

Library learning spaces: Data gathering to inform

By Anne Whisken

Introduction

Learning Landscapes articles in 2012 looked at the ways that libraries are changing to meet evolving educational understandings, with flexibility in both physical and digital space design being a stand-out consideration. This ability to be many things to meet different ways of learning is stretching traditional concepts of what a library is about. In regard to library as a physical facility, increasingly we see focus on spaces for cooperative learning with engaging mobile learning technologies gaining ascendancy over spaces for storing and managing access to print materials. Even such a relatively recent innovation in which libraries became desktop computer centres is going; as users move to BYOT (Bring Your Own Technology) using the library's networked resources.

Within the context of the style established by last year's articles, in which I reflected on mainstream school library movements with reference to my own library, this article again uses my existing situation to look at how we meet these changed expectations (promises and threats?). This time I look at the situation most people face: a slightly or very tired library building and possibly not a lot of money to change the building or furniture. To inform that, two key aspects are considered: for what function is the library space and its programs used, how effectively is that done, and how can we measure that? What can we do to alter our practices and the way we use the space to meet established priorities?

Background

In November last year I submitted our library vision to architects designing a new three storey innovation centre at my school, which will include a library space on the ground floor (Whisken, 2012). We anticipate moving into the new centre in 2015. So what happens between now and then, with at least two years of library operation in our old space? It is not realistic to consider spending much on new furniture or fittings, so must we be constrained to old ways of operating just because the building is old style? Or dare we risk putting new wine into old wineskins despite the warnings (Mark 2:22)?

We have decided to push the boundaries and ask difficult questions about our practices and how we use the areas within this existing library space, even if it means a bit of seam splitting. Our library Action Learning Team this year is titled 'Know Thy Impact: Collecting data about how library programs impact on student learning'. It accords with the school's key learning goals and the Hattie (2003) research informing our professional development program.

Literature review

Initial reading to inform our action research data collection lead us to general library program monitoring, material focusing on public library programs, and that aimed at program standards and data gathering in school libraries (see references). David Feighan's presentation to the School Library Association of Victoria Conference March 2013 (Feighan, 2013) provided a very timely literature review update. He pointed out that library data collection models pose four questions: How do you measure the value of a library? What data do you need? How do you present it? Use it?

His answer is firstly to have a clear business plan. The data gathering, reporting and accountability is then driven by, and tied to, the plan's priorities. The 'whys' of data gathering he outlined supported our aims of self-examination:

- measure, understand and improve the library service by identifying gaps in order to identify future priorities;
- to measure patron satisfaction;
- to measure against stated goals and objectives;
- to report to the school on what and why the library does what it does;
- to report the value of the library to the school.

His 'what' points of data gathering were also useful references as we determined our areas:

- what the collection is doing to deliver value – data about loans, in-house circulation, reservations, booking, patron usage, collection turn-over, age of collection?
- what are the staff doing to deliver value?
- patron perceptions of the library?
- staff perceptions of the value of their work?

When it comes to analysis of the data collected, David suggests using the findings shared by networks such as the Victorian Public Libraries Network Annual Surveys, Council of Australian University Librarians, and Institute of Education Sciences, and National Center for Education Statistics. Many of these results are also benchmarked against others, and David refers to several very useful case studies.

What are the staff doing to deliver value?



Making best use of the data collection capacities of library software and databases is a key point made in his presentation, and as school libraries move their expenditure towards increased use of online resources, it is a very important one to consider when making vendor selections: can data be collected about the use of this library resource? At our library, we have a view that such data collection is best done via an aggregation capacity in the library management software.

Action Learning Team

Action Learning Teams at our school follow a standard process of submission of proposal, approval, action over a period of time, and reports of action learning at the end of the project. Our team consists of our Mellor Library staff members – four teacher-librarians (one in the role of eResources Coordinator), one librarian, two library technicians and a library assistant.

Our research proposal title: 'Mellor Library Data Collection: Know Thy Impact! What library programs contribute to student learning, and how do we determine, measure and report that?'

Goal: Undertake investigation about how to measure and report on the contribution to student learning in key school goal areas by Mellor Library programs:

- Use of library spaces
- Wide Reading
- Information Literacy
- Online resource use
- Fiction and non-fiction collection use

Key Questions: What data should a school library collect to measure its impact on student learning in key school goal areas? What programs should be measured? How is the data best collected and reported?

After brainstorming in meeting one we determined that initially we would focus on how to measure use of our learning spaces and resources, chiefly for the key program areas of Wide Reading, Research and Resource provision (print, DVD, online). We saw that data collection in those areas was easiest to establish, while data collection about impact and efficacy of Wide Reading and Information Literacy programs would wait until we had developed our skills further.



