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Small Changes

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Nora watched the third-grader trip on the power cord. She knew it was a safety issue. But, as a long-time kid-watcher, she was inclined to look beyond the immediate problem to the entire context. This boy had been running back and forth between the catalog and the shelves while culling books about tigers for his animal report, using call numbers that he'd either half-memorized or written half-right. She knew she could simply secure the cord along the table leg or run it along a perimeter wall or enclose it in a protective cover, or she could move the computer catalog to another location. However, watching the student cope with those long Dewey numbers for mammals, she recognized that the problem went beyond a mere safety issue; this third-grader's memory and scribing skills still wouldn't be equal to the task.

Nora, a composite of four school librarians who I have observed closely over time as a consultant, is a solo media specialist in an unremarkable and underfunded urban school library that serves a diverse population. As Nora watched him shuttling from the computer to the shelves, the problem of providing him with a record of his results began to take shape. Should she find an economical way to print the call numbers and titles? Maybe the library should buy some handheld devices that would display the OPAC and search results? Would young students be able to keep track of handhelds?

She decided to step back even further. She asked her student library ambassadors (Sykes 2006) to describe the problem in their classrooms. She brought the question

to both the parent volunteer group and the library-technology team that meets for a half-hour at the end of every staff meeting. Perhaps the entire faculty ought to weigh in on which baby step might position the library for future ubiquitous access. The running and tripping had shifted her view of the problem, and she had begun to investigate the multiple layers of her users' experience, an investigation that would result in "deeper and more robust insights" (Suri and Howard 2006, 247).

Even when I am consulting with other faculty, I like to check in with these four school librarians because of the interesting ways in which they think about space. In fact, they are among the reasons that this issue of *Knowledge Quest* is not primarily about large-scale construction projects. Like the other librarians who contributed to this issue, these Noras have discovered that "human-centered, observation-based research" (Suri and Howard 2006, 246) can yield insights about space utilization that more effectively support the library's functions and the learners it serves.

Take, for example, one Nora's reasoning about the print reference collection. About five years ago she noticed heavy dust on her reference shelves. Her first response was to assume that the janitorial service had been cut back. As more and more of her reference books showed up as e-books or in aggregated, searchable databases, she realized she should weed, and she did pull science books with older copyright dates. Being frugal, she also intershelfed several potentially useful titles with the nonfiction books and changed their check-out period to the standard two weeks to see if they would get more use. Circulation on some collective biographies did jump when students discovered their value for

a mathematicians report, but other reference titles continued to languish. She pulled some titles for a used-book sale, donated several general reference books to an afterschool community homework club, and gave a few literature titles to a homeless shelter that was setting up a family common area.

As in school libraries across the country, the shrinking print reference collection offered an opportunity . . . to do what? How to use the freed-up space? She talked about loosening all the other shelves and spreading out the book collection, or converting the reference shelves to display shelves with books face-out to entice passing students, but neither felt quite right. “What kind of *learning* needs the space?” she wondered. She decided to do some observing, ask her user groups, and look for patterns. At a staff meeting, a few of the social studies teachers suggested creating an additional high-end multimedia production area that students could use to create their assigned presentations when the computer lab was booked. Rather than make a decision then, she asked everyone to spend the next few weeks noting what they wanted to do but couldn’t. As she cycled the question through her user groups, one idea that surfaced repeatedly was to create a collaborative area for small-group learning or even faculty planning, as the faculty room was unattractive, out-of-the-way, and housed no resources. By “involving everyone in observation, synthesis, and interpretation” (Suri and Howard 2006, 248), Nora was able to develop common ground and consensus so that she was sure of unified support when she announced her decision to begin with a collaborative area and no technology. To add in high-end equipment, she explained that she’d have to wait for the next budgeting cycle, which gave time, in her words, “for us to develop the space.”

Our Noras haven’t always felt their communities’ support. For some time several years ago, one Nora’s library was the casualty of a construction project to build more classrooms. The principal told her that one section of the library was needed as an extra classroom until the new facility was finished. When space is tight, school librarians have often seen administrators look wishfully at the library, especially if they’ve even once glimpsed the library’s teaching space empty. Nora e-mailed me in outrage, blaming the administration for not understanding that the library was her classroom. After a flurry of e-mails she rethought her bottom line and requested that the administrator assign only teachers who volunteered to teach in her space. Those who

elected to teach in the library’s classroom turned out to be faculty who were already familiar with the library, who didn’t mind being observed in an open space, and who were open to collaborative projects. By putting herself in their shoes, Nora had recognized that flexible volunteers were likely to collaborate more readily than assigned victims. Even after the new classrooms were completed, these teachers continue to team with Nora, but they bring their classes to the library only when students are doing research. Perhaps this construction experience taught them about the nuisance of an arbitrary schedule, as well as the value of a school library and a collaborative librarian.

