The evolution of a library program from rigid blocks to entangled clusters

By Leonie McIlvenny
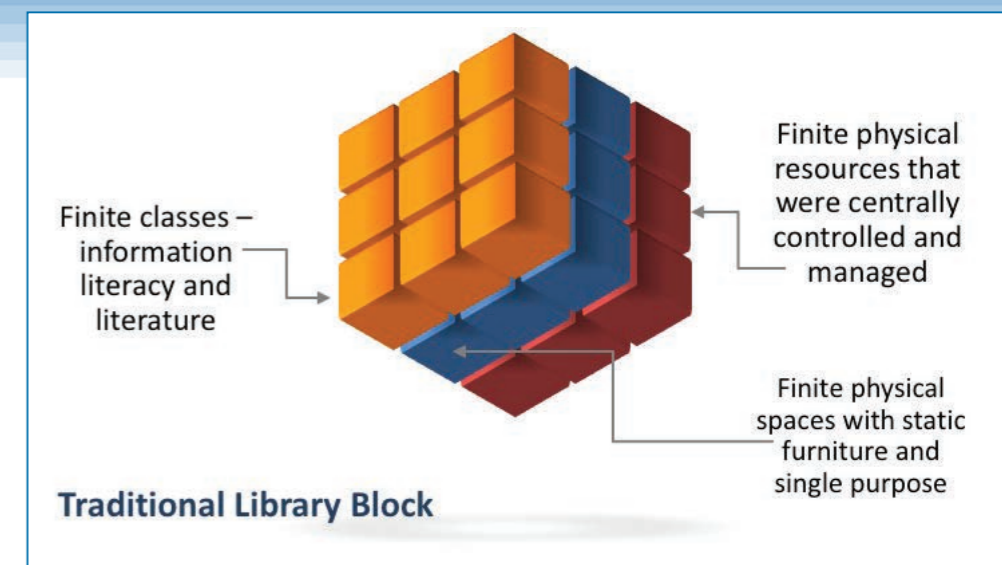

Traditional Library Block

Finite classes – information literacy and literature

Finite physical resources that were centrally controlled and managed

Finite physical spaces with static furniture and single purpose

Biography

Leonie McIlvenny has been an educator for over 35 years. Initially a primary school teacher, then teacher librarian, Leonie has taught in both primary and secondary schools in the public and private sectors in Western Australia. During her career, she has been a curriculum consultant, online course developer, library consultant and ICT project manager for the Western Australian Education Department. She was a project officer for the Teaching Teachers for the Future *project at Curtin University and also lectured in digital literacy and inquiry learning for pre-service teachers. Her interest in information and digital literacies and digital badges was the driver behind such projects as* **Studyvibe***, the* **Research Safari***,* **My Digital Passport** *and the* **UN SDG Digital Passport Challenge***.*

When I began my career as a primary resource teacher back in 1984 my 'world' consisted of a physical space containing a finite number of books separated into fiction, non-fiction, a reference collection, vertical files (for magazine and newspaper clippings), a classroom area, a reading nook, a circulation desk and a card catalogue that was the 'access gateway' to everything we held in the library. My curriculum program delivered 34 classes a week — 2 lessons per week (one research and one literature) to 17 classes. The research lesson focused on teaching students how to search for, locate and extract information from the books we had in the library. The literature program was based around themes and genres.

Students followed a sequential series of lessons navigating a step-by-step inquiry process and usually completed worksheets based on the various 'sections' in the library. We had lessons on the Dewey Decimal System and how to use the card catalogue and played games where students had to 'pretend they were books and order themselves in alphabetical and numerical order 'just like on the shelves'. They practised using a Table of Contents and Index to find information in non-fiction books and encyclopaedias, learned how to 'skim and scan' a book to ascertain its relevance to their search task and completed keyword note taking. As there was no library curriculum, we tried to make it relevant — mainly as a parallel program because, for the most part, we were DOTT (Duties other than Teaching) providers to the classroom teachers. All these lessons were usually focused around a topic (either selected by me, the classroom teacher or the child) and culminated in the celebratory presentation of a written report, poster or talk on such exciting topics as dinosaurs, explorers, inventors, weather and Ancient Egyptians.

