

# Climbing to Excellence – Defining Characteristics of Successful Learning Commons

By David V. Loertscher and Carol Koechlin

## Introduction

If you knew about Google in the year 2000, you were one of its first users. By 2005 your students were beginning to Google around your library webpages. New tech tools were appearing daily, and Google Apps for Education was launched. That year at a school administrators' conference in San Diego, a common comment circulated that we would no longer need school librarians in California.

What did all this mean? Do you remember the first time you saw a Google document in which multiple writers could write simultaneously on the same piece of virtual paper? This was not evolution; this was a revolution. By 2007 it had become clear that school libraries were in trouble. Even with the professional research of Keith Curry Lance, that claimed benefits in state after state, holding on to school libraries' and school librarians' time-honored roles in education was in jeopardy.

That year, the authors teamed up to rethink the role of the school library from the ground up. We had to question and rethink everything in the face of an exploding information environment: the appearance of the iPhone, the proliferation of laptop computers, and the advent of the iPad. Thus, we published the first book about school learning commons in November of 2008 (Loertscher, Koechlin & Zwaan. 2008) and in December attended the dedication of a high school learning commons under the direction of Valerie Diggs at Chelmsford (MA) High School.

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Now, six years later, much has happened as school librarians faced the explosion of information and technology, and tried to learn what this revolution was all about, and, more importantly, claim a place in this challenging new world. Many recognised the inevitable changes that were needed. Others tried to hold on to their traditional role. And now, we find many across North America and Australia rising to meet the challenge.

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We are not the only profession or entity having to reinvent itself. Manufacturing, medicine, pharmaceuticals, and the automobile industry are just a few examples. At the same time, we saw our customer

base reinventing itself. Children and teens were becoming addicted to social networking. What we began to notice was that if they did not like a tech tool, they could switch – by the millions – to a new one overnight. Whether we recognised it or not, we were being placed in a position of competing or getting out of the way.

Why the name 'learning commons'? It became clear that the focus of the transformed traditional library should be on learning in its many manifestations, whether formal or informal, and the word 'commons' could reflect a shift from a top-down organisational structure to the flat networked world where the clients, both teachers and students, consider themselves to be in command of knowledge-building (see figure 1). Then as we confronted the future, would there still be a need for a physical space in the school known as the learning commons? Would it be only a virtual space? We opted for both, led by a very different kind of professional.



Figure 1. Learning commons knowledge-building dynamics.

Evidence of school library transformations has energised our journey. In 2010 the Ontario School Library Association, in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Education, published *Together for Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons*. In 2013 Achieve, an organisation building Common Core materials in the U.S., published *Implementing the Common Core State Standards: The Role of the School Librarian Action Brief*. Using the essence of these two documents, knowledge gained from grassroots experiences, and our own three books (see list of recommended resources), we would like to outline the role, the characteristics, and the indicators of a reinvented school library climbing to excellence.

Reflect with us and other futurists you know about the winds of change, the red flags, the realities, and, best of all, the possibilities. In this article, we trace the concept of one major proposal: the learning commons.

For a few years now, we have been travelling along on the journey from school library and computer lab to a school-wide learning commons. During that time many exciting transformations yielded both challenges and rewards. It's time to take stock of where we have been and reflect on where we want to go! The responsive nature of this approach to excellence in teaching and learning means that the journey will never end; but it is continuously morphing to address the current and future needs of learners and schools. As our world continues to spin out new ways of working, playing, and learning together, one thing we can count on is the learning commons.

## Changing environments

Our interpretation of the world of information and technology now – compared to how it used to be – affects the kind of environment we need to construct for the young people we mentor. If we are about preparing young people to compete in the current and future world, then the cocoon we call schooling must take a different approach than the cocoon of yesteryear. Children and teens know little of top-down edited information as they experience Wikipedia. They assume the availability of instantaneous information because of their cell phones and smartphones. They are experts at social interaction but might not know their next-door neighbours. They expect to be connected on any device, anywhere, and any time. They think that they can get rich by putting their music, writing, or inventions out for the world as they see other young people becoming billionaires. If young people can't find an app they like, they invent one. They ask Siri for phone numbers and directions. From their perspective, everything worth knowing, doing, or consuming is at their fingertips – and we expect to appeal to this crowd with a traditional library? Well, we can be like the smart techies rolling out 'safe' iPads in Los Angeles only to find out that protection schemes are outsmarted the first day. Perhaps we could rethink the role of the cocoon, not as a skin totally protective from the cold cruel world out there, but rather as an environment of mentored experimentation as the pupa prepares to survive and thrive.

