The MANY FACES of COLLABORATION

BY STACEY GERWITZ

Much to my dismay, there are no hallway traffic jams caused by teachers lined up at the library door anxious to collaborate. In fact, some teachers might never cross our library threshold if I didn’t reach out and offer my services. Working with different faculty members can be quite the adventure, and it is never the same experience. There are different levels of collaboration. Some will be full co-teaching experiences, while others will include a division of skills and teachable moments. Whether you are just beginning your career or are a seasoned veteran, you may already know—or may someday meet—this assembly of collaborating teachers.

The Dream Teacher

This is the teacher who makes a librarian’s life amazing! When you meet with the teacher for the first time, you become instant collaborators. You want to work with her as often as you can throughout the year. In fact, the year isn’t long enough for all the ideas you have. She realizes the potential and increased cognitive gains for students through collaboration. It’s a win-win-win for the students, teacher, and librarian. Her units become your units and vice versa until you can’t tell which unit belonged to whom in the beginning. It’s a perfect peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

After the first meeting, there is no need to reach out because this teacher reaches out in a variety of ways. This teacher becomes the library’s biggest promoter and could sway others to give collaboration a chance. Ask this teacher to have her professional observation in the library; a little administrative exposure can go a long way for the students and the library program.

Here are some opportunities made possible through these successful partnerships:

• When more than one instructor reinforces skills, students can become more independent users of the skill. I reinforce the skills teachers introduce to students in the classroom. For example, during research, students examine texts for information, which allows me to reinforce close reading skills.

• Ethical representation of materials is critical to avoid plagiarism. When I see parenthetical documentation on a teacher’s slide, I know this is a true partnership.

• Consistent vocabulary is important when collaborating. The dream teacher and I will meet to ensure that the words we use have the same meaning.

The Never Enough Time Teacher

“There will never be enough time to teach this curriculum. There will never be enough time for me to see my students.” These are common phrases heard when you approach this teacher-type about collaborative opportunities.

There are different levels of collaboration. Some will be full co-teaching experiences, while others will include a division of skills and teachable moments.
Here are some strategies to advocate for collaboration with this teacher. First, help the teacher by letting him know that you will alleviate some of his workload. Words only go so far, however. You must show him.

Conduct some research about the topics he teaches. Give him specific ideas on how a project with you can address his curriculum while lessening his already overflowing plate. If you have a 6th grade science teacher, and she is working on a unit about rocks, propose student-created, researched books about rocks. The students need to include the necessary curriculum elements the teacher wants to cover in class (type of rock, how the rock is formed, and an interesting fact that can be based on an inquiry question).

Start collaboration small: maybe a day or two of research, or a mini-research project. Students gain necessary skills, and the teacher sees the value of collaboration. We, as librarians, know there is always time for collaboration. We just need to show the teachers there is always time for the library.

2) Attend some department meetings or grade level meetings. Bring some materials and show her how collaboration is beneficial to students. Bring some work samples from the dream teacher’s classes!

The Denial Teacher

Teachers in this category believe they have everything under control and can teach what a librarian teaches. You have tried different approaches, but these teachers feel they can teach all the components of research. They have no need for book talks. Other teachers have even remarked about how easy it is to collaborate and how students were engaged while students received additional support when needed. You’ve tried starting small; now it is time to get creative. Ask if you can teach a lesson in the classroom (try for ten minutes). Find out about the teacher; is he or she more passionate about books, research process, technology, or something else? Take that passion and create a mini-lesson. Ask her if you can try it with the group to get some feedback from the students.

Sometimes, teachers like their space and don’t feel comfortable coming to the library, or maybe they are worried about others messing up their work. If you can get in for that first ten minutes, maybe next time you will get twenty minutes—and so it begins.

The Refusal Teacher

Either your efforts to communicate are ignored, or a solid “no” is given by the teacher each time an attempt is made to reach out. Emails are not returned, and they want nothing to do with the library program. It will quickly become quite frustrating! Thankfully, this has only happened once or twice to me, and after I realized that no attempts would ever come to fruition, life was much better. At the secondary level, students have different teachers for different subjects. So, while this particular teacher may not want anything to do with collaboration, I realized that I could reach those same students through a different teacher.

Concentrate your efforts where the collaboration will have a positive impact on the students. It’s okay to walk away from this teacher. Kindly remind him or her that you are there if they should ever want to collaborate and then let it go.

The People Who You Meet

Have you met other types of collaboration “personalities”? Educators help students learn, grow, and develop into their best selves. Each of us has different methods to help achieve this goal. For the teachers whose methods are different than yours, find common ground and remember to ask yourself: what will the student gain from this collaboration? I know collaboration is going well when I hear comments from students like, “Research isn’t as complicated as I thought” or “I have to make sure I do my work because both teachers are watching me.”

Stacey Gerwitz is a library media specialist at Ballston Spa Middle School in Ballston Spa, NY.

Stacey Gerwitz is a library media specialist at Ballston Spa Middle School in Ballston Spa, NY.