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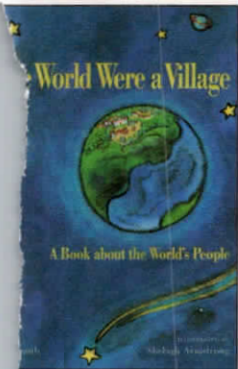




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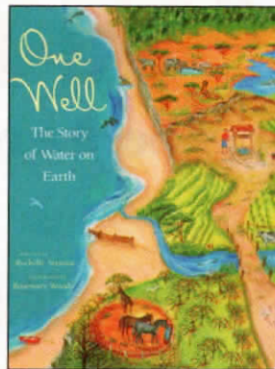


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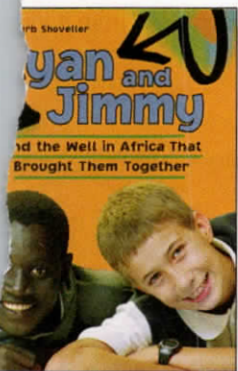


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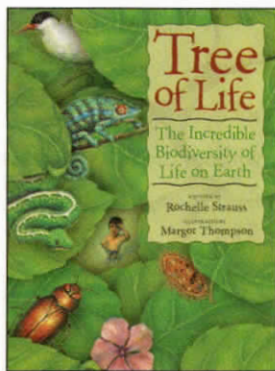


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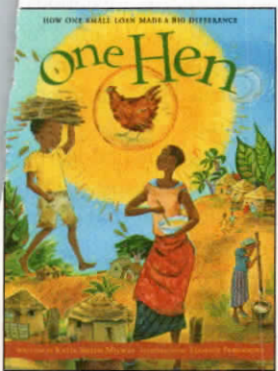


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Flip This Library

School libraries need a revolution, not evolution

By David Loertscher

ONE OF THE BIGGEST BUSINESS BATTLES OF OUR TIME IS BETWEEN MICROSOFT AND GOOGLE. The two have very different business models. Microsoft believes that if they build it, we will come—and buy their product. Google's approach is different: if they build it, we will integrate it into our lives. We use Microsoft products on their terms, but we use Google products—from iGoogle to GoogleDocs—on *our* terms, to construct whatever we want.

What does this have to do with school libraries? A lot.

School libraries are like Microsoft (without the revenue, of course). We've created and invested in library media centers—and in recent years, their Web sites—with the expectation that our students will come to these places.

Sorry folks, but the old paradigm is broken. It's time to become part of the Google generation. If we polled our students, we'd probably discover that they're busy searching online, and maybe IMing or texting each other. Our school libraries and Web sites are the last things on most kids' minds. At some point, we have to admit that our creations have become irrelevant to today's students. There isn't time for business as usual.

Last year, when I thought of revising my book *Taxonomies of the School Library Media Program* (Hi Willow, 2000), I realized that I had pushed the traditional model of school libraries about as far as it could go. We don't need a revision. We need a reinvention. Experts say that the rank and file of any profession can't re-create itself because it's too enmeshed in the status quo. We're more hopeful.

