Razzle dazzle: Creating interactive library spaces

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Abstract
Creating an interactive and engaging school library environment for your school community is an important prerequisite to establishing a creditable identity with teaching staff, which in turn, leads to opportunities to develop collaborative curriculum programs. The library and its personnel must be perceived as a hub for learning and part of the core business of the school by the whole community, including senior administration, teachers, students and parents. Such an environment demonstrates the value adding to the curriculum, literacy, information literacy and student learning outcomes that occur when professional library staff are part of the staffing equation in a school.

Introduction
Schools and curriculum in the 21st century are no longer confined by the four walls of the physical buildings. Access to the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) has meant that students can study any where and any time, collaborate with their peers and talk to experts in an environment where geographical boundaries no longer apply (Werry, 2002). Students now have opportunities to learn and experience vicariously and to participate in problem-solving and decision-making using Web-based simulations, virtual worlds and online curriculum (Combes & Sekulla, 2006). Schools have the potential to be the hub of their communities, and are a far cry from the chalk and talk, passive learning style and curriculum dominated by content that characterised traditional classrooms of the past. In this emerging picture of schools as expandable spaces that are inhabited by independent and self-reliant, so-called *digital natives* who use technology as a vehicle for learning with ease, the importance of the teacher and the idea of community appear to be redundant. While some researchers believe that technology can create the necessary connections between the learner and the learning experience (Wagner & Rachael, 2009), students' commentaries in other research studies report that this is not the case.

A large body of research tells us that students value highly the face-to-face learning environment (Sander, et.al., 2000; Mcsporran & King, 2005; Hentea, Shea, & Pennington, 2003); they want their teachers to provide guidance and to facilitate the learning process, and for them, the social context of learning is extremely important (Peltier, Schibrowsky, & Drago, 2007; Mark, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005; Deek & Espinosa, 2005; Aldridge, et.al., 2002; Alexander, 2001). First Year Experience (FYE) studies at university confirm these findings, where students report that a sense of isolation, lack of motivation and anxiety are all major factors that lead to disengagement (McInnes, 2000; Beder, 1998; Latham & Green, 1997). These studies indicate that a lack of a community identity is a major issue for on-campus university students who have opportunities to communicate face-to-face with their peers and teachers and have ready access to support services and one-on-one instruction in the classroom. It is no surprise that students working wholly online also report similar issues (Gulatee, Brown & Combes, 2008; Combes & Anderson, 2006; Hara & Kling, 1999). Apart from informing educational practice at the tertiary level, the FYE studies also have an important message for teachers and school administrators working in the secondary and primary areas of education. The sense of belonging to a community and establishing a community identity are important aspects of the social context of learning. Students need to feel they belong and since school is a major event in their lives and makes up a considerable part of their daily activities, these feelings of community are very important. For many students who present at the school door already feeling socially disconnected and vulnerable due to family problems such as divorce, absent parents and physical and emotional abuse, the community aspect of school life can have a significant impact on their educational achievements and social growth as future citizens.

Developing a sense of community and belonging, and providing a safe haven from the rigours of the schoolyard have always been an unacknowledged part of the teacher-librarian's role and the school library.

Libraries are essentially community spaces which draw together the social and academic aspects of the school. They should be the social and learning hub of the school for everyone in the school community including administrative and teaching staff, parents, students and friends of the school. A major issue for teacher-librarians and library staff is how to develop this very important role of community and meld it with the emerging picture of 21st century education to create a flexible library space that is attractive, interactive and engaging for the whole school community. This paper will present some initial ideas and strategies for the development of an interactive and engaging library space with particular reference to physical, social and virtual spaces. It is by no means exhaustive and will be part of an ongoing discussion using the International Association of School Libraries (IASL) Web portal and the *School Libraries in Action* section for post-conference collaboration.

In the beginning: The physical environment
As teacher-librarians trying to move our schools into a new era where access to quality information for teaching and learning is a major issue and changing technology a major driver for continual and rapid change, we would all like to have a purpose-built library where our experience and knowledge is taken into account during the design process. In reality, this is seldom the case. Although the current Australian Federal Government initiative for new libraries in schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) and the National Inquiry (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) into professional staffing is welcome, many teacher-librarians in schools still wage an ongoing public relations campaign with their principals and teachers about the added educational value a well-resourced and staffed school library can bring to the teaching-learning equation. So in reality a teacher-librarian will be working in a physical space that was built in the late 1970s and early 1980s when school libraries were in their heyday. Indeed, the Australian School Libraries Research Project reports that 44% of all school libraries in the survey were older than 20years, with a further 11% between 15 and 20 years old (Combes, 2008). In these libraries there is usually limited access to power sockets, Internet cabling and access points. Sometimes the design of a school built thirty years ago will also make the provision of wireless networks difficult due to solid structures interfering with wireless signals. In some cases, the library is a makeshift arrangement that was originally a classroom. In this case there may be little natural light, low ceilings and the ubiquitous 'mission brown' paintwork that characterised buildings in the 1980s in Australia. There is probably no air-conditioning or heating either. Most of these libraries were furnished with brown or dark blue carpet, beige or grey internal walls (often unpainted brick), dark (painted) woodwork and similarly coloured, heavy furniture. Ideally we should be replacing these antiquated buildings, but the reality is that teacher-librarians will probably have to make do with the current physical infrastructure.