The library management systems were mandated and controlled by the central Library Services section of our Education Department. They selected our books, catalogued, processed and covered them and even created the catalogue cards and spine labels for each.
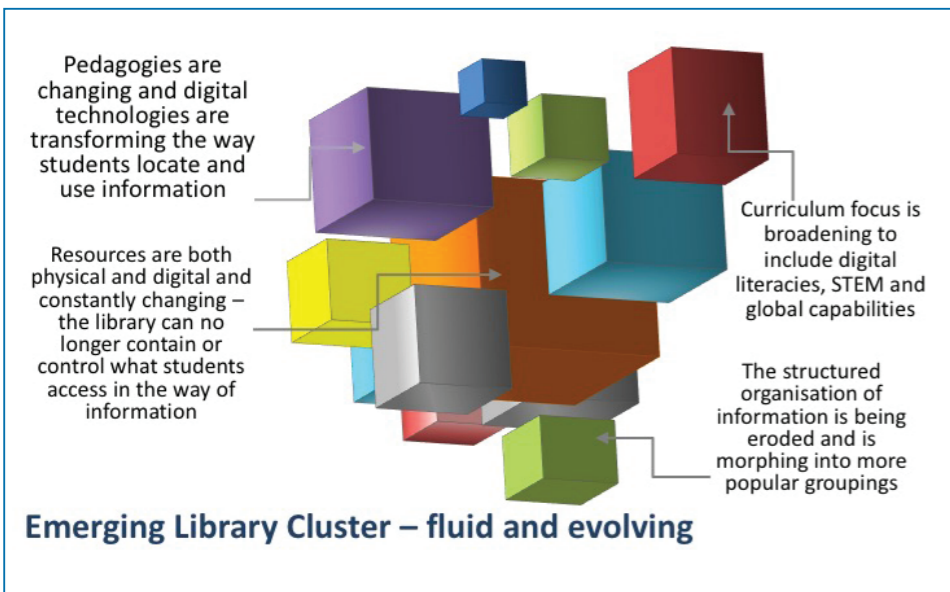
Ahhh, they were the days — simple (yet busy), structured into sequential and rigid pathways with a definitive endpoint.

If I had to think of an image I could use as a metaphor that describes this scenario, it would be something like a Rubik's cube where all the elements of what I did were very rigidly structured and 'stuck together' with little possibility of movement.

34 years on and, oh, how things have changed …

The library space is no longer rigid and fixed. Furniture is constantly being moved to accommodate multiple functions and lesson types. The resource collection is no longer finite and static — in fact one might suggest it is infinite in its extent. Now, instead of just books and, well, books — we have print and digital resources, CDs, DVDs, electronic books and readers, streamed video collections and live news feeds. Cassette players have been replaced by digital recorders, eBook readers, iPods, GoPro cameras and 3D printers. The card catalogue has transformed into an automated catalogue that can now, not only find the physical resources in the library, but federate searches of thousands of other resources located in proprietary databases and digital media collections. As the central control of libraries has been replaced with a more autonomous approach to library management, the once sacrosanct adherence to the Dewey Classification system to classify and store physical resources has been replaced with a more liberal and practical approach that reflects the trend towards popularisation. The tradition of strictly adhering to a separation of fiction and non-fiction collections is now morphing into the trend of creating genrified collections which blur the line or perhaps completely ignore the rules of Dewey. Now, instead of just one fiction collection (with QF sized books

Pedagogies are changing and digital technologies are transforming the way students locate and use information

Resources are both physical and digital and constantly changing – the library can no longer contain or control what students access in the way of information

Curriculum focus is broadening to include digital literacies, STEM and global capabilities

The structured organisation of information is being eroded and is morphing into more popular groupings

