Library Learning Commons: A Secondary Perspective

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THE HEART OF IT ALL IS STUDENT SUCCESS

In a Library Learning Commons model, student success involves the integration of technology, focusing on personalized learning, collaborating, and inquiring, and is best measured qualitatively. Central to this model is the theme of original content creation, under the guidance of a qualified Teacher-Librarian in collaboration with others. A Library Learning Commons model embraces new ways of teaching and learning by encouraging and enabling the interactions of learners with each other and with new ideas, providing access to rich resources, information, technologies, services, and expertise. A Library Learning Commons is a program first, that lives in both physical and virtual spaces.

The physical space of a Library Learning Commons works to support success. Ideally the space has both physical and virtual components. The physical space is malleable and flexible, energized with exploration, welcoming and central to the entire school. It should be flexibly bookable, with spaces for whole class, individual and small group inquiry projects, often occurring simultaneously. A Library Learning Commons necessarily is a managed space, curated and supported by qualified Teacher-Librarians. Similarly, the virtual components are managed, curated and made accessible through the expertise and qualifications of trained Teacher-Librarians. The virtual components extend and enrich the brick and mortar Library Learning Commons, but in no way replace it.

Ideally, the project of moving a current space and/or current program along the continuum toward a Library Learning Commons model serves as the impetus for more systemic and school wide changes. However, movement along this continuum may begin at any level and percolate slowly—with a single teacher or project, between a few department members, across departments and through a school. The common factor is that change requires the articulation and adoption of a common educational philosophy—that of a Library Learning Commons approach.

In a Library Learning Commons, everyone is a learner; the goal is to ensure every learner succeeds—teachers, teacher-librarians, students, parents, visitors, and administrators. To that end, upon entering the Learning Commons, everyone assumes the “learner stance”, and becomes co-inquirers in the learning process. Surrounded by “pros”—process, professional practice, program and project—all learners are proactive in the creation of new learning. This philosophy is central to a Library Learning Commons.

A Continuum—A Few Steps in Moving Toward a Library Learning Commons Approach

Current Library/Resource Centres might have:

- a physical space only
- a primary use as a “study hall”, or for prep coverage
- little flexibility in schedule/use
- limited or no print resources
- limited or no digital resources—perhaps it is wirelessly enabled but there is an absence of curated, rich, digital resources
- an isolated/inconvenient physical location within the school—make shift
- a static design of the space that impedes dynamic learning environments
- as its primary purpose, information location
- limited or no qualified Teacher-Librarian
- limited or no collaborative program, disconnected from a larger vision—whole school, district, inter-district, provincial, global

The Library Learning Commons Strives to:

- have both virtual and physical aspects, working in cooperation with each other
- be the hub of the school, centrally located and flexibly bookable
- co-create learning, based on inquiry and the creation of new content, with original and inspired design
- provide balanced, rich, diverse and professionally curated sets of current print and digital resources to support multi-literacies
- increase access through digital, 24/7 virtual presence
- enrich the learning by providing the expertise of qualified, Teacher-Librarians, willing to collaborate in the design of personalized learning
- be connected with department, school, district, provincial and/or global goals, grounded in current research and intentional in purpose and design
Working in collaborative groups, Vancouver Secondary Teacher-Librarians inquired about what needed to be in place for a school library to be termed a Library Learning Commons. Working with current research in the area of learning commons and such movements in education toward fostering inquiry, 21st century skills and personalized learning, the collaborators present a summary of their findings, a working document for the transformation of School libraries into School Library Learning Commons—a blueprint for universal educational change.
WHAT IS A LIBRARY LEARNING COMMONS?

Several important themes underpin discussions of teaching and learning in the context of a Library Learning Commons model:

- Technology has had a dramatic impact
- Learning in this context needs to be personalized and meaningful
- Inquiry forms the basis for genuine and lifelong learning
- Collaboration is required of all learners in this context, between Teacher-Librarian, classroom teacher, and students

The demands of the twenty-first century require learners to develop essential information literacy skills to evaluate and make sense of the rapidly proliferating, but often biased and inaccurate, volume of information being published. The ‘text’ of information is presented in many different formats, and learners must develop the skills of multiple literacies (print, digital, media, visual) to determine the intended meaning and to understand it in context. In addition, learners must use critical- and creative-thinking skills to transform the information that they gather into organized knowledge that they can use to make decisions, draw conclusions, and create new knowledge (Standards 17).

