There are times when you go by instinct and trust that you are doing the right thing for your students, your teachers, and yourself. My first year at Monticello High School in Charlottesville, Virginia, turned out to be one of those times.

Due to a shrinking budget, my fulltime library media specialist job at the elementary level was reduced to part time. A position opened up at Monticello, and I moved into my current position for the 2010–2011 school year. After previous experiences in both classroom and public library environments, I began my library media specialist career at the middle school level. So even though I choose to describe this evolution to a learning commons as shaped by instinct, I did have years of experience working with students and teachers from PK–12 to inform my decisions. I also cannot emphasize enough the impact that my role as mother has had on my philosophy and actions as a professional. Creating a positive educational experience for my children has become a lens through which I strive to meet all students’ needs. Fortunately, this lens meshes with the student-centered flexibility that is core to creating an effective learning commons.

I truly loved working with my PK–8 students. Their boundless energy, inquisitive nature, and creative spirit fed my soul and inspired me to respond in kind. I learned something new about technology, creativity, and collaboration from my students every day. My first month at Monticello was dramatically different. The media center had been a traditional high school library staffed by two librarians and one assistant. Students visited independently with signed passes or with a classroom teacher. Circulation was moderate. Usage was primarily for research, quiet study, and reading. Teachers reserved the library for instruction, including lessons in research, copyright, citation, and reader’s advisory—everything necessary for students to complete assignments, think critically, and graduate as informed, digital citizens. But something was lacking. I missed the spontaneity and challenge of working with a student body with diverse needs. Hosting twenty to forty students during any of our four periods wasn’t truly serving our school population of 1,092.

Whenever possible, I made it known that the library would also be open to all students and teachers as a gathering place. Talking was encouraged, and no food or beverages rule was lifted. It didn’t take long for our students to respond. In addition to scheduled classroom visits, we averaged seventy independent student visits each period. Our students have tight schedules, their only break being a thirty-minute lunch. We also have a daily remediation program called Mustang Morning. Students needing remediation are “drafted” by teachers. Uncumbered students may visit the library during Mustang Morning. These brief periods didn’t give our teens much time to socialize. We were beginning to provide a space for socialization and also a respite from a demanding school day.

While space is at a premium in most school libraries, we have plenty of room. The design is reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, located nearby. The main library space is two stories tall, with exposed metal beams and large expanses of glass. Columns frame this area with bookshelves placed behind them, on the diagonal. Modern and airy, the space invites quiet reflection and study. The tall ceiling and exposed beams, however, amplify any unwanted sound. The perimeter is comprised of five smaller rooms: two storage rooms, a workroom, and two offices. Storage rooms housed old equipment, archived periodicals, and a professional collection, but I decided that they could be put to better use. My initial idea was to convert the equipment room into a media lab, thereby affording students and staff the opportunity to use newer technologies to create digital products. Dave Glover, collibrarian (and musician/rapper), decided to resur-
rect some cast-off computers and loaded them with the free version of FL Studio, a music-authoring program. The magnetic force of music for teens was palpable, and Mustang Studio quickly became a mecca for students. They made beats all day long, but more importantly, their behaviors were beginning to evolve. At-risk students stated that having a chance to work in the studio, for even a brief time, was what motivated them to attend school. Students commented that they were working with kids they would never even have spoken to in classes or in the halls. Students were building collaborative skills.

Exciting, but also noisy and chaotic! No longer a traditional library media center, our space still had several limitations. The acoustics that worked successfully in a traditional library worked against us, amplifying even casual conversation. Our instructional area, a bank of centrally located tables, was constantly inundated with distracting conversation. I found myself pleading with students to quiet down. Teachers conducting research with their classes lamented that we had lost control. Meanwhile, Mustang Studio was bursting at the seams, overflowing into other areas. The open, welcoming environment we were trying so hard to promote was at risk.

