A journey to iCentre thinking

By Anne Whisken

Without a doubt, libraries will continue to evolve. The purpose and experience . . . will change, and change again, in the 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. Prakash Nair and Annalise Gehlin, in the introduction to *Rethink! Ideas for Inspiring School Library Design* (La Marca, 2007).

iCentre – is it a name or a way of being?

What is an iCentre? Lyn Hay, Lecturer in Teacher-librarianship with the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University, and a Teaching Fellow of the Flexible Learning Institute (FLI), introduced the term in 2010 when she looked at the issues, concerns and potentials of school library futures. Lyn challenged teacher-librarians to "examine how our own practice can contribute to building capacity for a sustainable future where school libraries become key learning centres of information, inquiry, innovation, immersion and instructional excellence". She used this concept to look at the ways schools can develop such a centre based on the principles of form, function and brand. Lyn saw a generational change occurring for teacher-librarians in both human and pedagogical terms and a technological generational change moving even faster. iCentre provides a change management strategy – it is more than a label or a building: it guides us to a new way of being.

Over a few decades, my position and the places I have led have been variously known as Library Manager, Head of Resources, Head of Information Centre, and Director of Learning Resources. At some schools we came close to being an iCentre in some ways, with proximity of staff with a variety of skills bringing many benefits even though we all kept to our own specialisations and distinct work zones.

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What name to call the evolving space which brings together traditional library function and skills with rapidly evolving technologies and associated expertise has recently entertained participants in the OZTL_NET discussion list, with energetic contributions canvassing functions, forms, traditions, futures and names. Instigator, Angela Anderson, Coordinator of Educational Resource Faculty at St Monica's College, Epping, summarised the week of 'iCentre or Library' discussion with the observation that actions in the space are more important than the name (Anderson, 2011). Participants felt that while a new title can have jargon power, communities still tend to use the term library because "it is a much broader idea than just information retrieval, which of course is an essential part. Library is a place of inspiration, imagination, finding, learning, community, study, safety and enjoyment." Alison said that most replies indicated that teacher-librarians were happy with the title library as it is an umbrella term that means a multitude of things, but that "it still needs to be dynamic and its services responsive to generational change. The name is not the determining factor in its success."

What is the thing that teacher- librarians can do that others cannot? How can we be intermediaries in the new environment?

Lyn Hay urges us to use the concept of iCentre to imagine and create a powerful future for ourselves. In a similar vein, Jason Clarke, of Minds at Work (Clarke, 2011) recently challenged us to consider the future of libraries in terms of thinking innovatively to develop the best outcomes. He pointed out that supply (online information) and demand (students) now know each other (laptops and connectivity) – so what happens to those who used to be the intermediaries (teacher-librarians)? He suggests that we look at the role of methodology (the way we have always done it) and intuitiveness (a way we have never done things before), asking: "Are you keeping a microchip out of a job? If you are doing that, perhaps you should be replaced – what do you have, and what can you do, that no-one else can do? ". What is the thing that teacher- librarians can do that others cannot? How can we be intermediaries in the new environment?

A threatened species?

For the past few years, I have been feeling a bit like a member of a doomed species wandering across the lonely reaches of a world that was evolving beyond me. I was still viable, but my herd was a dying breed, and with the passing of my generation the species would disappear. The last school librarians would be making brave stands in the few learning environments that still saw a place for them, resolutely guarding several small grey metal cabinets containing remnants of once vibrant non-fiction collections. Grimly, we would clutch the keys, refusing to let our standards slip, desperate to prove our relevance in an 'information age. "Weren't we the information experts? Why were we being bypassed?", we cried.

I was frustrated with software systems that didn't enable the library's digital and physical items to become part of the operating environment of teachers and schools. I saw no point in buying expensive online resources if finding materials required individual searches of each individual database, using different search methodologies in each. What point was a catalogue if its interface was old fashioned and didn't provide for a rich interactive experience reflecting the user's interests? Why have shelves of non-fiction books if students couldn't borrow them when they were needed because they had to stay in the library for the many classes that needed to access them in the same few weeks? Basically, a reference-only collection.

