Developing independent learners: the Box Hill School experience

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Abstract
Box Hill School is an independent school in Surrey, England. In 2008 the English curriculum was abandoned in favour of the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBD). A library is a statutory requirement of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) endorsement who also recommend this be managed by a qualified teacher-librarian. In May 2008, I was employed to create a library and develop independent learning throughout the school. This paper considers the rationale behind the physical design. It outlines the implementation of independent learning in an international school community where no infrastructure to promote this style of teaching and learning previously existed.

Introduction
Box Hill School (2010) is a co-educational independent boarding school for 11-18 year olds located in rural Surrey, England. The school was founded in September 1959 by Roy McComish, a housemaster and art master at Gordonstoun School (2010) in Scotland.

The School follows the philosophy of Kurt Hahn the founder of Gordonstoun and an experimental educationalist. Hahn's principles (Flavin, 1996, pp. 15-17) state that education should:

1. Give the children opportunities for self-discovery
2. Make the children meet with triumph and defeat
3. Give the children the opportunity of self-effacement in the common cause.
4. Provide periods of silence
5. Train the imagination
6. Make games important but not predominant
7. Free the sons of the wealthy and powerful from the enervating sense of privilege.

The 425 students at Box Hill School are drawn from 37 nationalities. It is a founder member of the Round Square (2010) and as such is committed to internationalism. Round Square is a worldwide association of more than 80 global member schools and 26 regional member schools on five continents which share a commitment, beyond academic excellence, to personal development, taking responsibility and serving others. The criteria for membership include a strong commitment from students to participate in the six pillars that form the foundation of Round Square. These can be summed up by the word IDEALS: International Understanding; Democracy; Environment; Adventure; Leadership; and Service.

Not surprisingly, in 2008 the decision was taken to abandon the traditional English syllabus in favour of International General Certificates of Education (iGCSEs) and the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IB) for students aged 16 and 18 respectively.

However, at this time the school had no library, having disbanded it in favour of IT suites six years previously, due to pressure on teaching space. The IBO require any school they endorse to have a library, and recommend this library be managed by a qualified teacher-librarian. Their documentation states:

> It is strongly recommended to employ a fully trained and well qualified librarian, ideally a teacher-librarian, to be responsible for the library. It is also expected that this important member of the staff will have a sound overall understanding of the DP [Diploma Programme] curriculum and be sufficiently informed to be able to advise students on such important issues as resourcing their TOK [Theory of Knowledge] assignment or researching the extended essay (Goodban, 2004, p.13).

Specifically the application criteria state that the library/resource centre should also meet defined requirements:

> The school management and the library/resource centre staff must ensure that:
> - the library is well designed and equipped to serve the requirements of the Diploma Programme and that it encourages both student and staff use
> - library staff have appropriate training in librarianship and that they maintain an awareness of current thinking and new developments
> - library staff have been consulted in assessing the needs of students and teachers involved in the Diploma Programme
> - the collection of books, periodicals and reference materials meets the needs of the Diploma Programme, including all subjects, theory of knowledge and research for extended essays
> - there is an annual library budget that provides sufficiently for the maintenance of, and additions to, the library's collection and equipment
> - a proportion of the library collection is devoted to books and periodicals for the professional support and education of the teaching staff
> - audio-visual equipment is sufficient in quantity, appropriate in type, in good repair, and readily available so as to be of effective use
> - students and staff have access to documentation available through information technology
> - Internet access is available for reference purposes" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2006).

In May 2008, I was employed to create a new library by September 2008 and to develop independent learning throughout the school. My only brief from the SMT was to make everyone say "Wow!" During the summer I was left very much alone with only a few people to consult. However I did have the outline of the IBO criteria as a starting point, together with my experience of developing other school libraries.

Transforming the physical environment
The immediate challenge was to transform the school drama studio into a modern library. Three dilemmas were identified:

- Lack of access to the area until the beginning of July
- Constraints imposed by the Grade II listed building status and space restriction
- Limited budget.