Also during the construction, a reading tutor approached Nora about meeting her assigned students in the library, explaining that her struggling readers were often distracted when she tutored them in the classrooms. Rather than reject this proposal as a misuse of library space in tight times, Nora told me that she decided to offer to store the tutor’s purse in her office and house the tutor’s materials on a shelf at the fringe of the library’s small study area. It seemed an overly generous gesture to me and, somewhat brusquely, I commented that I didn’t see any big advantage for the library. Nora proved me wrong.

Nora seems to have a sixth sense about creating new adjacencies. When working with an architect to renovate or design a new library, you are asked to document the functions, activities, and teaching that have space implications for a new facility, as well as the physical relationships that these interior spaces bear to each other. The architect is looking to place complimentary functions together or nearby. In this case, the tutor became a second pair of eyes monitoring behavior in the quiet area, as much to protect her tutoring as anything else. While waiting for her next student, the tutor might help a drop-in locate a book or use the nearest OPAC. An even bigger bonus for Nora, who had no aides, was that the tutor informally served as the supervising adult so that the library didn’t have to close when Nora was teaching in a classroom. Their professional friendship reaped other rewards. Nora overheard snippets of tutoring, asked questions about what she saw, and grew more proficient at teaching reading strategies and study skills. The tutor gained confidence in teaching the research process to special-education students. Seemingly disparate goals, functions, and activities were synergistically enhanced by being physically adjacent.

The last time I was on another Nora's campus, she was buzzing about the permeable Web and learners expecting to create information and construct knowledge, not just consume it. I suggested that she start a blog in order to understand the cultural attitudes and trends that were influencing her students, but Nora wasn't interested: "They're saying blogs will peak in 2007." But she was asking herself how her students could experience the participatory aspects of learning through use of the library space. "They expect to be active, to make changes . . . what could the space contribute?" she wondered. She wryly commented that the biggest challenge to collaborative work was the library's classic oak chairs, which discouraged informal grouping and regrouping. She's thinking about swapping out six of them for a couple of two-person beanbags and several lightweight plastic patio chairs just to see if it would have any effect on small-group dynamics.

Nora mentioned that she'd moved a lightweight dry-erase whiteboard into a window nook for a brainstorming session with a small group and, when she forgot to move it out, noticed that other groups

were vying to use that nook with its floor pillows and whiteboard. Being a pattern-finder, Nora considered creating a second area with an interactive whiteboard, but wasn't able to identify a spot that she could darken enough. She knew she'd have to take a broader look at both lights and colors (Fielding 2006) at a later point. But for now, her hunch was that students wouldn't find this as attractive because an adult would have to be present to supervise their technology use; they'd feel less independent. Nora rarely expects technology alone to solve a complex problem.

But Nora welcomes technology when it fits. My last Nora story begins when, noticing the proliferation of flat-screen monitors in airports, department stores, and other public spaces, Nora snagged a pre-Vista PC and monitor online at a rock-bottom price and positioned it near the checkout area. Initially she described it as a space for reading advocacy—a slideshow of students working and reading in the library (Nora carries a small digital camera so she can add photos to her monthly e-mail to the principal). A bit later, she added some edited video clips of authors' visits from previous years.

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I was going to ask why she hadn't instituted self-checkout computers to speed the line, but then she described what had been happening. First the student council asked if they could run a poll in which students could choose the new clubs they wanted in the afterschool program. Then, in quick succession, Nora plugged in a mike and students began spontaneously interviewing each other about what they were checking out and who were their favorite authors. When she created a display of new books on an adjacent table, a couple of students asked if they could download Audacity <<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>> to podcast book reviews, and Nora began to wonder if she should propose a podcasting club for the afterschool program. New polls keep popping up—everything from whether MySpace should be allowed in school to guessing alternative endings for Harry Potter's *Deathly Hallows*. Flexible, fast prototyping has jump-started this dynamic space that everyone has begun calling the “check-it-out” area.

While they don't describe what they are doing as innovative, I think of our Noras as creative facilities designers. Able to look beyond an immediate stimulus, such as tripping on a power cord, to contextualize a problem and identify less-obvious patterns, their approach stimulates everyone's inventive thinking about the library's spaces and functions. By adopting a “source agnostic stance” (Suri and Howard 2006, 248) in which all perspectives are valued, and by seeing analogies to

design problems and solutions beyond the library's walls, these school librarians cast a wide net for ideas and interpretations before they attempt to synthesize a plan. Sometimes they prototype quickly, without becoming attached to any one solution, then watch for what's confusing and what people like and make incremental improvements (Kelley 2001). At other times they seem to have endless patience for the slow evolution and emergence of collective wisdom. As with many of the contributors to this issue of *Knowledge Quest*, our four Noras are innovative designers of small changes. Their impact on enhancing learning with and without technology, on independent and social construction of knowledge, and on community involvement and long-term faculty collaboration, is anything but small.

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