The Building a Reading Culture (BRC) Project
Roundtable on School Libraries and Design:

How Design Can Help Us
Rethink Library Spaces

by Loh Chin Ee, Agnes Paculdar and Wan Zhong Hao

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About OER Knowledge Bites

Launched in May 2016 by the Office of Education Research at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, **OER Knowledge Bites** aims to share education research discussions and issues as seen in the Singapore context. It also serves as a platform for researchers to share thoughts and concepts of education research with policymakers, educators and the public.

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Roundtable Overview

This inaugural roundtable is the first of a series of three roundtables co-organised by the Building a Reading Culture (BRC) project and the Office of Educational Research (OER) at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore, to bring educators and experts in the field to discuss how to better cultivate effective and equitable reading practices in school. The BRC project is an ethnographically-inspired mixed-methods study of the reading and school library cultures of six Singapore secondary schools, and examines how we can better understand the connection between reading and learning. It is particularly interested in how school libraries can serve as effective and equitable spaces for levelling and amplifying learning in different schooling contexts.

The first roundtable was held on 28 February at Commonwealth Secondary School. The school had recently renovated its library space to encourage reading and was an appropriate space to hold the roundtable on how design can help us rethink library spaces. The session was chaired by Assistant Professor Loh Chin Ee (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Mary Ellis (Co-Principal Investigator) of the BRC project. Three presenters (Dr Loh Chin Ee, Dr Benjamin Cleveland and Dr Chong Keng Hua) from different fields and institutions provided different perspectives on school libraries and design. This was followed by discussions in breakout groups and, finally, a whole-group discussion. Participants included school representatives, policymakers from the Ministry of Education, Singapore, librarians from various institutions, and researchers from Singapore Polytechnic and the Singapore Institute of Technology.

This report is presented in three parts. The first section summarises the presentations made. The video and full transcripts may be viewed online at http://www.nie.edu.sg/news-detail/oer-organises-roundtable-on-school-libraries-and-design.

The second section summarises key issues discussed and the last section records participant responses to future areas of research and improvements.

– The BRC Team
Creating Reading and Learning Spaces in Our School Libraries

By Loh Chin Ee

Dr Loh Chin Ee’s presentation tackles the main questions and areas that the ongoing study on library spaces should focus on. Among the salient points raised was the need to address the issue of library usage not from the “student as problem” perspective, but from the perspective of “space as problem” by re-looking library design and usage.

When the space rather than the student is perceived as the problem, the question to ask is: Why should students want to read, and why should students want to step into the school libraries?

The presentation is based on a year-long study of reading and school libraries, and reports on the preliminary data from Commonwealth Secondary School (CWSS).

CWSS renovated its library in 2016 with the specific intent of encouraging reading, collaboration and study in the library space.

This presentation documents the research methods used and the preliminary findings on the effectiveness of the CWSS school library as a reading space.

Lessons from CWSS

Preliminary findings indicate that well-designed, well-laid-out library spaces can attract students from both the Express and Normal Academic (NA) stream to use the library to read in a sustained manner.

Researchers note that books in this library are organised according to genre for users to locate them easily. It might have played a role in increasing readership as book loans increased year on year for the month of January, from 143 in January 2015 and 87 in January 2016 to 483 in January 2017.

Time-lapse videos showed how certain spaces were used by students: Sofa seats near book displays encouraged both sustained reading and browsing of interesting titles. Students were also seen reading alone or in groups, showing that reading can be an individual as well as a social activity.

Multi-use spaces, such as the amphitheatre space, can be used for lessons, performance and reading. The library’s varied spaces see students using them for different types of reading, including sustained reading, browsing and book flipping. This suggests that we need to widen our understanding of what counts as reading. Interestingly, students colonise various spaces within the library for reading, showing that they are socialised into reading in school libraries.

Finally, researchers note that a reading programme need not only comprised sustained silent reading programmes; other activities and curriculum-integrated reading projects encourage the culture of reading as well.

The important learnings from preliminary data obtained thus far point to the need for clarity in terms of what spaces are designed for.

Schools need to decide whether they want their library to be study spaces, reading spaces, research spaces, leisure spaces or collaborative spaces. Understanding the preferred dominate use helps guide library design and policies for usage. This clarity of purpose as far as the priorities and usage of spaces are concerned should be communicated to both students and teachers.

