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FOCUS ON A LIBRARY

Brauer College new resource centre

By Sharyn Anderson

Brauer College is situated in Warrnambool, a beautiful coastal city of 32,000, located 250km west of Melbourne. The College was established over forty years ago as a technical school, but with a name change and a forward-looking principal, it has become a leading school in the south-west. Brauer has a student population of 1400 and a staff of 140 and achieves excellent VCE results. It has a fine performing arts theatre, gymnasium and excellent sporting facilities, including an Olympic standard athletics complex. The staff is committed, enthusiastic, skilled and deservedly enjoys the confidence of the local community.

The only area which seemed to be lacking pizzazz was the library. Constructed in 1960s it was worn and tired – think Commonwealth Library brown brick, stained timberwork, worn carpet and furniture, all combining to present an unappealingly, dingy picture. There seemed little to attract young people to its doors. Fortunately, thanks to library staff, the library was well supported and systems functioned well. In 2005 for the first time, library staff began keeping statistics and, to our surprise, discovered we averaged more than 800 visitors a day and over 1000 at peak times!

Clearly, though, Brauer students deserved something better than a dull and dreary library. The first six months were spent observing, asking questions, listening to opinions and addressing individuals and faculty groups to find out what was wanted. From this, it was clear there was a wide desire for change and improvement.

In July, a report was written and circulated on the conditions experienced in the library. It was necessary to avoid jargon and library talk; we used Learning for the future (2003) to provide a context for the findings and to offer ideal benchmarks. The Resource Centre team visited a number of schools which had had recent make-overs and their facts and figures were included for comparison.

Information was gathered from Melbourne about country public and private schools which enjoyed community support and which had redeveloped their libraries to suit their needs. A copy of the old architectural plans for the building was obtained and used as the basis for constructing a visual plan of how the space should be re-developed. This involved some reconstruction, but no additional floor-space could be created.

Working closely with Assistant Principal Tony Austin and strongly supported by the school Principal, Michael Cusick, a submission was written for funds from the Commonwealth Investing in Ours Schools Program. We concentrated on aspects of the library which could be improved, and which were most likely to attract funding. Consequently, we asked for CLICKVIEW (a digital storage and delivery system of video and free to air recordings), carpet, air conditioning – even a $20,000 ‘one-off’ request for funds for science...
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books, since this was one of the most dated areas of the collection. Anxious hours were spent writing and re-writing our submission until it was word perfect.

Early in 2006 we had our answer. Success! $100,000 of Commonwealth money was ours. Our Principal generously sought another $200,000 from school funds and then planning and consultation began in earnest. We engaged a firm of architects from Mortlake. We spent many hours discussing, observing, talking through the problems the library had and how we could address them.

Problems

The four class areas were noisy and cramped. The light was dull – exacerbated by narrow windows often obscured by shelving, brown brick, worn carpet, and a ‘seventies’ lowered ceiling. Ventilation was poor; the atmosphere could be oppressively hot in summer or stale and stuffy in winter. The service desk was so small only two staff members could work there at a time and there was only one service point. Library staff offices and storage areas were oppressively dull and cramped; bench space was limited and badly organised. A significant area was given over to the storage of videos and class sets, but there was no storage space for the archives. The VCE Study Area at the back of the library had been built by volunteer staff and parent labour in the 80s, but had all of the problems of the above, plus, it experienced regular flooding whenever there was a downpour!

Three months and many meetings later, we had our plan.

Work in progress

At last the day in December 2006 for our big move had arrived. Over two days our super school handyman and a small group of senior school boys made up a team of impromptu navvies to lift and remove over 30,000 books and many, many metres of shelving and other heavy equipment. The library team removed forty years worth of dirt. Stationery and office equipment were removed to an area at the rear of the library building. All office equipment, stores, newspapers and staff worktables were re-located to the VCE area at the rear of the library. All books had to be re-shelved here for use in Term 1 and over the Christmas holidays these were swathed in plastic.

In this cramped area we began Term 1 2007 and there we worked through the hot summer months until May, as the rest of the library was refurbished. No library services suffered, nor was there any loss or damage. Upon relocation, this rear area was the last to be restyled.

What did we get?

We got a state of the art ventilation system (used extensively in West Australian schools) which works on convection and is totally environmentally friendly because it uses no electricity except to open the ceiling vents.

White painted walls and workbenches throughout, with the lowered ceilings removed and lovely crisp white ceiling tiles with neat square lighting panels are a great improvement. The circulation desk is now elegantly shaped, similar to a ‘question mark’; it is large enough to accommodate four or five workers, has two service points and plenty of display and shelving

Alicia Bates, Sharyn Anderson (Manager), Shirlee Zanos, Chris Hayes, and Nicky Baker.
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space. Made of smart laminated surfaces in ‘aubergine’ and marbled grey, this desk is now the focal point of the library: suspended above are our ‘flying saucer’ lights – ultra modern, they are the subject of much admiration.

The carpet is an economy extra tough blend with a mix of predominantly grey marble shot through with tiny specks of colour which are picked up by the series of large display boards around the walls, in aubergine, emerald and pumpkin, thus breaking up the expanse of white. The staff office area is light, bright and modern, with a kitchenette, archive compactus and a separate compactus for videos, DVDs and class sets. There is a mix of benches, at waist height and sitting height, lots of open shelving and a separate office for the manager and AV assistant.

The new Resource Centre can book in four different classes at a time through the automated system, BOOKIT. The old VCE Study Area has become our exclusive fiction area. It is lined with shelving in timber laminate and interspersed with short lengths of colour shelving for display. Above are specially built shelves contrasting in dark blue for the rotational display of bright ceramics provided by the Art department. Two large sofas, with colourful cushions, display boards plus tables and seating for thirty, complete the picture.

The old shelving and trolleys have been spray-painted to give a uniform look. New shelving on castors was purchased, so that our layout could be altered to suit the needs of different groups. We ordered new signage – aubergine lettering on white, which is crisp, informative, smart and functional. We concealed ugly rubbish bins inside cupboards with swing tops.

In addition we have another small classroom off the Fiction area for tutorial groups, small classes, after hours’ meetings and special interest groups. There is another large class area which may be shut off from the rest of the library for active teaching purposes, plus a ‘silent’ class area and a VCE study area. All have access to computers and OPACs. In the middle of the Centre is a large open space which is utilised for displays, visiting authors’ presentations, staff meetings and small musical groups.

Our new Resource Centre is environmentally responsible in its effective provision of no-cost cooling and effective lighting. In line with the requirements of VELS it provides ample personal and group learning spaces. It is a place of creativity: of music, performance and laughter. It is clean, modern, open and friendly; colourful with displays of student works, posters, book displays, and lots of fresh flowers! Our display area has hosted musical performances, staff meetings, professional development activities; staff celebrations, visiting poets and authors. We have encouraged faculties to hold their fortnightly meetings in the library while we ply them with cake and coffee so that we can walk them through our new facilities. Our students have been overwhelmingly appreciative, and so many took the trouble to congratulate us it is evidence that our aim to create a comfortable, student-friendly learning facility has at long last been achieved.

References

Learning for the future: developing information services in schools (First edition) 2003 Australian School Library Association, Australian Library and Information Association (School Libraries Section) and the Curriculum Corporation

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