THE GENESIS OF A LIBRARY LEARNING COMMONS IS THE SCHOOL LIBRARY BUT ALSO IMPERATIVE IS

- A Teacher-Librarian with a vision for teaching and learning transformed by new possibilities
- A dynamic, responsive and student-centred school library program
- A school community open to new ways of working together to enhance student learning
- Shared understanding about the role of a qualified teacher-librarian and the conceptual underpinnings of the K-12 Learning Commons approach
- A supportive school administrator

"Inquiry follows a fairly standard process that involves starting with what the learner knows, asking intriguing questions about what is not known, investigating the answers, constructing new understandings, and communicating to share those understandings with others. But inquiry is much more than simply following a process. It is an essence of teaching and learning that places students at the heart of learning by empowering them to follow their sense of wonder into new discoveries and insights about the way the world works" (Stripling 3-4)

A LIBRARY LEARNING COMMONS

- Begins within a responsive and dynamic school library program
- Is dedicated to student-centred learning because successful learners are empowered citizens
- Has as its outcome or product enhanced student engagement and success
- Is a significant school and school district investment of time, energy, resources, services, tools, and expertise
- Is a shared and managed space that enables access, both real and virtual as well as physical, intellectual, and equitable, to resources, tools, and services
- Is a welcoming, safe, and supportive place that values mobility and flexibility of design in both the space and the opportunities for learning
Enables learners, including adults, to address the unique learning needs of the educational community.

Is a never-ending project, always “in beta,” as new resources, ideas and tools differently enable the learning.

Is a collaborative and recursive process guided by the professional expertise of the Teacher-Librarian.

Is grounded in shared understanding that meaningful and important educational change occurs when there is professional commitment to innovative practice and collaborative implementation of new designs for learning, grounded in inquiry, creativity and reading.

What is clear is that, while every Library Learning Commons is a school library, not every school library is ready to be a Library Learning Commons.

Embracing a Library Learning Commons model means being responsive to diverse needs, and requires shared vision and determination. Indeed this is true of all inspired educational change: “We must take the more vertiginous route that scales the heights of professional excellence and public democracy. For it is this truly challenging path that will lead us to the peaks of excellence and integrity in student learning and its resulting high levels of achievement” (Hargreaves, and Shirley 111).

Excellent school libraries [LLCs] require facilities that provide support for a variety of learning and teaching styles and equitable access to new and developing technologies” (Achieving 36).
Always in Process

The Library Learning Commons develops through a process of evolution, over time, and in a manner unique to each school’s learning community. This process is not linear and can begin at multiple points of entry—local and global. While the starting points may vary, what remains constant is the need for qualified Teacher-Librarians and a culture of collaboration.

Possible Local Points of Entry Through:

- Transforming A Physical Space: Some libraries begin the process with the redesign/renovation of their physical space to suit user needs.
- A Professional Learning Community: Some libraries begin the process in professional learning community activities such as tech talks, digital tool sand box sessions, professional book clubs, discussion groups, leading inquiry groups…all led by the Teacher-Librarian.
- A School-Wide Initiative: Initiatives can emerge from student perspectives through Student Council, school newspaper editors, Gr. 10 Planning classes, library advisory committees, and library clubs. Staff can use a combination of surveys, interviews, even newspaper articles to gather student input on the development of the LLC. Quaker Road Elementary provides a good example.
- Developing a Virtual Presence: This may take the form of a website or blog, collaborative assignments or hand-outs, curated collections of e-resources (databases, video streaming, links), online tutorials and online knowledge building spaces (Google docs, blogs, wikis, social media tools and virtual clubs).

