

# **TOGETHER FOR LEARNING:**

## **SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE LEARNING COMMONS**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **Responding to an Era of Complex Change**

Today's schools are experiencing a great deal of change. Just as the rest of the world's political, social, economic, and scientific realities have been shifted by swift advances in information and communication technology, so too has education. These forces are altering the way people work, play and learn. Schools are being challenged to harness the unfamiliar yet incredibly fascinating opportunities presented by this transformation... all while ensuring students emerge with the skills they need, not only to survive, but to thrive. Development of a Learning Commons addresses this challenge.

#### *What is a Learning Commons?*

A Learning Commons is a flexible and responsive approach to helping schools focus on learning collaboratively. It expands the learning experience, taking students and educators into virtual spaces beyond the walls of a school. A Learning Commons is a vibrant, whole-school approach, presenting exciting opportunities for collaboration among teachers, teacher-librarians and students. Within a Learning Commons, new relationships are formed between learners, new technologies are realized and utilized, and both students and educators prepare for the future as they learn new ways to learn. And best of all, as a space traditionally and naturally designed to facilitate people working together, a school's library provides the natural dynamics for developing a Learning Commons.

#### *Why a Learning Commons?*

There is growing consensus among educators that students need to learn transferable

skills in order to work efficiently and successfully in our future world. To achieve this, students will need to become critical consumers of information, effective problem solvers, capable decision makers and innovative communicators as well. They will require the skills and ability to flow with change. And most of all, students will need to understand that these transferable skills give them the capacity to make a difference in this world... personally.

A Learning Commons provides boundless opportunity for growth. It is based on a cross-curricular perspective that recognizes literacy, numeracy, knowledge, thinking, communication, and application as foundations for learning how to learn. A Learning Commons becomes the physical and virtual catalyst where inquiry, imagination, discovery, and creativity come alive and become central to growth — personal, academic, social and cultural.

### *The Role of the School Library in a Learning Commons*

The school library, a key component of a Learning Commons, has an integral and transformative role to play in implementing this fresh and innovative vision for education. Every member of a school's population will ultimately participate in the creation of a Learning Commons, but the concept's early coordination and leadership will rest with school library expertise. Where properly developed, a school's library is already the hub for networking and information access. As the Learning Commons' concept grows, a school library's collection-based facilities will continuously change and expand, creating access-based services suited to a school community's needs.

This process will mean changes in the operations of a school's library. Resource collections will need to be reshaped even more rapidly and readily than they are currently to reflect their communities as well as the world at large. It is the only way a library's access to the global, interconnected and interactive communication networks of the future — whatever they may be — can be assured.

## The New Learner

Educators of today understand that when students are provided with rich learning experiences and opportunities to explore areas of interest, they learn better. When they're given tools to solve problems and encouraged to think creatively, they're ultimately better equipped to make useful connections with the real world. The search for more relevant content and experience has driven much educational practice in recent years. But it is how this needs to be done that is undergoing incredible change. Technology is rapidly modifying the nature and significance of information. The context for finding relevance is in radical transformation.

For those younger than 25, a technologically-rich environment is a natural part of

everyday life. The interactive and social nature of digital technologies is woven seamlessly into their lives. To them, the online world is a reflection and extension of the offline world. For this generation, it is not about the technology, it is about life.

- Young people are very social, and depend heavily on technology to keep in constant touch with one other.
- They use social media routinely and through their use, define themselves as individuals.
- They are growing up in a media-saturated environment; information and ideas are accessed and shared in extremely visual, multi-media formats without concern or deliberation.
- They expect that you can have conversations with anyone in the world.
- They use multiple technologies to obtain and share information on an “on demand” basis. Most “wear” a variety of portable devices allowing them to stay in contact with friends and family, access the Internet, listen to music, watch videos, play games, and take photos and videos.
- They expect to have access to electronic information quickly and easily. Most have never known a world where this wasn’t possible.
- They embrace new technologies readily and transfer their skill with one technology to each new technology.
- They are comfortable learning informally with their peers as the technology brings them together socially.
- They are multi-taskers. It is not uncommon to see them chatting on cell phones, surfing the Web, sending instant messages, watching TV or listening to music, all while doing their homework.