How would we fare when all students 7-12 had 1:1 laptops – would there be a need for a physical library, apart from the fiction collection and desk space for staff? Wouldn't it make more sense if the library staff members were out working with classes in their rooms, providing expert research or reading support in those learning spaces? When I looked at the traffic exploring our shelves, I had to admit there actually wasn't much. There was high use of the spaces by senior students who like the controlled environment for individual and small group study – but surely such facilities could be provided in ordinary supervised study rooms? The middle school students flocked to use the chess tables and laptops at break times – but that too didn't need to be done in a library. Students liked to have our help with printing and photocopying – but any service centre could do that.

Yet . . . middle school students liked to browse for fiction, and everyone loved burrowing in the big reading cushions – not so easy to provide elsewhere. People called in to collect newspapers, get help with laptop use, talk about reading, order materials, hold meetings, design curriculum, conduct language coaching, tutor – difficult to find a supervised, always-accessible space for that if there isn't a library, I thought.

A new paradigm

Then the world shifted on its axis, and the nearly-extinct saw a possible reprieve. Our library staff team spent a day visiting some other libraries. At Melbourne City Library we saw a space that flowed seamlessly from arcade to library, self-search and self-check, staff roving instead of desk-static, outsourced processing and a huge virtual membership. Nice. At Wesley College we saw a catalogue with discovery layer technology to provide an

exciting search and interaction environment. Excellent. At the State Library we saw an old building reinventing itself into exciting physical zones buzzing with activity, and the online environment transformed. Inspiring.

The new Principal marked a new library as one of the areas he would like to focus on in a building upgrade, and suggested I start getting some ideas together.

Joyce Valenza burst into our consciousness with her impossible-seeming virtual library presence.

Susan La Marca gathered the wisdom of many in *Rethink! Ideas for Inspiring School Library Design* (2007) and wrote *Designing the Learning Environment* (2010). Collections of good design principles, these books emphasised library as a learning space rather than repository, with flexible, well lit areas to provide for collaboration, reflection, and research. Business marketing and promotion practice was incorporated into advice for product placement and furniture layout, acoustics, signage and traffic flows.
David Feighan, Director, Libraries and Learning Resources at Bialik College Hawthorn, provided a platform for change strategies at a Learning Futures Forum at Bialik College in 2010.

Lyn Hay's iCentre turned the known on its head and said "Shift happens: It's time to rethink, rebuild and rebrand.". Her advice came down to: Think – what functions do you want in an information learning space? Now design it, make it happen, but don't think you can put old wine in that new wine skin. The people in that space need different dispositions and skills.

The virtual space of an iCentre

Surely a crucial function of an iCentre is information management expertise and presence? The guidance that leads patrons to the best information sources for their teaching and learning, helps them determine and define their information needs, locate and evaluate the best sources, select the most relevant information for purpose, synthesise and reflect, control and manage multiple sources and formats, use and create ethically. I felt that we needed to establish our credentials as information experts by providing a sophisticated information delivery system to meet the needs of the school's teaching and learning environment. We needed new software and new skills and a new locale: a virtual space.

I wanted automated, real time information gathering and presentation to users. While we could do a lot of work to make good Intranet or Learning Management System sites and pages, it involved a lot of unproductive work, in the sense that data had to be gathered, reprocessed, formatted and published – then constantly updated. I saw a future where our excellent but time-consuming pathfinders would become too limiting, too difficult to undertake given the burgeoning spiral of online sites and networks. I wanted automated, real time information gathering and presentation to users. We needed to determine our patrons' information needs, locate the information sources, and index or establish connections to them in such a way that when a patron entered a search the whole range of information in whatever format it lay would be presented to them in easily navigable directories.

I learned new terms – federated searching, faceted navigation, and liked what I saw. Now – was there such a system for schools?

And, sneaking up over my shoulder was this eBook thing. I had a little look and saw fiction being downloaded to reading devices, and wasn't impressed. Did I want to manage a whole heap of quickly superseded devices, and the software, and the business of licensing? Not likely. What about non-fiction? I had a little look at that too and saw boring PDFs (often just scans of the book pages), and at that stage not even containing interactive materials or links.