Possible Global Points of Entry Through:

- Digital Tools: Joyce Valenza, former school library media specialist, worked almost primarily in the virtual realm—meeting, discussing, researching and planning—to create her LLC.
- District or Ministry Initiatives: In Ontario, the move toward LLCs came first from the Ministry and was supported with extra funding.

Suggested Steps

Ideally, the process incorporates a whole school vision, a philosophy (Points of Inquiry), and a design development for physical and virtual spaces. This design will require the weeding and updating of existing resources and technology; and therefore will most likely need financial support.

1. Create an Advisory Team
   - The Teacher-Librarian, in collaboration with others such as administrators, classroom teachers, students, parents, etc.
   - This team should be motivated to create enriched learning environments.

2. Create an Informed Vision by
   - Visiting other Library Learning Commons sites (School, District and Provincial)
   - Collecting online data from across Canada
   - Providing for a variety of users of the facility
   - Researching furniture, equipment and digital resources for cost and suitability

3. Evaluate Unique Needs
   - Physical design
     - Shelving (type, use, number, displays)
     - T/L office, cataloguing and storage.
     - Interior décor for colour, furniture, walls (paint), flooring, window coverings
     - doors, cupboards and posts
   - Infrastructure
     - access to adequate electrical capacity
     - placement of that electricity(switches and outlets)
     - bandwidth (adequate capacity and speed)
   - Resources
     - Print, digital, portable devices, smart technologies

4. Create an Action Plan with the following:
   - A financial needs assessment—building both physical and virtual capacity requires funding.
   - A timeline for execution
Professional Practices

At the core of the birth of a Library Learning Commons is a shared set of understandings about working together, a set of professional practices that:

- have been explored, understood, and shared,
- are in place and referenced, as required, and
- ensure change is, to an optimal degree, managed and facilitated.

While a Learning Commons instills a sense of ownership amongst various stakeholders in the educational community and input is facilitated and encouraged, the important leadership role of the Teacher-Librarian is shared and understood to include:

- Creating and sustaining the impetus for change
- Managing the conditions of that change
- Creating a functional and inviting working and learning environment
- Designing the optimal use of the existing facility or redesigning a new space around function, flexibility, mobility and flow
- Assessing and acquiring the best print and digital resources for the school’s collection
- Ensuring equitable access to tools and resources
- Prioritizing access and use of the space to optimize collaboration and inquiry

The learning commons is the most cost-effective place for scarce funds, staffing, technologies, and resources that support all classrooms and programs school wide. As a result, the learning commons should not be viewed as competition for scarce resources, and funding but rather seen as an investment in the entire learning community.

The process of “transition calls for physical, virtual and pedagogical changes as well as a shift in mind set for all players” (Loertscher, Koechlin, and Zwaan)

“The feel of the Library Learning Commons is about busy-ness: teaching and learning happens here! Hum and Hub not Hush” (Ekdahl).

Professional Protocols

Each Library Learning Commons is part of a larger professional and school community, with its own culture and unique needs. Professional practice will vary between different LLCs but establishing and communicating a shared set of professional protocols is a highly recommended practice.

Protocols should be:

- Established and reviewed over time
- Grounded in trust
- Negotiated, flexible, and respectful
- Shared by the principal who is on board, who supports and encourages the growth of the facility, and who enables and expects on-going collaboration with the Teacher-Librarian
- Supported by the parents who are comfortable working or talking with the teacher-librarian and with accessing the space
- Enabled by school districts that value professional development and invest in creating contexts for collaborative teaching and meaningful learning
- Viewed by the community as an essential part of the learning equation in the school and an important extension of learning for every classroom, teacher, and child

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Physical Facility

The evolution of school library into a Library Learning Commons occurs in response to the needs of its users. The Teacher-Librarian can work with the professional learning community to create, manage and redesign the optimal use of the existing facility.

