How to Create Safe and Active Learning Environments Webinar Q&A Log

Questions from Live Demco Webinar, as answered by Marci Milius, Learning Environment Design Consultant, mmilius52@gmail.com

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Q: Do the research findings apply to higher education students?

A: The specific research project was focused on the primary environment. Here is a link to the research for more information.

Q: Electricity is the biggest problem. What are some ways we can get more power to our space?

A: Core or pocket drilling used to be the only solution to this issue, which is expensive and in some cases impossible. Two companies are focusing on this issue as becomes more apparent with BYOD (bring your own device) and 1:1 schools. Bretford has introduced and will start shipping its solution, Juice Mobile Power, this spring. Demco will have Juice Mobile Power on their website when available to ship. Juice Mobile Power is a very innovative solution; it's mobile and can be configured to move so that power is available to support students. Another solution is by Connetrac. This product can be placed both on top of and under carpet. Connectrac prevents the need for trenching or core drilling. Both of these options are ADA compliant and much safer than power strips running on the floor with covers.

Q: What new types of library furniture will help me best utilize my small space?

A: It depends on your vision for the space, student learning needs and age of the students. Take a look at my website for furniture that supports students. Also look at the photo gallery for many completed spaces for ideas.

Developing your vision for the space is very important in design. First, decide on what learning spaces you want in the library. What is necessary for student learning? Think about your learning model and what type of modern literacies you want to support. Talk to students, staff, administrators and community about the space. How does that affect your vision?

Next is the HARD part: take a look at your collection. Has it been weeded so that books and materials support learning? Remove materials that have not circulated for several years. I use the CREW method for weeding or deselection of materials. After this is completed, you may be able to remove some library shelving to open up some floor space. Flexibility, mobility and dual-purpose products would be key for small spaces. The second step for me would be to make the library shelving mobile so that you are not limited by shelving.

In my process, selection of furniture comes after the above steps are taken. Keep in mind my non-negotiables: it's flexible, it serves a dual-purpose, it has mobility and it fits the size of students using the space. Some general furniture items that I like are:

- Flip tables that are height adjustable with casters, as they can be nested together when not needed, used for visible thinking walls or used to separate spaces.
- Galvanized metal walls, which can be used as STEM/STEAM activities, visual thinking walls and even LEGO® walls (by gluing magnets on the back of base plates)
- Lightweight mobile upholstered furniture. Take a look at my photo gallery for options, as well as this idea gallery from Demco: Seating With a Purpose.

Q: How would you separate spaces for a K–8 library?

A: I would recommend that library shelving is used to separate areas. The furniture would have a distinct change from primary grades to older grades, with older grades using higher-top tables (40" tall), so look for [height-adjustable tables](#) and [chairs](#). You can also use [freestanding acoustic dividers](#) and [mobile whiteboards](#) to separate areas.

Also a change of color scheme or a more industrial feel would signal that "this is for the older students."

Q: Could you touch on universal design considerations, such as for students in wheelchairs or with low vision? Traditional library environments are not well-designed for this; learning commons present an opportunity to make a number of changes so all learners can be active in the space.

A: All students need to be supported in learning environments. This is accomplished by bringing students and staff into the discussion on the vision for space. When selecting furniture for learning commons, I like height-adjustable tables with pin-clip legs to accommodate all students. The pin-clip legs are easy to adjust to support all learners and do not require tools to adjust the height.

Another option would be to replace the fluorescent light bulbs with LED bulbs that provide a more white and bright light. The use of LED bulbs that do not flicker also helps students that are sensitive to stimulation.

I also like interactive projectors that provide a large HD image to support all students. These projectors cost much less when comparing the cost to a monitor that would provide the same size image.

Q: Any suggestions for cleaning bean bags? It seems to be our biggest issue when using them.

A: Keeping bean bags clean is an issue for every school. If you already have a bean bag that is dirty, maybe someone in the school community could sew a new cover for it. When purchasing bean bags, I always make sure that they have removable covers. This is necessary for safety, as things happen in a school environment: infestations, spills, bodily fluids, allergens, etc. The ability to sanitize furniture is absolutely necessary. Removable cover bean bags also allow you to change the look of a space without a major investment.

Q: What is the best way to figure out the layout, i.e., do you have a suggestion for a program?

A: As Liz mentioned in the webinar, Demco interior services specialists will work with you (and your budget) to plan your space. They can be [contacted here](#). I use an online program called [Floorplanner](#) that allows users to design spaces.

Q: Do you suggest incorporating a non-carpeted area?

A: Non-carpeted areas can be good if your vision includes a makerspace or robotics area. When incorporating a non-carpeted area in a learning commons, you'll want to consider the noise factor. Carpet does serve as a noise-dampening surface. On tile or concrete surfaces, the noise bounces off and could be distracting to the students in the learning commons as well as the floor below if you're located on the second floor of the building.

Q: What considerations do you use when planning to integrate a makerspace into a learning commons?

A: What is the vision for the learning commons and how would a makerspace support learning? The makerspace should reflect the needs of the students using the space. On my website, I have an entire page dedicated to makerspaces, as does Demco's Ideas and Inspiration blog (search "makerspace").

Things to consider:

How does the makerspace support learning?

What type of makerspace does the school need?

Traditional

- Knitting
- Sewing
- Drawing
- Creating posters

Some Tech

- Prototyping with cardboard
- Woodworking
- Building non-electronic creations
- Building with LEGOs, K'NEX®, etc.

High Tech

- Coding
- Robotics
- 3-D Printing
- Programming
- Electronic Textiles
- Fabricating

Makerspaces naturally will need storage for materials for prototyping and unfinished prototypes. Organization can be accomplished in various ways, but the most efficient way that I have seen is clear tubs with various colored tops. For example, all of the blue-top tubs have materials that are consumable (can be removed from the makerspace), all of the red-top tubs are nonconsumable (cannot be removed from the makerspace). The red-topped tubs would contain LEGOs, K'NEX, robotics, etc.

The other consideration is your tolerance for the messiness that comes with a makerspace. If you are not bothered by the messiness of prototype learning, then how the space is organized might not be an issue. If you are developing a high-tech makerspace, then some type of locking storage is very necessary.

Q: Organizing the library by genre or reading levels — is it advisable?

A: I am really rather old-fashioned. My preference for a library organization is Dewey order, mostly because of call-number patterns and ease of a catalog search. But, if you chose not to use Dewey, my preference would be to organize by genre. Tiffany Whitehead has a great blog post on Demco's Ideas and Inspiration blog about genrefying your library.

When genre organization or bookstore models are used, all levels are together. Students who are not reading on grade level will not be uncomfortable looking for a book this way. If books are leveled according to reading level, I do not like to see the level on the spine of the book. Having it inside is preferable, but I do understand the logistics of searching for books on grade level.