

# Case Study 18: The Learning Resource Centre

Invergordon Academy, Highland Council

**This case study describes how one secondary school developed its library to form a dynamic learning resource centre involving pupils as partners in defining the strategy and identifying initiatives.**

Invergordon Academy serves the mix of industrial and rural communities that characterise that area of the north of Scotland with its focus not only on agriculture but also in oil industry-related services. It is a small secondary with some 400 pupils. The learning resource centre (LRC) of the school has developed over the past few years not only as a rich resource for supporting curriculum delivery across the school but also as an agent for change in the promotion of creativity in learning and teaching. A visitor to the centre at 8.30 a.m. is struck both by the number of pupils in the centre and by the variety of functions the centre is performing. It is a social gathering area, a place for personal study and a reference point for information from a wide range of media sources including the internet, publications and other audio–visual sources. It is clearly a place where pupils want to be and the atmosphere is more akin to that of a learning workshop than to that of a traditional school library.

*After a class teacher the LRC is always my first port of call. The climate for work is good and help is always available either by using the resources or from staff. There isn't the need to be pressured to work – you want to do it – most of the time!*

*It is a warm and friendly place to come into. There are always people here who you know and the atmosphere is supportive.*

Group of pupils reflecting on working in the LRC

The centre is in the charge of the LRC coordinator, Julie Simmons, who is qualified as both a librarian and an English teacher. Senior management had appointed her to herald the change of character of a formerly old-fashioned library to help meet the needs and demands of the modern education system. Initial priorities lay in updating and modernising book stocks and introducing ICT to catalogue and manage borrowing and stock control. An early decision was made to ensure that the system could not only manage the day-to-day book and media borrowings but also identify and track the borrowing patterns and trends of individuals and departments. A further reason for installing the system was to ensure that the LRC coordinator could spend the bulk of her time supporting the pupils in their learning rather than on basic administration.

*In liaison with department staff we have tried to focus on individual pupils' interests and needs. I try to make recommendations for reading and study development based on my knowledge of pupils and their personal interests and learning styles. As regards department support I liaise with staff and identify gaps in departmental provision and try to help. This support may involve simply accessing existing resources,*

*leading pupils in an internet search or, in the longer term, deciding on priorities for publication acquisition.*

Julie Simmons, LRC Coordinator

The drive to update and modernise stock was supported enthusiastically by departments with whom the LRC coordinator set up a number of consultation meetings to identify needs. Establishing a pupil management committee was a fundamental step taken to involve pupils in the running of the LRC. At first the committee was concerned with reading initiatives and mainly involved pupils who were very much 'into reading', by offering advice on book selections. Gradually the committee became more formalised with representatives from different year groups, and the remit was widened to involve parents, mount exhibitions and seek pupils' views using questionnaires.

*We have several committees in the school as well as the school council but the LRC was the first to be set up. Things have changed and as a result it is no longer 'geeky' to go to the LRC because it is valuable to your classwork and study and there is such a good range of material.*

Eilidh Valentine, S5

Another role of the group was to give opinions on materials to aid in the decision-making process of resource selection and purchase. Further examples of their contribution included the acquisition of board games for the centre, the starting of a film club for lending videos, a music CD collection and support of other school initiatives such as the chess club by acquiring chess sets for break time and after school practice.

*Before you had to sign up to get to use the library but since we were given responsibilities that is no longer the case. For example, we realised that everybody has a different way of working. That's why we bought in the personal CD players so that those who prefer to can have background music on while they work.*

Lewis Fraser, S6

The committee meets monthly or on an *ad hoc* basis for specific initiatives. The meeting takes the form of a working lunch and is informal but lively in character.

*As I carry dual librarian and teaching qualification I enjoy the privilege of working both in a department and with colleagues in a cross-curricular way. The importance of literacy drives all of what I do. I realise that a lot of the literacy and research skills are transferable skills. This leads to interesting collaborations. For example the RME teacher and I have worked jointly on the fourth year's moral issues in technology unit. We have also done two units of work with S1 pupils including religions around the world with a focus on gathering information and presentation of findings.*

Collaborative work with colleagues has led to some interesting larger-scale developments such as a Holocaust Rescuers topic that was recently completed. This work was stimulated by the first Holocaust Survivors Day and was based on the gathering of resources and sources from a variety of places. The research and presentation of pupils' work formed an exhibition that was open to the public and was also attended by pupils from seven other primary and secondary schools. The impact of the pupils' writing in all genres and other displays was very powerful and the event made a significant impression on all who saw it. The pupils then developed the notion of establishing a memorial garden in the school grounds not only in memory of rescuers of holocaust victims but to all who have made a significant contribution to humanity and this will be taken on board as a school initiative next year. The work on this topic allowed for the integration of studies in RME, English and history with units on the Diary of Anne Frank and World War II.

