

School library to Learning Commons: Planning the journey

By Camilla Elliott

As we increasingly move toward an environment of instant and infinite information, it becomes less important for students to know, memorise or recall information, and more important for them to be able to find, sort, analyse, share, discuss, critique and create information. They need to move from being simply knowledgeable to being knowledge-able. (Wesch, 2008)

A teacher-librarian attends an interview for the position of Head of Library at a relatively large secondary college. The principal asks the interviewee's opinion on the structure and operation of a secondary school library in 2010, as one would expect. He has a commitment to the role of the school library but is looking for a match of visions. He knows the library can be an isolated building in its non-central location within the school grounds but has a principal's vision of what he would like his school library to be, stating, "I want the library to be a presence throughout the whole school, not just the physical building". The teacher-librarian also has a vision focused on 21st century learning partnerships and resources distributed physically and virtually – there's a match.

Seeking relevance

In observing the devaluation of many school library services, it's apparent that principals and leadership teams are struggling to see the relevance of their libraries. In many instances, teachers share the perception, as do students, who look at the room with outdated books on shelves accompanied by traditional practices and call it 'The Library'. Meanwhile, teachers, students and learning specialists operate in a largely self-sufficient mode, often unconnected to the library. They don't see the need.

Another factor entering this equation is the recent boost to computer infrastructure through the government's Building the Education Revolution, which, while welcomed, must be managed efficiently if it is to transform the traditional curriculum. School leaders are looking for ways to bring about this transformation and many teacher-librarians are being appointed as elearning specialists, or at least being involved in the integration of ICT into the curriculum. Increasingly, the comment is being heard, "It's an exciting time to be working in a school library". Yes it is, but not the traditional model of school libraries. To be relevant, it must be a school library that is owned by the whole school community that meets individual needs and is a 'Learning Commons' within the school.

Academic library model

What is this model of school library service that is a "presence throughout the whole school"? What is this model that creates community, cooperation, collaboration and access to resources that serves all members? For some years, academic library services have been undergoing a transformation. They have been moving from the traditional library to a Learning Commons model. In the *Charles Sturt University Learning Commons concept paper*, Shirley Oakley (2009) describes this as:

... a learning space beyond the classroom which sustains the learning experience from the class session into other learning contexts. It provides an integrated work environment for students and academics with learning spaces and technologies that support learning theory principles.

Some examples of Australian institutional libraries adopting the Learning Commons model are Charles Sturt University, Monash University and the University of New England. They have re-evaluated the role of the library, giving it a new direction. It is a new way of thinking about the 'space'. To quote Diane Oblinger (2006):

Space – whether physical or virtual – can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness.

Leveraging off the academic experience, it is now time to have a close look at the secondary school library 'space'.

Maintaining relevance

During this age of ubiquitous information, the traditional role of the school library must be transformed to maintain relevance. It is a valuable resource that must be seen to belong to every member of the community, a resource within which they all have a stake. It goes without saying that the internet and easy online access to resources has impacted on the role of the library as information gateway.

Access to learning resources has become fragmented and duplicated across the school as: teacher-librarians manage the library resources; teachers manage student learning on computers in labs and classroom; and other learning specialists work within their silos. Many libraries have effective collaborative information skills and reading programs in place, many do not, and others struggle. Many have cooperative lesson planning arrangements with teachers, others do not.

Success through collaboration

An examination of curriculum learning networks will generally reveal a lack of communication, duplication of tasks, inefficient knowledge management practices and minimal collaboration between library staff, teachers and learning support specialists in most schools. Collaborative development of a central Learning Commons, therefore, that coordinates the community's learners, teachers and resources will not only create efficiencies, it will build partnerships, save time and reduce stress. Teachers are becoming accustomed to distributing learning resources and communicating with students via the school Learning Management System. To be effective, library resources must also be seamlessly accessible in this same space, not isolated within the Library Management System.

According to David Loertscher (2008), professor at San Jose State University and coauthor of *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win*, potentially powerful learning partnerships can be created by coordinating library, teachers, learning support specialists towards the common learning goal. This goal must have as its focus, the student as learner.

