Boys will be boys...

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After eleven years in girls schools, recently I returned to a library environment where there are boys! From my colleagues at my two previous schools, Methodist Ladies' College and Presbyterian Ladies' College, I am asked questions like: Is it so different? Do you like working with the boys? Do the boys use the library? Well, the answers are yes, yes and yes!

I had thought that one of my biggest challenges as head of the library at Scotch College would be getting the boys into the library. How wrong I was! The challenge is no longer getting them in, but rather keeping them occupied, entertained, engaged, involved ... and out of mischief. Boys need to be 'managed'. There needs to be clear communication, constant justification, clearly defined outcomes regarding behaviour and follow-up ... and yes, it is more demanding. The last time I worked with boys there was more structure in the school day and more teacher directed activities. There were no computers, no internet, no MP3 files. A visit to the library was certainly not on the agenda for most boys.

While for boys there appears be a natural affinity with all things connected with computers, it is important that the library is not seen as primarily the place where they can access technology. For example, the appearance of a cardboard stand-up of 'Buffy' has created another angle of interest in the library at Scotch. She is widely regarded as the library icon and was referred to as such by the vice-principal at a general assembly. We offer continuously changing displays along themes of interest to the boys, such as popular music, sport, movies and travel. There have been quizzes, games, movies and speakers. Despite the reputation of boys for being uncomfortable with change, our strategy this year has been to deliver constant change, so that this becomes the norm! One of our most surprising (to the boys) and successful lunchtime activities was the appearance of a very cool staff jazz band. Our aim is to become the cultural hub of the school.
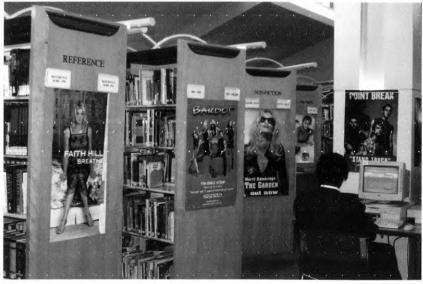

The staff jazz band strutting their stuff...

Boys are so much more robustly physical than girls and harder on the equipment! They push and shove, wrestle and play and hack into computers, while girls sit and talk or e-mail, and plan and prepare. Girls make suggestions, boys ask questions. Boys need to know how everything works and know what is the purpose and of course how they can challenge it. For example, when we put in a new security system at Scotch at the start of second term, the system just had to be beaten. Boys spent whole recess periods watching what was happening, checking it out from all angles and delighting if they thought they had found a way of defeating the technology. Girls are more accepting of change. When we installed the new security system at MLC, they just walked on through, maybe making a few comments along the lines of 'what a good idea'.

Technology has resulted in a whole new library clientele, regardless I suspect, of gender. There are students who never pick up a book, but could spend all day e-mailing; a large proportion of students access the internet; some access all the latest databases; some play computer games and download files; there are of course the computer boffins doing whatever they do; and then there are the students doing private study and keen readers who want a quiet place to sit.

Changing technologies means that now, more than ever, a revolutionary approach is required to deliver a 'just in time' library service to schools. We need to continually redefine our roles and practices. We need to be strong leaders, we need to think big and take risks. We need to share our vision with our school and continually market our services. We must stay in touch with the needs of our users. Survey them, talk to them, provide a suggestion book, get feedback on activities and programs. We need to know what they value, what they do not value, what we are not delivering. We need to know if the services we are providing are being used, and by how many people. Are our users accessing the library home page? Are there any services we should discontinue? Are our resources addressing the needs of the curriculum? Do we run enough orientation programs? Do our staff and students have the skills to access the information they need? What indeed, are their information needs? Were our professional development programs appropriate, timely and useful? Do teachers know what teacher-librarians mean by information literacy? We need statistics, we need evidence, we need action plans, we need feedback, and we need to promote, promote, promote.

We need to know our users and anticipate their response, then have the vision to deliver services and programs appropriate to these needs. Then, if you are lucky enough to be working in the deeply challenging world of teenage boys, they will certainly let you know if you are missing the mark! ∎

Now, why do the boys visit the library?