Thus, we have proposed that the learning commons serve a unique purpose in the school as a bridge between educational philosophy being practiced and the

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real world. As such, the learning commons serves school curriculum but also is known as a place for experimenting, playing, making, doing, thinking, collaborating, and growing. For example, it may be the only place in the school where the networks are open; it may be the place where clients are experimenting with the latest 3-D printer; it may be the virtual hub of school activities. Although the learning commons will look and feel different in every school, it must be the centre of inquiry, digital citizenship, project-based learning, collaborative intelligence, advanced literacy as well as the centre of creating, performing, and sharing. It will sometimes take on a role as 'third space', neither home nor school. It is the place young people love – their space.

We as librarians have a history of helping kids and teens reach out. We have done it despite policies that thwart intellectual freedom. Now, we open the world. However, we must take a fresh look at both our physical and virtual spaces. When learners enter the school library learning commons, what do they see first? Rows and rows of bookshelves? A single controlled teaching area? Signage listing 'don'ts'? A couple of couches within easy sight of the massive checkout desk? A story rug with a rocking chair? Is the space all about control? Is the website just a one-way stream of information?

Ideally, not. Thus, characteristic 1 of a learning commons:

### **A collaborative physical and virtual environment that invites and ignites participatory learning.**

We will start the list. You add to it:

- Ownership is replaced by 'Access To.
- Single teaching spaces are replaced by multiple and flexible learning spaces.
- Quiet is replaced by varying noise and activity levels.
- A few tired-looking presentation artifacts have been replaced by a plethora of high- and low-tech productions.

By making deliberate space conversions, both physical and virtual, what are the behaviours we are encouraging?

- Collaborating, participating, helping?
- Authentic and engaging inquiry and knowledge building?
- Playing, creating, tinkering, building, making?
- Demonstrating respect in both physical and digital space?
- Experimenting, sharing, performing?
- Producing, doing, constructing?
- Connecting, accessing, self-monitoring?

If the physical and virtual environments are not stimulating the expected responses, then we modify, rethink, redesign, and rework until they do. It has become obvious that much of the world's technology, organisations, and now governments must be in a constant state of perpetual beta. This reality means that flexibility allows continuous change as the needs of the clients change. Perhaps a few examples we have witnessed personally in actual visits to learning commons and through the reading of numerous transformation experiences in *Teacher Librarian* will provide context.

- Tour guides in the new learning commons who can't stop talking about the exciting projects that they are doing in this new space.
- The sophomore in high school who invented a \$1,500 centrifuge that does as well as the \$15,000 commercial model.
- The iTeam of the learning commons, seventy-five strong, who make the place hum and who are tech mentors across the entire school.
- A small group of students creating a documentary film in an alcove.
- The middle-schooler who single-handedly organised and led adults and fellow students in the creation of a graphic-novel alcove.
- Young people streaming into the learning commons, picking up tablet computing devices, and going right to work as a normal occurrence.
- Kids writing on a giant whiteboard wall in the learning commons about their suggestions for stopping bullying in the school.

- At least seventy-five high-schoolers sitting on a giant staircase in the learning commons during lunch working individually and in small groups on their projects while they eat.
- Several hundred teens sitting on the brand new learning commons rug from which chairs and tables have been removed so students can watch performances by their peers, performances ranging from music to drama to poetry slams.
- The head of the English Department who sits in the learning commons during his planning period because he wants to be where the action is and where he can help his students.
- The place where exhibits by students and faculty change regularly.
- The virtual learning commons in a Spanish-immersion school where kids contribute regularly in both Spanish and English.
- A student tech team which tests all the new technology coming into the building and has the ear of the tech gurus when tech issues are to be resolved immediately.
- A fairly large learning commons where at least twenty different activities are happening simultaneously almost any hour of the day – and at night in the virtual learning commons space.
- A single student engrossed in her book oblivious to everything going on around her.
- A senior seminar where teacher and librarian are consulting with students working on their final projects in the learning commons conference workspace.
- Elementary children working on projects during their 'assigned' learning commons time as the adults mentor a different group in an adjoining space.
- An elementary student who is organising a digital book club in advance of a blockbuster film coming to town.
- Elementary and middle school students across several schools in the district competing on Minecraft for the most sophisticated structures.
- Students engaged in a virtual learning experience with students in Asia, Africa, and Australia.
- A middle-schooler who is president of the science fiction virtual book club that spans other schools across the community.
- Preparations by students and adults for entries they will show at the community Maker Faire in the public library this weekend.
- A fifth-grade student doing a health project and tinkering with software she found on the Web but is modifying to interface with the 3-D printer.
- A principal doing a walkthrough and interviewing students about the projects they are working on.

