

# teacher | librarian

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**Learning Commons  
Professional Development  
Administration  
Collaboration  
Booktalking  
Inspiration**



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Number 3  
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## NOTEBOOK



# Year of the Learning Commons

David V. Loertscher and Elizabeth "Betty" Marcoux

In this issue of *Teacher Librarian*, we announce the Year of the Learning Commons that begins in April of 2015 and ends in May of 2016.

This initiative invites everyone interested in any aspect of the learning commons concept to celebrate, present, write, advocate for, and demonstrate how the transformed school library moves toward the center of teaching and learning in the school. Check out the website at:

<https://Sites.google.com/site/yearofthelearningcommons>

Transforming the traditional school library that is the center of resources and consumption into a vibrant center of knowledge creation, creativity, inquiry, and the center of high tech information and experimentation is a wonder to behold. As the transformation happens in schools we have visited, a whole new sense of excitement and interest arises from students, teachers, administrators, and the community. It becomes a model worth advocating for as this century of rich information and technology marches on.

Drs. Loertscher and Marcoux examine the state of the Learning Commons (LC) through their recent survey results. They report on what is happening presently in terms of the Learning Commons and offer suggestions for future work as a Learning Commons. The examples they offer can be customized as well as emulated when looking at your own Learning Commons. This feature article is followed by an elementary school's journey to become a Learning Commons. It is colorful, interesting, and full of amazing ideas about how to develop your own LC.

Of course any LC can't materialize without the partnerships and collaboration of many constituencies. This is not only evident in the aforementioned article by Steele, but reinforced emphatically by the subsequent article. Ellis and Jacobs-Israel talk about the New York School Library System and the benefits they receive as a unit rather than as individuals. They work under a mandate to not only provide relevant professional development offerings, but also work concertedly on communication with each other.



"The traditional idea of the library is the consumption of knowledge; but in the learning commons, we add the creation of knowledge. The first is more passive; the second much more active."

# Learning Commons Progress Report

DAVID V. LOERTSCHER AND ELIZABETH "BETTY" MARCOUX

We are often asked "What is the difference between a library and a learning commons?" and, "So what? What difference does it make?"

The first book introducing the concept was published in November of 2008, and the first article to appear in our literature was by Valerie Diggs in *Teacher Librarian* about her Learning Commons in Chelmsford MA so, we decided, as editors, that it was time to take a peek at the progress made on learning commons concepts over the past seven years by taking a look at the state of the art.

In early January of 2015, we sent out a simple and short questionnaire to teacher librarians who had written about the learning commons in *Teacher Librarian* as well as more broadly across various networks. The questionnaire is still available for anyone to take at:

<http://tinyurl.com/n68mzpw>

And, the responses can be read by anyone at:

<http://tinyurl.com/ldaxwwq>

We are reporting on the 28 answers received by the date of this writing (late January 2015), but we encourage everyone to keep contributing so we can build a bank of learning commons transitions over the year. Our intent is to follow the progress of the learning commons concept in all schools. If you look at the responses, you can check the date when the response was posted.

In this article, we preface the answers to the questionnaire by a brief summary of the learning commons concept and then quote and summarize the responses to help the reader gauge progress. The concept of the learning commons is a fluid one; not a firm set of standards. Likewise, one can never say that they have finally reached the ultimate in a learning commons because the central idea is always changing as the worlds of information, technology, and curriculum change. What does not and will not change is the idea that the client has a major role in shaping a participatory learning environment.

## LIBRARY VS. LEARNING COMMONS: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Here is an analogy that might be helpful in considering what is a Learning Commons. A library is like a tablet computer; a learning commons more like a laptop computer. The principal function of a tablet computer is a consumption device of print, video, games, and

entertainment with a bit of creation built in for writing, picture and video creation, and social media response. But if you really want to get into the creation business, you need to move toward a laptop or full computer with more power to create rather than just consume. The more powerful the device, the more the opportunity to build, create, make, edit, experiment, and produce.

The traditional idea of the library is the consumption of knowledge; but in the learning commons, we add the creation of knowledge. The first is more passive; the second is much more active.

In reviewing the answers to the questionnaire, we found that many survey respondents see a difference in student learning when they implement aspects of the learning commons concept. For instance, many respondents spoke about the acceleration of collaboration found in the Learning Commons, something they didn't necessarily see in a traditional library program. Space to be collaborative, creativity innovation, and connection with others were all mentioned.