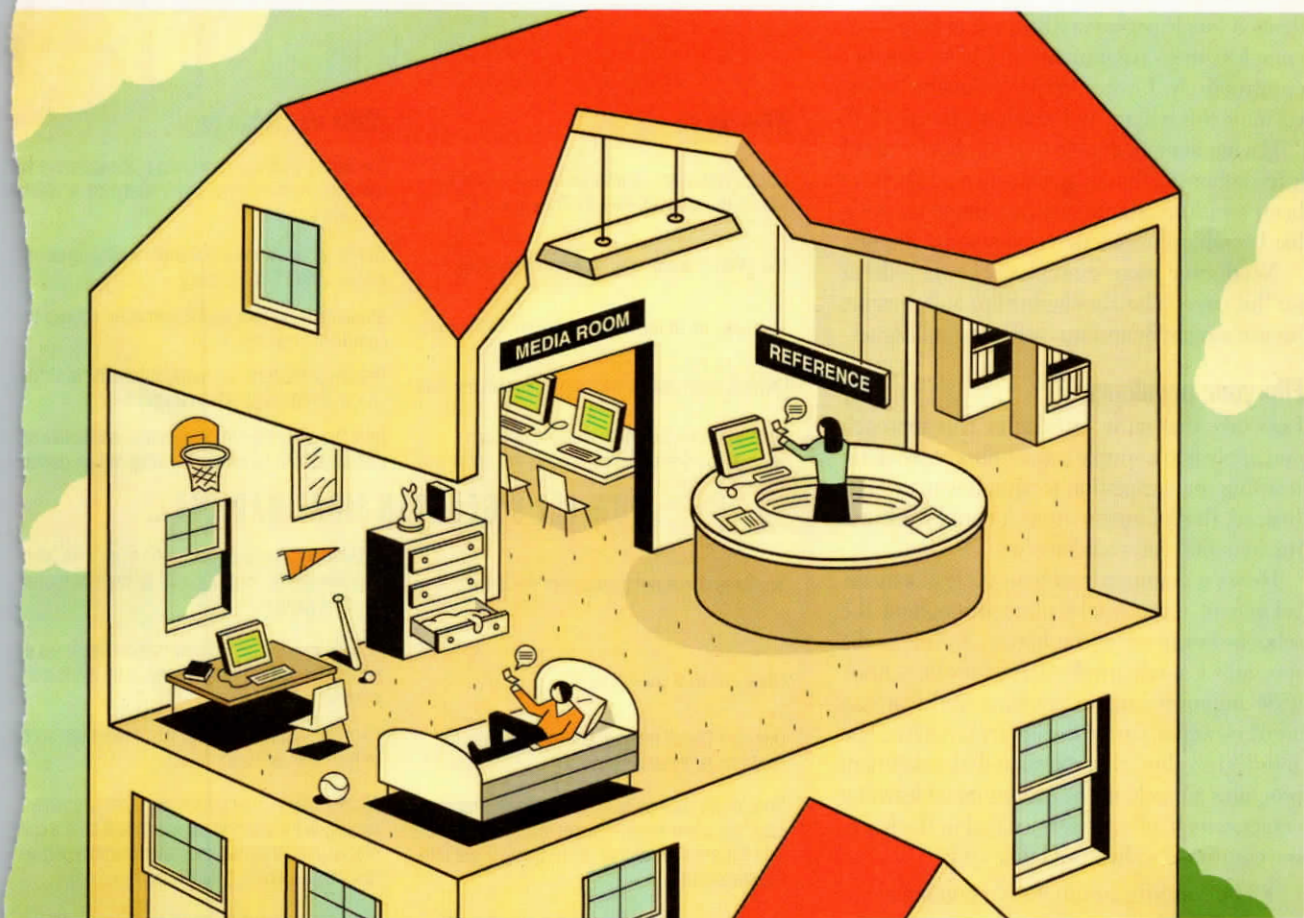
What has to happen for school libraries to become relevant? If we want to connect with the latest generation of learners and teachers, we have to totally redesign the library from the vantage point of our users—our thinking has to do a 180-degree flip. In short, it's time for school libraries to become a lot less like Microsoft and a lot more like Google. With this notion in mind, I collaborated with two of my colleagues, Carol Koechlin and Sandi Zwaan, Canadian educational consultants, to develop an idea we're calling the school library learning commons.

