Role of Computers in the School Media Center

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Technology is of major concern to the modern school media coordinator. Each new technology generates new challenges and opportunities for the media professional. While computer technology is no longer new, its potential benefits to school media center patrons and staff alike have yet to be completely realized. Computers can supply information and enjoyment, and can greatly enhance the teaching process. They are becoming an integral part of the educational scene, and it seems logical that they should be present in the media center, and that the media coordinator should be responsible for facilitating their use.

This article is an attempt to describe the role of computers in the school media center. It is based on the writer's experience with school media centers in North Carolina in general and the sixteen local education agencies in the northeast Region in particular. The media program at Cape Hatteras School in Buxton, N.C., under the direction of media coordinator Nancy Cowal, is used as an example. The writer believes that the general principles expressed in this article represent good practices anywhere.

The Computer as an Instructional Resource

At Cape Hatteras School the media program for using the computer as an instructional tool is directed toward both teachers and students. The media coordinator serves on the committee which developed and oversees the school computer plan. The media center makes software packages available for preview by the faculty, and the coordinator assists in the selection and acquisition of new materials. Once materials are acquired and cataloged the role of the media coordinator is to facilitate their use. She leads grade-level information meetings which keep the classroom teachers abreast of the new software and hardware which is available, conducts new

software and hardware demonstrations, and provides mini-workshops dealing with the application of the software to particular situations. Copies of the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC) software are available for teachers, and assistance is provided in using the packages creatively in the classroom. The scheduling of computer hardware for use in individual rooms and the compilation of appropriate software bibliographies are other services offered to the faculty by media center personnel.

Students are provided services which are more instructional in nature. Three computers are set up in the center for student use. The media coordinator provides individual assistance to students in grades eight through twelve in word processing, data base searching and graphic production. Using the objectives found in the *Teacher Handbook*, the media coordinator provides both small and large group instruction on such topics as introduction to computer use, keyboarding, and simple programming. Classroom teachers are involved in teaching computer concepts in the classroom or in the computer lab. Activities which take place in the media center are supplemental to classroom work and insure that skills presented in the *Teacher Handbook* are acquired sequentially by the students at the proper grade level.

Hardware

An important role of the school media center is to maintain and schedule the use of equipment necessary for efficient and effective classroom instruction. Computer hardware should be treated by the media center in the same way as any other classroom resource.

Cape Hatteras School uses labs as its major computer teaching tool. Instruction about the computer and courseware related to the curriculum is introduced to students individually and in groups in the lab. The media coordinator schedules and supplies the equipment for labs, as well as providing at least one computer which can be easily transported to classrooms and used by teachers with minimum setup time.

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Software

The media coordinator's responsibility for maintaining the resources necessary to support the curriculum includes a role in the selection, cataloging, processing, and scheduling of computer software. It is helpful for the center to maintain a separate software catalog as well as entering these materials in the main card catalog.

As the media coordinator strives to attain the objectives for school media programs listed in *School Media Program Recommendations*, she must develop the philosophy that computers and their accompanying software are to be managed and used just as any other medium. The media coordinator should assist the student in searching all forms of media, including computer software, in order to find the appropriate material to accomplish the task at hand, and should be prepared to give instructions in operating the necessary equipment, including computers.

While the task of teaching about computers may not be primarily a media center function, the *North Carolina Teacher Handbook* does list objectives which deal with computers in the section on Educational Media and Computers. The media coordinator should strive to ensure that all students in each grade level have a working knowledge of the skills listed. The major responsibility of the media coordinator in teaching about computers should be to fill the gaps that are discovered and to coordinate the efforts of classroom teachers so that all objectives listed in *The Teacher Handbook* are met for each student.

The Computer as a Research Tool

The Cape Hatteras School media program views the computer as a research tool. All software owned by the school is represented in the card catalog so that students may use the materials when writing papers or doing research. Computer data bases, including an information file, software file, fiction books, and some periodicals, are provided for student and teacher use. In addition to the data bases the center provides a computer which is equipped with a modem for electronic communication. The center is a member of Western Carolina University's MICRONET network. This network allows information exchange with other members as well as communication with professors at WCU. Other features include interest area conferencing and answering questions on math and science projects. Plans are being discussed to subscribe to a commercial data base service to allow online searching for research articles.

In the "real world" computer research is rapidly becoming a reality. The physical distance that once separated researchers and research materials is fast disappearing with the advent of large data bases and search systems. Since one of our responsibilities as educators is to insure that students are ready to function in the world outside of the school, it is necessary that we acquaint them with the process of online searching through the use of such agencies as DIALOG, BRS, or other commercial data bases. At a minimum, we should create an artificial environment which would simulate online searching.

The Computer as an Administrative Tool

The media center coordinator at Cape Hatteras utilizes the computer to assist in clerical and administrative tasks. Though the media center is not automated, many on-going tasks are accomplished by using various programs. Data bases and templates from such programs as PFS and APPLEWORKS are also used. Currently the word processor is being used for newsletters, memos, correspodence, and for producing materials for presentations. The media coordinator produces purchase orders, budgets, media center schedules, and catalog cards using the computer. Overdue notices and bibliographies are generated from data bases which were compiled by the center personnel. The equipment inventory is kept using a simple data base which shortens the time and effort needed to produce reports during the year. Thought is currently being given to acquiring a complete library automation package.

School media coordinators have been given more and more responsibility over the past few years. Computers must be used to accomplish the clerical tasks and the repetitive activities that are inherent in the overall program. Planning for the use of the computer as an administrative tool requires that the entire program be analyzed to determine where the computer can enhance the program and save time. It is important that one ask the following questions when determining whether to automate a center function:

1. Will it save time?
2. Will it allow me to be more effective?
3. Will it allow me to do something of importance that I cannot already do?
4. Will it be economically feasible?

If at least one of the questions cannot be answered affirmatively, the process should not be undertaken. One must recognize that time must be invested in order to save time in the future. This fact must be a basic assumption when mak-

ing decisions concerning automation and computerization.

Conclusion

Computers are a fact of life in today's schools. It is extremely important that school media coordinators understand their role in dealing with them in an effective and positive way. Looking at the center's role in the educational process is a first step in determining just how computers should be incorporated into media center activities.

One should be aware of three major functions of the computer:

1. The computer as an instructional resource
2. The computer as a research tool
3. The computer as an administrative tool

It is the professional responsibility of all educators to continue to explore ways to provide better services to students. As you analyze your individual situation keep in mind that complete automation may not be the answer to all of the problems in your school. The responsibilities which are designated to the center staff vary greatly from school to school. The size of the student body, grade levels served, size of the collection, and the organization of the media center's staff should all influence decisions about automation.

Remember, if you can't do something more efficiently, more effectively, or more economically by using the computer, then don't use the computer for that task. You must also remember that you must invest time now in order to have more time in the future. *You* must study, *You* must apply computer technology, and *You* and *Your* students will reap the rewards.

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