

# Is Your Library the Gathering Place?

Transforming Collections and Learning Spaces  
Saskatchewan School Library Association

THE MEDIUM – WINTER 2015

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## Transforming Collections and Learning Spaces Saskatchewan School Library Association

When Lydia relocated to her new library at Sir John A MacDonal College Institute in Toronto, she noticed that one thing was missing ... the students. Her library was filled with shelves and shelves of books, but granted, there was hardly any space to put the students even if they did come into the library. Lydia tracked down some students and consulted. They confided that not only were they having trouble finding material they wanted to read, but they were not enticed to sit down at a table to read it.

Across the city and into the suburbs, Gloria opened the doors of the Alvin Curling Public School library, a brand new school showcasing an architectural design with many contemporary features. As she surveyed her student population of 80% Southeast Asian descent she questioned if her collection would engage her readers. Over in Edmonton, Susan observed the library she inherited. She waited for the students to arrive. When they didn't, she went into the hallways to find them. They candidly told her that they just did not see themselves reflected in the collection. Gloria had arrived at the same conclusion.

These discoveries led the teacher-librarians to redefine their library spaces. Transforming school libraries was a major theme that resonated through the Ontario Library Association's Super Conference held at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre from January 27 – 30, 2015.

The theme was eloquently captured in Chris Kennedy's keynote address to the school library sector. "Be the gathering place" was his advice. Kennedy, a Superintendent with the West Vancouver School District, urged the audience not to talk about the library they used to have when meeting with administrators and budgetary personnel, but instead to focus on the one that is needed for 2020. He noted that parent groups have spent the last two decades building playgrounds for schools. Now they need to help build school library learning commons. He challenged teacher-librarians to identify what needs to be done in their school libraries to make it the space where students want to be, to read, to make, to collaborate, and to learn. After all, Kennedy concludes, the teacher-librarian is not going anywhere when the school library is the hub of the school.

For Lydia at Sir John A Macdonald School redefining her library space meant cutting her collection in half and transforming the traditional library into a "learning commons with flexible learning zones, advantaging learning spaces over learning resources while providing colour, sizzle, and spirit to revitalize the library space." The fiction collection was regrouped into genre and series. The number of tables and chairs were decreased to provide room for more



Long couches replace tables and chairs at Sir John A MacDonald School Library.

This long tech bar provides a space for individual or collaborative work.



Decreasing the size of the collection allowed for the creation of a multi-purpose space. Sir John A MacDonald students and staff have used the space as an art gallery showcasing student work, as a musicians' space for concerts, and most recently as a crime scene staged for the criminology class to apply their forensic techniques.

comfy seating. In an inspired move Lydia repurposed the extra shelving remaining after reducing the collection size. Some of the cast off shelves were turned into display units. Others were joined to create a tech bar, a new alternative to the study carrel. With the addition of some trendy stools, the tech bar is a place for individual or collaborative work where mobile devices can be recharged.

Extra shelving was repurposed and turned into display units.



On the last Friday of every month, students bring their bag lunches to "Lunch in the Library." It is just one more method Lydia leverages to establish the school library as the gathering place. Lydia hopes that students might spy an interesting title on one of her displays or appreciate the student art work showcased on the walls.



## TRANSFORMING SCHOOL LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

With budget dollars tight teacher-librarians have to be very strategic when developing a collection. The needs are numerous. Does the collection support the curriculum at all grade levels of the school? Does the collection contain the current titles trending on young readers' lists? Are non-fiction titles and serials on offer? Has the latest installment of the most popular series been purchased? After balancing all of these needs, a question remains: is the collection diverse enough to engage all of the readers?

Chris Bourg, Director of Libraries at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, addressed the myth that library collections can be neutral in her conference session, "Never Neutral: Libraries, Technology and Inclusion." All too often selection decisions are based on what will be the safe choices. This is especially problematic when new materials are acquired based on the principles of patron driven access where the key questions are "What is popular" and "What is circulating." Bourg urges collection developers to ask, "Who is missing? Whose experience is not being featured." Bourg identifies the default as western, white, straight males. A good exercise would be to take a shelf of fiction books and categorize them. How many fall into the category of western, white, straight, male/female? How many reflect diversity? Be cautioned not to accept cultural stereotypes, either. The novel about the academically-minded Asian student is not helping to create a climate of healthy cultural diversity.

Those seeking to make their school library collections more diverse may want to consider the following resources for selecting materials which were recommended at the Super Conference.

### **Breaking the Mould of Western/White/Straight/Male Protagonists:**

#### **FIRST NATIONS**

**First Nations Communities Read** website: <http://www.sols.org/index.php/links/fn-communities-read>

An annual reading program supported by the Southern Ontario Library Service to share books of First Nations, Metis and/or Inuit content

**Good Minds** booksellers website: <http://www.goodminds.com/home>

An Aboriginal family-owned business specializing in bias-free resources related to Native American, First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal studies

#### **PEOPLE OF COLOUR BOOKS (POC)**

**#We Need Diverse Books Campaign** - <http://weneeddiversebooks.tumblr.com/>

A grassroots organization created to address the lack of diverse, non-majority narratives in children's literature



## Second Story Press - <http://secondstorypress.ca/>

A Canadian publishing company founded by Margie Wolfe which has been publishing books on social justice, human rights, equality, and ability issues for twenty-five years

## LGBTQ COMMUNITY

### Dewey Divas and Dudes Blog – <http://www.DeweyDivas.blogspot.com>

This blog is written by a group of eight publishing industry professionals who together represent over 600 publishing companies including Ampersand, Penguin, Thomas Allen, Canadian Manda, Scholastic, Harper Collins, Martin & Associates, and Random House. Their mission is to publicize the hidden gems on a publisher's list. Often these titles are not the mainstream success stories, but instead break the mould of the western/white/straight/male.

Our Favourite Young Adult LGBTQ Reading Recommendations: an annotated bibliography

<http://ampersandinc.ca/libraries/dewey-divas-and-dudes/ola-2015-lgbtq-session-handout>

Back in Lydia's Toronto school library, this display features books on the theme of "Gender: Questions to Explore." Chris Bourg, Director of MIT Libraries, says that the starting point is just to make it known that the school library is a safe place to address issues of race and sexuality. The students will come and seek you out.

Transform your school library into the gathering place for all students.

#### Sources:

Bourg, Chris. "[Never Neutral: Libraries, Technology, and Inclusion](#) ." Super Conference 2015. Ontario Library Association. Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Toronto. 28 Jan. 2015. Lecture.

Kennedy, Chris. "[Leading from the Library – Inquire, Inspire, Innovate!](#)." Super Conference 2015. Ontario Library Association. Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Toronto. 30 Jan. 2015. Lecture.

Perovic, Lydia and Gloria Westrik. "[The School Libraries / Learning Commons Study Tour](#)." Super Conference 2015. Ontario Library Association. Sir John A Macdonald Collegiate; Alvin Curling Public School, Toronto. 28 Jan. 2015. Lecture.