This learning commons is both a physical and a virtual space that's staffed not just by teacher-librarians but also by other school specialists who, like us, are having trouble getting into the classroom and getting kids' attention. Support staff operates the open commons so that the specialists such as literacy coaches, teacher

technologists, teacher-librarians, art teachers, music teachers, and P.E. teachers can spend time creating learning experiences and co-teaching. The main objective of the open commons is to showcase the school's best teaching and learning practices. For example, a principal—impressed with the collaborative teaching going on among the teacher-librarian, the teacher technologist, and a social studies teacher—may invite the three to demonstrate their next unit in the learning commons. Since their work exemplifies the yearlong school improvement initiative, invitations are sent not just to the faculty but also to the school board. On another day, parents may be invited to the learning commons to observe a jointly designed medieval art fair created by a classroom teacher, the art teacher, and the teacher-librarian.

The learning commons also includes an experimental learning center, which also occupies a physical and virtual space. The experimental learning center aims to improve teaching and learning by offering professional development sessions and resources that are tailor-made to each school's greatest needs.

What does this new learning commons look like? In the physical space, we enter a room that's totally flexible, where furnishings can be moved about to accommodate different functions and groupings. The open commons, like the traditional library or computer lab, functions as a warehouse for books and other shared materials and is staffed by paraprofessionals and computer technicians. Its flexible space allows individuals, small groups, and classes to visit at their own convenience. But the distinctive feature of the open commons is that it's a place where teachers



can demonstrate the very best teaching and learning practices in the school and others can observe excellence in action.

The experimental learning center is the hub for all school improvement initiatives. It's the center for professional development sessions and action research projects, where innovative ideas are presented and new technologies are tried out before being fanned out into the rest of the school. For example, to test the new intra-district blogs, five classes simultaneously use multiple online book clubs under the direction of classroom teachers and teacher-librarians to determine if they generate more interest in reading.

In the virtual world, the learning commons is both a giant, on-going conversation and a warehouse of digital materials—from ebooks to databases to student-generated content—all available 24/7 year-round. Thanks to social-networking software, information can flow not just from teachers to learners but in multiple directions: among students, from students to classroom teachers, from teacher-librarians to classroom teachers and students. As expected, the virtual learning commons supports the work of both the physical open commons and the experimental learning center. Teachers, for example, may go online to meet. Professional development or action-research sessions can also take place online.

Do that 180-degree flip

Thinking differently—and creatively—is never easy. Here are some exercises to help you make a 180-degree switch.

Resolve to think like a patron rather than a provider, a customer rather than a store owner. For example, right now your

library is probably open throughout the school day. Imagine what it would mean to students and teachers if it were open 24/7, 365 days a year.

Let's say each student is currently allowed to check out two books. What if each child could check out an unlimited number of books or download digital or audiobooks to their Kindle or iTough device anytime they wished?

In some schools, students only get credit for reading books in the Accelerated Reader program. How about giving them credit for reading everything and anything?

Many of today's students read textbooks and take notes in class. Imagine a learning environment in which the multimedia world of information fed individual students' needs, and where on-demand digital textbooks/multimedia/databases are available 24/7 and under the control of the user.

Here's another 180-degree flip: a typical classroom assignment and library Web site are examples of one-way communication. Adults tell learners what to do, how to do it, and where to find information. But in the new learning commons, homework assignments and library Web sites offer two-way communication.

How? It's easy. The teacher posts assignments on a blog that's linked through an RSS feed to individual students in the class, each of whom can access the blog through an iGoogle page or another personal home page. When an assignment is given, everyone—teachers, librarians, students, and other specialists—can comment, coach, suggest, recommend, and discover together, and push everyone toward excellence. Content flows in and out of stu-

THE PARADIGM FLIP

Where we are

- Library Web site pushes information one way—toward the student. Result? They ignore it.
- The OPAC is a one-way information system.
- Students are at the mercy of the entire Internet.
- I have a book club or two depending on my time.
- Library spaces that have a single function because bookshelves, computers get in the way.

Where we need to go

- The library Web site turns into a collaborative virtual learning commons where everyone is sharing resources and ideas.
- The OPAC becomes a collaborative information system. Hint: Fish4Info.org.
- Students build their own information spaces to control the Internet.
- Dozens of student-run book clubs exist in virtual space; learner led/adult coached.
- Total flexibility over learning commons space so that areas can be easily reconfigured on demand.

