TechKnowledge

A Web Portal Just for Kids

Ohio library network tests new K–12 research tool

A big problem facing school libraries—how to provide student-friendly, information-rich collections online that support the curriculum—may have a solution in a unique Ohio project.

Theresa Fredericka, executive director, INFOhio

Developed jointly by INFOhio (www.infohio.org), a state cooperative school library and information network, and SirsiDynix (www.sirsidynix.com), a provider of integrated library systems, School Rooms is a new multimedia online portal designed for K–12 schools.

Based on the SirsiDynix Rooms content management platform, School Rooms will link to both state and national curricular standards and will feature databases, selected Web sites, the library's catalog, and e-content

from publishers, such as DK and Helicon. Metasearching, or federated searching capability, will allow users to simultaneously search multiple resources, displaying result sets in a clear, student-friendly format.

"It's an engaging way to support student discovery, while providing educators with high quality resources and parents with an accessible way to help their children learn," says Theresa Fredericka, executive director of INFOhio, which provides schools statewide with electronic resources, library automation, and other services.

The project will be piloted in the Shaker Heights City School District beginning in January 2006, before a potential statewide launch in fall 2006, according to Fredericka.

Thus far, School Rooms have been developed for earth science and U.S. history for grades K–12. There's also a special School Room for parents, which, in addition to providing the same information students receive, will include articles on issues such as peer pressure, bullying, tutoring programs, and good homework habits, a link to "ask a librarian" services, and other content to help parents stay connected to their child's learning.

Fredericka says the idea for creating student portals grew from INFOhio's strategic planning process. INFOhio, which has automated more than 2,300 schools, was looking to better support learning, with a more student-centered approach to engaging kids in the process of online exploration and discovery.

Development began this past summer.
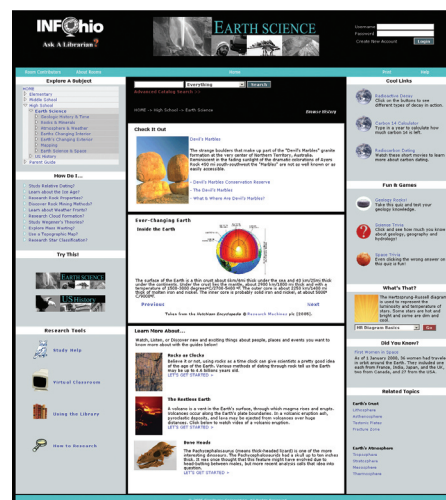
SirsiDynix employed Ohio school librarians and teachers to work in "content teams" to choose material—including Internet sites—and develop taxonomies. In addition, each team also included a media expert, experienced in presenting Web content.

Shaker Heights, with 5,600 students in eight schools, will be the first to test the earth science and U.S. history School Rooms. "That's the litmus test—if the kids use it and like it," says Angus Carroll, SirsiDynix's chief marketing officer. Kent State University's School of Library and Information Science will also provide usability testing.

Feedback and evaluation from the trial will help shape School Rooms in preparation for establishing the project statewide, says Fredericka.

But the INFOhio community is optimistic. The idea of teaching students to use a portal to access a variety of resources—all chosen specifically for them—is compelling.

"I see it as a tool that is easy to navigate and packed with information sources tied to school goals and student achievement," says Kathy Fredrick, director of library media and instructional technology for Shaker Heights. "It's the antidote to Google overload."—*Brian Kenney*

It's Worth the Risk

If libraries want to thrive, they need to be bold and imaginative

'M A SUCKER WHEN IT COMES TO VISITING NEW OR RENOVATED LIBRARIES. I'm curious about all sorts of things—from the fun of experiencing fresh designs to learning about the choices the architects and librarians made to understanding how these libraries will be used by the public. So when I heard that ImaginOn, the new facility created by the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) and the Children's Theatre of Charlotte, was opening in October 2005, I knew I had to see it.

I didn't really understand the building before I visited it, nor how the collaboration between a library and a theater company would play out. I knew only that ImaginOn was a freestanding building the size of a city block, entirely devoted to serving children and young adults—reason enough for *School Library Journal* to head to North Carolina.

What I found knocked my socks off. We sometimes talk about what a library would look like if we could create one entirely from scratch, without archetype or precedent or a skimpy budget. ImaginOn would be it. Sure, it has lots of familiar elements (preschool storytimes begin at 10 a.m.), but much of ImaginOn is radically different (for instance, there's a really cool studio where teens can create and edit videos). Somehow, a process that began with the goal of moving the children's and young adult services out of the main library and into their own structure turned into a risk-taking enterprise.

I had similar thoughts a month ago when I listened to risk takers in Ohio discuss their School Rooms project . Theresa Fredericka, the executive director of INFOhio (the state's information network), along with a group of school librarians and leaders are creating something unprecedented: a rich, online multimedia collection—a type of library, really—designed to support K–12 learners. School Rooms will use the same digital vernacular that the generation "born with a chip" expects. And Ohio's school librarians have borrowed tools from university libraries (portals, federated searching) to make it happen.

"Of course, you'd write about PLCMC," a friend of mine said the other day, "they've got more money than God." And Ohio libraries are the best supported in the nation, he added. I'm not sure if God has borrowing privileges at PLCMC (although I wouldn't be surprised). But I can understand my friend's perspective. He manages a children's room in New York, where he fights each year just to retain his existing level of funding. He innovates and takes risks, but on a smaller scale.

But my pal is missing the point. There are other public libraries and school consortia that are well supported. But only a few, including PLCMC and INFOhio, realize that to survive libraries must evolve *and* choose to initiate change. As librarians we are better at charting "best practices" than "best risks." When projects as daring as ImaginOn or as ambitious as School Rooms come along, we need to take notice, shine a spotlight on them, and, we hope, jump-start a national discussion about the important, new ways in which libraries are enriching children's lives.

Will these bold experiments succeed? It's far too early to say, although my hunch is yes—with some tweaking along the way. We'll be sure to revisit them in a year or two and let you know. In the meantime, congratulations to both on jobs well started.

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