What were the publishers thinking, I demanded of my suppliers? Where was the capacity to buy eTextbook or non-fiction chapters which could be downloaded into learning management systems, indexed by library systems, with capacity for URLs of particular pages or sections pasted into the context of the online course content? Or else, eTextbooks existing as password protected online sites with URLs for particular sections for contextual linking from courses? Where was the exciting stuff? I was told that the publishers couldn't work out how to do that and make a profit, given that there weren't sufficient 1:1 laptop schools in Australia to provide the sort of large scale purchasing that enables publishers to cover the intellectual creation let alone have a profit margin.

I turned back to making a case for investigation of an integrated library system that enabled a lively interaction between system and patron via accounts, a la Amazon, and which provided for federated searching and faceted navigation. With school approval we looked at a variety of systems, selecting Civica. It had a large base of expert, pushy members (public libraries have to justify their existence constantly) and ticked off on all the things a good integrated system should have in its *Spydus* catalogue. The roll out of its faceted navigation discovery layer *Sorcer* had started, and it was working on a federated search capacity (recently launched as *Blis*). We liked the fact that all these functions were in the one system. Plus, we could have remote hosting to reduce the impact on our ICT department: the Civica people would undertake the research and development, updates, management and problem solving. The *Spydus* content area enabled a nice menu of information for patrons: operation, contact, and promotional material, from where we could insert links to focus areas or related content in our school portal or learning management system. We signed up.

Semester One 2011 saw the data migrated into a test system, a week's *Spydus* training (part of the cost, and quite wonderful), and then full implementation by a P-12 cross campus library technicians group which not only operated as an action learning team but also brought closer co-operation between our libraries. The links to databases, leaning management system pathfinders, and study guides have been developed. We have received our *Sorcer* training, and will soon roll out promotion of user accounts and the loans management, reviews and contact made possible by that system. Crucially, there is a link on our school portal landing page which takes patrons straight to our *Spydus* search and content page. This was no sooner installed than we started receiving requests from teachers for materials listed in our catalogue: that had NEVER happened before! Next step is *Blis*: a digital assets management software developed by Civica to search across nominated digital repositories, be they external subscription databases, online encyclopaedias, internal collections such as *Clickview*, archives or the learning management system.

In the short space of time that we set up our system, eBooks moved on a pace. Suddenly it became glaringly obvious and urgent that we have capacity to manage eBooks and eResources: to acquire the various permutations of license and manage their access and loans. I didn't want to rely on having links to the particular locations – I wanted to incorporate them into our search coverage and delivery, provide access to those with 24/7 whole campus licensing, and loan capacity for those purchased under a one title deal. With that staring me in the face, I learned that the new system *Blis* can manage eBooks and the whole third party, Digital Rights Management area. I liked that.

It comes with its own 'stable' of eBook publishers whose titles and licenses it manages at no cost to us (apart from our annual *Blis* payment), as well as being able to manage titles from other publishers at an additional cost. It maintains user access statistics, so that we can monitor use of our eBooks to guide future purchasing or 'weeding'.

Having an exciting range of eBooks, eDatabases, and eLearning Modules means that I can fill that gap: the one lying between the fact that students can't borrow books when they need them because we cannot hold sufficient books on medieval castles to enable every child in eight classes to borrow one when needed, and the fact that students just head for Google and Wikipedia anyway so they can get instant access. I want to set up 24/7 access to good

quality, reliable, suitable, relevant online materials to fill that gap. Quality non-fiction eBooks could do that – I hope they will. I'm about to commit significant funds to buy the best of what is available to find out.

With the information architecture in place, and a clearer idea of what we could deliver as information experts, I was able to submit a discussion paper to school leadership as part of the strategic plan development process, using Hay (2010), La Marca (2007, 2010), Fielding (2006), Feighan (2010) and Learning Architecture (2010) as key thinking tools.
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Carey iCentre 2012 – 2014 – Vision, Planning and Building. Discussion document.

The past and present: establishing a basic library space and service

2008-2011 has seen the library build its information and reading service, undertake collection redevelopment, initiate research and study and reading activities, replace software to provide for management and indexing and accessing of resources in a blended learning environment, and establish a welcoming space for those who want to meet, explore, check online, relax, read. These are basic functions for a place that should be the heart of a school.

What do we need for the future?

