

Changing the shape of the library: shaking it up and putting it down

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Abstract

Whilst teaching years 5 and 6 I was once asked to describe my library. My response to this was 'it rocks'. The staff viewed me quizzically and subsequently moved on to their lunchtime conversation. Little did I know this would be the theme of the 2015 conference?

In 2013 I inherited my current library as the stereotypical 'quiet', very structured environment of the past century. It was visited by few students during their lunchtime as they required a lunchtime pass (only 6 per class) which was given to them by their classroom teacher. These passes were then collected by library monitors at the door - no pass, no library!

Library lessons consisted of 30 minute sessions whereby books were loaned, returned, a story read and the class departed and then the next class arrived to repeat the procedure regardless of age. The schedule was busy as there are 24 classes. There were occasions whereby a book was recommended as a great read and short listed books from the Children's Book Council were shared. How to change the mind set of both staff and students to see the library and its potential was both my challenge and my goal. It was time to move towards 21st century learning whereby students can develop the skills of creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking. This is not rocket science as this is every teacher librarian's goal. I can successfully say that 2 years later my library rocks and this sentiment is wholeheartedly shared by students, staff and the community.

'So much time and so little to do. Wait a minute. Strike that. Reverse it. Thank you.'
(Willy Wonka, 1971) That was 2014.

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'In schools where the library and librarian are properly recognized as integral to student success, the library is a powerful arena for transformation' (Hartzell, 2003). Libraries should be the center of any school environment but are they? If you think about just the resources which are held in this location, which amounts to a considerable amount of the school funding, then this alone should make the library a priority, but unfortunately that is not always true.

A school which will both lead the way in the 21st century and facilitate a learning environment in which your students may 'confidently define, locate and critically use information from across a broad range of information sources and technologies' (Todd 1996), is a school which through problem-solving, decision-making, exploration and creativity develops students who are information literate.

However, change may be necessary to create this environment. To implement successful change practices within a community and your school library, an understanding of the theories which underpin a successful learning community is first required. Fullan (1999) cites the Child Development Project which succeeded, because as a model, it encompassed dual theories -pedagogical reform and shaping local conditions. With the implementation of new curriculum in New South Wales, it is an opportune time in which to affect change. This has been my endeavor at Newbridge Heights but change does not just happen. It takes time and it needs to be a journey that is shared.

Having spent 8 years overseas, and returning to Australia in 2011, I was fortunate enough to gain a temporary position at Newbridge Heights Public School. In 2012 the position of teacher librarian became vacant as the previous teacher librarian had retired. The position was advertised and I was the successful applicant who then became a part of the team at Newbridge Heights. During the interview for the position I was asked what I would do if I was successful. I had the advantage of already working in the school so I had grand plans and a list! I replied 'I would pick up the library, give it a severe shake and put it down. It will never be the same again!' I also remember saying I would liberate the cushions. Sounds like a strange remark, but the scatter cushions, which had been purchased for the library, were kept in large tubs and only liberated on special occasions. Why? I will never know. In 2013 I began the transformation of the library. What would I change immediately, which would have an impact, establish goals which would encourage staff to be part of the journey and how would I go about it? Kilpatrick (2003) acknowledges that learning communities are formed with people who share a common purpose and are able to achieve a solution to a problem – at Newbridge Heights this was easily achieved as I was working with a Principal who shared my vision and a staff who were ready for change. The staff had already moved on from what was once the traditional library where students visited for half an hour, exchanged their books, read a story (if time allowed), discussed information literacy skills and left. Many viewed it almost as a waste of time and an unnecessary intrusion into the learning happening in the classroom. It was a half hour which existed in isolation. It was now time for Newbridge Heights to change and become a learning community.