Moreover, the intersection of policy, programme and practice in a space is underscored. Policies guide how a particular space should be used (e.g., use of space, Internet and handphone policies), programmes can support and encourage desired habits and practices on how students and teachers are actually utilising the library space.

Understanding how policy, programme and practice build a reading culture can help us encourage more reading, better reading and critical reading in schools.

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Understanding how policy, programme and practice build a reading culture can help us encourage more reading, better reading and critical reading in schools.

Loh Chin Ee is Assistant Professor with the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

View the full presentation: http://bit.ly/2ln2WnN
Dr Benjamin Cleveland’s talk focused on the library as a behaviour setting space, comprising physical and social components that are vital to the creation of effective learning environments. Dr Cleveland, Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne and a former teacher, gave a presentation that alluded to various graphic examples of exemplary physical designs of library and learning spaces.

Examples from Australia

The University of Melbourne’s School of Design, for instance, houses a library with an atrium that functions as a multi-disciplinary hub for students from Architecture, Interior Design and Landscape Architecture. Students engage with one another’s disciplines closely, especially during Expo Week, during which the Hub serves as a platform for learning exchanges.

Among the principles underscored by the speaker is the user experience of space. Citing Behaviour Settings Theory (Lefebvre, 1991 and Barker et. al., 1968), Dr Cleveland noted in particular how ecology, physical, social and cultural environments influence behaviour, and how physical settings powerfully influence what we do. Dr Cleveland illustrates this phenomenon by highlighting that, as individuals, we instinctively know when to be quiet as we enter places of worship, noting that the physical, social and cultural design of the space influence our behaviour.

Bechtel (1997) and Schoggen (1989) argue that architecture bounds behaviour, delineating which behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable. Citing Built Pedagogy, of which Monahan (2002) is a proponent, the presentation underscores that the design of school spaces is tied to educational philosophies (e.g., from one that is discipline-focused and regulatory, to one that is geared towards more autonomy as an orientation). This particular view argues that the ways in which spaces are distributed and centralised, for instance in the classroom, produce impacts on learning.

Given this, there are various fundamental spatial settings in which various types of learning take place (e.g., in collaborative/shared learning spaces; reading; creative/makerspaces). An assemblage of different settings come together to offer a range of spaces and generate behaviours.

Finally, an alignment of pedagogy and space can be helpful if we are to reflect upon the question of how we encourage different forms of reading. This involves looking at the education philosophy, practices and behaviours, and how these can be best supported and framed within the physical design, structure and information communication technological resources available within the school library spaces.

The crux of Dr Cleveland’s presentation lies in the idea that there exists a relationship between space and behaviour, and that the interconnection of an array or network of settings integrated in one building offers choices to people occupying the space.

References


Benjamin Cleveland is Senior Lecturer with the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

View the full presentation: http://bit.ly/2o9Qu1S

Image credit: Peter Clarke
Dr Chong Keng Hua’s presentation focused on his work on Creative Ageing Cities, which takes a close look at ageing in Singapore, and the different ways in which social creativity manifests through place-making.

The first part of his presentation focused on how a particular group of people (the elderly/ageing community) came together to solve issues and address their needs. Through the process of documenting the ways the elderly community of Singapore cope with their built environment, Dr Chong shows clear evidence of how negotiations of space take place. A group of elders colonising particular spaces—such as coffee shops, lift lobbies, waiting areas, drop-off points—for their own purposes effectively transforms the space to a regular site for engagement and recreation among fellow elders.

The photos presented by the speaker show how these spaces have been repurposed to become social settings for elders, and the negotiation of some public spaces to become personal spaces for the aged. Clearly, the process of design needs to take the needs and preferences of the user into account.

The second part of the presentation focused on his involvement in designing creative places “for and with” seniors. Dr Chong described the process involved in designing creative spaces with seniors: They ran workshops, conducted focus group discussions, held road shows, exhibited model sites while conceptualising the future senior care centre.

In all this, the aim is to involve the stakeholders in the design process. Stakeholder participatory workshops were held to collect feedback. These information were then further categorised and affected how various spaces were used; even the use of certain materials for building the environment were suggested by elders and seniors in the area.

Describing the award-winning Silver COVE Senior Wellness Centre in Marsiling Heights, a public housing project, Dr Chong put forth his idea of “breaking the wall”—to erode the wall that seems to delineate a space like this (i.e., a rehabilitation centre for elders) from the regular, normal, active world that frames the daily life beyond the walls of the institution. Dr Chong’s example illustrates the need to involve the users in design, and the need to consider how we can rethink traditional spaces in more creative ways.