Thus, characteristic 2:

**A responsive dynamic that is invested in school-wide improvement through an evidence-based process of design, modify, rethink, redesign, and rework.**

## **Learning Commons response to ever-changing environments through personal expertise and leadership**

The number one factor in converting a library into a learning commons is the strength and vision of the professional doing the transition. This circumstance has been true no matter whether the person has come through the traditional library education credentialing or a different preparation. This is no new discovery because we have always known that a quality professional makes all the difference. Changing the name of the space does not miraculously make the difference.

One major problem in the profession has been the low number of professional staff in the library. Both in academic libraries and in the K–12 arena, we are beginning to see a reaching out to other specialised professionals in the organisation. Thus, the professional staff of the learning commons might include not only a lead school librarian, but also a reading specialist, a technology-integration specialist, a curriculum specialist, a student-success professional, and perhaps even a counselor. Why? Most of the specialists in the school have a mission very similar to that of the school librarian. That is, these experts are trying to reach every teacher in the building to embed their specialty into each teacher's classroom. By joining the staff of the learning commons, these professionals team in ways that break down the isolation of the classroom. The mission of the learning commons expands, and the physical and

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virtual learning commons thrives from a diverse set of professional expertise. The learning commons becomes a one-stop shop for help and collegial collaboration across a number of fronts. To administrators, here is a united cadre on board to make a difference in the entire school's push toward excellence.

Our observations of professionals who are developing a vibrant learning commons provide some indicators of success:

- The teacher-librarians are gutsy risk takers, disruptive thinkers, change agents with a vision.
- These leaders are masters not just of traditional materials; they also keep up with the technology and lead the push to harness the power of technology to improve teaching and learning.
- They keep up with the trends not just in libraryland but also have their personal learning network tentacles out across education and beyond. They watch the research in a wide variety of fields to have a vision that is broad rather than siloed.
- They attend a range of conferences either virtually or in person as they continue their own professional learning.
- They constantly think about and re-think where they are, where they want to be, and how they are going to get there. We have met scroungers, political giants, charmers, go-getters, and folks who step out, act, and ask forgiveness later.
- In one state, we have seen two giants, with totally different personalities, make major differences: one through dazzling technology, the other by just loving her inner-city kids into college and careers.
- The principal either 'turns the school librarian loose' or marches alongside as they lead the change.
- At the district level, a great library supervisor links arms with a great education-oriented technology director. These two make each other look good as they push the building-level folks, support them, inspire them, and just keep saying 'yes, yes, and yes'.

So, it does not seem to be a one-size-fits-all leadership team that creates a learning commons transformation. However, we have noticed that few take 'no' for an answer, and when they are beaten down by organisational chaos or bureaucracy, they seem to get up and fight on to succeed in spite of the barriers.

Thus, learning commons characteristic 3:

**Professionals who can successfully lead out front, or lead from the middle, or push from behind are great candidates to head a learning commons.**

## Participatory learning community

In the learning commons everyone is an active participant in knowledge building and learning to learn. Both teachers and students are engaged in building their own personal expertise and contributing to the growth of others. The resulting synergy is conducive to driving whole-school improvement that sticks.