Creating a sense of community identity for students is first and foremost a visual experience. How do we take these old-fashioned, often unworkable/inflexible physical spaces and make them more inviting and more engaging for our students? Initially, all library personnel need to make a cognitive transition and commit to change. Everyone needs to be on board and prepared to conduct business differently so processes and procedures match the new environment. A library will only ever be perceived by students and the school community as up-to-date if the staff are working in a mindset that is open to challenge and change. Many teacher-librarians are currently working in old-fashioned physical environments, but are perceived as the *makers and shakers* in their schools because they are already operating in the new teaching-learning paradigm. Changing the physical environment, while managing and utilising the new space according to old processes and procedures will mean no real change in what the library delivers or how it is perceived by the school community.

If the school community (administration and parents) is willing to refurbish existing infrastructure, then ask for lighter paintwork, lighter but (small) patterned carpet, white (painted) woodwork, small moveable desks and comfortable office chairs (with wheels). The installation of a false floor so power points and Internet connections can be available throughout the library via the floor will introduce flexibility and allow students with laptops to plug-in anywhere in the library. Install flat screens and thin client technology so the space devoted to technology is not the focus of the library, but an integral part of the infrastructure of the physical space. Power, computer and network access points should be scattered throughout the book stacks and available in all private study carrels. The aim is to create a flexible infrastructure that can be moved easily to accommodate different group sizes and activities. Ask for air conditioning and adequate heating so the

physical space is comfortable all year round. We cannot expect our students to learn anything if the physical environment is not conducive, a point that needs to be stressed to department administrators, parents and politicians.

Look closely at your physical space and how it is currently organised. What do you see outside the entrance to your library? Is it clearly signposted and does the name of your facility tell students this is the hub of the school? While the term library is all encompassing, generally universally understood and has a long history; for many students in this current generation the word has no resonance with their world which is dominated by technology and change. A name change may be in order to something like Library and Information Learning Commons, or perhaps we should be asking the students what they want to call their space. Is your library entrance welcoming or is it dominated by solid looking doors covered in instructions telling students what they can't do when using this space? Our signage often gives off negative messages before students get past the doors! Think seriously about how the space is to be used and use positive messages located both on the outside and inside the library to encourage appropriate behaviours. Place a welcome sign/mat at your front door. Change those heavy doors to sound and shatter proof glass, which will introduce natural light and provide an inviting window for those looking in from the outside. If the school can afford more structural changes, then ask for large picture windows as well (these make great outward facing display spaces).

Now look closely at the physical layout and space inside your library. If you have a low ceiling then ask for some half shelves. These can be placed against/along windows, where the top of the shelf doubles as display space and a stand-up reading/reference place for students. Stock is out of direct sunlight and library floor space opened up for other activities such as small group work, comfortable reading nooks or whole class activities. Taking book stacks away from a central position on the floor and using half shelves will create an illusion of light and greater space. It will also detract from the perception that the main function of the library is as a repository for books, rather than a hub for teaching, learning and social activity. You may even decide to manage your collection differently and have your physical items reflect more closely your virtual access (OPAC) (Combes & Valli, 2007). Use mirrors to reflect natural light in dark spaces, while also providing extra security (you can see round corners). Glassed-in classrooms and computer labs reduce flexibility, but pot plants are moveable objects, have a naturalising effect and introduce ambience, while acting as see-through screens to create separate spaces in the library.

Physical spaces that follow these simple design ideas are welcoming, light, airy and comfortable; as well as flexible, easily moveable and therefore dynamic. Students can come to the library and find something different every day. While the book stacks and technology are part of the overall infrastructure and physical design of the library, neither should dominate the physical space which in turn can dictate how the library is perceived by the school community.

Let's engage: The social environment
Libraries are social spaces that should say something about our school communities. In the words of Harold Howe (1967) who was a former US Commissioner of Education: "what a school thinks about its library is a measure of what it feels about education". How we use the library to engage with the curriculum, the students and each other is a reflection of the educational philosophy underpinning each school community. What does a poorly resourced and under-staffed school library say about the importance of literacy, the provision of an engaging curriculum that is supported by a range of quality resources selected to ensure all students have the opportunity to learn, or the recognition that the world has moved beyond the confines of education past and into a new era dominated by information? How we present and use our library space will determine whether it is attractive and engaging for students, parents and teachers alike. The social context of the library is also one way of engaging students and getting them in the door, so they become comfortable with the space and more open to engaging with the academic/learning services the library offers.

