

**Virtual libraries: Enabling  
learning in an online world**

**fyi**

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Welcome back to school for 2015 and to our Summer edition of FYI! I hope you have all had a relaxing summer break with your family and friends and feel renewed for the year to come.

The Professional Learning program of our Association offers many exciting opportunities for expanding our knowledge base and developing our skills in a variety of ways including conferences, workshops, forums and discussion opportunities. Our professional learning theme for the coming three years is 'collaboration across the curriculum' and reflects the role that school libraries have in education. The particular focus for 2015 is on 'students at the centre of learning'.

School libraries are both a physical and virtual space for teachers, students and, increasingly, parents to explore, create and access relevant information, that support curriculum and enhance learning outcomes for students. Our profession is used to sharing and networking and our professional learning program provides opportunities for keeping abreast of changes and new initiatives in educational and library fields. I encourage you to take advantage of these possibilities to be well placed to offer strong, informed advocacy of our profession and its key role in education.

Congratulations also to Camilla Elliott and Cindy Tschernitz for the outstanding professional learning opportunities which continue to provide a responsive and stimulating program for our SLAV members.

No doubt we can expect new directions from the recently appointed Minister of Education, the Honourable James Merlino. We congratulate him and look forward to engaging in further dialogue on the role of school libraries and teacher-librarians and their pivotal place in 21st century education. Education is a dynamic entity with chang-

ing priorities and shifting emphases and teacher-librarians understand this process of constant renewal which is a feature of our educational landscape. We are not fazed by change and welcome the opportunity to play a constructive role in supporting new educational initiatives.

Since the theme of our Summer edition of FYI is *Virtual libraries: Enabling learning in an online world*, it is a key time to reflect on how the process of learning is evolving in the digital age with the vast array of resources available, changing curriculum needs and the different teaching and learning strategies required in order to optimise new media and technologies.

School library teams are highly skilled in developing knowledge building environments, both physical and virtual to enhance collaboration and creativity. These environments encourage knowledge work and provide a shared space where ideas can be evaluated, refined and enhanced. Increasingly, the personalising of learning also demands the creation of flexible and varied learning spaces that are both communal and social, individual and group but most of all create zones where students can by choice switch seamlessly into their preferred learning mode. Furthermore, our collections in our 21st century school libraries provide students and staff with access to information 24/7, thereby fulfilling the expectation that information is available anywhere, any place, anytime.

One of the extraordinary strengths of SLAV is our branch structure which enables all library team members to be involved at the grass roots level in our Association. I would particularly like to acknowledge the outstanding work of our convenors and co-convenors who conduct our 22 regional and metropolitan SLAV branches. I would encourage you to take advantage of the learning opportunities

provided by the branches to connect with your colleagues in your region. In addition, through your local branch representative, your SLAV membership provides an opportunity for you to have a voice on SLAV Council.

Finally, I look forward to catching up with you at our very exciting professional learning opportunities that are planned for 2015. I hope this FYI finds you well and I wish you all a very good start to our new school year. See you during 2015!

*Dianne Ruffles*  
SLAV President

### Reading Matters Conference

29-30 May 2015

For program details and registration  
See Centre for Youth Literature at  
[http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/  
live-learn/centre-youth-literature](http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/live-learn/centre-youth-literature)

### AUTUMN 2015 Issue

The library as the  
centre of creativity

Deadline: 30 March 2015

### WINTER 2015 Issue

Reading and Reading programs  
Deadline: 20 June 2015

### SPRING 2015 Issue

The Thinking Curriculum  
Deadline: 30 August 2015

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[secretariat@slav.org.au](mailto:secretariat@slav.org.au)

# The Virtual Learning Commons and the building of a participatory learning community

By David V. Loertscher and Carol Koechlin<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Welcome to the Year of the Learning Commons!

Since 2008 when our *The New Learning Commons Where Learners Win*<sup>[2]</sup> and the second edition of that book in 2011, we have noticed a fair acceptance of the idea across the English speaking world of the need to reinvent much of the tradition of the school library. In this short article, we would like to consider some of the concepts that have seemed to resonate and concentrate the thinking about the role of the Virtual Learning Commons.

We are also announcing a milestone of celebration known as the Year of the Learning Commons from April 2015-May of 2015.

## What is a Learning Commons?

A Learning Commons is a common, or shared, learning 'space' that is both physical and virtual. It is designed to move students beyond mere research, practice, and group work to a greater level of engagement through exploration, experimentation, and collaboration. The Learning Commons is more than a room or a website; it allows users to create their own environments to improve learning. It's about changing school culture, and about transforming the way learning and teaching occur. As it has begun to develop, the concept turns the library from just a place of consuming to a place of creation.

## Progress

It became apparent very early on, that most librarians interested in the learning commons concept began by revitalising the physical space. Instead of rows and rows of bookshelves taking up most of the usable space, librarians were either putting the bookshelves on castors or cutting

the amount of shelving down and moving it against the outside walls. This gave them a great deal of room in which to create flexible learning spaces for individuals, small groups, and large groups working simultaneously.