The next article in this issue of TL, "The Journey from Library to Learning Commons," should be helpful to readers to gauge the difference in concepts.

## WHAT'S IN THE NAME CHANGE?

The real reason for the change in name is to move from the concept of "contents"

denoted by the word LIBRARY to the idea of “function” as suggested in LEARNING and COMMONS. In Canada, the term Library Learning Commons is popular and used in their new national standards. In Australia, Information Commons is popular; and, in the U.S. many retain the name of Library along with Learning Commons. The first Learning Commons in the United Kingdom (in Bradford, Lancashire, England) opened in 2014. Whatever it is named, the idea is to indicate a major shift in purpose from consumption to creation; passive to active; peripheral to central; mildly interesting to completely indispensable. It is a major attack on a stereotype.

Respondents told stories of how it has been interesting to mount a change to the name and perceptions of the school library, often citing the need to work with administration concerns and to gain teacher buy-in. They also spoke about the increased activity, trust, and interest in the library when students became more engaged in the work of the facility and how perceptions were sometimes turned around by students, teachers, and administrators. That is not to say respondents aren't often challenged regarding the Learning Commons approach. Changes in location, facility, and staffing impacted what was taking place in many situations. But creativity and use was up when the LC was physically in play.

### WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LEARNING COMMONS TO TEACHING AND LEARNING?

The focus of the entire learning commons concept is to move the school library into a more central role in the teaching and learning environment of the whole school. It is what we hoped would happen back in the 1960s when school libraries were being created across the U.S. However, in the last decade or so, that view of centrality diminished as evidenced by the elimination of many professional library jobs in favor of paraprofessional staffing as the resources of the Internet increased exponentially and financial exigencies struck many school districts.

Many respondents have confidence that they are on the move toward the center. Approximately 23 of 28 indicated that they were making good progress. Others are watching and hoping that the movement will become a part of their program. We get the clear impression that a shift in emphasis and leadership of the teacher librarian is producing the desired result. A sampling of the comments illustrate this central push:

There is no question that the physical facility of the Learning Commons is where most professionals start. For instance, when writing about the physical facility, there was great response to changing its floor plan and seeing how it impacts programming. Flexibility of the facility and access to it contributed significantly to what could be done there. Another large issue was the welcoming nature of the facility, something that seemed to increase with the increase in collaboration. There is more interaction between students, teachers, and community partners - all inside the facility. There is comment about how student projects, thoughts, information are shared more widely and concertedly, and how students see their work as part of the whole, rather than just for a class. Small steps, various phases, and incremental movements are being implemented and tested to see how they are used and received. There is still much “traditional” work occurring, but there is also much experimenting with many newer concepts.

### WHAT CONTRIBUTIONS TO LEARNING IS THE PHYSICAL SPACE OF THE LC MAKING?

Many teacher librarians who embrace the learning commons concept begin by attacking their old and tired physical facilities. As we have visited a number of libraries over the past decade, a pattern emerged. One enters a very large room known as the library or media center and immediately sees a place that looks like a bookstore with most of the space taken up by immovable book shelves, oversized circulation desks, rows of dedicated computers taking up much floor space, and a single



## JUNIOR NONFICTION

### WHEN YOU GROW UP . . .

Belton, Blair. **Be a Zoologist** (Be a Scientist). Gareth Stevens, 2015. 32 p. 23.35. 978-1-4824-1477-6. Grades 3–6. Being a scientist can be interesting and helpful. Bright photos, fact boxes, and appealing layouts give readers a brief look at six different science careers. A glossary, more information, websites, and an index round out the title.

Berne, Emma Carlson. **Run Your Own Babysitting Business** (Young Entrepreneurs). Rosen PowerKids, 2014. 32 p. \$22.93. 978-1-4777-2922-9. Grades 2–6. Whether it is help with babysitting or having a bake sale, car wash, recycling business, or yard sale, here is a series to cover all the bases. The title concludes with a list of items to check off when completed, for example, shop for supplies, make flyers, and track your profits.

Jacobson, Ryan. **Get a Job Helping Others** (You're in Business!). Lerner, 2015. 40 p. \$25.14. 978-1-4677-3836-1. Grades 5–8. Here is a series that covers job suggestions for kids not quite old enough for traditional ones. For example, there are suggestions for lawn mowing, dog walking, and car washing. Fact-box tips give guidance for getting started. There is a glossary, further information, and a brief index.