Our solution came in the form of what had been a yearly challenge. Each summer our building is leased out to CFA, a global financial analysis company that administers a program of study and rigorous examination. In these precarious financial times, this brings needed revenue to Albemarle County Public Schools. The library becomes the company’s base of operations. This translates into packing up the library during the first week of June each year. Everything gets packed and stored either in trailers parked on site or in unused classrooms. The space is reduced to four walls and a carpet. The impact on our schedule is enormous. From April through the first week in June, getting the collection in shape for packing takes priority. Early in my first year at Monticello, I began to entertain the possibility of coming up with a new arrangement. I reasoned that a totally empty space should easily be reassembled in the arrangement of my choice in mid-July, when the “library” returns. My instinct told me to divide and conquer both the space and our students. Impressed with the engagement of our students, our superintendent and principal gave us the go-ahead to plan the new arrangement and renovation of our library. Funds were allocated from the CFA revenue, and I began collaborating with Building Services and the original architect. Almost every available space was repurposed for student and teacher use; however, the renovation was basically limited to four areas: reorganizing bookshelves, erecting a glass wall as a sound buffer, creating a studio suite, and creating a whiteboard room.

Tall bookshelves were relocated to the rear of the main library space. Intensive weeding began, thereby eliminating as many bookshelves as possible to keep spaces open. Luckily I had the help of Elizabeth Waterbury, my library assistant, to determine the shelving logistics. Elizabeth is now an elementary librarian in our division, and it certainly helped to have a San Jose University student helping me form my vision of our space. Repositioning our low bookshelves allowed us to create two lounge areas adjacent to the circulation desk. This area had been occupied by desktops resting on bulky desks. Although they were not yet scheduled for replacement, I was able to convince our IT department to swap our desktops for a cart of laptops destined for an adjoining computer lab. Soft seating was purchased for what we now call our reading lounges.

Relocating the book collection freed up space behind the columns on each side of the library. A glass wall (matching the original windows) was erected on the right to serve as a divider/sound buffer, creating what we call our classroom. This has become our teachers’ favorite instructional space. It’s semiprivate, seats thirty, and contains a mounted projector. Our open classroom on the left is an instructional space (seating twenty-five) that flexes into a casual gathering space for students, who use it for study, socializing, and lunch. It’s often noisy and always collaborative—our students love it!

After installing a new viewing window between the rooms, my office and the room that had housed our professional/periodical collections now became our studio suite. Rooms were painted a muted shade of purple that we hoped would inspire students to create even more of the cool beats we were now used to hearing. With some help from the Music Resource Center, a local nonprofit dedicated to teaching musicianship and music production among area youth, Dave furnished the studios with recording equipment and an iMac loaded with LogicExpress. Changes were also made to the room we were previously using for our Mustang Studio. One wall was painted with “idea paint,” turning it into a gigantic whiteboard. We initially called it our whiteboard room, and it served as a collaborative classroom space, quiet study area, or gathering spot for students. It connects to our workroom, enabling teachers to work with large and small groups simultaneously. Our professional collection is now shelved in this area. Students were encouraged to use the microwave and sink. It has become another favorite spot for lunch and study.

Our usage was skyrocketing, and our statistics for the end of the 2011–2012 school year proved it. Classroom visits totaled 1,014 for all spaces, a weekly average of 28. The total annual number of students visiting independently soared to 28,000! We had become the hub of the school, a shift that was primarily student led (always a good thing in education). Our attempt at disruptive innovation provided the comfort and respect craved by the digital natives we taught each day. Teachers began to realize that our comfortable spaces removed an often-adversarial relationship with students that traditional classroom arrangements have perpetuated. At first
glance appearing chaotic and noisy, further observation would show that amid the socialization, students were engaged and on task. There's no arguing that students had claimed ownership of what had evolved into a contemporary youth media space, but we still needed to cultivate this ownership among our teachers. We also began revamping our library website in an attempt to mirror virtually what we were accomplishing physically (Kowalski, 2014). We added pages to allow access to music the students produced in our studios, a growing pathfinder page to reflect the increased collaboration with teachers, and a "Writers' and Poets' Cafe" page to encourage teen authors.