An early May appointment had certain advantages even though I was unable to access the library space until July. I could set up home in the staff room and keenly observe the ethos of the school, the teachers, and the interaction they had with the pupils with respect to teaching and learning. This certainly influenced my choice of design and also helped me to create a management protocol that would be in keeping with the outlook of the school. This is, as I discovered through my research for *The Innovative School Librarian* (Markless, 2009), a crucial element for success.

The restrictions of a Grade 2 Listed Building prevented the installation of some technology and the space available was small with static original design features. However, the building itself is beautiful with a gothic style Reading Room and a Drama Room which would become the main library. Original stained glass dating back to 1870 depicts *Aesop's Fables* and the fireplace tiles show scenes from Walter Scott's novels.

Figures 1 and 2 below show how I designed the library and reading room layouts to allow multipurpose use and how my stock choice and resource management were construed to compliment classroom resources and encourage independent study.

Figure 1: Main library at Box Hill School after conversion from the drama studio

Light wood chosen to pick out the stone work and a light coloured carpet to brighten the room and contrast from the old drama room

Detail from stained glass. These pictures have been made into bookmarks which also have the story on them and Dewey code on the back. We also use these for young visitors – we give them a book mark and ask them to find the picture while we talk to the parents

Funky kidney shaped tables allow more seating and add a touch of quirkyness fitting in with the school's ethos

Office and storage area off the main stage also allows for private conversations or one to one teaching

Tiered and mobile shelving minimising austerity and maximising flexibility accordingly

School colour photocopier/scanner for staff and pupil use. The librarian can take the opportunity to talk to staff and discuss their teaching and learning plans and book classes into the library or arrange to visit the classroom

Resource Box unit allowing stock to be moved according to need not just within the library but between library and department library too and maximising space

A NO RULES, informal library. Eating and drinking are allowed and we trust our pupils to take care. Noise levels tend to be self limiting. Frequent use by staff and pupils – it's a cool, buzzy place to be and often both groups just come in to unwind or have a chat

Library fiddling toys – mini puzzles and tricks eg Rubiks cube to prevent graffiti