Mara, Wil. **Space Exploration: Science, Technology, and Engineering** (Calling All Innovators: A Career for You?). Scholastic, 2015. 64 p. \$27. 978-0-531-20615-7. Grades 5–8. STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) careers are explained with this series, which provides practical information about choosing such a career as well as an interview with someone in the profession.



## YA NONFICTION

### WHAT CAN I BE?

Etingoff, Kim. **Women in Medicine** (Major Women in Science). Mason Crest, 2014. 64 p. \$22.95. 978-1-4222-2929-3. Grades 6–10. Here is a fresh look at STEM career opportunities for females. The chapters begin with “What does it take to be a doctor?” and conclude with “Opportunities for Women Today in the Field of Medicine.” Other titles in the series cover a broad range of science careers for both genders.

McGuire, Kara. **All about the Green: The Teens’ Guide to Finding Work and Making Money** (Financial Literacy). Compass Point Books, 2015. 64 p. \$29.99. 978-0-7565-4372-3. Grades 6–12. Learn to make, protect, and sensibly spend money. McGuire takes the complicated topic of finances and makes it more understandable with a threefold focus: career planning, owning a business, and income. The cover of a teen with green hair is sure to attract attention. A glossary, bibliography, and index are included.

Meyer, Terry Teague. **The Vo-tech Track to Success in Information Technology** (Learning a Trade, Preparing for a Career). Rosen, 2015. 80 p. \$33.25. 978-1-4777-7724-4. Grades 7–12. For students interested in vocational or college education in the technology field, the series will help goal planning. Back matter has a glossary, more information sections, a bibliography, and an index.

Trueit, Trudi Strain. **Veterinarian** (Careers with Animals). Cavendish Square, 2014. 64 p. \$30.79. 978-1-62712-464-5. Grades 6–10. This series highlights animal careers such as animal trainer, animal therapist, conservationist, and rescue, in addition to veterinary medicine. Information is provided about the education, training, and pros and cons of various careers.

area dedicated to a teaching area where the librarian delivers instruction in a traditional classroom arrangement. Schedules limit the number of individuals and small groups working in the library and evidence of any coteaching is absent.

With some “risk takers,” whether with a little or a lot of money available, we’ve noticed a complete transformation of the physical space that breathes new life not just in one space, but affects the attitudes of the students and the teachers. In our visits to these new spaces, we continue to interview the students and the teachers about the before and after learning commons remodeling. In our visits, we notice:

- Fewer immovable bookshelves in the middle of the room; those that remain are on wheels and move as patrons need various learning configurations.
- Physical book collections have been weeded and the remaining collections circulate to both individuals and classrooms in much larger numbers.
- Banks of wired computers taking up a great deal of floor space are replaced by robust Internet connections allowing for mobile laptops, tablets, and BYOD from home.
- Adjoining classroom/seminar and lab facilities are re-purposed for creative work and replaced by a more traditional teaching stations that provide a maximum of both individual and small group flexible working spaces that constantly change throughout the school day depending on the wants and needs of patrons at any given time for a purpose they design rather than are assigned to.

• Spaces to make, create, build, and construct projects involving real things and to support knowledge building brain work. Projects of many types and varieties are going on simultaneously; some, scheduled; others arising spontaneously.

• Smaller physical collections of both fiction and informational materials are dwarfed by online multimedia and digital access to the best of the best across the world. It becomes less of what is “owned” and more about “access.”

• A real sense of ownership transfer from the former kingdom of the librarian to a sense that everyone owns this common

space and thus everyone contributes, cares for, and learns to coexists as the activity level in the large space increases exponentially.

• The staff of the learning commons includes not just the professional teacher librarian, but also other specialists in the school such as technology integration specialists, gifted and talented professionals, reading specialists, or any other professionals who have a whole-school assignment.

• A constant stream of co-taught learning experiences by teacher librarians or other specialists with classroom teachers that are taking advantage of the resources, technology, and the flexible space that allows learners to spread out, move around, and enjoy the additional help of multiple adults.

• Everyone works toward school improvement and there is ability to archive units so all can learn from them - the idea of transparency.

Such are the original dreams for a vibrant physical space. What did our respondents of the survey claim? Here are a few of the comments from our questionnaire:

From various respondents, we note the character of student ownership and interest in the facility has increased. There is talk about different areas or zones of the library - some more traditional and some more collaborative and active in nature. More space is being opened up and made flexible; more space is being devoted to student creativity and interaction. Of course there is mention about the downside of too much social interaction, but there is also much conversation about its benefits.