Learning spaces

Because the learning we do about how we use spaces is crucial both to informing our usage of our old building as well as to our input to the design process of a new library building, our team spent considerable time thinking about how library space design and usage contributes to student learning. Indeed, we asked over and over the uncomfortable subversive question: why would anyone come to this space? What can they get here that they can't get elsewhere? How might we measure those things? Hay's advice (2010, 2011, and 2012) guided us here: determine function and design the space.

Focus Question: What is the key function of this learning space?

Hypothesis: The key function of this library learning space in a school is to facilitate the teaching and learning of knowledge creation using best practice information skills, resources and learning practices; and for teachers and students together to explore reading in its many forms.

Learning Impact questions: If the key function of this library learning space is as above, then:

- What about this *physical space* enables teaching and learning of excellent information practices and exploration of reading, and how would we measure that?
- What about these *resources* enables teaching and learning of excellent information practices and exploration of reading, and how would we measure that?
- What about these *programs* supports that teaching and learning of excellent information practices and exploration of reading, and how would we measure that?
- What about the *staff members* assists teaching and learning of excellent information practices and exploration of reading, and how would we measure that?

Of these, we decided to focus first on two aspects of the use of the library learning space: collection of data about use of our physical spaces and our book and online resources.

Physical spaces

What are the strengths of our current building and what opportunities does it provide?

Description: Mellor Library is a 1970's building with broad mezzanine running around four sides of a large ground floor space, two upstairs classrooms, two downstairs classrooms and a large ground floor lounge and shelving area. In a 2008 refurbishment we moved furniture and some walls to create spaces to accommodate the equivalent of seven classes of students and kept walls cream with white or cream shelving and pale beech panels. Despite its age it presents as a light, bright space with comfortable seating and constantly changing displays.

Location: Excellent location next to the 'Quad' – a huge, bright covered space central to senior student life with a great canteen/ café.

Light: Good light floods from an overhead 'lantern' reflecting from cream walls and wooden frames;

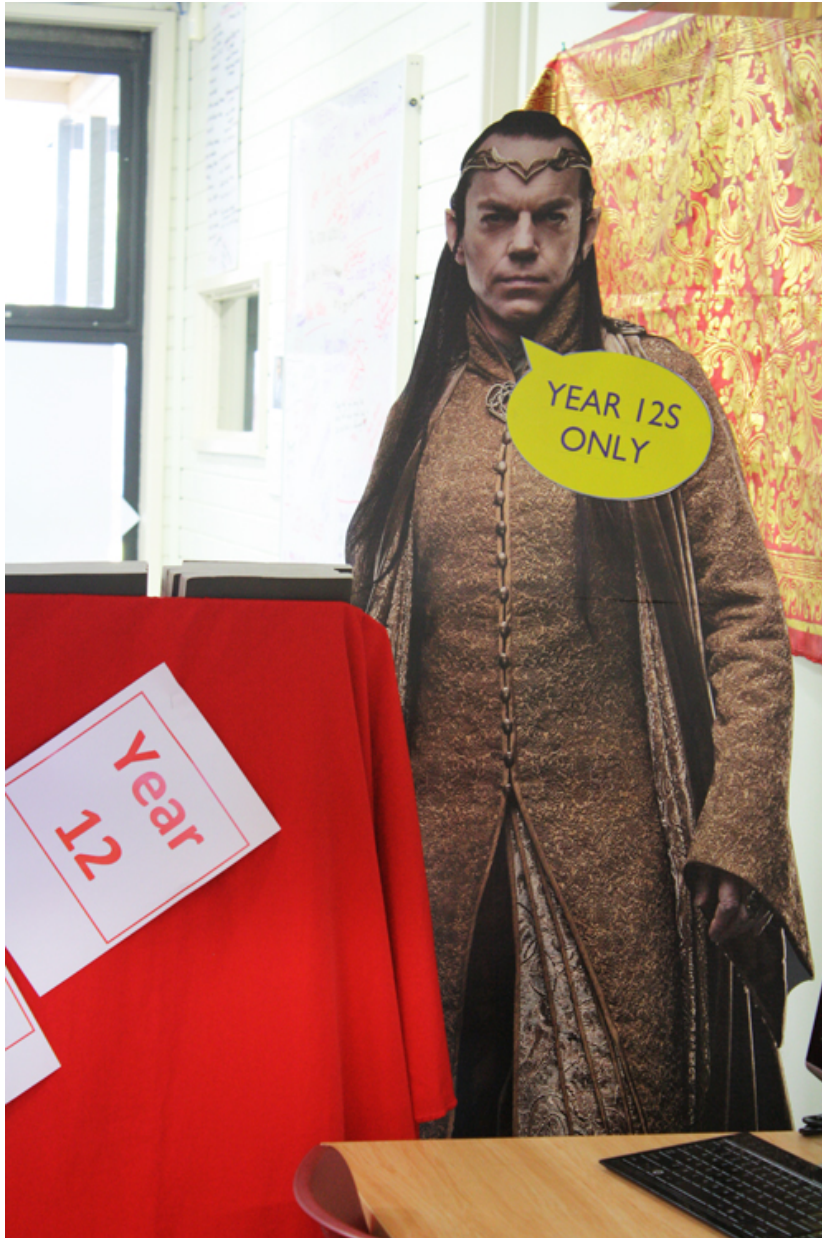
Furniture and shelving: Furniture is ageing but OK and adequate, kept maintained by careful recovering; non-fiction shelving is old but with new pale beech laminate panel ends looks fine; new low reference shelving is cream metal with pale beech tops and ends; fiction shelving is all new, with white Ikea 'Billie' bookcases lining the considerable expanses of mezzanine walls providing bright shallow display and storage capacities, and cream metal moveable display and static free-standing units elsewhere.

