

# Access to academic databases gives students a leg up

Buying software licences in bulk reduces costs for school districts and delivers materials that are evaluated to a rigorous set of criteria.

by Leslie Dyson

// **E**lectronic delivery of resources is going to be huge,” said Rick Paterson, vice-principal of Educational Programs in Delta. “We’re only seeing the tip of the iceberg ... We have to get away from the notion of printed textbooks as a long-lived resource.”

Mark Robinson, vice-principal at Delview Secondary School with a population of 700 students in grades 8 to 12, said about 50 percent of students are connected to the Internet at some time during the school day.

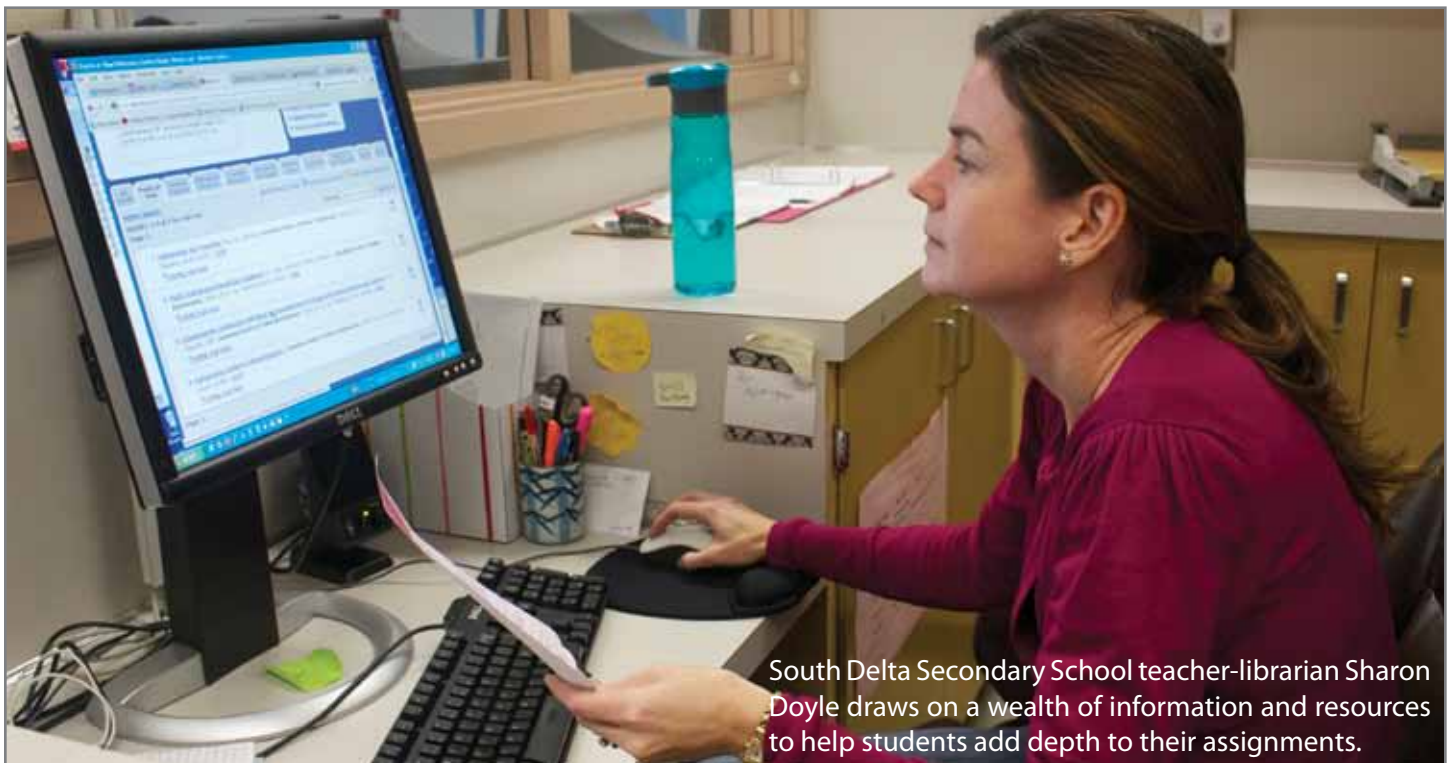
Like schools throughout the province, he said, “some teachers embrace the technology, some don’t want to see it and others are in between.”