Displays that change regularly are an enticing feature of any school library. To ensure they will be a feature of the library space, someone needs to be responsible for managing the displays which may be static on boards or on a screen that is hosted in the main school foyer as well as the library, thus going out to a wider audience. Strategic planning is the key to successful and interactive displays. Plan your displays well in

advance. To make them relevant to students and part of the teaching-learning cycle of the school, try to develop collaborative programs with the English and Media teachers so students are responsible for any photographs, media design and display presentations. Students create the displays, market them and receive both public acknowledgement and assessment recognition for their work. The teacher-librarian manages the display program, provides teaching at the point of need about good design principles, marketing, Web design and presentation, and assesses the final results using a rubric designed for the activity. Students will come to the library to see their own and their classmates' work.

To engage students teacher-librarians need to consider what it is they are likely to find attractive. While young children are very egocentric beings, this aspect is still a feature of young peoples' cognitive development during the adolescent years (Rogers-McMillan, 2009). So anything that is about them will attract students to your library. A *Brag Board* is a must in any library. This display is interactive (changes often) and highlights achievements from across the school community. It may include sporting, academic or community/extra curricular achievements. Exemplary work, art work (always framed), ideas, smart commentary about favourite reads or a recommended website could be featured each week. If you employ roving reporters who are responsible for the display (see above), their faces and biographies will appear on the board as well. You may feature the *Brag Board* on your electronic display as well and use this as a marketing tool for the school.

A display that is easy to make interactive due to the nature of the topic area is technology. This display should feature changing technologies and may include themes such as cybersafety, cyberbullying, appropriate use and *How to* FAQs. Snapshots of sample webpages, news and magazine articles can also be included. Once again, making this display part of a curriculum program ensures student engagement with topics that are extremely relevant and part of the school curriculum. Finally, including a voting system (teacher-librarian creates the assessment template) where students rate and provide feedback on displays created by students develops critical analysis, and higher order thinking and peer review skills: all of which are learning outcomes that fall under the information literacy umbrella.

Another way to make your library space engaging and interactive is to include a day-by-day lunchtime program for the library. Each day of the week is devoted to a specific activity. Such a program also provides fodder for the *Brag Board* and your roving reporters. Monday might be *Games Day* where students engage with a range of games including electronic, board games, puzzles (have a Rubik's Cube competition), traditional games (Chess and Scrabble) or games students have created. Thursday might be *Storytellers Day* where students/ parents/grandparents tell tall stories or authors visit the school. Use students to organise, schedule and project manage these activities (part of their assessment). These are simple ways to make your library a more social space. Yes, there may be a heightened noise level during lunchtime, but it will be incredibly dynamic.

Across the airwaves: Virtual spaces
Use your technologies to create space in your day and to streamline traditional work practices. Technology can be used to deliver and support student programs through readily available, scaffolding templates (to get them started), FAQs, links to foster guided inquiry for specific programs and tips/cheat sheets. It can also be used as an electronic *Brag Board*, as a publishing mode to promote student achievements in the form of ebooks, postcards, art work, photographic displays and animations. Planning is essential if electronic displays and publications are to remain interactive and engaging. Someone also needs to manage the technologies to ensure they are updated regularly (preferably weekly). *Website of the Week* should appear on everyone's login page every Monday morning and include the person who found the site (this activity should also include teachers and senior administration). Use an electronic submission so participants are learning how to use technology while suggesting sites (software is available where students can submit a vote). Collating the votes, subsequent tallying and determining the winner each week requires mathematical skills that could be the responsibility of a particular class (also acknowledged).

Providing an *Ask@YourLibrary* virtual service is also one way of engaging students directly with the reference skills provided by the teacher-librarian. These services are time-consuming and a twenty-four hour turn-around time is essential if the service is to be viewed by the students as useful and relevant. Clear

guidelines will need to apply otherwise students will expect the service to operate 24/7! Try to anticipate queries if you decide to set up this type of service and have a series of links already available in your *Virtual Library*. Your *Virtual Library* should also be interactive. If the theme for the month/term on the technology display is cybersafety, then the *Virtual Library* should also have daily/weekly links to websites and news articles. An *In the News* link on the front page of the Virtual Library can alert students and staff to new technologies and issues appearing in the information landscape. Once again, acknowledge the person who finds the site. Once these activities become embedded into the daily routine of the school, the students and some staff will provide the content, while the teacher-librarian manages a valuable, up-to-date information service for the school community. All of these activities can be collated easily and transferred to your monthly newsletter so parents are involved in the teaching-learning activities generated through the library.

Conclusion
Schools are volatile environments, heavily influenced by both local community factors and systemic initiatives. They often tend to be workplaces where crisis management or just-in-time management rules the working day. Having enough time to be creative is a major issue for all staff including library personnel, who must deal with an overcrowded curriculum and an overloaded information landscape. Therefore creating an interactive, engaging school library space requires careful planning, delegation and controlled implementation strategies to ensure ongoing success, plus smooth operations which do not impinge on staff workload. Start small when planning your new library space by doing one thing differently. Thoroughly plan the program, delegate and manage it rather than doing the work yourself, and try to include collaboration with a teacher/s so students are involved and the program is both engaging and part of students' teaching and learning. Report on your successes to the significant stakeholders in your school (Principal, senior administration and parents). Then begin planning your next program/bright idea and make your library *the place to be* in your school.

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