Key Takeaways

In applying design thinking to libraries and redefining the school library to maintain its relevance, the speaker noted that while schools recognise cognitive faculties (i.e., five senses, instinct, imagination, memory and intellect) and the aspects of education (i.e., character, intellect, physical, social and creative), school libraries presently place significant account and weight on intellect only. The library should be seen not only as a source of knowledge, but also as a source of value-driving interest, innovation and collaboration.

Dr Chong Keng Hua is Assistant Professor with the Architecture and Sustainable Design at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

View the full presentation: http://bit.ly/2nu7TPJ

Image credit: Chong Keng Hua
What Should Future Libraries Look Like?
A discussion between librarians, teachers, school leaders and policymakers

The roundtable tackled three questions on the future of school libraries collectively. The discussion opened with the following guiding prompts:

1. In this digital age, is there a need for the school library?
2. What should school libraries be used for?
3. How can we design and construct libraries that support the kinds of reading and learning we want to see?

In this section, we sum up key themes raised in discussions by various participants.

School Libraries as Physical and Symbolic Learning Hub

The school library is an essential space that is centrally located and focused on learning. The library is symbolic of the importance given to reading, information seeking and learning. It is not just a repository of knowledge but also a place where learning and collaboration occur. It is a symbolic and physical space where people can come together and work. The school library is an inclusive social space where different individuals can connect, dialogue, and find inspiration to address problems, issues and difficulties encountered in the real world.

During the discussion, the school library was referred to as a learning hub, a sacrosanct place, an equaliser of opportunity, a place for sharing information, interests and ideas, a knowledge-seeking space, a place to nurture a love for reading, a quiet place for concentrated study and reading, a place for creating and making, a place for collaboration, and a place for rest.

The library should continue to be a social space to be used for the exchange of ideas, to support a community of readers who are critical and creative thinkers in relation to larger social issues. The school library provides students with opportunities to gain more knowledge about the wider world through access to books and information in its different forms.

The school library is a community space where individuals can gather to read, learn and interact. In developing libraries, we need to understand how the students feel towards the space and how they effectively use the space for their own needs and interactions. To this end, the library may contain more than books. Board games, maker tools, musical instruments and newsrooms are some examples of activities that may encourage collaborations and connections in the school library space.

The library should be seen as a space of opportunities for different activities. Ron Starker from the Singapore American School referenced David Thornburg’s (2007) article, Campfires in Cyberspace: Primordial Metaphors for Learning in the 21st Century, as an example of how the library space (both physical and online) may be organised around the idea of campfires (spaces for storytelling), watering holes (spaces for informal learning from each other), mountain tops (spaces for grand large crowd events) and caves (spaces for self-reflection and learning). He suggested caves could be provided for reading, campfires for book discussion, mountaintops for poetry slams and author visits, and watering holes for collaborative interactions.

From a sense of place perspective, students need to see the school library as a meaningful place rather than a mere functional space. Time is required for building memories of place and some autonomy must be given students to build their own sense of space. This sense of place is often initially a reflection of the principal, head of department, and teachers’ notion of space but, over time, will be customised by students for their own purposes. Use of space is often negotiated over time between school and students. The school library must first be valued as meaningful space officially, and students must also recognise the value of the library space in order for it to become a valued place for them.

Design Interactions and School Libraries

The kind of attention accorded to school libraries is often reflective of the school’s attitudes towards reading and learning. School libraries in this digital age should provide the physical space to learn from subject-matter experts, generate ideas and to make things.
In this digital network age, books continue to be relevant. Library spaces, with their emphasis on curation and access to knowledge, allow for individuals to discover unexpected connections between books. The act of browsing in physical shelves is different from doing a search online and provides different opportunities for picking up new ideas and following new paths.

However, in a constantly changing world, school libraries should also constantly evolve to ensure that students have access to both physical and online resources to learning. The resources should be current and relevant to the needs of the students.

Students also need to be taught how to manage online information and be provided with skills for research. The school library can be a central space for training students in information literacy. In international schools where the teacher–librarian is appointed and seen as a key member in curriculum planning, teaching students information literacy skills is part of the job and scope of the school librarian.