Paterson is also the district contact for the BC Educational Resource Acquisition Consortium (ERAC) and has been involved with the organization from the beginning, when he was a member of the software advisory committee.

And now “very little of the software (used in the district) is not ERAC sourced,” he said. ERAC, with mem-

bership from almost every district in the province and several private schools, uses its bulk-buying power to negotiate reduced rates for licences and software for its members. It is a service that used to be provided by the Ministry of Education. All ERAC materials are evaluated by trained B.C. teachers and subjected to a rigorous set of criteria.

The district’s Microsoft licence, negotiated by ERAC, brought the Delta School District’s costs from \$90,000 a year to \$35,000. “It took some time to



South Delta Secondary School teacher-librarian Sharon Doyle draws on a wealth of information and resources to help students add depth to their assignments.

run the numbers, but we've seen some significant savings," Paterson said.

Delta received a pleasant surprise when it discovered additional savings from its purchase of a single district-wide Microsoft licence through ERAC. Costs associated with processing purchase orders for every school in the district were no longer necessary.

Robinson knows more about ERAC resources and services than many administrators in the province. He was a computer co-ordinator before he became an administrator. He continues to provide support for classroom technology in his duties related to the school budget.

He acknowledged that many companies providing educational software and hardware are happy to enter agreements with ERAC. "It's a marketing tool for these companies so they can hook end users when they finish school. But the reality is that this [dilemma] is around us all the time. We need to make choices in the best interests of the kids."

ERAC licences are district-wide, he noted. The number of schools and computers are irrelevant. It's no longer necessary for each school to pay the higher retail prices and it levels the playing field so that minimum standards can be met in every school.

Teacher-librarians and computer co-ordinators know about ERAC, he added, but it's also important for administrators to know where the money is going and what ERAC is as well. "I like the access to the software and media devices," he said. "We couldn't afford it if we didn't do it through ERAC. In an environment of doing more with less, it gives us access to databases, software and movies that are in the outside world. Personally, I think it's a good thing and fits with 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning. ERAC has grown and gotten better." Robinson

said he looks forward to the day when ERAC can offer applications and tablets at greatly reduced cost.

ERAC's databases are well used at South Delta Secondary School. English literature teacher Scott Pike wanted his students to understand the themes in Willa Cather's short story *Paul's Case*. To prepare, he went to see teacher-librarian Sharon Doyle. "She has a wealth of information and resources," he said. *Paul's Case*, written in 1905, is about a young social misfit who's unable to accept the drab reality of his daily life.

Doyle went to the school library web page and quickly called up Academic Search Premier to see what resources were available. Much of the information that the students needed was in that database.

Gone are the days of doing a simple compare and contrast between a couple of short stories. Pike told Doyle that he wanted his Grade 12 students to be able to examine the story from several perspectives: historical, feminist, formalist, Marxist, psychoanalytical and biographical. They would be required to choose two of those viewpoints and write a two-page analysis using several sources and proper citations.

With the resources now available to young students, Pike recalled the difficulty he had in university. "I wasn't a very good student," he said. The Internet "wasn't nearly as straight forward and easy to use and you couldn't do research from home. Now it's much more accessible and powerful. Students are being given a leg up."

The quality and reliability of the information makes it easier to fulfill the requirements of the IRP that calls for synthesis and analysis combining information from multiple sources. "It makes the whole endeavour more robust and meaningful."

But the depth and sophistication of

the research exercise comes as a surprise to students. "It is a lot of work. I think some of them were quite shell-shocked," Pike said.