### *The Challenge*

The structure of school learning was built more than a century before digital communication was developed, and since then the structure has not changed significantly. It is no wonder there is a growing disconnect between the way students live with technology outside school, and the far more restricted use of technology they experience inside a school.

Many students are finding it almost impossible to make meaningful connections between what they learn at school and what they need to know outside in the world. The skills needed to be successful in life, technology notwithstanding, remain largely the same. As much as ever, a learner must be able to attain the ability to think critically. But the tools to carry out decision making are expanding and merging with remarkable speed and subtlety. What a student will need to be able to do in a school, in a workplace, or at home is experiencing radical change. How we teach time-honoured skills has to change as well. The Learning Commons provides the environment for this transformation.

## The Emergence of the Learning Commons

The Learning Commons integrates the new and the old in a seamless physical and virtual space in which all formats can be assimilated and studied. The Learning Commons liberates the exploration of ideas and concepts, encouraging inquiry, imagination, discovery and creativity through the connection of learners to information, to each other and to communities around the world. For schools, the Learning Commons incorporates the classroom, the school library and the school board to connect students to the real and virtual worlds that are growing and maturing around them.

Just as the Internet has created a web of global connections, information and interactions, the Learning Commons creates a network of information, people and programs for learning within a school and beyond. Universal access ensures that learning is within reach of everyone at all hours... day or night.

## The Learning Commons Creates Empowered Learners

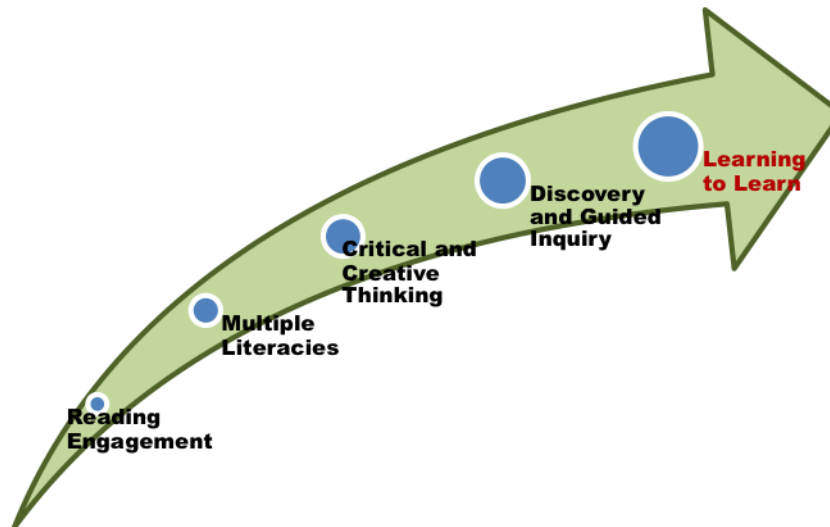
In the Learning Commons, everyone is a learner. Learning within the curriculum becomes personalized, individualized, motivating and enlightening. The Learning Commons addresses multiple learning styles and learning levels. It creates virtual spaces that are flexible and inviting. It ensures equitable access for all. And the Learning Commons seamlessly integrates technology with working together. The Learning Commons helps students view learning as a life pursuit. Students will see learning modeled by everyone in a school. As a result, students of a school with a Learning Commons will become empowered by learning how to learn.

## Learning to Learn: From Information to Knowledge Creation

The real mandate of the Learning Commons is to design, facilitate and support dynamic learning experiences that utilize the best available resources, technologies, strategies and learning environments.

Learners move beyond merely retrieving factual information to constructing personal meaning and building individual and collective knowledge. As learners read, research, experiment, discover, perform and create in the Learning Commons, they collaborate with others to test, confirm and enrich their learning.

