NEW & IMPROVED LIBRARIES

A snapshot of some of the virtual learning spaces of New Milford High School.

in our library, to reflect the reality of our learners by
allowing them to contribute to creating a dynamic
community. My goal was for them to feel empowered
and learn with and from each other.

It was with all of these things in mind that I
embarked on two major initiatives. The first was
the creation of a "Makerspace" in the library. In
creating this informal learning space, I spent the
first few weeks of the school year watching the usage
patterns of the first few students who came into the
library, speaking to them about their interests, and
even peering over their shoulders as they used their
devices to ensure I had a firm grasp on what they
would want in their Makerspace. At the same time,
I looked carefully at the existing curriculum and
programs that the school was offering. It was at that
point that I developed themes for our Makerspace.
I ordered materials to support the themes I came up
with and then went to work on designing the space.
To set up the physical space, I used my school’s

HOW ONE LIBRARY REINVENTED THE LEARNING SPACE

At the James I. O'Neill High School Library in the Highland Falls/Ft. Montgomery CSD in New York, we reinvented our library into a 21st-century learning commons. Here's how.

Changing the Rules: There have always been many rules in the library that prohibited the formation of a true learning commons where the students wanted to be. Therefore, we made the switch from "No" to "Yes"—we now allowed students to eat, drink, use their cell phones, play computerized games, watch YouTube—and yes even talk—in the new library commons.

Changing the Physical Space: A three-year renovation plan was created. First on our list was tackling the books. After weeding our list, we still needed to accommodate 10,000+ books, and we did not want to use valuable floor space for bookshelves. This was solved by relocating the free-standing stacks and mounting them to the empty wall space.

Next on the list was repurposing the open floor into learning spaces to accommodate multiple classes occurring simultaneously, while allowing the space to remain as open and flexible as possible. We subdivided the 60 x 60 space into five areas—a computer lab setting for 32 students with an interactive whiteboard, an Internet browsing area with 18 work stations, a moveable lounge for 24 students (this area also doubles as an informal classroom setting), and two moveable classroom collaboration areas for another 50 students.

Adjacent to the learning commons is a media lab/maker space for classes on Web page creation, design and drawing for production, computer animation, 3-D design (complete with a 3-D printer), and electronic music production. In addition, we built a video production studio including a chromakey green-screen wall for student and faculty use. The video club has taken the lead in using this space to collaborate with classes to produce read-alouds of poetry and reader's theater.

Changing the Virtual Space: Changing the virtual space came naturally as a result of an online public access catalog and the district-wide adoption of Google Apps for Education. We equipped two charging carts with Chromebooks for use in the classroom and also for students to borrow while in the library. In addition, the 11th- and 12th-grade students received a Nexus 7 as a part of a 1:1 initiative. Teachers are using their Web pages and GAFE to make assignments and learning resources available for student and parent access 24/7. This transformation has opened the door for students to be active participants in this process as they define the learning spaces that empower them to succeed.

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