He is pleased to be able to introduce his students to university level resources. "The majority of kids don't realize that most of the websites (available through Google) are powered by commerce. That's what dot-com means. We need venues that limit the searches in an academic way and get past that garbage. They can waste lots of time searching Google. [With these databases] they can have something that's instantaneous, reliable and credible."

Doyle points out to students how distracting Google can be. She gives the example of looking for information on Voltaire. If you Google "Voltaire," the first site on the list is Wikipedia. Next is Voltaire.net, a gothic-styled musician's site filled with striking images and youtube videos. Left to their own devices, students are likely to go to the flashy site. "I tell them, 'Before you know it, 45 minutes have gone by and now you're into the vortex.'"

As a teacher-librarian, Doyle said she sees her job as getting students past the distractions so they can make the most of their time. "It's just good teaching."

The online resources link on the school library's web page is modeled on university and public library web sites. Students and teachers can easily access *Oxford Reference Online*, *Student Resources in Context*, *Biography in Context*, *Academic Search Premier* and many other databases and resources available with an ERAC membership. She said she likes *World Book Advanced* because it provides links to primary documents. *Canadian Points of View* opens the door to many periodicals (North American mostly) and

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Dyson, continued from page 9 provides guidelines on how to write a thesis statement, judge facts vs. opinions and evaluate web sites.

“Simply telling students ‘It’s on the web’ is like telling them it’s in a book,” said Doyle. “We have to teach them how to read and how to use materials that are developmentally appropriate.”

Paterson tells staff in his district that electronic textbooks are coming next. “Printed textbooks can’t keep up with the sciences,” he said, “especially biology, chemistry and physics.” Other disciplines also benefit from new online delivery models. In the near future, online curriculum packages will contain textbook excerpts, interactive learning objects and strategies developed by different teachers. “It’s here now,” he said. “It’s just not widespread.”

The Ministry of Education is moving toward a “bring your own device” model, he said. Schools are no longer waiting for shipments of IBM or Apple computers. “We can’t afford to put a device in everyone’s hands,” he said.

Robinson said the Delta district entered a partnership four years ago with a local cable supplier to offer wireless connections in every school. Bigger bandwidths were provided in secondary schools and routers were placed to ensure there were no dead spots. Even so, maximum levels are being reached.

Delta Secondary, with 1,550 students, has more than 1,000 student-owned personal devices (smart phones, iPods and iPads, etc.) connected to the Internet at all times of the school day, said Paterson.

“But as more and more students bring their own devices, there are bottlenecks.” There is growing urgency for broader bandwidths. Even though South Delta School received an electronic upgrade last year, he said, the school is already at a maxi-


mum level. He’s envious of UBC which underwent a massive network upgrading program four years ago. “It’s phenomenal.”

Paterson acknowledged that Internet connection is even more challenging in remote school districts that are still relying on satellite technology. However, he was gratified to learn that the last throne speech included a reference to funding delivery infrastructure in schools. “Optimally, we will see much better bandwidth at a reasonable cost.”

One area of concern in Delta is elementary students’ access to technology support, Paterson said. With reduced funding for non-enrolling teachers, teacher-librarians, who are schools’ information specialists, are spending

much of their time covering for classroom teachers who are doing preparation work. “It’s hard to provide proper technology support,” he said. There’s little time to collaborate with teachers on effective ways to integrate technology in intermediate classrooms.

Paterson keeps abreast of the technology advances by following other educators on Twitter who are also interested in education innovations. You can follow him at [@rpaterson](#)

Paterson has good news for those of us who feel overwhelmed with overflowing email inboxes and information coming at us from all directions. “It might have plateaued,” he said. 

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## Cover Art



Our cover art this month is by Riikka Iivanainen, a Rotary Exchange student from Finland who is currently in grade 11 at Clearwater Secondary. Riikka normally attends a Beaux-Arts Secondary school in Helsinki. We thank Riikka, her teacher Mr. Menard, and Vice-Principal Peter Persad for sharing this work.

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