Six years ago I accepted the position as the school librarian in a diverse urban elementary school (80 percent low-income student population). The library had a bare-bones automation system, block scheduling, and no library assistant. None of this, however, was my biggest challenge. Inheriting an institutional, cold, child-UNfriendly space with no budget has been my biggest challenge. However, I don’t plan to dwell on the negatives—from here on out I’m going to refer to this challenge as my labor of literary love. I am a school librarian (hear me roar!), and this is my story about transforming my library from drab to fab and creating a space for students (and teachers) to learn 21st-century skills.

Year One

So there I was; I had landed my first job as a school librarian. I was so excited to have a space to call my own, and then I walked in the doors and looked around. Picture this: book stacks in institutional rows, rectangular tables and chairs (circa 1983), a teacher’s desk, a neglected and outdated automation system, and barely a shred of decor indicating it was an elementary school library. I wish I had taken pictures of the library before I started to transform it! Lucky for me it was summer vacation so my infant son and I were able to spend many of those summer days at the library, as I painted a mural on the wall and sorted through the stacks.

There were a million things I wanted to change, and a million and one things I wanted to do, but I knew I had to be methodical and organized. After all, on a fixed schedule and no budget I would’ve gone insane (in addition to stressing out the school staff) by changing too many things too quickly. So the first year I had four goals: weeding, rearranging, building relationships, and writing a grant. So many of the
books were outdated and b-o-r-i-n-g that I had to roll up my shirt sleeves, begin to fill boxes with unwanted books, and recycle the books that were falling apart. I knew the unwanted books could find a home with the students in the school. A few boxes with the words “free to a good home” were all it took. I didn’t go too crazy with weeding the first year; I wanted to get to know the collection and students’ needs and interests better before I thoroughly weeded the collection.

Luckily, my bookshelves are mostly all on wheels; rearranging the shelves to create a better flow was simple. The library had been set up with rows of bookshelves that would come the need to prove myself. Teachers can be tough critics, and I was very cognizant of that reality.

Building relationships was probably going to be the process that would progress most slowly, but I was okay with that circumstance. I had a lot on my plate, and focusing on the students was my priority. I did manage to write a grant my first year to purchase books and a SMART Board for the following school year. At this point, I knew one thing for sure: I loved my job! I spent countless hours at night creating lessons, following other school librarians online, and learning from what they were doing, but without a doubt I was energized, and I loved every minute of it.

Year Two

My second year I again set goals for myself: continue weeding, provide teachers with professional development opportunities focused on using the interactive whiteboard, create a tech space for the SMART Board, write another grant, and add multicultural books to the collection.

To build the staff’s trust, I chose to bring in a SMART Technologies rep to implement the training with me. It’s not that I couldn’t do the training alone, but I wanted the school’s staff to begin to trust decisions I was making that would ultimately affect the entire school. We were all able to benefit from the expertise of a technology expert from the company that developed the SMART hardware and software. For my part of the professional development I identified and demonstrated some fun websites that staff could use with the kids.
Up until now, technology for learning was rarely being used in the school. On a cart we had thirty MacBooks that were barely used—that situation had to change. My hope was that if I made use of technology more convenient, they would come—call it my own field of library dreams.

I ended up moving furniture again and dividing our library in half so that teachers could come in with a class and use one half while I worked with students in the other half without either group of learners being distracted. I used my rolling bookshelves to divide the space. On the tech half, I set up the SMART Board and the Mac cart; the cart could be rolled out and borrowed, or the laptops could be used at conference-style tables. I had found the tables elsewhere in the building; they weren’t being used so I had them moved into the library—score!

Finally, after getting to know my collection and students for a year, I felt like I needed to settle in for a year and focus on working with teachers in grade-level meetings and write another grant request. I am convinced that my most successful changes have been the ones that have happened naturally. By looking for patterns the students and teachers made on their own, I could see what changes needed to be made and what the library had to offer the school.

Year Four

By the fourth year I felt confident and ready to make more positive changes in the library to benefit the students and faculty. Change should inherently come easily to librarians. (If you fear change, you may be in the wrong profession, or maybe you should be an archivist.) Teachers were slowly embracing the new technology in the building; students were taking ownership of the library and loving the new layout, and I clearly saw a path forming that I needed to follow. We needed a computer lab in a separate space, and there just happened to be an appropriately sized office attached to the library, though currently the office was occupied by the Title I Reading staff.