Guiding learners along their information to knowledge journey, and providing needed instructional interventions, is the focus of all partners in both physical and virtual learning spaces.



Exploiting resources for information and mastering technological applications to gain information is just the beginning of this journey. When teaching partners design higher order thinking learning experiences that take advantage of the social dimensions of learning, the potential for deeper understanding and the building of collective knowledge is enhanced. When learners take responsibility for learning — when they begin building their own personal learning networks — learning for life is on the horizon.

Throughout all activities in the Learning Commons, both students and teachers strive to improve. Metacognition of content understood as well as skills and processes gained helps to build learning to learn skills and attitudes and responsibilities. The rich variety of resources and technologies as well as flexible physical and virtual spaces in the Learning Commons enhances differentiated instructional opportunities in the information to knowledge creation process.

The school library program has a central role to play in nurturing the Learning Commons' culture of imagination, discovery and creativity.

## Developing the Individual in the Learning Commons

Society needs citizens who have respect for others and who understand their responsibilities in participating in a safe and lawful society. Issues such as plagiarism, privacy, intellectual property, copyright, bias, stereotyping and gender all require deep understanding, as well as reasoned acceptance or rejection. With today's nearly

unlimited amount of information available and vast amounts of unfettered content to be shared, these considerations have become even more sensitive and significant. As a key partner in the Learning Commons, school libraries and teacherlibrarians can offer expertise in navigating this vast array of information

## The Engagement of All Learners

If learning is enjoyable and challenging, learners will do it enthusiastically. Think of a video game that players are keen to concentrate on for hours. They do it because it's "hard fun." Turning hard work into hard fun requires helping students relate their work to their own lives and the culture in which they live. This type of learning, inherent in the Learning Commons, is sticky — it stays with the learner. And it creates an environment where the individual will grow and flourish.

## Transition and Change

In the current state of the world, creativity, innovation and imagination play key roles in children's development. Young people need to learn transferable skills that make them critical consumers of information, effective problem solvers, capable decision makers and exciting innovators. They also require a level of knowledge and a diversity of expression unprecedented in human history.

Currently, many students are finding it difficult to make meaningful connections between what they learn at school and what they need to know outside of school. The Learning Commons has the potential to bridge that gap for students. The Learning Commons can make learning more pertinent, engaging and significant.

## Pedagogical Shifts Inherent in the Learning Commons

Information Seeking  
and Reporting

Individual and Collective  
Knowledge Creation

Teacher directed learning



Self and participatory learning

Classroom learning



Networked and global learning

Standards driven



Exploring big ideas and concepts

Teaching



Process and active learning

Individual teacher expertise



Collaborative learning partnerships

## Making the Learning Commons Happen

The Learning Commons must be fluid; it must grow and evolve with school needs, emerging technologies and global realities. It requires leadership to succeed, and that leadership can only come through the willing co-operation and collaboration of everyone participating in the school learning process.

At the school level, the principal is key in establishing and encouraging working partnerships among staff and students. The principal must provide the climate for cooperation, experimentation and growth. The Learning Commons has great potential, but only when everyone participates.

## Conclusion

Just how important the Internet and its networking capabilities have become in our daily lives is impossible to understate. In the 1970s, Marshall McLuhan said that a car is a physical extension of a foot... of a person's total being. If asked now, McLuhan would have to add a cell phone, a handheld device and social media as extensions of a person's total being. It is these devices — and their evolving technologies — that constitute the natural reality of the students in our schools.

The relationship of these new communication tools with our students is what schools and libraries need to absorb and embrace. We are just beginning to realize the power of technology on our communication, research and critical thinking. A new era is still just ramping up. Where it will lead us is, as yet, unimagined. Changes will continue to be profound, exciting... and bigger than all of us. Together we stand to harness unseen potential.

The Learning Commons provides direction in the face of this great change. The Learning Commons provides schools, school libraries, educators and students with the increased flexibility and breadth of control needed for the challenges ahead.



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