

Designing Libraries: Learning for a Lifetime

by Alan November of November Learning | NovemberLearning.com

Pat Kyle, librarian at the Washington International School (WIS) was presented with a rare opportunity. A private PreK-12 institution in northwest Washington, DC, WIS had launched a five-year redesign of the school in which she would take an active role, helping build a brand new media center.

Having participated in a design workshop at my Building Learning Communities Summer Conference (www.novemberlearning.com/blc) last year, Kyle understood how a properly designed space, one that thoughtfully integrated online learning, and collaboration and content creation among students, would serve the entire school community well into the future. So she invited me to meet with her, the school's headmaster, IT director, and lead architect in what was an incredibly exciting opportunity for me to get in on building a true 21st Century school.

When I looked at the existing plans, I saw a fairly traditional library, with the usual configuration of bookshelves and a central circulation desk. There was an adjacent classroom where teachers would bring students to do research utilizing laptops on mobile carts. As I have frequently seen in plans for new schools or ones being remodeled, it was a "new/old library." Despite the presence of technology, WIS's plan was not quite the ideal space for helping students develop the skills necessary for functioning in a digital, global economy.

I encouraged Pat and her colleagues to imagine their library in 10 years, because if they design for today, they would already be behind. As you look critically at your own spaces, consider this: As technology grows ever more ubiquitous, the massive shift from paper as the dominant media to digital content will

only continue. Beyond going to the library to do research--simply accessing existing published work--students need to be engaged in producing content of their own. The growing trend toward online learning, more personalized instruction, and collaboration on a global scale also challenge librarians and media specialists, who are positioned to lead the way as technology adopters in their schools.

DESIGN FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Stanford University offers online learning from kindergarten through high school. Michigan will be requiring all students to complete a specified number of online learning opportunities before graduating. Online learning will explode. Schools will need to address ways of working with students who are becoming more individualized in their own learning and at the same time are also becoming more collaborative.

What libraries can offer are intimate spaces for online learning. It is within these learning spaces, with the help of talented librarians, where students can learn to be self-directed. As learning becomes more personalized and individually designed, it will be even more important to also include social spaces where students can work together to construct meaning from their online experience. Therefore, the design recommendation is an online learning center with glass walls where students can be engaged alone or with others.

GLOBAL COLLABORATION CENTERS

We needed to consider a collaboration center that includes a long conference table with a plasma screen at the end, level with students who will be seated around the table—almost removing the barriers of geography. Within spaces like these, it will be important for librarians to teach students how to responsibly and safely connect with others from around the world. You can show students how to go online and find other students, professionals and organizations that would be willing to discuss and debate topics being studied. You can make use of web databases such as ePALS where classrooms from India, China, Australia and other countries abroad are waiting to bring a new dimension into learning. Additionally, you can use software like Skype that will allow your students to make these connections for free through online audio and video conferencing.

DESIGN STUDIOS

We also had to imagine students spending hours creating content alone and with others and posting that content online. It will be important for librarians to encourage and enable this inventive work, as these skills are essential for a global economy. Design studios are where this can happen and could quite possibly be the most exciting places within the library. These multiple, small studios will be areas where students can group together behind glass, soundproof walls before, during and after school hours to create podcasts, collect and make sense of scientific and historical data, direct and produce video and most importantly, expand their personal boundaries of learning.

COMMUNITY PRESENTATION SPACE

Finally, we recognized that once students research authentic issues, design and carry out rigorous and motivating projects and produce robust presentations, a space will be needed where classes and community members can come together to

become engaged with the student presenters. This community space will be an open area that can be converted to accommodate presentations of different types. A screen and LCD projector will come down from the ceiling as needed and various inputs and outputs will be readily accessible to accommodate any type of media presentation.

According to Pat, “The actual physical changes suggested were not huge but very significant both in terms of use and approach.” These new spaces are not going to be successful because they are packed to the brim with all the latest and greatest technologies or because a significant increase in money was allocated. It will be the librarian engaging students through personalized instruction, global collaboration opportunities and creative assignments that will remain absolutely essential.

About November Learning

Alan November has been an education technology consultant since 1995. Since then he has helped schools, governments and industry leaders improve the quality of education through technology. In 2004 Alan expanded November Learning to include a team of educational specialists and a wider range of educational materials. The November Learning Team is a highly specialized group of educators. We have a range of expertise in educational issues, with a primary focus on community building and technology integration. The November Learning Team is dedicated towards supporting and challenging teachers and students to expand the boundaries of learning.

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For more information, please contact:

donna@novemberlearning.com or +1 (781) 631-4333