We also noticed that some were converting physical space to workable space with almost no money; others were receiving hefty grants to remodel or build new facilities. Architects who had some experience with learning commons in academic settings, began to design much more flexible spaces than ever before.

Storage rooms and conference rooms were being converted to more usable spaces, particularly for the creation of multimedia materials by students and for project based group spaces. As the spaces opened up, so did opportunities for the teacher librarian and other specialists in the school to co-teach alongside classroom teachers who suddenly discovered that the library had turned into an extension of their classroom.

Last year, we began to notice the emergence of makerspaces as part of the learning commons as further evidence that the idea of creation was making an inroad. The more acceptance of project based learning, the more, the idea of the learning commons grew.

Of the numerous articles written about the learning commons in *Teacher Librarian*, we noticed a new excitement, not just from the teacher-librarians who were discovering a new vision, but by students and teachers who began to take ownership of the space. That transfer of ownership seemed to be the tipping point as opposed to just a change of name over the door.

While one can read about the transformation, it is very beneficial to visit a transformed facility when students and teachers are actually using it, and to inter-

view the kids and adults who remember the old atmosphere and are quite happy to discuss the differences they see. And it has become commonplace to hear that the physical learning commons is always in transition as new demands are made on the space and adjustments happen to help noise levels when so many are working on their various projects.

## The Virtual Learning Commons: A definition

The Virtual Learning Commons (VLC) is the online force of the Learning Commons; it's a digital learning community in which the whole school participates. It is *not* a library website that only provides a one-way stream of useful information. Instead, both the instructors and the students of the school collaborate to establish the VLC as a place where individuals and groups are actively learning, communicating and building together in real time. This participatory community of learners is powered by software that allows many contributors, and it is as public or private as the school wishes it to be.

In a recent article in *Library Journal*, David Weinberger calls for libraries to reinvent themselves as 'platforms'. He urges libraries to switch from a portal mentality to one of infrastructure that is ubiquitous and persistent. "A library as platform is more how than where, more hyperlinks than container, more hubbub than hub."<sup>[3]</sup> The school VLC has the potential to become the 'infrastructure' Weinberger argues for, so schools can better deal with the messy business of learning, celebrate and archive results and move together towards school improvement.

## Varying perspectives

The Virtual Learning Commons totally changes the dynamics of learning. It is

set up as a client-side environment rather than a top-down information service, and because of this perspective, each individual and group uses it for their own varied purposes:

- For the school administrator, the VLC is the centre of school improvement and experimentation.
- To a specialist such as a reading teacher, it is a place to foster reading improvement and engagement across the entire school.
- For the teacher-librarian and the teacher technologist, it is a place of collaborative learning and the centre of the push to make information and technology actually boost the quality of teaching and learning.
- For the athletic coach, it is the place the parade sporting events and opportunities.
- For the student, it is the 'go to' place to find assignments join and participate in school groups and clubs, find tools and tutorials, or share and build knowledge with other students across the world.
- For the classroom teacher, it is the place to build collaborative learning experiences for students with the help of school and district specialists. It is the place to encounter experts and invite parents to participate in activities and learning.

Overall, the VLC fosters a sense of ownership by everyone in the school. It is a place where everyone is reaching for and exhibiting excellence. It represents the culture of the entire school. The VLC is designed with change in mind and remains in a state of perpetual beta as it evolves to serve the community that jointly owns it.

We are advocating a new way of thinking not only about school libraries but about learning for the future. A tour of the

Learning Commons, in both its physical place and virtual states, will give you a taste of the endless possibilities to drive school improvement. Jessica Hansen provides a vision of the Learning Commons in the following four short videos:

[http://www.screencast.com/users/jlyn\\_81/folders/Virtual%20Learning%20Commons](http://www.screencast.com/users/jlyn_81/folders/Virtual%20Learning%20Commons).

## More examples

Here are just a few examples of what might be happening in the Virtual Learning Commons across various grade levels:

- The physical education department is conducting a wellness campaign across the school. Using the VLC, students can report their fitness activity levels, share recipes and nutrition advice, and arrange real-time athletic meets.
- The teacher-librarian is encouraging all students to participate in the state book awards programs. She uses the VLC to promote literacy through reading, critical thinking through voting, and first-hand research by communicating with the authors and other school groups across the region or nation.
- The student iStaff team (like a geek squad) is promoting several new Web 2.0 tools to be used by students and teachers across the local schools. They post the tools and tutorials, and man a virtual help desk to assist the use of those tools.
- Fifth grade students are helping second graders to research various animals in preparation for their trip to the zoo. They use a knowledge building centre on the VLC to help their young partners prepare for the excursion, both in and out of school.
- The PTA is launching a school-wide environmental project with teams from each classroom. The VLC serves as communication central to organise

tasks and meetings.