Learning communities have two major foci, these being the human element and the curricular structures which are used to develop knowledge (Kilpatrick, 2003). Consideration of the human element is important and it is imperative that within educational learning communities there is a feeling of trust which has been developed between the principal and the staff, and the staff with each other. Change is not sustainable if this is not evident. An autocratic leader can only achieve and sustain change whilst they are present. The community must believe in the common purpose of an information literate school community and a changed library. The teacher librarian giving orders or even suggesting change was not going to be sustainable. This needed to be a shared journey.

This change needed to be seen as a benefit for the teachers and the students so I decided to tackle the physical environment of the library first. This would provide evidence of an

immediate reinvigoration and one which I felt would benefit all and inspire all to accept change.



Newbridge Heights was built in the early 80s and the library is large with a computer lab attached, a pit, (a step down 2 tiered learning space), and a loft which holds teacher resources. It has timber panelled walls, lots of character and has a large teaching space. However, the library configuration which I inherited was crowded and the layout outdated. It needed a major cull of the collection, movement of furniture – tables and shelving - and the relocation of the enquiry terminals. It was like buying a house with the sole purpose of renovating. It had 'good bones', but needed changing. The enquiry terminals which were situated almost in the middle of a teaching space needed to be relocated towards the rear of the library. This was quite an easy task as there were supporting posts around which the enquiry terminals were situated and as there were two of them, both of which had power points and internet connections, moving from one to the other

required little effort. This resulted in a less cluttered appearance and a bigger floor space in which students could sit and work.

Following this was the moving of the library office into the reading resource room and vice versa. I had been into the reading resource room whilst on class and found it daunting, claustrophobic and very user unfriendly. (I was told that the office restructure I was suggesting was the way in which the library had been originally designed. It had been this way sometime previously but had been changed by a former teacher librarian.) There was definitely no room to turn, discover or access the readers which were needed for classrooms. The office in comparison was huge, by office standards, and cluttered with miscellaneous 'stuff' and disorganized. It was time to change.

Fortunately there is a very capable General Assistant at the school who has the ability to turn ideas into reality, so he was able to construct the new hanging space for readers and relocate shelving into the designated office spaces. This was achieved over the Christmas break and was ready for staff usage when they returned. It had an immediate impact. This was the beginning of a learning community which would share a common goal and support each other in learning.



Newbridge Heights was taking the first step towards becoming a dynamic learning community which had the capacity for change. My vision of the school library being the center of learning was beginning its realization. The professional learning community, which the school was becoming, reflects changes that occur 'in relationships, culture, roles, norms, communication patterns and practices' (Huffman 2001). The creation of a school vision is integral to this change process and although it can be implemented over time it must be based upon the common values and beliefs of the community. It is a vision which must be shared by all, collaboratively written and not just invented by the administrators to frame and display in the foyer. Physical changes are easily seen, immediate and can rejuvenate staff and the community in developing a vibrant learning center which is no longer static.

Changing the collection was the next major challenge. There was shelving everywhere and there was no clear line of sight of students and movement around the shelving was limited. This was an opportunity to cull outdated and damaged resources and reorganize shelving. What a task! Hartzell, (2003) states change inherently involving conflict can be minimized by utilizing the skills and knowledge of the teacher librarian. As the teacher librarian has the opportunity to interact with all others across the school community they are in an ideal position to implement change. The teacher librarian has an advantage in that they have access to information and knowledge about curriculum across all grade levels. This results in the teacher librarian having access to considerable information which then creates the perception that the teacher librarian is a person with considerable influence and can be trusted when it comes to culling or rearranging the collection. This enabled me to be ruthless. Much of the non-fiction collection was 15 to 20 years old.

I then completely revamped the layout of the collection and moved non-fiction from its place in the library and reshelved it where it was more easily accessible. (A year later after attending a Kevin Hennah workshop I installed some front facing shelving.) This was an excellent way for me to understand and know the collection, as I reviewed each book before returning it to the shelf, or designating it to the recycling bin. With the responsibility of resource management the teacher librarian is able to directly influence staff and students by providing advice on suitable purchases which will then support teaching and learning. Teacher librarians also have the practical skills of organization. These organizational skills need to be utilized for the benefit of all (Hartzell, 2003). Reorganization would provide a relevant and easily accessible non-fiction section.