Currently we are experimenting with furniture arrangements – what do students like and respond to, what happens when we create different arrangements and locations, what happens when we hand the arrangement over to them? It is a process limited by the fact

that there is little to no budget for new furniture, so how do we get around that? We keep re-arranging what we have into different formations and locations (plus a bit of beg, borrow and steal from elsewhere!).

Our data collection about these experiments is done on an ongoing basis, as in: try something – if students use it, keep it; if they don't, try another arrangement! Record what has been tried and what works. Ask students in surveys what they like and don't like.

... what happens when we create different arrangements and locations, what happens when we hand the arrangement over to them?



Space usage

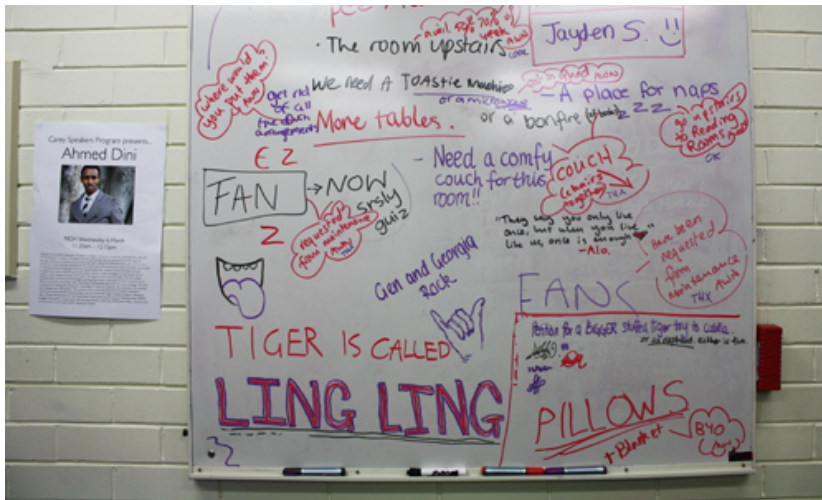
We frequently change how we use our physical spaces, trying to find out what happens if we present different options.

Large central downstairs space. Usage: Furniture is interspersed with shelving to provide a range of casual lounge seating, wall benches with tall swivel stools, single tables between tall stacks, group tables for two or four. Its display areas of free standing three-fold screens, wooden bi-fold carousels and island tiered book stands give promotion to new books, senior fiction promotion and current feature themes.

Two ground floor classrooms open to rest of library. Usage: Both were used successfully for research classes, the larger one with data projector, but over the past year we have changed their usage to try new ideas. The larger room is still used for research classes but has also become our modern history room, with books in Dewey order but collected from a number of denominations and marked as the modern history collection. This focused accessibility has resulted in a greater usage of the collection. The smaller room has been turned into a Year 12 Study Centre in response to conversations with Year 12 leaders about how the library can support Year 12 learning. A combination of casual seating and formal chairs and tables, whiteboard and markers, stationery, colourful decorations and large stuffed toys (!) has produced a wonderful little area which is self-controlled, positive and used constantly for its purpose.

Mezzanine on four sides of library. Usage: It has tables and lounge chairs for single or two person study, and used by senior students on study spares, language assistants for coaching, and crazy chess at lunch and break times. Displays of fiction genres, popular journals, Manga and classic comics are done in wooden bi-fold carousels and mobile face-out shelving as well as the shallow Ikea shelves.

Two upstairs classrooms. Usage: These provide very successful wide reading spaces, equipped with lots of huge cushions providing popular base/back-against-walls seating plus lounge chairs, low display tables, wall shelves for face-out display, data projectors for book trailers, soft wall tiles for poster displays – and excellent noise control to provide for quiet, reflective immersion in narrative.



Points of Difference

Our team asked: What makes our spaces different to those in a class room? Why would students come here, and why would a teacher bring a class here?

