

Redesigning the floor plan of a secondary school library

This paper reflects the process undertaken in redesigning the floor plan of a secondary school library. This minor refurbishment project took place in 2006 in the Resource Centre at Siena College. Siena College is a Catholic girls secondary school, Years 7 to 12, located in Camberwell, Victoria with an enrollment of approximately 710 students.

First a little insight into what led to the modest refurbishment of this Resource Centre. The results of which have provided an area that is both functional and appealing whilst providing authentic learning spaces that meet the changing needs of education.

Midway through the College building project, which began in 2005, came the surprise suggestion that money could become available to re-carpet the Resource Centre. The Resource Centre had been seriously inconvenienced during the building project. The entrance had been temporarily moved to the rear of the building, forcing the relocation of some shelves. A mudslide, a concrete spill and a flood had all taken their toll. It was six months before the decision was finalized to re-carpet however the Resource Centre team was also informed that there would be no additional funds for any other refurbishments.

The Resource Centre team saw this windfall as an opportunity to redesign the floor space and to provide more defined learning areas, a dedicated fiction area with provision for quiet reading as well as a functional workroom that eliminated the occupational health and safety issues that existed. Also the Careers area was to be relocated and this was to create some additional space.

The main constraints were the finances available, the existing permanent building structures such as pillars and doors, and the internal structures such as the circulation desk, computers, photocopiers and the kitchen in the workroom. Any alterations to the layout of the Resource Centre had to take all of these constraints into consideration.

Because the furniture needed to be removed to replace the carpet careful planning was necessary to identify areas that could be enhanced. Redesigning the floor plan presented the opportunity to provide a well-designed learning environment that took into consideration the needs of students from Years 7 to 12 as well as staff. The area needed to be user friendly and aesthetically pleasing to enhance learning and the pursuit of reading for pleasure.

There was a need to provide three defined, separated class areas that could operate simultaneously without interrupting each other. The shelving also had to be positioned so that there was easy access to all resources with an uninterrupted view from the circulation desk. It was necessary to address the occupational health and safety issues in the workroom and this provided the opportunity to create a pleasant, functional work space for staff with a multi

purpose space that could be used for individual or group tasks. This area could also be used for meetings and for morning tea or lunch. Access and storage was needed for new items that were to be catalogued and processed so that a proper workflow was possible with a more efficient placement of the compactus which is a main storage unit.

Early in Term 1 2006 the four members of the Resource Centre team began the process by reading the relevant chapters from the 2nd edition of *Learning for the future: developing information services in Australian schools* and *Effective learning spaces: inspiration for school library design*. This reading provided an insight into what constituted authentic and effective learning spaces.

The Resource Centre team recognized that the refurbishment was a big task, which therefore needed to be undertaken well as there would only one opportunity to create a very functional and appealing working environment. Alterations would not be possible after the task was completed. The refurbishment was always an agenda item for the weekly Resource Centre meetings thereby ensuring consistent progress. Each team member was encouraged to speak up and all ideas were considered. The regular discussions covered what should be done, the method to be used and what benefits could be gained to enhance student learning. From the discussions a wish list was prepared.

In Term 2 the planning stage began. At a whole staff meeting the Siena College staff were offered time and the opportunity to draw or list their suggestions for a working and learning environment. A few things were repeatedly mentioned and these included defined authentic learning areas, a silent VCE area, provision for viewing videos and DVDs as well as a Fiction area that provided for the promotion of literature and the opportunity for quiet reading.

During Library and Information Week in May a competition was held where students were similarly invited to draw or write their suggestions for the Resource Centre. Most of the entries received were drawn. Again there were valuable suggestions, which also included the need for a proper Fiction area with space to sit and read.

A list of like schools was prepared and each team member then individually contacted and visited the Resource Centres of four similar sized schools. The aim of the visits was not only to observe other Resource Centres but also to ascertain what, for them, worked and what didn't. The ambience and the first impressions were important observations. Before heading out time was allocated at a Resource Centre meeting to prepare a template itemising information considered important to ascertain; this ensured that everyone would be gaining similar information about the libraries they visited.

At each school, each member of the Resource Centre team was made to feel very welcome and given the opportunity to look around, make notes, take photos, talk to staff and then ask questions of the Head of the Resource

Centre. The information gained was invaluable. Each team member was then given the opportunity to report on the Resource Centre visited. In addition two other Resource Centres, which were familiar to the team were discussed. Once again similarities, both good and bad, were evident in the reports that proved to be invaluable when later making decisions. It was agreed that gaining information about six Resource Centres was sufficient and did not produce too much information that was difficult to process.

One of the early decisions related to the need to review and cull all resources. This process took place over a period of months. Every team member was involved in reviewing, culling or deleting items from the catalogue. This review was then used to form the basis of future purchases. For the last month of Term 3 only urgent items were purchased. Normal purchasing was suspended as the time needed to catalogue and process the latest purchases was very limited and they then needed to be incorporated into existing shelves.

During Term 2 funds from the Building Project saw an unexpected bonus, money became available for further improvement. All venetian blinds were removed, then the lower sections of the windows were frosted and the upper windows were tinted. As the Resource Centre has glass on three sides this had a huge impact on making the area look lighter, less cluttered and more modern as well as reducing the heat particularly in the summer months.

