

Practical preparedness: Dealing with compounding disasters

By Susan Mapleson

Snapshot

Susan Mapleson, the Senior Teacher Librarian at Christian College, Geelong describes the challenges she and her team have faced in recent years - the Senior Library was flooded twice and then in May 2018 the Library and Administration building were destroyed by fire. While this experience is not something that you are ever prepared for, the good news is that there were many positives that came out of the rebuilding of a new library.

Last year I was invited to present at a joint online event organised by the School Library Association of NSW, Blue Shield Australia and the School Library Association of Victoria. My brief was to discuss the impact of fire and flood in relation to our school library and provide practical strategies to deal with such disasters.

I have been a Teacher Librarian at Christian College Geelong for 21 years and for the last 12 years based at our Senior School Campus, currently as Head of Library. The Senior Campus has about 550 students from Year 10 to 12. Our Library and Administration was a relatively new building having been completed in 2011.

It is never a good sign when you receive any early morning phone call from your Head of Campus. When I was told there had been a fire in the School Administration and Library building my first thoughts were that this was a joke but then the emotions of shock and disbelief took hold. The harsh reality soon hit home when I jumped in the car and headed straight to school. The fire brigade was still there ensuring that the fire was completely out and that the building and surrounding area was safe and secure. It would be about 5 days until we were able to go back inside the Library to see the damage firsthand.

Despite rumours amongst the students that the fire was deliberately lit the fire investigation found the fire started from a desktop computer in the staffroom. The School Administration and staff area had been destroyed by the fire and the Library had extensive smoke and water damage. All the Library's soft furnishings such as chairs, couches, ottomans, and the magazine collection were unsalvageable. The previous year we had spent a considerable amount of money converting our Non-Fiction shelving to mobile shelving. The Fiction shelving was already on wheels and this meant the fire brigade were able to quickly move the books away from the fire and minimise the damage to our collection.

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Smoke residue from a fire can cause extensive damage to contents particularly clothing, paper, books, electronics, furniture, soft goods and carpets. If not dealt with quickly, permanent odour damage, staining and/or corrosion can occur. Steamatic, was the professional cleaning company the school employed for our clean up and restoration. They came promptly and completed a thorough inspection of the site and assessment. This process helped to determine the restorability of all Library contents items.



Steamatic came and boxed up our Library collection. They did this in a systematic way to ensure the books were in Dewey order and this information was clearly written on the outside of the boxes so when they were returned it made the task of reshelving very easy. Initially books returned still had a faint smoke smell but once on the shelves this disappeared. Steamatic's assessment team were able to manage the entire project to ensure all cleaning and restoration was completed to a high standard. In total we lost a combination of 182 magazines and books that were water damaged or beyond professional cleaning.



Unfortunately, our Library workroom was closest to the heart of the fire so everything we had in there which included personal and stationary items, book covering materials, new books awaiting cataloguing and display items were destroyed.

What was our initial response and concerns?

Being overwhelmed and wondering where to start, our priority was to establish where our temporary home would be located as we needed a base for our students to study. Initially we were put in small room at the back of the School Chapel and stayed there for Term 2. The last week of Term 2 saw us start to move into a portable building that was relocated onsite. Slowly the tables, chairs, shelving all returned after being professionally cleaned. Term 3 started back in our new portable building, which was large enough for a class area, private study area and all our previous shelving. The many boxes of books slowly returned during this term.

The professional cleaning company provided an Excel spread sheet with all items they had taken, and this information included if the item was written off or to be restored. Once the books had been returned, we did a stock take to ensure our catalogue records were accurate and to identify any items that had been lost during this time.

The task of having to write down every personal item, piece of furniture, stationary, board games, display merchandise, artwork, and everything else a Library holds was rather daunting but was needed for insurance purposes. This list was added to over the following months, as it was not possible to have an accurate list straight away.

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many classes and simply went to the classroom to provide this information. We also promoted the use of our online databases, newspapers, and Wheelers ePlatform to staff and students. We are lucky to have Deakin University very close to our campus, so I contacted them, and they were very happy to have our students use their resources. Promoting the use of the Geelong Regional Library to our students was also very important.

The rebuild

I can't stress enough how important it is to work closely with the person responsible for the rebuild. While our Library footprint remained the same, we were able to change the internal layout of the Library.



The change meant we created a larger workroom and relocated our Circulation Desk so it was next to the workroom, this made the flow of the Library more efficient. We were also able to create a bigger area for recreational reading and a larger area for our Private Study students. Our Library had been flooded twice before the fire because of poor guttering and in the rebuild this problem was fixed, we also realised carpet squares were a better option, so we ensured they were in the new rebuild.

It is important to have accurate documentation of the furniture and items that need to be replaced. The insurance company wanted three quotes for all furniture, this was very time-consuming putting together all the information but also very important. I was able to use the money to replace furniture items that did not previously work very well in our Library with other items such as new study booths which have been very popular with the students. We finally moved into the new Library building in August 2019.

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Positives to come out of the fire:

As a result of the fire the staff and students worked in much smaller spaces, but this brought the school community together and made them appreciate the Library as a central part of our school. Not long after the fire we received a beautiful bunch of flowers sent from the School Prefects acknowledging we were doing it tough and that they were thinking of us.

A chance to change the internal layout so that the function and flow of the Library improved. By simply changing the paint colour on bulkheads the Library appeared lighter and brighter. We lost a small office space but increased the size of our workroom. The IT Office and photocopiers were relocated to the Library foyer giving students easier access to IT support.





We were able to create a separate area for English classes to use for their reading which encouraged each Year 10 class to make permanent weekly reading sessions in the Library. This also meant we could purchase new soft furniture that provided flexible seating arrangements.

The process of unpacking and reshelving the books as they came back from restoration also provided us with the opportunity to have a thorough weed of Library collection.

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When we didn't have a physical library the Teacher Librarians remained a valuable resource for the students by going into the classrooms and promoting our online resources and working collaboratively with the teachers.

While this experience is not something you are ever prepared for, I hope that by sharing some of our journey and personal story it will help with practical strategies should you and your library be faced with a similar disaster.

Susan Mapleson is the Senior Teacher Librarian at Christian College in Geelong.