The ICT provision in the school consists of three ICT suites and in the LRC there are, at present, six PCs with one dedicated to the management system. The management system has been developed for use by primary and secondary schools. It is easy for pupils and staff to use and allows for the printing of monthly reports on reading and borrowing patterns. It keeps track of who has used the catalogue and also the range of resources pupils are borrowing. This has led the coordinator into a personal research study centring on literacy and the issue of gender variations in reading. It was stimulated by concerns in the media detailing the failure of boys to develop their reading as well as the evidence of this in her work with pupils. With the full support of the school's SMT, she applied for and obtained a SCRE teacher research grant to explore and publish findings on the issue of raising attainment in literacy for boys. (SCRE Spotlights 81, March 2001) The work undertaken involved:

- surveying the reading habits of S1 boys and girls (also later S2 boys) using the school's library management system and prepared questionnaires. This in turn led to findings that:
  - boys preferred non-fiction and sport (especially football) and adventure-orientated material
  - there was a powerful peer influence on boys' choice of reading and indeed choice of reading as an activity
  - pupils had clear view of the importance of reading for educational and future progress in life.

As a result an intervention programme was designed to encourage boys to read more. A reading incentive scheme, 'Power Readers', had already been established in the school but the evidence showed that this had to be made more attractive to boys. Participation in the scheme was entirely voluntary with certificate awards being made at bronze, silver and gold levels. The LRC committee suggested that the findings pointed to the need to meet boys' interests more directly and that it would be useful to involve the local football team, Ross County, to support the reading drive. The team coach has presented the awards at school assembly on the most recent occasions and this has helped increase the kudos of receiving an award. In liaison with the local press each presentation ceremony is reported and each recipient has his

or her photograph taken with the football team coach as a memento.

The Power Readers scheme itself was amended to include the reading of non-fiction to recognise the validity of boys' choice of books with awards being dependent on reading a mix of book types. As a result of efforts three quarters of the S1 cohort joined the scheme and at an awards ceremony on World Book Day the numbers of boys achieving awards equalled that of the numbers of girls.

The research also highlighted the need to extend pupils' reading choices with the indication from many pupils of the importance of magazines in their reading lives. The LRC committee consulted pupils to see which titles ranging from recreational to the special interest would be preferred and it is indicative of the sense of responsibility developed in the pupils' ownership of such initiatives that no silly or inappropriate suggestions were made. Extensive use is now made of this resource. Audio books were introduced and the range of more graphic novels and biographies of sporting personalities was extended.

The highlighted differences in gender choice led the English department to bring two single-sex class groups to the LRC once a fortnight to enable more focused discussion on book preferences and information handling skills. Behaviour has improved in single-sex groups and the generation of a more positive learning atmosphere has been consolidated at an earlier stage. This has proved so successful that all S1 and S2 classes will adopt the model next session.

To enhance home support for the reading initiatives an S1 parents' reading evening was held involving local authors and reading information packs that include hints for supporting a child's reading and lists of recommended titles for both parents and children. A bookstall and a guide to the LRC run by the pupils of the LRC committee added to the event and, whilst most parents attended, the majority of those who couldn't attend requested information and packs.

The reading habits of boys have changed. This has resulted in a more positive attitude to reading and this is confirmed through the LRC management data, discussions with pupils and the noticeable breadth of research in their project work. To further interest and develop skills the school has just applied for and obtained New Opportunities Fund monies to establish 'Dads and Lads' and 'Mums and Daughters' recreational reading groups and a range of after-school and weekend activities involving writers and other literary people. A mentoring scheme pairing senior pupils with younger readers has also been put in place and plans are in hand to have more real-life writers of different genres such as poets, newspaper reporters and report writers as well as fiction writers to work directly with pupils.