NOW LET'S GET EVEN MORE RADICAL...

Students check out books from the library.	Students download books on their own learning commons' "credit card" to their personal reading device.
Library owns a collection.	Access to copyrighted information becomes electronic access rather than ownership by the learning commons.
One-size-fits-all Internet access networks for students and teachers.	User-controlled/responsibility connected access to networks and information.
Specialists such as teacher librarians, literacy coaches, counselors, teacher technologists—all with separate programs—keep trying to get into the classroom.	All specialists in the school are either physically or virtually in the learning commons and form a collaborative team that becomes an irresistible partner for teachers in boosting student achievement.
The school administrator who is charged with instructional improvement exists in a separate administrative suite.	The administrator in charge of instructional improvement may be housed physically, but certainly virtually, in the learning commons.
One-to-one computing with single connection devices.	Connections on a wide variety of personal devices at the preference of the user.
Library instruction/information literacy lessons taught by the teacher-librarian.	Student-developed information and research strategies developed on demand under the coaching of adults.
Bring every child up to a minimum level of achievement.	Every child and teen challenged toward excellence. It's all about "beyond the minimums."

dents' iGoogle pages via RSS feeds to help them complete their assignments and work together constructively. Involve the tech director in developing this system, and watch the barriers fall.

Having done that, note that you have created a revolution in thinking. Directive adults have been transformed into coaches; direct teaching has been transformed into collaborative inquiry.

Need some more examples? See the sidebar on this page (The Paradigm Flip) and imagine these changes. Brainstorm with your colleagues.

Flip your problems

Let's take that same 180-degree flip approach and apply it to a simple school library problem, resisting the temptation to say, "It won't work." Instead, think of the reasons it could work and the benefits that would accrue.

Here's a common problem: professional development sessions take place throughout the school—but never in the library. So the media specialist is rarely involved. As a result, school-wide improvements in teaching and learning aren't viewed as part of the library program. The 180-degree flip: all professional development programs are held in the experimental learning center, which, of course, is located in the learning commons. Why would that work?

- The learning commons is a politically neutral space.
- Administrators would have one place to go for school improvement programs: the learning commons.
- Even if you weren't "invited," you'd be there anyway.
- The learning commons is where the best resources and technology are located and folks just might stumble over that idea as they work together!

Think over the benefits, and remember, you have to be convinced yourself before you can convince others.

Get spacey

Still not sure? Take a look at your space. How can it function as a learning commons and an experimental learning center? For starters, consider getting rid of the immovable bookshelves cluttering the center of your space and the banks of computers taking up major real estate. Think of alternative solutions: wireless laptops that can connect anywhere. Circulate books to classrooms so you don't have to shelve the entire collection in the learning commons.

Are the "can'ts" and "won't happens" still crowding in? Hold a creative problem-solving session with other colleagues and include some outsiders who might bring fresh perspectives.

Finally, make the learning commons happen today, not tomorrow. Host a professional development session in the library and promise to overcome any problems or barriers. Now that's the spirit—it's going to happen; it will happen; you will make it hap-

pen. It will be a success with the resources and technology of the old library now front and center in this new learning commons.

What we're proposing is bold. Gone are the days when we can afford to exist on the periphery. The new learning commons is at the very center of teaching and learning. No longer will the library be something that students and teachers need to remember to come to—instead it will be integrated into their lives. Finally, the library will become the hub of teaching and learning—a place that everyone owns and contributes to—a one giant conversation that's both a social and a learning network.

Face it, folks. We're at a crossroads. Doing nothing, trying to shore up the status quo, or attempting to resuscitate a dead model aren't feasible choices. It's like mom saying, "Either eat your spinach or go to bed." We may not like it, but let's start eating.

David Loertscher, Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan are the authors of The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win! (Hi Willow, 2008).