With the inclusion of new chairs for the student tables the physical layout of the library had undergone a radical change. It was now time to tackle the teaching.

The teacher librarian who is involved in collaborative teaching and learning practices accommodates, and is cognizant of teachers' instructional styles and capabilities, in order to develop successful working relationships. Understanding this, I suggested moving away from the half hour lessons and implementing team teaching. Kilpatrick (2000) acknowledges that learning communities can be deliberately fostered through the sharing of leadership and utilizing the skills and knowledge of all contributors. I was able to join 2 classes together (60 students) for an hour with 3 rotational activities, therefore fully utilizing, the teaching spaces, the available technology and expertise of the teachers whilst working with smaller groups. Library skills would no longer be taught in isolation but would become part of the 'classroom'

curriculum. Stage 3 (years 5 & 6) were happy to give this a try as was Stage 1 (years 1 & 2). Students would rotate through 3 activities, using iPads, the computer lab and interacting with each other and the teacher librarian through the use of the Commbox.

Fullan (1999) says 'it is the quality of the relationships among organizational members, as they evolve, that makes for long term successes.' 2013 was a resounding success with staff totally supportive and engaged in this new teaching method in the library. All staff involved saw it as supporting and adding value to what they did in the classroom. 2014 saw Stage 2 come on board with this team teaching and rotational activities. As the school was also moving to increasing the number of iPads it provided a non-threatening environment in which staff could familiarize themselves with the capabilities of the various apps and the subsequent inclusion of this new technology into their teaching and learning.

The physical aspect of the library continued to evolve with the purchase of book bins for the Junior Fiction, replacing the standard library shelving, and the replacement of the Interactive Whiteboard with a Commbox – an interactive LED screen which has the capability of an iPad and the resolution of an LED television. There was no longer a need to close blinds to enhance picture quality. In addition there is a half boat, with sail, which acts as a display for books and changes its 'persona' annually. It has been a pirate ship, a rainforest ship and it is currently a pink ship with butterflies, fairies and cobwebs. There is also a bridge, left from last year's Book Week display on which students can sit on cushions and read. The bridge was a part of the Book Week display and was used to connect the outside world to the library, supporting the theme of 'connect to reading'.

2015 Saw the staff in stage 2 and 3 take another 'leap of faith' as we introduced Kath Murdoch's model of inquiry based learning. This style of learning supports the new curriculum focus of developing creative, critical thinkers who can independently search for and use information. As Hay and Foley (2009) state 'the basis of student learning through the school library is an inquiry-based instructional program. School library programs build students' deep knowledge and understanding through effective inquiry when they connect with students' existing knowledge and interests to establish relevance, and engage students in learning about and solving real world problems'.

This is a steep learning curve for everyone as we assist students to tune in to a big question and then develop the skills to research a solution. In an inquiry classroom we encourage students to notice their learning (Murdoch, K. 2011). Although only using this inquiry learning model for one term the students have developed a real purpose for learning research skills and sharing their information with each other. They are becoming critical learners who question and discuss rather than accept blindly.



Teacher librarians do not have all the answers to all the questions but they can guide and demonstrate the ways in which to find solutions and they can be the driving force behind change in a school. Principals who have developed information literate school communities acknowledge the worth of their library and the teacher librarian and the teacher librarian in turn must articulate their beliefs and act on those beliefs in concert with their school community. An information literate community is not achieved solely through the inclusion of a teacher librarian, within the community, but rather through the combined effort of the learning organization. Newbridge Heights Public School is a learning organization which continues to strive for excellence and one which is not afraid to change. As Llopis (2014) states, "change is difficult; not changing is fatal".

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