*I firmly believe that the pupils must have a sense of ownership in anything they do. This has characterised work in the LRC. The value of peer modelling and support cannot be overestimated. We have just introduced a paired-computing scheme in which senior pupils help*

*younger ones to master the multimedia computers in the LRC to assist them with presentation of projects and studies. This is certainly helping to raise confidence and skills with the younger pupils but it is also assisting in the interpretation of reading information in a at times complex area for both the older and younger pupils and is therefore another aid to literacy development.*

Julie Simmons, LRC Coordinator

*I applied for the position of mentor and was interviewed for this. Basically, I work two nights a week and I get paid for this. I know from personal experience that sometimes it is easier for a pupil to learn from another pupil and that's why I think the scheme is good.*

Hailey Fowler, S5

Pupils have been involved in other schemes, including one to write Big Books for infants in the local primary. This required careful consideration of topics, presentation and authoring but has helped raise self-esteem and confidence. Their sense of achievement was boosted by the correspondence between the primary children and the fourth-year pupils concerned. They have also been involved in reviewing new books for a young writers' magazine and senior pupils have assisted with the bar-coding and labelling of new stock. It is interesting to note that losses and damage to stock have fallen to less than one per cent since pupil involvement in the centre was actively sought.

*Our Painted Landscape* is an anthology of young people's writing that was produced to mark the Millennium with funding raised from various sponsors. The publication was organised and produced through an editorial committee of senior pupils and has drawn on contributions from across the school and from link schools in America and Austria.

*As an editing group we edited the writers' contributions for the anthology and that was hard work. We all read everything and then discussed the merits of the different pieces. You don't want to offend anybody but you had to keep in mind the overall presentation of the book. We think the results were worthwhile and the book has sold well. I think it is a real celebration of the contribution of young people to their own written culture.*

Eilidh Valentine, S5

The book has brought widespread local commendation, which is reflected in local sales and the LRC committee are now looking to the world wide web as a possible source of further dissemination.

The school did have a separate research and study skills programme that was taught from S1 but experience had shown that pupils do not always transfer the skills into real study situations. The LRC coordinator now liaises with the subject departments to build these into departmental programmes so that there is immediate relevance for the pupils and also so that the linkage of pupils to the LRC can be consolidated in common approaches. This has been a powerful tool for pupils in applying common research skills across subjects.

There is no doubt that the smaller size of the school makes this way of working very effective in that the personal links between staff are easier to make. However, whatever the size of school, the model of sharing departmental plans is helpful in the process of providing study support to pupils. The sharing is a two-way process with the LRC coordinator alerting departments to new resources and internet sites.

The centre always has a buzz to it and is open from 8.15 a.m. most mornings and also at break times. Pupils' attitudes to sourcing their studies independently and to reading for pleasure have developed and attainment levels have been enhanced. The centre is not only a natural gathering point for pupils but is now established as 'the place to go' for consolidating study and engaging in recreational reading and research activity.

*I am a senior pupil and I can remember what the old library was like – it wasn't somewhere you wanted to come to – never mind study here! The LRC is a completely different place now there is a range of resources and we really know how to use them to get the best from them. I chose to do my study leave here because it works so well.*

Hailey Fowler, S5

The approaches to pupil involvement and to learning and teaching employed in the work of the LRC have contributed to an active debate in the school on learning and teaching approaches.

*How we go about the business of learning and teaching and not simply curriculum content is a professional exercise in which we are becoming more engaged. The work of the LRC has raised some interesting perspectives for all of us. This is now firmly on our development plan agenda.*

Jim Steven, Headteacher

*I think we have to be more critical of ourselves – I know that at times I tend to be overly directive in my teaching style. The LRC developments and the approach to learning which it encourages have been like a breath of fresh air.*

Jim Bryce, PT Maths

*The centre has a relaxed, discovery-orientated approach. I like the fact the pupils are confident and relaxed. It has made the image of personal study and research positive.*

Valerie Muir, English teacher

*I try to keep analysing my approach and level of interaction with the pupils and I use some research-based tools like child–adult proximation grids to help me. I think this kind of personal self-evaluation of my own effectiveness in facilitating and developing learning is absolutely vital. I feel I have to help them become independent learners and problem-solvers in order to equip them for lifelong learning. The benefits of this kind of analysis are also*

*personally rewarding in terms of my increased effectiveness as a teacher and facilitator.*

Julie Simmons

In recognising the need to address issues in literacy and attitudes to study the school has pointed up a number of key elements to developing creative approaches.

- Recognition of the need to develop higher-order skills such as team working and collaboration as well as more specific skills in organising personal study.
- Involvement of pupils as a source of valued development of ideas and strategies and also as real partners in effecting change.
- Capitalisation on the stimulus of raised motivation to consolidate action.
- Recognition of the need to research issues and to work out shared solutions.
- The importance of supportive management in undertaking challenging tasks and possibly controversial approaches.
- The willingness of management to look to role models and developments to engender further discussion and development.
- Interdepartmental collaboration and joint working particularly to achieve shared objectives in projects.
- The significance of a climate and ethos that is supportive of learning and young people.
- The usefulness of partnership with parents and the wider community to deepen the effectiveness of change.