Information Commons vs Learning Commons

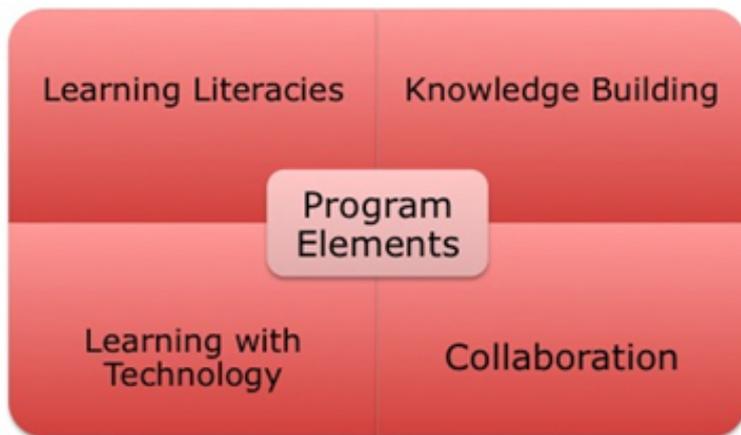
A review of the literature on this topic reveals that two similar but quite distinct terms are used to describe transformed library services. They are referred to as either *Information Commons*, focusing on the organisation and management of resources, or *Learning Commons*, where the emphasis is placed on the community of learners.

The key purpose of an *Information Commons*, according to Lippincott (2006), is to leverage the intersection of content, technology, and services in a physical facility to support student learning.

Beagle (2006) also emphasises the service nature of an *Information Commons*, describing it as "a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organised in support of learning". This contrasts with the *Learning Commons*, which develops when the resources of the *Information Commons* are "organised in collaboration with learning

initiatives sponsored by other academic units, or aligned with learning outcomes defined through a cooperative process" (Beagle, 2006, xviii).

The Learning Commons recognises the library as place, an environment that enhances social interaction and cross-disciplinary learning outside the classroom. To quote a student recently, "the library is different to other parts of the school, it's a place where we all mix regardless of age groups or nationalities". Calling it a *Learning Commons* is a flexible and responsive approach to helping schools focus on learning collaboratively and expanding the learning experience, guiding students and educators into virtual spaces beyond the walls of a school. Bennett (2008) sums it up succinctly in explaining, the fundamental difference between the *Information* and the *Learning Commons* is that the former **supports** institutional mission while the latter **enacts** it.



Source: Loertscher, Koechlin & Zwaan 2008

Not an Information Commons

The Information Commons is predominantly a library service model that integrates library and technology resources for the school community. It doesn't address the role of the teacher-librarian as a learning partner with classroom teachers. The Learning Commons, on the other hand, represents a greater functional integration of learning support and collaboration. The library becomes a member of a partnership of educators communicating and collaborating to support students.

Teachers have a relatively small window of access to their students during the school day. A visit to a dynamic school library during non-class time on any day will reveal it as the place where many students spend time learning outside the classroom by reading, exploring, creating, and communicating. Moving to a Learning Commons model develops community ownership and creates an environment that nurtures these activities by providing content in a variety of formats, technologies, and spaces (physical and virtual) built to encourage collaboration and interaction within a support structure that enhances learning outcomes.

The dynamics of the school learning commons must revolve around learning partnerships that share the vision of creating powerful learning environments combined with the best learning science and a common goal of improving learning and achievement for each and every student. (Koechlin, Zwaan & Loertscher, 2008)

Teacher-librarian, an essential component

Unfortunately, there has been a trend in primary schools in particular, to appoint library technicians as school library managers. This trend must be questioned at a time when government funds are creating

new and refurbished library spaces. State and federal library associations are providing – and collaborating with academic institutions to provide – training to equip library professionals with 21st century library management skills. To ensure it is delivering an appropriate return on investment and is involved in building successful learning outcomes, management of the library remains fundamentally a teaching role. To ensure this, the onus is on teacher-librarians to grow with the change and ensure their skill level is being maintained sufficiently to carry out the role.

