PRAKASH NAIR & ANNALISE GEHLING

Foreword

At ALEA/AATE's conference in early 2007, Misty Adoniou talked about the 'third space' created by her eight-year-old son as he made highly sophisticated trading cards and board games using skills from his formal schooling alongside passions of his from popular culture. The space he chose to work on his creations was a small section of the living room floor. One of the questions this raised was: 'This is brilliant, creative work that shows a deep understanding of genre and text type – why is he not comfortable doing it at school?'. Consider for a moment what the physical make up of most schools is like – where is there a space with the same experiential qualities of the living-room floor, and a similarly unhurried schedule? The closest you'll probably come to this is the school library.

Good libraries have always been places where personalised learning has taken place. The hidden curriculum of traditional school architecture, with its long corridors and inflexible box-like classrooms, sends messages such as 'Learning happens under the constant supervision of one all-knowing teacher' and 'you are not responsible for your own learning'. Good libraries, on the other hand, have a variety of spaces for individuals and small groups to work together and often have places for larger group presentations as well. Of course, they are also text-rich. The message in this type of architecture is: 'Here are some of the tools for you to learn with. You are a trusted learner. Go for it!'.

Most of our work is in redesigning schools so that the architecture supports a productive hidden curriculum. Surprise, surprise, the spaces we end up with often look more like today's best libraries than yesterday's best schools.

The current revolution in school learning spaces is long overdue, but it will be many years before all students are touched by a humanising curriculum, supported by humanising spaces. In the meantime, libraries will be the place where students can engage in their own projects, explore topics and texts at their own pace, according to their own interests, on their own whims.

But wait . . . we have the opportunity to do that here and now! With the Internet now a ubiquitous presence in our lives, we must bring up that old chestnut – what's the point of a library when surely the information we want is available to us anywhere we have a computer or mobile phone?

Let us attempt to answer this question. The internet is like a library in many respects. Some things it does better than a library: it isn't as physically restricted, it contains far, far more information than the largest library in the world, and it can be accessed by far more people than that library physically can be. And, most importantly, is has democratised media delivery and creation in a way never seen before.

A library can do some things better than the Internet. A good library not only has answers to our questions, past and present and future (as the Internet can usually provide), it has a place, a physical domain in which we can become absorbed in those answers. A good library makes interacting with texts of all kinds irresistible. It's comfortable and peaceful. Particularly for children, it is rare to be in a space in which the rules and expectations are not controlled by others. The space of the classroom is controlled by the teacher. Libraries are, in a sense, the domain of librarians, but use of the space is up to the user: kids generally don't just walk in, sit down and wait to be directed or spoon-fed by the 'owner' of the space.

It has humans in it! One of the greatest things about so-called Internet 2.0 applications such as Facebook, YouTube and MySpace is their focus on sharing. It might sound a little like this: 'I love this book, I think you'd like it too!' 'I know you like making things, Jonathan, I found this magazine online that's all about making things!' 'Wow, the director of that YouTube film had some great ideas about furniture!' and 'What did you think of the latest Harry Potter movie?'.

Libraries, similarly, are all about sharing: connecting people with others and resources that might just feed a passion or spark an idea. Librarians – real people who know their clientele (especially in the case of a school), have some idea of the scope of resources available and can help students find and navigate their way through them – add so much beyond the sheer power of the Internet.

Without a doubt, libraries will continue to evolve. The purpose and experience of libraries will change, and change again, in their physical and virtual iterations. It's daunting in many respects, but at the current speed of change in information/media management and dissemination, we're best off when we assume that change is a constant.

The contributors to *Rethink!* have shared outstanding ideas that hopefully will encourage readers not only to improve their regular practices, but also view librarianship through different lenses.

Kevin Hennah's lenses start us thinking about libraries as places for showcasing 'merchandise' in the same way as shops. Architect Paul Katz and interior designer Tasmin Morgan give us the lenses of professional designers, encouraging us to be critical of our library spaces and creative in our approaches to design solutions for them.

As school facilities planners we are quite critical of architects who enter a contract with a school and begin with the question: 'How many classrooms do you need?' It's also really difficult to work with teachers who expect this question and fail to see the pedagogical opportunities available when school space and structure is redefined.

The most successful projects always involve a partnership of forward thinking. For this reason, it's really important that the chapters by Dr Susan La Marca and Mary Manning, and Cecile Murray, are first: they show how pedagogy and design inform and support each other.

Rethink! is an outstanding contribution to the ongoing professional discussion of learning environments.

We trust that it will bring you ideas, profound and practical, to enhance and support your best work as teacher-librarians, administrators, teachers and technicians.

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