

Divine Design in the Library

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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I remember clearly walking in to this library for the first time. It looked pretty much like every other school library I had seen. Book shelves packed to their ends with books around the perimeter? Check. Tables and chairs crowded into the centre of the room? Check. Tables of computers? Check. Orange shag carpet? Check.

At about the same time, I was reading a great deal about 21st Century Libraries and the Learning Commons. Schools were in the news for throwing out books and adding coffee shops to their libraries. I was completing course work in Teacher-Librarianship, and I was learning more about not only the nature of my role as a Teacher-Librarian but also the library space. Libraries and Teacher-Librarians were rapidly evolving. The 21st century library is a space that works for multiple groups of people and multiple purposes. It is a gathering space, a teaching space, an inquiry space, a comfortable reading space, and more!

There was a clash between the reality of the library in which I found myself and the practice about which I was learning. I began to look critically at my space and how it functioned.

The Physical Space

The space was an excellent meeting room. There were enough tables and chairs for our large teaching staff and other groups who needed to meet. The library was working well as a computer lab. Housing 25 computers, classes booked in to use the computers and practice their typing or to type their reports. It was also working well as a book repository. In fact, there were books housed here since the 40s and 50s! Weeding had not been a popular practice in previous years. Finally, it was working great as a place to sign out books! Each day, classes dutifully filed in and out in their 15 minute time slots to sign out books for the week. What the library was not doing was working for the students it claimed to serve. It was not a space where students could work collaboratively, be inspired, easily access multiple modes of information, create and share their work or even read comfortably.

I worked in the library for a year without making any changes. I needed to see how the space worked, how it was used, and what was used regularly. I

also needed to learn more about the culture of the school, and take time to build relationships before making a massive overhaul.

At the time, my school served a K-5 population. In two years the school would operate as a K-3 school, the only primary school in the province. During my second year in the library, I began to critically and purposefully evaluate the space and how it was used. I read and researched more about school libraries that were making a difference in student learning and what was happening in those spaces, and I gradually developed a vision for what I wanted my school library to be.

I accessed Learning Support Facilitators in our school division, Samantha Mirwald and Patricia Peech. I had a vision in my head, but I wasn't exactly sure how to go about achieving it. These ladies helped me to think through the vision and develop a plan. Two videos really helped me to see what I knew I wanted.

The first video was about the [Anythink Library in Brighton](#). I liked that this library focused on creating a space that worked for the patrons. This library is not a book repository. I liked the comfortable seating, the open space, the flexibility of the space, the variety of activities that could occur, the inclusion of technology and (gasp!) the shift in how books were organized!

The second video that had a big impact on me was from [Amesbury School in New Zealand](#). Their school library was the hub and heart of the school, students had easy access throughout the day and the space was used for reading, research, creation and sharing. I wanted our library to be busy, to be comfortable, to be accessible, and to have technology for learning (not typing).

With a plan in place, I made a presentation to my administration team that included not only what I wanted to change, but more importantly why I wanted to make the changes and how they would impact student learning. Thankfully my principal is very supportive of the library. Aside from allotting me a budget of \$5000 to make the changes, he also advocated for and was successful in getting our 30 year old orange shag carpet replaced!

I had to first consider my students. I was going to be serving K-3 students. Some of the challenges we had:

- The furniture was not suited for small children (too high)
- There was a lack of accessibility (students visited only once per week) as well as practical fact that shelving was too high
- The library used as a computer lab
- It did not work for multiple groups at once

- There were a lack of tools and space to create artifacts that demonstrated their learning (space was not flexible)
- The space was not inspiring
- How to create independence for students who may not be able to read, read well and who did not understand Dewey

I thought about how furniture could be arranged so that it could be flexible and to create zones. I used furniture and fabric to accomplish this.

In one corner I have a story pit. I hung some sheer fabric around it to define it, but that would allow light to come through. This space works for students who want to read quietly or for group story times or meetings.





Next to the pit, I placed a large curved table that I found second-hand and put it on wheels so it could be moved around. I purchased some small stools to go around it. There is space to add more if needed or the table and seating can be moved so it can be a large empty space for a group to work on a larger project. Most of the time, small groups work here and frequently students like to sit together here to look at books.



Finally, the last corner across the back. I draped fabric over the ceiling and down the front to create the feeling of a cozy tent. I filled this space with bean bags and large pillows and have added a couple of comfy chairs. This is another space that works easily for students wanting to read, small groups, or can easily be a space for a whole class to sit and learn.



I had all of the computers except for a pod of five removed from the library. I gained 20 iPads as well. I wanted the technology to be used for learning, but not for a typing class.



The centre of the library holds three book shelves for picture books. In the middle I placed some lovely second-hand furniture. It looks like a sitting room and it can be easily pushed out of the way to make room for the book fair, or to host an author or artist for a larger group of students.



The physical change to the space was perhaps the easiest part of the change in the library. This was the first step to creating an inspiring, comfortable, collaborative space that suited the learning needs of students. The real hard work was yet to come. Next I tackled the collection. This is where I began to challenge traditional library organization and organize the collection to allow K-3 students to be more independent in the library and at the same time increase our circulation.

You can read more in the next issue of *The Medium*.

Resources:

Brooks Kirkland, A. (2011, October). Designing virtual library learning spaces [Web log message]. Retrieved from http://bythebrooks.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/46344821/HWCDSB_LLC.pdf

Hamilton, B. (2007, September 18). Six trends in school library centers for the 21st century [Web log message]. Retrieved from <http://theunquietlibrarian.wordpress.com/2007/09/18/six-trends-in-school-library-media-centers-for-the-21st-century/>

Loertscher, D. (2008). Flip This Library: School libraries need a revolution. *School Library Journal (online)*. Retrieved October 16, 2014, from <http://www.slj.com/2008/11/sljarchives/flip-this-library-school-libraries-need-a-revolution/>

School Libraries Project. (n.d.). Retrieved October 16, 2014, from <http://www.schoollibrariesproject.org/>

Sullivan, M. (2011). Divine Design: How to create the 21st century library of your dreams. *School Library Journal (online)*. Retrieved October 16, 2014, from <http://www.slj.com/2011/04/buildings-design/divine-design-how-to-create-the-21st-century-school-library-of-your-dreams/#>