This active community of learners revolves around participatory work in four major areas to position the learning commons as the:

- Centre of Knowledge Building
  - Inquiry experiences that build personal expertise, cooperative group work, and collaborative intelligence
  - Use of best resources, technologies, spaces, and instructional strategies
  - Participatory learning environments such as Knowledge Building Centres
- Centre of Literacies
  - Cross-curricular experiences to support traditional reading, writing, listening, and speaking
  - Motivational strategies to foster reading dispositions and lifelong reading habits
  - Instruction designs that develop multimodal learning literacies and transliteracy
- Centre of School Culture
  - Student-driven events, projects, clubs, and celebrations in both physical and virtual learning commons spaces

- Showcase of school-wide learning
- Global networking with other learners
- Centre of Experimentation
  - Professional learning and teacher research
  - Testing of new strategies and technologies by students and teachers
  - Participatory play, creation, and building such as in a makerspace

## From theory to practice

Pedagogically, a number of creative ideas are evolving in education as techniques for stimulating high-quality teaching and learning: understanding by design, personalised learning, the flipped classroom, connected learning, guided inquiry, project-based learning, mastery, blended learning, and more to come. In an environment of multiple methods or a push one way and then another, what can a vibrant learning commons contribute?

We recommend that every school librarian have a repertoire of intervention strategies in a variety of teaching models that are popular in the school. We may have little to contribute in some of the models where prescriptive and direct teaching lock out the world of information and use just one technology, but when we see an opening, we can pounce on the opportunity. We term this either intervention or embedding of knowledge-building strategies into learning experiences as illustrated in figure 2.



*Figure 2. Participatory elements for which the learning commons strives.*

For example, the teacher might have struggled because previous group projects were being done mostly by one member of the team with the rest of the team representing the classic slacker. Seeing this behaviour, the school librarian could volunteer to join forces with the teacher to teach the kids about cooperation and collaborative group work. With the students, the teacher and librarian develop expectations for each team member, set up checkpoints, and watch for improvement indicators. After the project is over, the school librarian and teacher do a metacognitive Big Think with the students: What do we know about our topic? How did our groups work out? How could we do better the next time we do group projects? Before the next collaborative project, educators and participants review the results of the Big Think, reset expectations, and watch for and make progress. Such an intervention and resulting improvement in behaviour would be something to document as a successful intervention.

While intervention opportunities help us scout out clients, we can kick it up a notch to a full co-teaching experience where we co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess the results. Such experiences allow a much fuller

opportunity to raise the bar on knowledge building. We might raise the level of technology usage by using the SAMR model (Check out [Ruben R. Puentedura's blog](#) for a list of his many presentations about pushing up learning through technology using his SAMR model.) as a guide. Or, we might use Loertscher/Koechlin/Zwaan's 18 Think Models (see *Beyond Bird Models*) to transform a bird unit up toward the top of Bloom's Taxonomy. We might use the Guided Inquiry model of Carol Collier Kuhlthou, Ann K. Caspari, and Leslie K. Maniotes to stimulate deeper understanding along a research journey. Or, we might prescribe a curation learning experience as recommended by Joyce Valenza. (See list of recommended resources for information about these and other resources.)

Whatever our tactic, we are meshing what we know into an appropriate instructional design the classroom teacher is attracted to. By doing so, we are saying that two heads are better than one, and that working in tandem to apply the best strategies can create the kind of learning experiences that engage and succeed beyond our normal expectations. The focus is no longer a push toward minimums; it is freeing students to climb far beyond what they usually think possible. That potential for students' growth is why we can guarantee that, if a classroom teacher works with us, the outcomes will be far superior to whatever the teacher could have done alone in the classroom. That track record of success is what we seek, the track record we can demonstrate, and the track record with which we can advocate.

This integration with learning experiences throughout the school is the work of the new school library professional we describe earlier in this article, the learning commons leader. Two new resources to support taking on this role were mentioned earlier

- Ontario Library Association's [Together for Learning initiative](#), which now has a new web presence that brings the document alive with examples and implementation ideas for schools

- '[Implementing the Common Core State Standards: The Role of the School Librarian Action Brief](#)' is developed around the following practical recommended initiatives:

1. Building reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills together across the curriculum.
2. Building appreciation of the best literature and informational materials together across the curriculum as a part of a literate culture.
3. Creating a school-wide participatory culture.
4. Building co-taught research projects in blended learning experiences.
5. Promoting interdisciplinary real-world problems, projects, and learning experiences that take advantage of rich information resources and useful technology tools.
6. Using technology to boost teaching and learning together.
7. Creating cultural experiences across the school, community, and the world.
8. Fostering creativity, innovation, play, building, and experimentation.
9. Assessing the results of collaborative learning experiences.
10. Managing the integration of classroom, school library learning commons, and technology tools.

