A New Style of Library for a New Style of Learning – Brighton Grammar School's Middle School Library Services

By Kris Paterson

The floor plans were drawn up, basement excavated, concrete poured and the building site was a hive of activity behind construction barricades at the time of my appointment to Brighton Grammar School libraries. Planning for Brighton Grammar School's new Middle School building was several years in, and the anticipation and excitement was palpable.

The task put to me in 2013 was to contribute to the design of a library space that would serve the Middle School community (some 300 boys in years 7 and 8, and staff).

Limitations of previous library

The library on the old Rosstrevor site had served the Middle School community well over its lifetime. An upstairs room the size of 1.5 'typical' classrooms, it was on the west side of a central quadrangle. Caring and professional staff over the years had improved services and both the physical layout and traffic flow of the space. Non-fiction collections had been audited and condensed, allowing shelving to be both cut down in height to allow better light flow, and the number of shelving units reduced so shelving could be spaced apart over the same amount of floor space.

Whilst new furnishings and colour could have freshened the look, with a brand new Middle School underway, the opportunity to review function, services, and plan for technology-rich activities and flexibility of purpose was an exciting opportunity.

Old library: the high circulation desk at left cuts staff off from the action. This lunchtime shot shows chess, and computer and tablet use underway.

Old library: boys access online and hardcopy resources.

Plans and vision for new library

The new Middle School, The Urwin Centre for Learning, is named for Brighton Grammar School's recently retired Headmaster of eighteen years. It comprises three levels including underground parking and services facilities. The two above ground levels accommodate four learning commons, each capable of accommodating 75 students.

Each learning commons features flexible spaces and furniture; white-board tables and smart-paint walls for writing upon, technology-rich spaces with Wi-Fi and large touch screens for connecting and shared viewing of staff or student devices. Each learning commons is the home and learning space for 75 boys and four team teachers.

"stunning and modern" says JS, year 7 student.

To complement this flexible environment, our library space needed to be designed to serve as both a collaborative space, a suitable breakout space from the learning commons, a hub for readers and studiers alike, whilst maintaining the flexibility to adapt to the needs of future generations of learners.

Old library: the recreational reading area sat only six students comfortably.

New library: stylish couches allow more boys to sit and recline in comfort.

Any library team looking to a new building project should have as a resource La Marca's works (2007 and 2010), for their thought-provoking writing and images. Sharing annotated scanned pages can be an effective way to get a group of planners visualising and sharing the same ideas for discussion. Additionally, the myriad ways of presenting online 'mood boards' of inspiration or exemplars (see Valenza on Pinterest and Paterson on ScoopIt), allows one to present a far more visual and imagination stirring showcase demonstrating possibilities and wishes. This can be more effective than a dot point list or descriptive plan.

Throw into the mix an honest review of the library programs, statistics of use (space, resources and staff expertise), as well as forward-thinking brainstorming of not just 'if we had . . . we could' ideas, but the broader and more exciting possibility of, 'what might we do?'.

Hard choices

Following collection use analysis, and an audit, the reality of the move and what would make an effective and exciting new space meant sometimes hard decisions had to be made.

The non-fiction and reference collection will be dispersed to the learning commons, allocated by matching content to curriculum. There was much debate and discussion over whether this was the right move or not.

"it's great to study and work in" says OM, year 7 student.

Whilst there is plenty of shelving across the entire building, the design of the library meant that it could serve as both a drastically reduced fiction and non-fiction collection, or we could focus on creating a recreational reading hub and disperse the non-fiction collection to the learning commons areas making the materials available at point of need. In the end, I believed for the population the library serves, their borrowing habits, and the curriculum programs taught, it was more valuable to have a vibrant and used recreational reading hub as the focus. Fiction, graphic novels and picture books, journals and magazines, and a revamped biography section were to be the core collection of our new space.

'Kick-off' and our first term of action

The Michael Urwin Centre for Learning.

Valentine's Day celebrations.

In January 2014 we launched. The builders moved out, staff moved in to the centre, and the removalists returned from storage and unpacked all 3,500 titles of the fiction and true story/biography collection.

Promotion of our authoritative subscription online encyclopaedias and databases as the prime source of research has led to an increased number of bookings of the teacher-librarian, in both the library space and in the

"a fantastic resource, and so well used" says CM, teacher.

learning commons. These sessions have been delivered to class sizes of 20-24 students, as well as half-commons cohorts of 40-45 students. Importantly, the ability to be flexible and teach out in the classroom has been seen by management as supportive of teachers in the new environment. Teaching 'out in the classroom' is neither new nor innovative; teacher-librarians have always worked best when they work with teachers. In our new building, where teachers are working in teams, where there are plenty of windows to internal passageways, being seen out and about working with teachers in 'their environment', being visible, has been valued by the learning community.