The current and future learning environment requires far more in terms of resourcing and supporting teachers and students, and in terms of the spaces used for multipurpose engagement with resources and hardware, skills development, and creative projects.

What do we need in a centralised space that has as its basis the function of supporting and resourcing use of information and learning technology for teaching and learning at the start of the 21st century? A space that has also a key role in ensuring the ongoing engagement of students with the power of narrative in its many forms? A space to build the ability to communicate with others using digital and language fluency – fundamental in an age where networking is key to creating knowledge.

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iCentre is built in physical and virtual space: a form to meet function

This resource and support centre is both a physical and virtual space, built in both zones to incorporate functions we know as:

- **library** – people, resources, spaces to guide and promote reading, information, study and meetings;
- **elearning** – people and resources to guide use of software and applications to engage, extend, enable learning;
- **ict** – people and resources to guide use of hardware and software to manage learning;
- **language** – people, resources, facilities, spaces to promote immersion, exchange, creation in languages other than English;
- **digital creation** – people, resources, spaces to facilitate use of multimedia software and hardware to create and demonstrate multimedia digital learning experiences and responses;
- **writing and publishing** – people, resources, spaces, equipment to develop talent for competitions and publishing in traditional media and online spaces;
- **fun and games** – spaces and equipment for traditional and digital games for fun and learning.

This focus on function to guide form is largely based on the work of Lyn Hay and the idea of the iCentre, a place that actualises the blending of library functions with other learning support functions.

Zones of engagement: spaces and facilities for function variety

The place that replaces Mellor Library will be a creative commons in its outer zone, moving into more focused areas to cater for specialised needs.

The outer zone will have help desks staffed by specialist support staff, power charge connections, walk-up Internet screens and will allow food and drink. From there patrons enter more secure spaces for focused activities – theatrettes, meeting spaces, reading and reference tables and lounges, access to book and journal collections, reference staff, loans check-outs, creation studios and presentation stages, small labs, large open lounges, covered upstairs outdoor patio gardens. The spaces will be flexible, the furniture easily moved and changed to provide for different purposes.

The building will be constructed to maximise views and inflow of natural light.

iCentre staffing

The areas will be well-staffed to provide for high levels of user support and guidance to focus on the tasks at hand.

Staff job descriptions will reflect the new functions required in an iCentre. There will be a move away from traditional understanding of library, ICT, audio visual, eLearning roles where structure of the service defines the job description. The purpose of the role will be defined in future by how it supports teaching and learning in a blended learning environment.

The skills of an iCentre

The iCentre concept points to a convergence to enable strategic conversations. "It is the teaming of people that is the convergence – rather than necessarily bringing them together physically, it is the bringing them together to work" (Hay, 2011a).

The iCentre concept points to a convergence to enable strategic conversations.

What will we look like in the future? I see us as curriculum design experts, both teacher-librarians and library technicians. We will have the information knowledge and expertise to work alongside teachers as they build information use into the learning experience. We will advise the team what information in what formats best suits the learning purpose of the activity. We will have detailed knowledge of relevant online databases, collaborative spaces, eBooks, eLearning objects or modules, information use applications and tools and how they are best integrated into the learning and at what point. We will work wherever the learning activity takes place at the point when our expertise is required: designing, online course publishing, team teaching, assessing. The iCentre might be where our desks are located, but our work spaces will be all over the school, physically and virtually.

And we will be on duty in the iCentre. We will be at people's sides when they need us, at the help desk, and roaming to supervise and be called to help.

A new species evolves: it's the *iCentraCat!*

I see a new species: it looks a bit like a web-designing – eLearning – library technician – teacher-librarian – Apps support – KM analyst – gaming consultant – second life guru . . . all or part thereof . . . and it converges and swarms and it's coming to an iCentre near you. It moves around on hover skates up and down the ramps connecting the multiple layers and moveable walls of this fluid learning space, now virtual, now real, and you never know which it is, but you do know that whenever you want help to design curriculum, find and integrate rich resources, locate and incorporate applications to enhance learning experiences and provide for differentiation, create and collaborate, introduce reading and literature as a lifelong learning pursuit, s/he's there beside you, purring tender words of advice and assistance. You can't imagine how you would teach and learn without this most wonderful creature and her/his ever-evolving expertise: *iCentraCat.*

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