It is worth taking time, therefore, to listen to US education leader Alan November (2009), who warns that these new spaces are not going to be successful because they are packed to the brim with all the latest and greatest technologies or because a significant increase in money was allocated.

“It will be the librarian engaging students through personalised instruction, global collaboration opportunities and creative assignments that will remain absolutely essential.” (November, 2009)

Experiment, collaborate, learn

Libraries are intellectual spaces where students can explore and create. Today’s students are the first generation to be, largely, greater producers than consumers of content. They need a place to experiment with integrating this content into their learning to explore and exchange ideas with peers. Libraries are no longer static rooms of bookshelves, newspapers and magazines but rather, a point of contact with the multitude of resources that will assist the building of new knowledge and understanding.

As a Learning Commons, the library has the potential to be a place where students can learn to: be self-directed; use their time effectively; produce work for assessment in a variety of forms. They need a learning place with access to tools to produce content of their own, and the necessary support to do this within the boundaries of responsible digital citizenship, and in response to learning outcomes.

The school library is not just a physical facility; it’s an intellectual environment where, to quote Ross Todd (2009), “the lights come on”. It needs to be a place where students can experiment with new forms of knowledge; where they can learn about the value of their mobile phone and iPod as a tool for learning, not just entertainment. At the opening of the new Chelmsford High School Learning Commons, Todd (2009) said, “schools have to turn on the lights and prepare kids for the everyday life they are growing up in”. He emphasised the fifty years of research that speaks of the value of school libraries in student achievement and the need to make them media-rich, device-driven environments suitable for today’s technology-enabled students – students who, by and large, have not yet realised the learning potential of their digital armory.

Library as Learning Commons

“The library has the potential to be a school’s physical and virtual Learning Commons where inquiry, thinking, imagination, discovery, and creativity are central to students’ information-to-knowledge journey, and to their personal, social and cultural growth.” (Todd 2009)

While the transition of the library to a Learning Commons may be an initiative of the Head of Library, that single individual is not the sole owner of the project. It is owned by the whole community of educators who have a commitment to preparing their students for the future ahead. It’s a commitment to coordination and cooperation in the development of a Learning Commons relevant to every member of the school community. Furthermore, it is recognition of the results obtained by John Hattie (2009) in his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses of educational research, published as *Visible Learning*, which shows that the most significant impacts on student achievement are:

- The role of teacher and quality of instruction
- Warm socio-emotional learning environment

- Engagement in discovery, inquiry, thinking and knowledge building

Similarly, findings published in the *School Libraries 21C: School Library Futures Project report* commissioned by the School Libraries and Information Literacy Unit of the NSW Department of Education and Training in 2009 identified key impacts of a future school library on student learning as:

- Contributing to student development of reading for comprehension
- Moving beyond information acquisition to deep critical thinking
- Moving beyond the superficiality of skills development to deep knowledge development, and
- The ability to apply new skills and knowledge across discipline areas and grade levels. (Hay & Todd, 2010)

It's clear that the Learning Commons model is a journey worth taking where one is attempting to make the library a presence throughout the school. It is not a journey for the Head of Library and library staff alone; however, it is a school community project focusing on improved learning outcomes.

Where to from here?

To be successful, the plan for a revitalised library and successful Learning Commons will require a number of initial steps to ensure current effective programs and practices are retained and journey partners are established. In this instance, initial steps will be:

- Discuss with principal, leadership team and teachers
- Envision possibilities for learning
- Enable library team
- Identify core learning partnerships
- Establish a plan
- Review resources -physical, virtual, personnel
- Consolidate, introduce, change practice
- Assess progress

Conclusion

To be information literate in the 21st century, the greatest skills required by students will be the ability to access quality information sources and the skill to differentiate between real and false resources. This redefinition requires a broader approach to resourcing with an emphasis on digital access and community instruction. It is feasible, therefore, to expect that the college learning community will benefit from the transition of traditional school library to a Learning Commons model involving greater unity towards the common goal of student success.



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