However, I mustered up my courage and pitched the idea to my principal, hitting all of the talking points I wanted to touch on. The students and faculty needed this resource to provide our students with 21st-century skills; I would maintain the space and coordinate the sign-ups to use the space. Would my principal uproot an entire office and find other space for its occupants? Yes! He would! We now...
had a permanent computer lab that teachers could use, a space where I could teach technology lessons, and the lab would be in its own space where the lessons wouldn’t distract library users. Oh, sweet success.

Now that I had all of the original space back in the library, I decided it was time to ask the PTA to let me chair the book fair committee. Previously, the PTA had hosted the book fair in the hallway and raised money for the school library. Of course, I was appreciative of this awesome support, but I had a few ideas that I thought could make the fair better, so for the first time the school library was transformed into a book fair for a full week. I used this as an opportunity to create a school-wide event to celebrate Read Across America. During the week-long event, book sales increased significantly; as a result, I was able to purchase more materials for the library program. I also managed to purchase more comfy furniture for students to curl up with books.

When I started at the school library, another teacher also jumped on the beautify-the-library bandwagon; each year since, she has done a class project with her students. The class picks a theme and works in small groups to paint ceiling-tile murals that the whole school can enjoy in the library.

Years Five and Six

Years five and six I focused on staff professional development, school-wide literacy events (including a million-word campaign and Read Across America), plus I was ready to begin to un-Dewey the collection. Gasp! The rationale: With the traditional arrangement, students had a hard time finding books they were interested in. By watching and observing how students used the school library and how teachers taught literature to students, I realized that the current organization of the collection wasn’t helpful for them. It needed to change. I wanted to start small and pilot one section.

I have to say, contemplating the change made me feel like a bad librarian. Ditch Dewey?!? Shame on me! But I did my research, and I went with my gut. I would start with my fiction section, reorganize it by genre, and then move on to nonfiction if the modifications to the fiction section were successful. I chose eight genres and spent the better part of the school year reshuffling books and adding a genre spine label to every book. The result? Independent library usage by even the most reluctant readers, special needs students, and ESL students. Adding genre labels and posters to the shelves helped all students independently find what they wanted. Book bins were added to the shelves so students could browse more easily. I found that students loved to browse the collection longer and more often to see what was there—so many new discoveries!

In addition to focusing on my existing library program for students, I also spent those two years focusing on staff professional development on integrating technology into the classroom in bite-sized bits. Classroom teachers appreciated professional development that could be done on their time when it was convenient. This approach proved to be extremely successful and provided differentiated instruction for our faculty. Change is not easy for many, and integrating technology can be scary for some. By the end of the sixth year we had come a long way. Every classroom teacher in the building used the library and the resources it provided. No longer was I merely the provider of a prep period for teachers; the school library had become an extension of the classroom.

I’ve learned that, regardless of budgets and resources, where there’s a will there’s a way. I have learned advocating for students is critical, as is not taking a back seat and accepting circumstances that may seem to be out of my control.
By the end of six years, our school library had been transformed into an entirely new space for learning and discovery. Teachers and students did the transformation; I was merely the vehicle to help make it happen. Our library teaches me; I watch, listen, and learn from the library stakeholders. I make changes as I observe the new paths people are taking. This isn’t to say that I don’t try to be an agent of change. I most certainly do. I follow the movers and shakers; I keep up with the latest, greatest library happenings around the country, but I carefully implement new ideas to suit the needs of our library’s users.

Lessons Learned

The fact that I was in an urban school with no budget and no district support never mattered—well of course it did, but our situation never stopped me from having high expectations. I have learned that an effective library program does not just exist, it is created with intention. It is relevant and standards-based; it changes and evolves; it is a wave. Like a wave, the school library program cannot exist alone; it is always a part of the ocean around it, separate but together. If a library is not enmeshed in the school day, the librarian is doing something wrong.

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I recommend participating in shameless self-promotion, being an agent of change, a defender of intellectual freedom. Step outside of the library walls, get involved in local library organizations, team up with the public library...Are you pickin’ up what I’m puttin’ down? The time is now. Change your library space to suit the needs of your students and teachers. It is not your space; it is their space. Watch the patterns patrons are making naturally and follow them. Most importantly, there is no elevator to success; we all have to take the stairs.

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