Support for Schools and Personnel Involved in School Libraries

The library should be a place where all students can access books and other forms of knowledge. It is particularly important for students who come from low-income homes as it can be a leveller in terms of access to books and knowledge. Encouraging a variety of reading practices encourages students to pick up and stumble across different things. To this end, we may need to rethink the role of the school library, library teachers and other personnel, learning from other schooling systems with more advanced school library systems.

To better leverage the school library as a space for amplifying reading and learning, there needs to be more dedicated manpower and training. School principals, library coordinators and teachers need to see the library as an important space, and work as a team to envision what the school library can do for students. There needs to be more professional development opportunities and opportunities for exchanges. Policymakers need to see school libraries as central to learning, and provide the resources and personnel for enabling learning in the school library.

Purposeful School Library Design for Meaningful Learning

School library design needs to be purposeful. Human behaviour sets the design of space, which is why space is repurposed for social setting.

Getting students involved in shaping space may give them a sense of ownership and choice. Understanding the student as user and aligning library design with educational objectives allows for meaningful design that caters to students learning needs. Spaces need to be flexible to meet the many needs of students and schools. The concept of “white space” was also brought up by one of the participants during the discussion as a design consideration to balance the library space.

Some participants discussed the kinds of behaviours that were desired in school libraries. Sleeping was brought up as a possible undesirable behaviour by a school teacher. This point of view was contested by some librarians who saw sleeping in the library as indicating that the library was a conducive space for students. It was suggested that when such “problems” were observed, teachers and librarians must rethink the design and organisation of space and furniture to change behaviour. A participant stated that the school library should be a flexible, inclusive space to cater to all kinds of students. This reinforces the need for clarity in purpose of the design of library spaces and furniture, and constant re-evaluation of how library spaces should be organised to maximise the kinds of behaviours desired.

During the discussion, a participant wondered if architects and school designers were conversant with library design and aware of the needs of schools. Evidence-based design that puts the user at the centre might generate fruitful conversations between architects and educators regarding pedagogically effective and inspirational spaces.

Based on conversations with various stakeholders, it seems that there are many schools that are interested in rethinking their library space but do not have the expertise in this area. It was suggested that a provision of template for school library design might be helpful for schools interested in redoing their library space to encourage reading and learning.

Reference

### The Way Forward

**Questions raised by librarians, teachers, school leaders and policymakers**

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<th>Library Design</th>
<th>Library Evaluation</th>
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<td>» How can we better organise the library and exchange ideas?</td>
<td>» What social systems are required to maximise the opportunities that school libraries may provide (i.e., staff requirements, behavioural expectations, funding, scheduling)?</td>
<td>» How can we better understand students and give them a voice in school library design and use?</td>
<td>» How do we quantify this new work in a way that old-school administrators can understand and appreciate?</td>
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<td>» How can we bring the library or books out of the library into other parts of the school?</td>
<td>» How can school and public libraries collaborate to meet the collective vision that the nation has?</td>
<td>» How can we set up a friendly or welcoming system to attract students to the library for learning purposes?</td>
<td>» How do we measure the success of school libraries?</td>
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<td>» How do we reach out to other non-library users?</td>
<td>» How do we ensure enough manpower and talent for future library spaces in Singapore?</td>
<td>» Should library be confined to one space?</td>
<td>» How can we help administrators, teachers and librarians think about evidence-based practice to drive library use and transformation?</td>
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<td>» How can we better organise the library to promote reading, learning and exchange of ideas?</td>
<td>» How do libraries help to close knowledge gap between different groups of students/different streams?</td>
<td>» How do schools strike a balance between what students want and what schools/teachers want for a school library?</td>
<td>» How can new understandings of the role and use of school libraries be translated to policy measures and guidelines to inform practice?</td>
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<td>» How can we meet the needs of a diverse population?</td>
<td>» How can we change the thinking/mindset of administration (MOE) on the purpose of the library and what is/are the measures of success? (KPI)</td>
<td>» How can we shape the social environment to encourage the behaviours we want to see in school libraries?</td>
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<td>» What programmes and policies can support the envisioned use of library space?</td>
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<td>» How do we design libraries to better facilitate access to knowledge?</td>
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<td>» How can we engage the library profession as a stakeholder and contributor in our process of thinking of library spaces and design?</td>
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For more information on the Building a Reading Culture Project, please visit: www.readingculturesg.org

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