School visits were a great way to see how other school libraries operated. During these visits there were many aspects to be observed beginning with the foyer and entrance, how they were used and the impact they created. Notes were taken on the location of the circulation desk as well as its placement and functionality. The type, height, length and placement of shelving, furniture, computers, storage areas and their layout all provided valuable information. The colour scheme, location and type of signage and displays also helped to determine the accessibility and appeal of the area. Observations were made about computer access and the online resources available. The placement and design of the workroom indicated workflow issues.

The research undertaken in our reading, staff feedback, student competitions, school library visits and personal experience ensured that the Resource Centre team was equipped with the knowledge to make informed decisions. Each team member then prepared their own floor plan presented them for discussion. Once again there were a lot of similarities. These plans were discussed at length and a final floor plan was agreed upon and drawn up.

In the meantime the Business manager arranged for carpet samples to be delivered. There are many different colours in the Resource Centre, salmon and coral shelving, white ceiling, cream table tops, blue chairs, pillars and bookshelf ends. Each team member selected the carpet they preferred with the intention of enhancing our existing colour scheme. Anyone who ventured into the Resource Centre whether they be staff, student, bookseller, parent or visitor were all invited to register their preferred carpet choice. The final choice of colour was called Jazz, a deep red with brown and black threads woven

through it. The colour was selected using the knowledge gained from our research and feedback from all sources.

The Resource Centre was closed for only one week at the end of Term 3 for the Resource Centre team to pack all resources. To ensure that the temporary relocation of resources ran smoothly all bays and shelves were numbered. When packing, resources were placed in a single layer from left to right and the box was then labelled with the bay and shelf number as well as the number of boxes for that shelf. Provision of boxes and storage facilities were provided. This accurate labelling of boxes ensured a smooth unpacking process as many resources were to be relocated to a different shelf than previous. During the Term 3 holidays the carpet was laid. Hired staff relocated the furniture according to the new floor plan and unpacked the boxes under the supervision of the Head of the Resource Centre.

The impact of the red carpet was striking and instantly made a difference and the Resource Centre was operational on the first day of Term 4.

The results of the refurbishment have been very rewarding and the process has been a great team building experience. The original plan was for the Resource Centre to only be re-carpeted; the other improvements in the Resource Centre, the workroom and the new Audio Visual area have been an added bonus. The Resource Centre looks inviting, it is much lighter and spacious and now has three separate authentic learning areas, a silent VCE area and a designated fiction space where girls can also sit and read on comfortable couches. The Audio Visual area has proper storage space as well as a viewing area. Class sets and magazines are shelved in easily accessible areas.

The staff workroom is very functional and is a safe, spacious, comfortable place to work, meet and socialise. No longer are there electrical cables crossing the floor or hanging from the ceiling. With the extra space provided by the moving the Audio Visual area into the office space vacated by the Careers, the compactus, used to store newspapers, literature circle books and class sets was moved from the body of the Resource Centre to a more functional position in the workroom. There is now a central table which has many functions. The Resource Centre team now meets in this area and it is often used as a large workspace where one or more team members can work. The table is always cleared before morning tea or lunchtime so that staff can socialize there if they so choose. Some teaching staff often visit as they too find the area appealing.

In the College Building Project two buildings were joined and the Resource Centre no longer stands alone. The colours in the foyer lead into the Resource Centre and although the carpet was an adventurous choice it has greatly enhanced the ambience and the risk has certainly paid off. When the Resource Centre reopened a lot of people were surprised at the choice of colour but pleasantly surprised at the overall effect.

For the Resource Centre team the results of the refurbishment have been very rewarding. The ambience has been altered, it is inviting and appealing and the space caters for the needs of education in the new millennium.

In conclusion "this is great, this has worked". There has been a lot of positive feedback. The Principal, at the time, was so impressed with the transformation that she arranged for the circulation bench panels to be recovered in a matching red cloth and for the purchase of three new couches to foster leisure time reading in the new Fiction area. New cupboards were purchased for Audio Visual area, which ensured the security of valuable equipment. A new desk was purchased for one of the Resource Centre team.

Siena College has a Resource Centre that ably caters for the learning needs of Year 7-12 students as well as the teaching needs of the staff. It looks modern and fresh. Various school-based committees often choose to meet in the Resource Centre and the number of students choosing to work or study in the area has increased. The placement of the tiered display unit at the entrance to the Resource Centre captures the attention of all who enter and it is an efficient structure to promote resources or concepts to enhance learning.

This whole project was performed in addition to the normal workload; the regular meetings and the planning process were a great team building experience. The Resource Centre services were never compromised during the whole project. What began as merely recarpeting of the Resource Centre became a minor refurbishment as additional money became available providing us with an appealing environment in which to promote the love of learning and reading. The official opening of the refurbished Resource Centre was celebrated in October 2006 on International School Libraries Day.

What does it take to design an elementary school library that inspires kids to read and learn? Vision, common sense, an ability to take risks and, most importantly, a set of aesthetics that promotes curiosity and excitement (Lau 2002).

Sue O'Shea and Anne-Maree Noonan
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