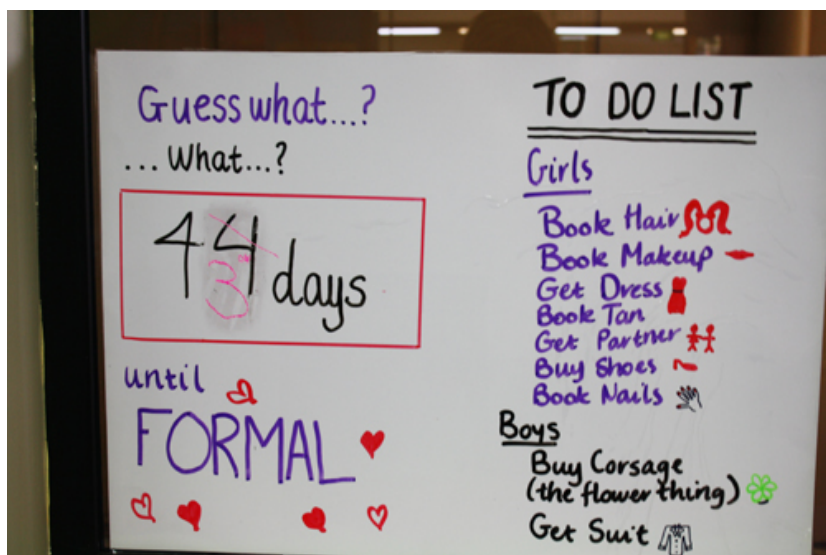
Hypothesis:

Students come to the library because it provides things they can't get in other spaces at school:

- access to study facilities before and after school – in 2012 we trialled then adopted extension of library hours to 7.30 am – 5.00 pm
- refuge from playground
- quiet place to read or study (or sleep!)
- meet with friends/peers for social or specific common purpose such as chess, games, computer games, research, study, debate planning, exam cramming, oral presentation practice
- access to collections of fiction, non-fiction, reference, journals – and help to find them or to request that they be bought
- collect printing, do photocopying – and get help with these
- complete large sheet assignments and posters which require room and equipment for layout, cutting, sticking
- research assistance, including online resource location and referencing expertise
- language tutors
- Year 12 study centre
- Year 12 evening study club Thursdays 5.00 – 8.00 pm, supervised by VCE Coordinator and others including Head of Resource Centre, Mellor Library

Teachers bring their classes to the library for

- Wide reading – quiet, enclosed, relaxed space with cushions and books and expert staff to team teach reading promotion
- Research – whole class size area adjacent to relevant books with data projector for a library staff member to team teach, show pathways to find books and online resources, teach note-taking and referencing
- Focused study – large or small classes book in to use the varied furniture and locations to enable small group and individual work and have expert support where required
- Computer access – if students are lacking computers for any particular reason, the class is booked in to use desktop or class set of MacAir notebooks, knowing they will all be in working order.



Tools to gather data to test our hypothesis about usage and reasons

Space Usage

- Daily door counter statistics – recorded on booking sheet
- Class space usage by subject, year level, teacher, purpose, numbers – booking sheet records
- Study period numbers and usage – observation check sheet records
- Break time usage – observation check sheet records and survey
- Community group and meeting usage – booking sheet records and survey
- Yr 12 Study evening numbers and usage – observation check sheet records and survey
- Yr 12 Study Centre usage – observation check sheet records and survey
- Wide Reading sessions – booking sheet records and survey
- Research and focused study classes - booking sheet records and survey
- Computer usage – booking sheet records
- Printer/photocopier usage – statistics of use gathered from machine software, given that users have to come physically to the library to photocopy or collect their printing.

User-staff interactions for resource use and assistance

- Circulations Desk – check sheet records
- Reference Duty – check sheet records
- User survey

Usage of physical and digital resources – print, DVD, eBooks, online databases

We decided to collect data on use of the physical resources (books and journals and DVDs) as well as eBooks and online subscription databases. We recognise that users now access our resources from within the physical space of the library as well as 24 hours a day from other locations, but regarded it as an important set of statistics to have at this stage. Tools to gather this data are:

- Library system loan records
- Internal usage records by recording in library system the items in special collections on trolleys and returns of items used and left out to be re-shelved
- Statistics of use gathered by platform suppliers of information databases and eBooks.

Next steps

- Develop the data gathering instruments and means of recording data gathered, trial them and then conduct data collection.
- Analyse the data and report findings - what does this mean about the way we use our learning space for best impact on learning?
- Review the usefulness of the tools used.
- Review the data collection skills and knowledge learned by the team.
- Make recommendations for future action.

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Anne Whisken has been a teacher and teacher-librarian for 30 years, leading major secondary school libraries in Victoria and Queensland. She is currently Head of Resource Centre, Mellor Library at Carey Baptist Grammar School. Anne is a PhD student at Charles Sturt University. She chose action research to investigate ways to work with teachers to model and develop student learning of skills and dispositions for 21st century information literacy.