New library: a variety of classroom chairs and soft furnishings keep lunchtime chess players on the edge of their seats, or is it the tension of the game?
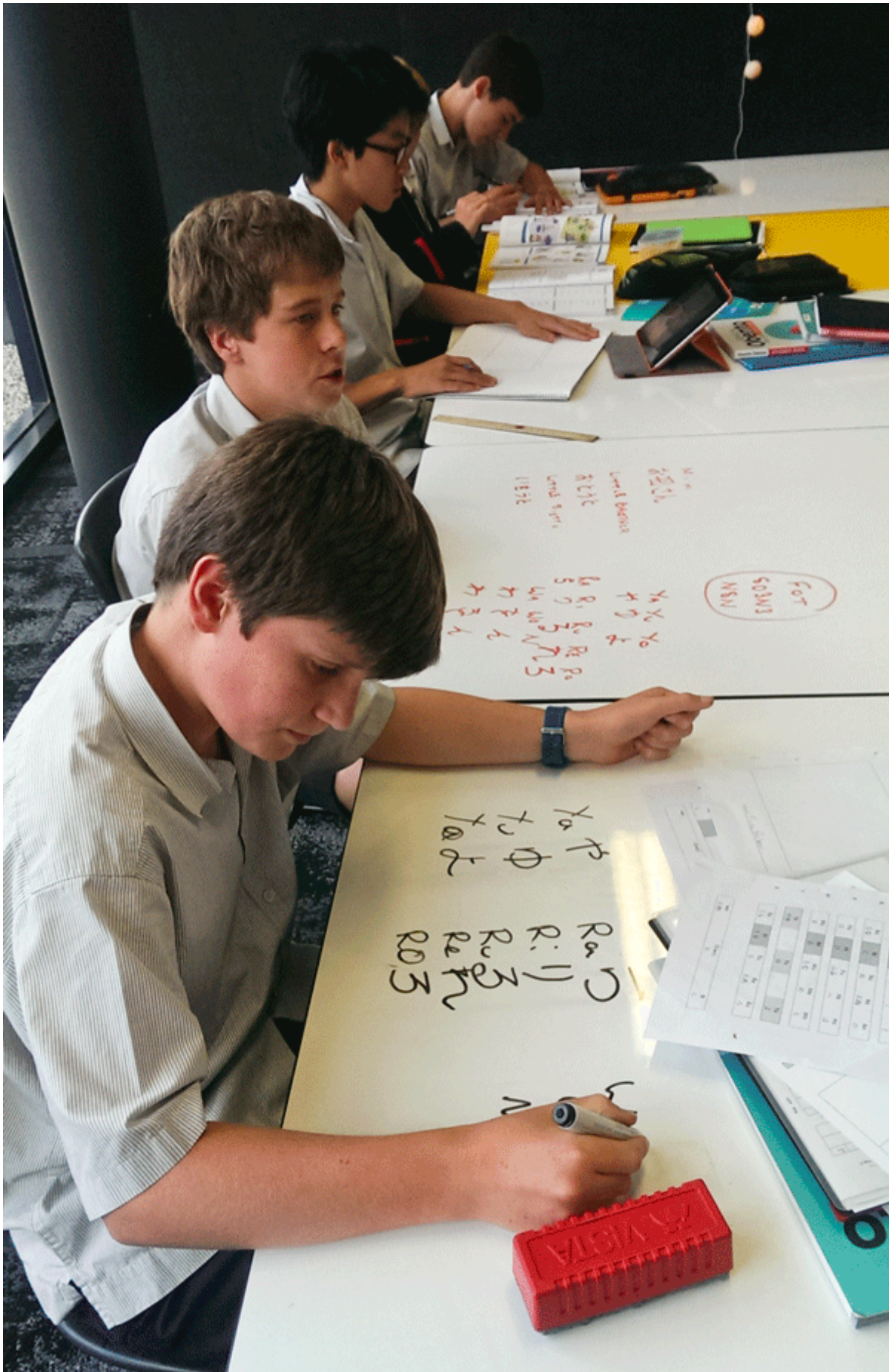
New library: whiteboard tables serve as a place for 'workings out' or collaborative notetaking which is then photographed and shared electronically.

Report card

Like any new building or significant change, there were plenty of opportunities for learning and personal growth this first term. A sense of humour and the help of colleagues is a must! But the successes have been pleasing. As an aside – I spent two and a half years working at a tertiary library and one of the most useful political tools I learnt in that time was that measurement of trends, patterns and comparisons across time periods and campuses is vital for planning, resource allocation and sharing success. Statistics and measurements are important for driving internal improvements and change, but it is the careful selection of high-stakes measurements (Deakin University Library, 2013) and anecdotal evidence for sharing with management and your community that will impress and convince, or provide non-library staff snippets of 'elevator pitches' of success. Here are just two statistics reported to library and school management:

- 21% increase in the number of loans this year compared to same timeframe last year
- borrowing of the true story and biography collection has increased 180% compared to last year. The actual number of loans (56) is more than last year's non-fiction, popular non-fiction and true story/biographies collection combined. When comparing true story and biography 2014 loans to the combined loans of all 2013 non-fiction collections, the increase is still a respectable 10%.

In the spirit of collegial sharing, here is the report submitted to both library and school management of the first term of operations.

The launch of the new library has been a lot of work but great fun. It has refreshed teacher and student library relationships, provided a very interesting workspace and helped us all to rethink the purpose of a modern library service. We've made a great start, and much remains to be done.

"what an awesome library" say new year 7s x many.

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