

## Case Study: SkillShare at Bellingham Public Library

### About Bellingham Public Library

Bellingham Public Library (BPL) serves the 82,000+ residents of the city of Bellingham, Washington, circulating 1.6 million items annually to more than 47,000 registered cardholders. In 2012, the total collection size was 236,979 items, with a circulation of 1,638,730 items; visits totaled 842,242. The transformation of space described here took place at the downtown Central Library location.

Beth Farley, Head of Information and Reader Services, was designated to lead the implementation of the space transformation project. Quotations are from Farley.

*“The library has meeting rooms.*

*We wanted to create a space that was more nimble, flexible, visible and inclusive than a traditional library meeting room.*

*We wanted to take the gathering/meeting out of the room...where people could choose to easily engage or disengage in the activity.*

*We wanted a space that was discoverable, serendipitous, different.*

*Hey, what might be happening in SkillShare today?!”*

## Responding to community needs

The original BPL plan for the space enhancement was to create DIY (Do It Yourself) kits on various subjects of interest to the community, and to partner with community members and organizations to share their expertise in those subjects. To gather community input, an 11-question online survey focused on the development of proposed specialized collections, specifically DIY resources.

### Questions included:

- *What DIY interest areas or hobbies do you already actively pursue?*
- *How frequently do you access Bellingham Public Library for resources to support these interests?*
- *What are new DIY interest areas or hobbies that you'd like to pursue?*

Library staff distributed a link to the survey to a wide range of community participants. There were 127 responses to the survey; nearly half of the respondents (47%) were age 55+, and 98% reported that they possessed a Bellingham Public Library card. Survey responses did indeed surface a list of varied, high interest themes, reflecting a curious and dynamic community.

Respondents identified a variety of local resources in addition to the library to support their interests, including the Internet and other people. But the “Aha!” embedded in the results came from the number of open-ended comments that expressed interest in a space to make connections, to meet, to collaborate, with BPL as the convener.



**(before)**  
**Bellingham Public Library**  
**stacks**

## Alignment and buy-in

BPL had recently completed a five-year strategic plan (2013–2017) based on extensive input gathered through numerous stakeholder, public and staff meetings, and other community sources.

The plan highlights four strategic directions: *Read, Learn, Meet, Discover*.

*“When discussing the concept of SkillShare with the Library Board and staff, it was easy to see how SkillShare fit in with our strategic goals.”*

The concept of a SkillShare space was shared internally early in the development process. Department supervisors shared the information with their work groups and Beth sent out periodic updates as changes were happening in the physical space.

*“I also emphasized in communications that this was an opportunity to experiment and to try something new. In general staff were very supportive of providing this type of programming space and of developing new partnerships in the community.”*

During the few months that it took to complete the space configurations, the curiosity of community members was naturally aroused. A small and intriguing sign stimulated anticipation of what was coming soon.

## Reclaiming space

To carve out some open space in the “in our face” location near the entrance and across from the circulation desk, something had to go. The adult music CD collection occupied that space. This was an opportunity to downsize the collection, since circulation had been dropping due to the availability of free music online. The new location for the slenderized CD collection held 40 shelves of nonfiction, which again required significant weeding and shifting. Staff are happy with the new location for the CD collection because it is more visible and less vulnerable to theft.

## Designing and planning

Librarians are not trained in architecture or interior design, yet those are key skill sets for creating a successful space. Farley admitted to feeling “paralyzed” by the design element of space transformation. The community network came to her rescue. She first approached the local office equipment shop, with which the library had a long-standing relationship. However, the initial design proposal was “boring” and didn’t fit the expectation of a “new look and feel” for the space. The office store rep talked up the

library project to his local business group and aroused the interest of an architectural firm, the Zervas Group, which provided free consulting, contributing ideas for color, furniture and materials. The pro bono work was “invaluable” to bringing the space into being.

The glitches in the project seemed to center around the flooring. An early fun flooring idea to collage and laminate magazine and newspaper pages fell through when the carpet was removed to reveal an uneven subsurface unsuitable for the lamination. Instead the team chose to lay down Marmoleum, an environmentally friendly choice of materials. Unfortunately, the first shipment was badly damaged in transit, but the manufacturer quickly replaced the goods and the floor was finally installed with no further impediments.

More community support arrived in the form of city facilities staff, who installed the data and electrical connections. The Friends of the Library funded a large digital screen to add an interactive technology piece to the space.

### Partnerships

The potential for working with various groups in the community instigated discussions about co-sponsorship policies. Realizing that it was important to be selective about program partners, BPL developed a SkillShare Proposal Form to screen proposals. The form describes the library’s interests (“Sparking creativity through content creation,” “opportunities to build skills,” etc.) and asks for the presenter’s background and qualifications.

*(after)*  
**Bellingham Public Library  
SkillShare**



## Programming

BPL staff had an early surprise confirmation of how patrons would receive their transformation of space and the introduction of SkillShare programming into the open space of the library. In November 2013, they ran into a scheduling conflict for their Holiday Tech Fair, an annual event involving reps from Best Buy and other local stores and numerous devices and tech gifts to touch and explore. Traditionally hidden from view in a basement meeting room, Farley decided to hold the event on the main floor in the open space, thereby raising its visibility. This was a first for the library. Attendance was so high during the event day that one Best Buy rep called it “the Black Friday of libraries.” Even better, not one single patron in the building complained about noise or chaos.

Currently, the weekly Tech Coaching sessions are happening in the SkillShare space. Creative Crafting, book discussion groups and Qigong classes have also met there. There are plans to use the space to demo the library’s digital resources and as a teaser for teen programs.

*“Staff have been pleased to move some existing library programs to this open and visible space.”*

## Unanticipated results and lessons learned

The space across from the circulation desk and near the entrance was well-chosen.

*“The placement of the SkillShare space is terrific because anything happening there is visible to patrons picking up holds, browsing new titles or using self-check-out. If you enter the main floor, SkillShare is in your face. Patrons want to know what is happening! What is this program? For instance we have been offering tech coaching sessions for two years in a room, with a closed door. This allows the public to see the work that we do, to share that info with others, and to get involved as a participant or volunteer.”*



Farley shared some important lessons learned in the process, especially the need to remain flexible in the implementation and open to shifts in direction.

*“This project morphed considerably from its original inception. It was valuable to be able to step back and rethink, change, move forward, tweak and repeat. For us, it made sense to move from a grand scheme that in the long term would present challenges (both staffing and budget) that were not sustainable. Scaling back and reframing the project made sense. My advice would be to be flexible, be realistic.”*

An unexpected staffing change impacted the programming planning, prompting Farley to rethink some early decisions and what she would do differently with hindsight.

*“Starting over I would have included the entire programming committee in the SkillShare programming meetings. The small SkillShare group became a programming satellite. We needed the buy-in and the expertise of the full committee. This became particularly painful when the SkillShare programming lead accepted a new position and was no longer involved in the project. If the entire committee had been collaborating on SkillShare programming efforts, the loss of one staff member would have had less impact on the project.”*

BPL has just moved someone on staff into the role of programming and managing community relations to bring people in to the space. The library and the community both look forward to seeing more transformation and engagement in the near future.

**(after)**  
**Bellingham Public Library**  
**SkillShare in use**