**Physical Design Elements:**
- Moveable furniture to reflect multiple-sized groups.
- Presentation area for presentations—author visits, outside educational and community groups
- Separate space for multiple uses—quiet individual study or noisy group work
- Up-to-date technology—green room for audio visual recording, computers, laptops, tablets, e-book readers, interactive boards, projectors
- Encourage students to use their own technology, (BYOT)

**Program Attributes:**
- Qualified Teacher-Librarian
- Active learning, both collaborative and individual
- Dedicated to student engagement and learning to become inquisitive and successful learners
- Collaboration with school and outside community groups—art exhibits, coffee house, human library, tech talks
- Value student opinions through student advisories, interviews, user surveys
- Multiple uses—recreational, curricular (all subjects), professional development, and inquiry

“**The design must allow for flexibility in the use of space and furnishings and incorporate spaces that will accommodate concurrent, multiple learning activities...A carefully planned physical layout contributes to smooth traffic patterns, simultaneous use, and a safe and welcoming atmosphere**” (Achieving 36).

Virtual Facility

Both print and virtual resources support diverse needs with unique strengths; thus both must be developed in a Library Learning Commons approach. Integral to this process is a shared sense of ownership and responsibility for these spaces, physical and virtual.

Print resources are essential to the promotion of silent and recreational reading, recognizing the growing trend in ebooks.

Digital resources can have multiple contributors in a variety of roles—students and teachers can research, contribute to and respond to the building of presentations, to represent student learning in a virtual environment either at the same time (real time or synchronous time) or on their own time (asynchronous time). While physical collections can also be used in this manner, the nature of digital collections lends itself naturally to these applications.

Whether virtual or physical, resources must be current, relevant and accessible. The ultimate goal in using these resources should be to allow deeper understanding, beyond information location/recall. A program, both virtual and physical should encourage the creation of new, and vibrant creations.

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“**New trends in architecture plus innovative reorganizing provide lots of open space and flexible configurations to provide a sense of client ownership rather than institutional dictates of function**” (Koechlin, Rosenfeld, and Loertscher).
Virtual Environment

Virtually, a Library Learning Commons is in perpetual evolution, a beta culture; it is not a one-year project, nor is it merely a library equipped with a computer lab. A virtual program must have current technology, but it also needs the professional capital and professional will to develop that virtual environment. Seamless physical and virtual use ensures that both can be used simultaneously.

Virtual Design Elements:
- Infrastructure that allows the efficient and timely use of technologies—wireless access, adequate bandwidth, (video streaming), learning portals such as knowledge building centers, online platforms, student dashboards
- Collaboratively designed and developed
- Access to a variety of presentation tools—PowerPoint, Prezi, Knovio, Glogster, Voicethread
- Technology support for teachers and students

Program Attributes:
- Students select their own learning environments—blogs, wikis, Google Drive, YouTube
- Scaffold learning—student/teacher/teacher-librarian/community expert
- Application of Social media—online book clubs, Twitter, Facebook, SnapChat...
- A willing Teacher-Librarian—to learn, share and apply, to let students help develop the virtual learning environment
- Digital learning community—whole school participates

“The virtual learning commons change the ‘dynamics of learning’ beyond research, practice and group work to a greater level of engagement through exploration, experimentation and collaboration” (Loertscher, and Koechlin, “The Virtual Learning Commons”).

Sample Virtual Resources

VSB Virtual Resources
  Gladstone
  Magee
  PW
  Parkland Secondary
  Charles Best
  LV Rogers
  École Kelowna Secondary
  ME TL Weekly Special
  The VLC and School Improvement
  Jacqueline Van Dyk
  Gordon Powell
  BCTLA LLC
  Michelle Hall
  Joyce Valenza
  Kathy Schrock
  Loertscher
  OSLA

Michael Eisenburg
Doug Johnson
Jamie McKenzie
Ken Havcock
S. Krashen Power of Reading
Buffie Hamilton
Judith Sykes
Marlene Asselin
Roy Doiron
Eric Meyer
Jennifer Branch
Diane Oberg
Ross Todd
The LLC As The Project

The ultimate experience for the transformation of a school library into a Library Learning Commons would involve the Teacher-Librarian in collaboration with the entire campus from the outset—the school staff, students, administrators, district supports, parents and the larger community. These stakeholders would collaborate on the project of transformation, developing and following a process, designing/redesigning/enhancing a program (both physically and virtually), and developing and/or reflecting on existing professional practices. The impetus for this project is always student success. These “pros” surround the student and work to enhance the learning. A project would also have as a core value wide-spread and systemic educational change.

