available, so she can make recommendations to students. Largely, most of the work done in the Terry Fox School's SLLC is done on the computer with ebooks and online textbooks, so Letandre has decided that the need for continuing to make purchases and develop a massive physical book collection is not needed. When looking around the SLLC, bookcases are on two walls, one short and one long, and the paperbacks are housed on three different wire racks. The majority of what students do in the SLLC is not reading the collection.

Personnel and Facilities Management

At the time of this interview, Letandre does not have any library clerks or techs working in the SLLC. However, Letandre does often utilize parent volunteers in a variety of ways. Parent volunteers are occasionally asked to help out with the Scholastic book fair as well as single or annual activities such as weeding, ordering, adding barcodes, and reinforcing paperbacks. In Letandre's experience, personnel issues have not arisen as often volunteer hours are few and far between, resulting in no opportunities for issues.

On the other hand, Letandre can often find herself "putting out fires" with student volunteers and drama that may come into the SLLC, preventing them from successfully helping. Letandre is sympathetic to the issues the students of the school go through, and is known for being a listening ear, so she treads lightly when issues with student volunteers arise. Typically, she offers those students time off, a break, or requests that they help a struggling student in the SLLC so their skills are better put to use.

In terms of the facility layout, Letandre's office is in the corner of the SLLC, with the Vice-Principal and resource teacher's office on the opposite side. Letandre's office is also able to look into "the cave" which is a secluded area of the SLLC not visible to the Vice-Principal, resource teacher, or anyone entering the library. This presents a challenge to the management of the area, specifically when Letandre is not present in her office or is absent from school. Strengths of the facility layout include a variety of seating, easy access and navigation for students and staff entering the SLLC, as well as an attractive and bright appearance. The SLLC's clean appearance is largely due to the lack of carpeting and other hard to clean fabrics. The SLLC has a linoleum floor, which is waxed at least twice a year, as well as leather textured couches and furnishings. All tables are easy to clean and do not have storage for ease in cleaning.

Technology Management

Admittedly, Letandre is somewhat unfamiliar with technology, as she uses a standalone PC in her office and does not utilize the laptops in the SLLC. Letandre knows the teachers in the school who are better able to assist in technology issues and has the divisional technology department on speed dial. There are a variety of HP laptops for students to use (8), as well as iPads (4). There are 6 standalone computers hooked up to the division's network, as well as two printers. One printer prints from any computer on the network, the other's use is dedicated solely to printing from the iPads. While Letandre would like to see more laptops and less standalone PCs, she understands that there is reason for having a variety of pieces of technology. Standalone computers are not required to be signed out, but Letandre's policy includes students using them for school purposes (except lunch times), as well as a one block limit. The laptops and iPads are not allowed to be taken out of the SLLC, which, as a commonly understood rule, does not pose any problems with students.

Leadership and Pro-D

Previously, the division Letandre works in offered professional development in the form of annual and bi-annual meetings among the Teacher Librarians in the division. The division has since removed this offering and waited out the Teacher Librarians into retirement. Letandre, who is one of two remaining Teacher Librarians (and paid an Educational Assistant's hourly wage) left in the division, is visibly upset when asked about how she feels she is supported and encouraged. She stated, "[the division] does not call us teacher librarians anymore, they have stripped us of our earned titles and reduced our pay. They justified it by saying we could either stay in the library with the EA wage or go back into the classroom. By the time they offered that, there were no teaching jobs, so it was either take the EA wage or look for a job elsewhere."

When asked further about this situation, and questioned why no one took it further, she shrugged and said “we trusted them.” Outside of the division offerings, or lack thereof, Letandre seeks out opportunities to network with new teachers and student teachers in the school. She asks a lot of questions, offers to help out in classes, and offers suggestions on how she would be of help.

Conclusion

While Terry Fox School experiences its own struggles and successes, it seems as though the experience students have in the Terry Fox School SLLC is the best that can be experienced given the resources and restraints on the SLLC. I have learned that Teacher Librarians will continue to experience an upward battle of being recognized for their successes and achievements, as well as catering adequately to the needs of the students. Teacher Librarians, it seems, are taking on more and more responsibility. Letandre might make the job look easy on a day-to-day basis, but her comfort in the job is due to her wealth of experience. It seems as though a Teacher Librarian who is willing to continue to work on their own professional development and expanding opportunities for students is viewed as indispensable. While this task was a snapshot of what I expect to experience, I am humbled to have been able to conduct this interview with an experienced and honest Teacher Librarian such as Letandre.