### WHAT IS THE STATE OF THE VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMONS?

The idea of a participatory Virtual Learning Commons has been a more difficult concept for librarians to understand and implement. Most teacher librarians have a website that is a one-way stream of information from the library to the patron

and generally connects the patron to the catalog, databases, and good things to read plus the library open hours and rules. Such a site has little chance of reaching a large percentage of the patrons, since Google and the Internet are on any preferred device.

In order to compete with Google, teacher librarians can create a participatory space online where everyone in the school can work, create, build, and share as a community. A few examples might illustrate the major differences between the static library website and the Virtual Learning Commons:

- Willard Elementary School: <http://screencast.com/t/UbkF0eholjk>

- Athenian Middle School VLC created by Julia Chambers: <http://tinyurl.com/pkhqzn5>

- Los Altos High School, Los Altos, CA VLC created by Gordon Jack and Vaughn Egge <http://screencast.com/t/gnk3AbEJkc>

Actually, the Virtual Learning Commons can be the best tool the part time professional, the multi-school professional, or the district level professional has to make an actual difference in teaching and learning as opposed to just being able to handle administrivia across the various locations assigned.

#### FEATURES OF THE NEW SITE CAN INCLUDE:

- A literacy space devoted to reading, writing, speaking, and listening where everyone is contributing something such as book talks, book trailers, poetry, short fiction pieces, digital storytelling, and accessing all types of digital resources including audiobooks, multimedia performances, and video. It is not just a consuming place; it is a place in the school where students, teacher, and others are creating, sharing, critiquing, and building rich experiences together.

- A knowledge-building space where all the units being co-taught across the school reside. Websites for particular units are owned jointly by the teacher librarian and the classroom teacher or any other specialist so that the adults mentor learn-

ing experiences 24/7. These spaces can include more than one class, school, or group across the world and are archived as evidence of the impact both specialists and technology are having on teaching and learning across the school.

- The information center where the catalog of owned materials, databases, and links to resources across the world are located. Everyone in the school helps build these resources as a part a policy of shared collection development.

- An experimental learning center where virtual makerspaces and experimental projects or initiatives are being tested by groups throughout the school. Such a space centers on self-directed learning, teachers trying out new techniques, initiatives in a testing period before going viral around the school. Professional development and genius bars run by students reside here and benefit the entire school.

- A place for school culture which becomes the living school yearbook and the real enticement for students to come to this site regularly, not only to see what is happening but also to post events, awards, news - the place to find out what's going on.

That is the theoretical potential of such a total school participatory digital space. So we wondered if any progress on this front was happening in the learning commons out there. Here are a few of the comments that indicate some progress:

The concept of the Virtual Learning Commons is the least developed at most schools. We see this in part because of electronic challenges, including policy concerns that each school works as part of a school district. Safety concerns about certain aspects of the Virtual Learning Commons, particularly its interactive nature, present some real challenges that need to be addressed. From virtual classrooms to interactive websites many professionals are invested in the concept of sharing, interacting, and connecting with others outside of the classroom.

A more than one-way website is seen as a way to curate information, connect with others, and develop personal learning. It is also seen as a way to update information,

and offer access to information for free or at minimal expense. A couple of great examples come from the survey is the use of the Virtual Learning Commons as a way to place post-it notes with student questions, likes, aha moments, and changes and offering suggestions for further information at the VRC. Students also participate in lessons, and use this space independently.

#### CONCLUSION: WHAT IS THE STATE OF THE ART OF THE LEARNING COMMONS CONCEPT?

What does this all mean? The state of the Learning Commons is ever growing and becoming a significant influence on student learning. It is being embraced by many education professionals, not only librarians, as a way to connect information and learning with students today. To suggest there is a structured approach to changing one's school library to a learning commons is a fallacy. Instead, there are principles and concepts to be understood and implemented according to the students' best interests.

We welcome the experimentation that is obvious by the respondents, their leadership, and risk taking. It all seems a healthy departure from tradition as information and technology change, but it also demonstrates the need to stay relevant, useful, inventive, and responsive. In a previous research piece published in *Teacher Librarian*, when the teacher librarian co-teaches alongside classroom teachers and brings the resources and technology of the learning commons to a learning experience, great things happen. Such a movement pushes toward indispensability; the contribution and recognition of a highly skilled professional; and a sense of ownership by the entire school as a real Hub of the School.