A staffing change proved to be the boost we needed to evolve our media space into a true learning commons. Needing classroom hours to finish his certification, Dave transferred to our English Department. He would now be teaching two periods of English but would maintain his presence in the Mustang Studio by teaching a music production elective class each day. Idamae Craddock (a veteran English teacher), now my colibrarian, transferred into the library and began working on her MLS at Old Dominion University. Her past collaborative experience with our faculty enabled us to work together to bring teachers in.

It now was imperative that we demonstrate the utility, comfort, and flexibility of our innovative space. One of our district's instructional goals for the year was to build a bank of performance/project-based lessons. We began the year with a staff orientation consisting of mini performance tasks in each space, through which teacher groups rotated. They collaborated on an activity in the whiteboard room. We set up Bluetooth wireless headsets in the open classroom to demonstrate that teachers now had the ability to schedule screenings of newsworthy or curriculum-related videos as another way to deliver content. Our classroom served as a display area for performance-based lessons that teachers had designed over the summer at our curriculum, assessment, and instruction workshops. We even had staff create beats in the studio. Our teachers were amazed and excited at all the possibilities for collabo-
ration. Like with our students, food and comfortable seating helped teachers relax and engage.

That year saw teachers and students finally using the space as a learning commons should be used: for gathering information, inquiry, socialization, and project creation. We met with teachers and collaboratively designed lessons in all departments. Our English teachers have reserved space to construct Rube Goldberg machines to demonstrate the hero’s journey based on their reading of The Odyssey. They’ve used our studios and new HackerSpace (with its green screen) to create videos focusing on persuasive writing and to add music to ballads. We jointly host an increasingly popular poetry slam each April. Science and social studies teachers have crafted videos on ecosystems and rotated through stations on migration and the civil rights movement. Our health and physical education teachers come to us for research, for presentation creation, and to record music for cheerleaders. Our Mustang Studio continues to engage students. Students may use it independently 75 percent of the day and after school. The culinary arts classes visit weekly to update their blogs. World language students have scanned booklets into digital format. Finally, our fine arts students have created famous artist podcasts, recorded audition CDs to send to colleges, and participated in percussion jam sessions.

With flexibility as our mantra, we have embraced the maker movement by morphing our whiteboard room into what is now our makerspace. Ira Socol, our assistant director for educational technology and innovation, wrote an initiative that purchased MakerBot 3D Replicator printers for several of our schools, including our learning commons. Math teachers have used this new technology to design and print parabolic structures. Students independently use the MakerBot to print throughout the school day.

The 2013–2014 school year ended with 2,323 classroom visits, averaging 58 visits per week. The total number of walk-in students reached an astounding 35,000 by mid-May! These numbers could not have been sustained without the dedication of our library assistant, Gina Habermeyer. Her love of students, books, and learning is integral to our success. Teachers and students are eager to provide a never-ending array of great projects to display, adding to this commons culture. A welcoming attitude, respect, and trust can work wonders.

Growing into a learning commons that has had a positive impact on our diverse school community has certainly brought me the spontaneity and engagement I was seeking. I have witnessed our students’ evolution from having a “recess” mindset to becoming young adults that are learning to think critically and manage their time independently. We still have a long way to go, for the challenge of filling each space with relevant projects that engage students as learners and lead them to become competent digital citizens is an ongoing task. Our website needs to evolve into a virtual learning commons to which our entire school community will contribute. Analysis of how to best meet our school’s needs is a task we perform daily, entering a state that David Loertscher refers to as “perpetual beta” (Loertscher & Koechlin, 2012). I believe that continuing to listen to my inner voice while still hearing the voices of my students and teachers will keep us all moving forward.

REFERENCES


Joan Ackroyd is a librarian who draws her energy and inspiration from her children, grandchildren, and all the students at Monticello High School in Charlottesville, Virginia. She is a graduate of Bowling Green University and received her Library Media Certification from James Madison University. Joan has worked as a librarian at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Her passion for providing engaging opportunities for all student populations led her to transform a traditional high school library into a dynamic Learning Commons.