Limited space means online resources are essential using library catalogue, intranet specialist link page, NetVibes links page, specialist subscription databases
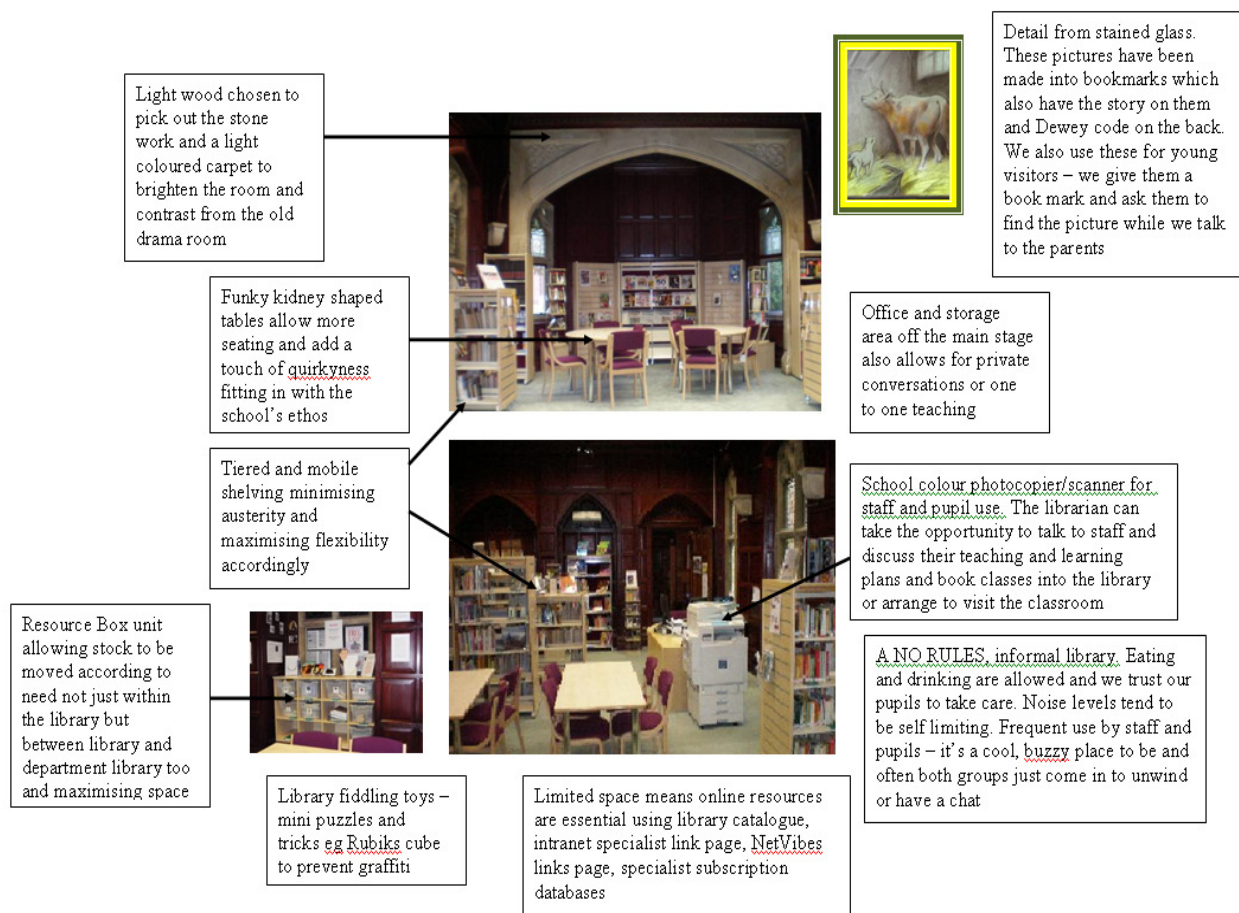
Figure 2: Reading Room at Box Hill School

Detail from the fireplace tiles which is also used in our bookmarks with the stories of Walter Scott

Reading Room set out like a front room around a fireplace to encourage curling up with a book. Lighting is more subdued too. This is awaiting refurbishment

Shelves removed from Gothic bookcase and reused as a display area. The original shelves were too high to reach

Group seating around the bay window giving a performance area and allowing space for class activities

This library looks wonderfully messy at times simply because the resources are in constant use and we are too busy teaching to spend time during the day tidying shelves!

This library is so well used by all members of the school community. It is situated in the heart of the school near reception and the staffroom but interestingly not near the classrooms.

In just one week we have seen:

Lessons for all year groups in a range of subjects including, English, History, Maths, Science, Languages, and Geography

Private study throughout the day until 9pm with pupils asking for help when necessary

Extended Essay advice on layout and referencing

Storytelling

Book Club with speed dating books

Trials for the Kids Lit Quiz

Building model castles

Rehearsing parts for the Junior Play

Making Christmas Shoe Box gifts

School Council meeting, Governors meeting, Departmental meetings

The librarian and her assistant have been involved with cataloguing new book stock, assisting with enquiries, teaching use of the online resources and the catalogue and delivering information literacy through a variety of subjects in the classroom

A third room houses a recently refurbished information communication and technology (ICT) suite which is also used as a classroom.

The budget for the whole project was £20K. This had to include all furniture, fixtures and fittings as well as resources for teaching and learning. The only existing book stock prior to conversion was the fiction collection (rather biased towards easy reads for 11-13 year olds and ancient hardback copies of classics) and a handful of dated copies covering drama and literature criticism. The sciences collection could be counted on the fingers of one hand!

Purchasing lists were drawn up from IBO recommended reading lists and from my previous experience as a school librarian. I was able to compile a list of basic essential texts across the 11-18 age range. I also invested in a number of online databases including those such as Questia (2010) which contained whole books. I included a number of quirky resources – the WOW Visual Encyclopaedia (Dorling Kindersley, 2008) and Guinness World Records (2008) complete with 3D glasses to entice students in. The most popular of the latter proved to be an edition of *Where's Wally*? (Handford, 2008) …in French!

