



LIBRARY MAKEOVER



(Top) Bright and comfortable seating in the reading area
(Above) 3D printers in makerspace

You don't have to demolish a library in order to improve it. **JENNIFER CAIN**, a teacher-librarian at a secondary school in Melbourne, outlines how a refurbishment gave a new lease of life to the library where she works.

Mater Christi College, located in Belgrave in Melbourne's south-east, is a Catholic secondary school for girls. In 2013, the school's learning commons was born from a need to rebrand and repurpose the library, partly on account of the introduction of a 1:1 device program. There wasn't a huge budget, but refurbishment has transformed the space and changed its function without any major structural modifications.

Once every student was equipped with a device, it seemed that all research could be done using Google, and the collection – and the library and the skills of the teacher-librarian were no longer in high demand. Students and teachers remained in their classrooms.

HOW COULD WE TURN THIS AROUND?

The first thing was to cull the collection, freeing up some much-needed floor space. Non-fiction use had dropped right away, and ten lengths of shelving became two, which now hugged the perimeter walls rather than protruding outwards. Suddenly the library could accommodate five classes rather than three, and the whole space opened up as a feeling of light and spaciousness took over.

New carpet was installed, which instantly updated the look of the space and had the effect of inviting students to lie on the floor to read if they wanted. Tables and chairs were next. Heavy, grey tables – almost immovable – were replaced with white, rectangular flip-top tables on wheels, accompanied by bright modern chairs. A variety of tables of different sizes and shapes catered for different needs and added interest to the space. Having the flexibility to quickly flip tables and move them out of the way provided a versatile space for hosting events,



Booths for collaborative learning and private study

guest speakers, performances, displays and exhibitions. It also provided a space that was large enough for entire year levels to come together to undertake interdisciplinary learning for a whole day with the added benefit of two teacher-librarians on board.

The seminar room, originally full of the same grey tables and dark chairs, was gutted to make way for learning booths. Banquettes in bright, modern print designs were installed with tables in between, and display screens were attached to the wall for students to work collaboratively and share their learning on the big TV screen. This is by far the most popular space in the learning commons. Seniors enjoy the intimacy and privacy of the booths, and this has improved the study culture of all students.

Lounge chairs and couches were purchased for the reading area, which now provides space for two classes instead of one. The girls love being able to move them around easily, making 'campfire' arrangements to suit their needs.

The original circulation desk, which was aptly dubbed the *Titanic*, was replaced with a sleek, purpose-designed and built workstation and relocated centrally against a wall to provide a workspace for two staff and an improved line of sight to all three entrances. Floor space was increased even further, which provided an improved welcoming experience, especially since the new entrance doors are now twice the size of the old ones.

A makerspace was created in a small corner by raising a long, wall-mounted bench – which housed a few general-use desktop machines – to a standing height for students to easily work at and access the two 3D printers. The area under the bench, combined with inexpensive IKEA storage cubes, has provided the perfect space for storing materials and equipment.

More recently, two enormous picture windows were installed, which provide students and staff with a view to the magnificent stained-glass wall installation in the foyer. Passers-by can also get a peek into the happenings within the learning commons. The question 'Where will we put this?' now has only one answer – 'At the windows.' The placement of artwork and activities by the windows invites students, staff and visitors to come inside and get involved.

The learning commons is a busy place where collaborative discussion and interaction are encouraged. It's not a quiet place, but in an effort to separate activities, services such as printing, photocopying, 3D printing and high-user traffic in and out of the Careers and Pathways centre are located at one end, far away from the reading area. Students often elect to close the doors to the learning booth space to better concentrate on their studies.

Although the total floor space has remained the same, a remarkable transformation has taken place on a limited budget that has seen usage dramatically increase and, more importantly, student learning improve. More users equals more learning.

In two short years, the library has been transformed from a dull, uninviting space full of musty old books into a vibrant hub of learning for the whole school community, featuring colourful, flexible furniture in agile learning spaces.

The Mater Christi Learning Commons can be found at bit.ly/2oWlQqf, and check out #morethanalibrary.

INCITE readers are welcome to visit the school. 

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