Thus, characteristic 4:

**Participatory learning through attention to excellent instructional design, using best resources and technologies, and building personal expertise and collaborative knowledge are the work of the learning commons.**

## In summary

Many major leaders in education are exploring the changing realities for schools and recommending shifts in teaching to address new ways of learning in our networked world. We suggest that the school learning commons approach is a viable, holistic, and fully sustainable direction for schools. In this article we have championed the new learning commons lead teacher as a school librarian ready to lead with the partnership of other keen specialists and educators in the school. We have provided readers with observations, suggestions, and anecdotes from our own learning commons journey to date, as well as our synthesis based on alignment with our own research and that of other educational and business thinkers. We conclude that at this time the characteristics listed below are a must for success:

## Climbing to Excellence – Defining Characteristics of a Successful Learning Commons:

- A collaborative physical and virtual environment that invites and ignites participatory learning
- A responsive dynamic that is invested in school-wide improvement through an evidence-based process of design, modify, rethink, redesign, and rework
- Professionals who can successfully lead out front, or lead from the middle, or push from behind are great candidates to head a learning commons.
- Participatory learning through attention to excellent instructional design, using best resources and technologies, and building personal expertise and collaborative knowledge are the work of the learning commons.

We expect that some of our readers may be new to the profession while others are well into the process of making the transition from school library to learning commons. Wherever you are on the continuum we urge you to begin documenting and sharing your stories as you transform learning environments and embrace participatory learning. Climbing to excellence via the learning commons is a journey worth embarking on and worth fighting for.

## Your Big Think – So what? What next?

Perhaps this simple reflection will help you chart new approaches based on the defining characteristics we have trumpeted.

Learning Commons Characteristics	Where are you now?	Where do you want to go?	How will you get there?
Collaborative Environments			
Responsive Dynamics			
Professional Leadership			
Participatory Learning			

## Recommended resources

### Books and documents

Koechlin, Carol, Esther Rosenfeld, and David. V. Loertscher (2010) *Building a Learning Commons: a Guide for School Administrators and Learning Leadership Teams*, Salt Lake City, UT: Hi Willow Research and Publishing.

Kuhlthau, Carol Collier, Ann K. Caspari, and Leslie K. Maniotes (2007) *Guided Inquiry: Learning in the 21st Century*, Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Loertscher, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Esther Rosenfeld (2012) *The Virtual Learning Commons: Building a Participatory School Learning Community*, Salt Lake City, UT: Learning Commons.

Loertscher David. V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan (2009) *The Big Think: 9 Metacognitive Strategies that Make the Unit End Just the Beginning of Learning*, Salt Lake City, UT: Hi Willow Research and Publishing.

Loertscher David. V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan (2010) *Beyond Bird Units: 18 Models for Teaching and Learning in Information-Rich and Technology-Rich Environments*, Second Edition, Salt Lake City, UT: Hi Willow Research and Publishing.



Loertscher David. V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan (2011) *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win*, Second Edition, Salt Lake City, UT: Learning Commons.

Ontario School Library Association. 2010. *Together for Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Library Association.  
<[http://www.accessola2.com/data/6/rec\\_docs/677\\_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf](http://www.accessola2.com/data/6/rec_docs/677_OLATogetherforLearning.pdf)> (accessed January 11, 2014).

## Articles

Loertscher, David V., and Elizabeth 'Betty' Marcoux (Editors) *Teacher Librarian*.

Since 2008, the editors have solicited and published many articles on the concept and development of the learning commons in the K–12 environment. Many of these were collected and published in the following collection. Others can found by searching various databases and accessing the issues at:  
<[www.teacherlibrarian.com](http://www.teacherlibrarian.com)>.

Loertscher, David V., and Elizabeth 'Betty' Marcoux (editors) (2010) *Learning Commons Treasury*. Baltimore, MD: Teacher Librarian Press. Available from LMC Source <<http://lmcsource.com>>.

Valenza, Joyce (2011) 'Curation is the New Search Tool.' Accessed January 11,2014 at:  
<<http://blogs.slj.com/neverendingsearch/2011/09/30/curation-tools-are-also-search-tools>>

## References

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