The furniture was ordered from Remploy (2010) who give employment to disabled people. I felt this supplier was in keeping with the values of the school. They supply good quality library furniture at a reasonable cost and were able to help in the design.

There was no existing library catalogue. I managed to add all basic resource records to all 5000 items using z39.50 downloads into our new Library Management System Access-It (2010). All the resources were equipped with a barcode and security tagged as part of the process and so we could operate as a lending library by the start of September.

We were ready by the first day of the new term….and people said "Wow!" when they saw what we had done.

Independent learning and information literacy

In developing an independent learning policy it is vital to have full support from the school's senior management team. At Box Hill this has been fully endorsed by the headmaster, the deputy dead and the IB coordinator who have ensured the independent learning culture has been encouraged at every opportunity.

Initially, effort was concentrated on the 6th form. Through collaboration and team teaching, in both classrooms and the library, across all subjects, we were able to let students explore this method of learning and researching for themselves.

Our first intake of IBD students had arrived from schools with a very mixed bag of library provision. The Box Hill School natives who chose to remain in the 6th form, were very much 'library virgins'. In my past employment I had worked in market research and, as part of my remit, was involved in *deprivation studies*. This involves a group of people who are asked *not to use* a specific product, then it is reintroduced and their opinions are sought. I was therefore not totally surprised at the upsurge of interest in using books for research rather than the Internet that followed the availability of the library. I had invested in two expensive sets of printed encyclopaedia and was very pleased to see them being used effectively. It is now a common sight at our school to see books propped up alongside computers and students using a mixture of both methods to access information.

In particular, the development of our NetVibes library website (Pavey, 2010a) together with our library intranet page allowed us to take the library catalogue to the classroom. I am an advocate of beginning any research project in a classroom alongside the subject teacher (Pavey, 2005). As librarian, I attain more familiarity with the subject and the way in which it is taught and the teacher can become aware of the resources available for a project without feeling undermined by the presence of another adult in the classroom. It becomes a learning curve for everyone and a truly collaborative exercise. Importantly, for me, it also provides an opportunity to become involved in assessment of the learning outcome.

Typically a research project follows a set of procedures. One module in the IB Diploma History (Higher Level) is to investigate the impact of the "League of Nations". An initial search of our library catalogue identifies books and DVDs covering this topic and these are placed in a project box. Next the records are turned into a visual search on the catalogue thus allowing one click access. A research guidance sheet is constructed and added to the box and given out to the students. This explains a possible structure for research and a guide to resources both in print and online. A separate research guide (designed for web use) is added to the NetVibes projects tab. The box is taken to the classroom and the teacher introduces the topic. We hand out the books from the box and ask students to explain to the class why their book might or might not be useful for this research. We then look at the NetVibes page and ensure everyone is familiar with how to access the online resources and discuss how best they are used. We also look at the NetVibes referencing page to look at recording information and other research methodology. The subsequent lessons take place in the library and IT suite. When the work is handed in, I help to assess the assignment in terms of the research and referencing. When necessary I am asked to go over the paper with the student to help them understand how they can improve their performance on the next occasion.

The IBD also has a requirement for students to submit an extended essay. This is a 4000 word piece of academic research on a topic related to an IBD examined subject. The majority of marks are given for research process and conforming to an approved academic research style. At Box Hill I have initiated the use of NetVibes to provide visual guidance on referencing and research using 'Authorstream' links (Pavey, 2010b) and have created a quiz on the mark scheme for the extended essay that can be downloaded to a mobile phone using QR codes. To prepare for this element of the IBD we also encourage the use of mobile phones for oral note taking and recording bibliographic details. Many of our students have English as a second language and writing can be frustrating, hindering their thought process while researching. I also make use of Turnitin (2010) as a teaching aid to help prevent plagiarism and to understand the rationale for

referencing work correctly. Because of this involvement I also work with supervising teachers and their students to help define the research question.