A Collaborative Culture

“Collaborative schools do better than individualistic ones...collaborative departments with strong professional communities perform more effectively than weaker ones....It is ultimately joint work that leads to improvement through exploring challenging questions about practice together” (Hargreaves, and Fullan 112).

A culture of collaboration is imperative to the success of any project undertaken in a Library Learning Commons approach—even the project of creating such a culture. The impetus for the project comes from the Teacher-Librarian and extends out to the larger community. The project includes the contributions to the vision from various stakeholders under the leadership of the Teacher-Librarian, and requires support from administration.

“School libraries [LLCs] are active learning environments. Under the leadership of a teacher-librarian, working in collaboration with classroom teachers, students develop and practice the information literacy skills and habits of lifelong learners” (Achieving 6).

Exemplars

VSB Wide Projects/Initiatives
- Shifting to a BYOT model
- Enabling access to existing digital infrastructure—WiFi, portable devices
- Hardware equity plans
- District maintained virtual resources
- District level Teacher-Librarian support (Mentor/Consultant/District Principal)

These projects have been utilized positively by many Teacher-Librarians and staff members to support educational changes. District, school wide, and departmental initiatives should include input from all stakeholders and user groups.

Individual School Project

John Oliver’s school wide project of redesigning the physical space began as a result of the acquisition of a private grant, providing the initial infusion of funding required. In this case, the space augmented the existing program creating more demand. The next step would be to invest in the professional capital to service the increased demands. Ideally these would be invested in simultaneously.

Individual Department Project

Magee Secondary’s transformation into a Library Learning Commons began with the Teacher-Librarians and their desire to construct spaces for recreational reading, small group collaboration and a more welcoming environment. Some new furniture, the removal of some shelving and the addition of some smart technology, and some new flooring, began the physical transformation of the space to enhance and refine an existing program.
“People do differ in intelligence, talent and ability. And yet research is converging on the conclusion that great accomplishment, and even what we call genius, is typically the result of years of passion and dedication….Teaching people to have a ‘growth mind-set,’ which encourages a focus on effort rather than on intelligence or talent, produces high achievers in school and in life” (Dweck 6-7).

“How are collaborative communities established? They do not just happen. Someone must lead the move, in conjunction with a move to coordinate what happens in the various classrooms to create continuity of learning. ….Teacher librarians need to view the concept of collaboration in its largest scope, beyond simple collaboration between the teacher librarian and individual teachers or grade-level groups to school wide acceptance of collaboration with the teacher librarian as a natural and obvious practice” (McGregor 202-3.)

Characteristics of pedagogical practices in collaborative projects that feature:

- Personalization that is student-centric
- Student engagement
- Foundations in inquiry and reflective
- A variety of resources that enrich and extend the learning
- A process that is non-linear and recursive
- A Focus on content creation
- Differentiation in skill level, interest range and resource type
- Respect for multiple intelligences
- Shared expertise
- Openness in multiple subject areas to adaptation and inclusion
- Seamless integration of technology as a tool

Growth Metaphor
“Growth Mindset”

Secondary School Library Learning Commons Exemplary Projects

Based in inquiry and focused on content creation, these projects demonstrate various elements of a Library Learning Commons approach to personalized learning and the demonstration of 21st Century skills for student success.

Hazel Science

Socials 10 Canadian Confederation in Graphics

Youth Criminal Justice Law 12

Foods—Cooking Terms Prezi—Cafeteria 11/12

English 11—Much Ado About Nothing—Digital Peer Editing

Course Planning/Guidance 9—Cyberbullying

ESL—Helen Leung--Socials

English 12 Gault

Stoichiometry—Chem 11

First Nations Water Technology (Science 8)