Emerging Library Cluster – fluid and evolving

might create mind maps on writeable desktops or apps on their laptops or iPads while they plan their research. They contribute to collaborative workspaces online for their group projects and generate curated lists of resources on their topics that others can access. They update their websites as they continue their research, record videos that will be embedded in their interactive eBooks and follow their favourite authors on Twitter. As they read their class novel, they upload a blog post to the library website or give the book a rating or write a review to be placed in the automated library system. Targeted lessons focus on such things as intellectual property and the use of Creative Commons attribution as a guide to what they can and
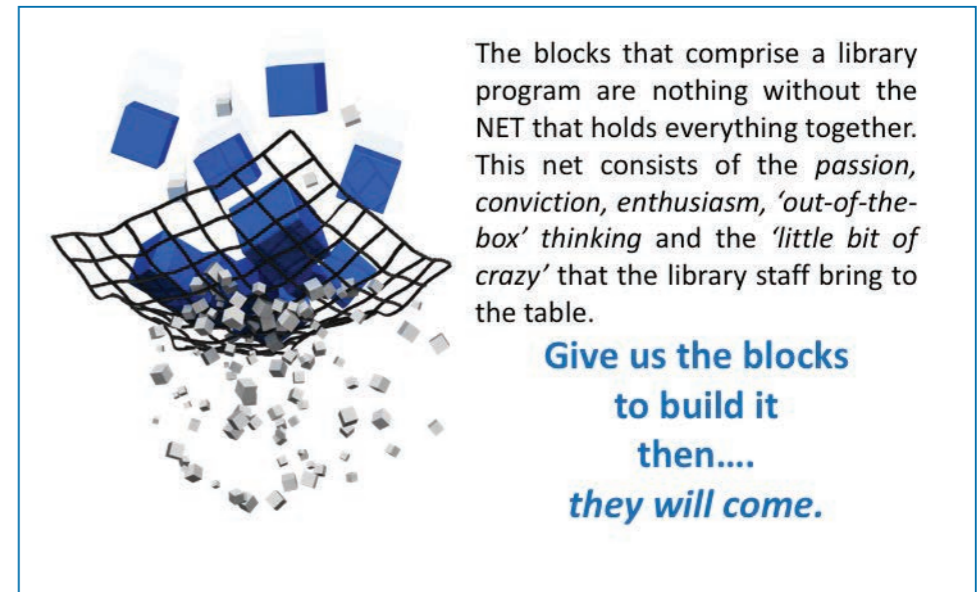
on the bottom shelf) we have our books clustered in a variety of groups based on the curriculum and student interest and reading levels. While the usual genres like fantasy, classics, science fiction, war stories, and adventure stories still fill the shelves, Dystopian fiction, Manga and Steam Punk are also appearing. Selected fiction and non-fiction are being merged into 'practical' groups like 'personal accounts',

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picture books, graphic novels, quick reads and easy reads. These innovative practices are providing a solution to the inevitable demise of the non-fiction section of the library, which is becoming a veritable 'ghost town' as more and more precious space is being repurposed for Maker Spaces, 3D printers and robotics.

Lessons take on multiple approaches and are mostly student-directed. Students cannot freely use on the internet, how to identify fake websites, how to stay safe online, which digital tools might help them create a dynamic presentation and ways to reference the different information formats they find online. Topics they explore might include the current plight of refugees round the world, Brexit, Trump's Wall in the United States, global warming, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the impact of social media on

teenage identity. Learning outcomes are determined through an eclectic 'pull' from not only learning area outcomes but also the General Capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum. The library program no longer sits outside the planned curriculum but embodies multiple outcomes from across learning areas.

The blocks that comprise a library program are nothing without the NET that holds everything together. This net consists of the *passion, conviction, enthusiasm, 'out-of-the-box' thinking* and the *'little bit of crazy'* that the library staff bring to the table.

Give us the blocks to build it then.... they will come.

Yes, this is a very different library I live in today …

So, how then would I see this scenario as a metaphor? Staying with the theme of blocks, I see this as more a 'quantum-like' cluster of entangled blocks loosely grouped together, yet constantly changing. While there are essential blocks that still must be addressed and accommodated (library management, resource selection and management, curriculum delivery), we can now no longer follow a rigid structure but must embrace a more fluid, constantly changing approach to how we manage and navigate these blocks.

The challenge for us as information specialists and educators is, however, to '**not throw the baby out with the bath water',** but to maintain the balance between embracing change and innovation while retaining the integrity of the library service we provide to our clients; knowing which 'blocks' are essential and central to our library program and which are temporary, transitory or even counter-productive to our core business. We must decide which of the 'blocks', regardless of whether it is 1984 or 2019, are still essential for building a strong

foundation for a library and information service and which are decoration, albeit functional and interesting, but which may actually compromise the integrity of what we are trying to create.

Last but not least, and in fact most importantly, there is one thing I have not mentioned through this 'wander down memory lane' and which might be considered the most essential ingredient of all — and that is the library staff. I don't consider them a block but more a net that binds everything together. And what is this net made of? It is made of passion, conviction, enthusiasm and a 'little bit of crazy' as well as a sincere belief that what we do in our libraries matters and should be a key component of any learning program committed to preparing our students for a life in an information-saturated and fully connected digital world.