We are now making more use of this approach in the lower school and in particular students are being asked to reference their work in line with a standard such as Harvard or British Numeric beginning with our youngest classes in Year 7 (11 year olds). I run an introductory six lesson course through our personal, health, social education programme (PHSE) to introduce the library. This is part of their wider module on emotions and we use the theme of *happiness*. The students explore the use of fiction, non fiction and reference books and ultimately devise a poster for an alien to explain what we humans mean by happiness. Skills such as understanding the Dewey System are reinforced with quizzes on our NetVibes site.

Independent learning projects
In 2009 I attended a course on Independent Learning Projects run by Patricia Carmichael (2009) of Concordia Lutheran College, Queensland. Inspired by what I heard, I suggested this method of delivering independent learning pedagogy to my administration team at Box Hill School. We decided to pilot projects with 10 special needs students in Year 9 (12-13year olds). A learning support teacher agreed to help deliver the sessions held in the library.

At Box Hill School we have groups of students who do not follow the standard curriculum for their year group for various reasons. Typically this is because they are native speakers of a modern language that others study (and they have already taken public examinations) or because they have special needs that are severe enough to warrant not taking a full range of subjects to iGCSE. These students will often have study periods allocated in the library and the small numbers of each provided an ideal opportunity to pilot an independent learning project. The Year 9 group was selected on the basis that they were the largest group and also had teacher support. In hindsight it would have been better to have chosen a different group for a number of reasons that I will discuss. We do intend to run this idea again but will probably choose our language students instead.

We introduced the projects by explaining to the students they could research any topic they had an interest in and wanted to investigate further. We thought they would be delighted to have an opportunity to work 'off curriculum' and prove they were knowledgeable in other areas of their lives. Some of these students were gifted in sports and drama. We were unprepared for the response. The students questioned why they were doing this when there was no direct benefit to their exam grades. The students refused to believe there could be any more they could know about their chosen subjects than they knew already. Those with initial enthusiasm for the idea quickly gave up when they realised it might entail some work. One student who was totally engaged wanting to investigate orthodontics (he had just been fitted with braces) was pressurised by the rest of this peer group to 'forget it'.

We began the process by using an online visual, aural, reading and kinesthetic (VARK) (Fleming, 2010) test so the group could understand their learning style and adapt their approach to research accordingly. The students enjoyed engaging in this and it yielded some surprising results. The teacher and I had assumed most of the tests would show visual or kinesthetic as the dominant strengths but in fact it was aural learning that appealed to the majority of the group. This discovery has had some impact on the approach of learning support for these students.

The packs we produced for each student proved too difficult for them to manage, even with teacher support. We simplified the process and gave them scrap books to complete their work. The group was too large to manage as many of the students needed constant one to one attention to keep them on task. The learning support teacher suggested that in each lesson half the class could complete homework and half could work on their projects. This eventually led to the class deciding they did not want to complete the projects at all favouring extra time for their prep, on which they placed more value.

Although the independent learning project did not work for this particular group of students I think the idea has much potential. We certainly intend to try an adapted version with our native language speakers in the next school year and maybe this will be done in their own language or bilingually. Our languages department are keen to give it a go since these students are simply writing book reviews in French, Spanish or German with no measurable learning outcome. A more formalised piece of research would help them prepare for a 6th form IB course or give them something tangible to take to an interview at another school or prospective employer.

Conclusion
To summarise, this paper has provided a snapshot of the implementation of independent learning in an international school community where no infrastructure to promote this style of teaching and learning previously existed. We are still very much at the beginning of our exciting journey and learning along the way.

Three key learnings:
- It is important to consider the ethos of the community in planning a school library
- Independent learning can be made enjoyable through the use of new technology
- Independent learning projects may only work where the pupil – librarian ratio is no more than 3 – 1 given the need for support.

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