- The debate club won a recent tournament! They showcase their victory in a VLC blog that details the major contests, their journey to the competition, and their trophies.
- The seventh grade class is raising funds for medical expenses of a fellow classmate involved in a terrible accident. They sponsor a campaign across the school where anyone can give a donation for every book read by anyone in the school. Details found on the VLC.

### A sense of community

A spirit of team membership, supportive friendships, and organisational fervor is well known by most during some part of their lifetime. As growing Internet Communities develop, we see the same comradeship and engagement in all types of causes such as online games, Wikipedia, political causes such as the Arab Spring, Internet fund raising, folksonomies, and many other collaborative construction projects.

Is it really possible to have that same spirit of purpose and passion in a learning community of a school or online learning group? Many schools try to achieve school spirit using sports around which not only the students can thrive but also but also community members and parents can participate. Building the same sense of participation and pride around academics

has proved much more difficult.

With young people claiming that the number one problem with school is boredom, some have suggested a variety of ways to move from boredom to engagement in order to combat high dropout rates of students during middle and high schools. Michael Fullan strongly suggests that if schools are going to truly improve the solutions for teachers and solutions for students must come as a package.<sup>[4]</sup> The VLC is a package providing 'solutions' for teachers and students to learn, play and grow, when technology is leveraged in ways that encourage participation.

### Building the Virtual Learning Commons

In the past three years, graduate students and instructor, David Loertscher, at San Jose State University, have been constructing Virtual Learning Commons sites using a variety of software. During the spring of 2012, the class did a study of the past efforts and then created five major rooms or portals into which the Virtual Learning Commons might be divided. Each portal would have its own construction team who are allowed to edit, build, and create. And, owners of the entire VLC could have the power to regulate the whole. Thus there would be a system of control but also a decentralised structure to allow a true collaborative culture to develop. No one

person would be constructing the VLC but rather groups of contributors and thus a participatory culture blossoms.

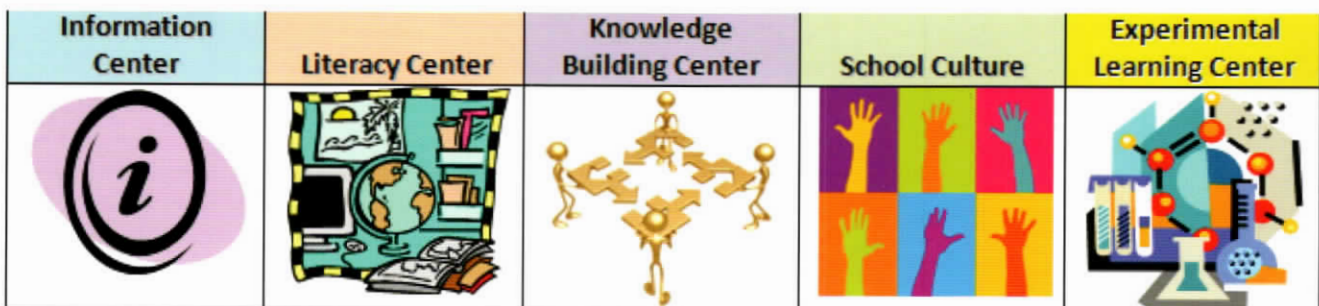
### The five main portals of the Virtual Learning Commons

During the Spring of 2012, the class at San Jose State University did an analysis of a number of creative efforts and combined all the efforts into five main sections or portals (see graphic below).

Here is a brief introduction to each major portal. As you read about our ideas for each portal consider your own school needs and where you would start in the construction of a VLC. What is important for your school and district right now? How could a VLC enable and engage students and teachers and drive improvement for your school? You might link into the VLC template and follow along as we introduce each portal. It is at: <https://sites.google.com/site/templatevlc>.

#### The Information Centre

This portal is the opening page of the Virtual Learning Commons. It is somewhat like the traditional school library home page in that it links the user into a wide range of useful resources and tools, databases, libraries, museums, activities, the Learning Commons orientation, etc. It is the point of entry for the other major portals. To capture and keep interest the front



The five main portals of the Virtual Learning Commons.

page features a 'hook' in the centre that draws in the user to the site as a whole.

### The Literacy Centre

This is the arena where a whole school culture is emerging around reading, writing, speaking, listening, creating, consuming, enjoying, collaborating, and celebrating all things connected with a variety of literacies. Here are the digital book clubs, the writing clubs, the book or movie trailers. This centre should include work and activities done in single classrooms linked to the Learning Commons, across classrooms, across grade levels, across schools, across districts, across the state, and across the world.

Various activities come and go as interests are sparked, created, implemented, and then decline. Presidents of school clubs post, teachers post, administrators post and everyone is commenting and participating in projects, activities, celebrations, and discussion.

### The Knowledge Building Centre

This is the learning community of the Virtual Learning Commons. Here is where the teacher-librarian, the teacher technologist, and other specialists are designing and conducting collaborative learning experiences with classroom teachers. The learning experiences can range from one-class participation to multiples classes and learning challenges around the globe. Because of the transparency of the VLC the very best of learning in the school can be tracked and archived.

### The Experimental Learning Centre

This is the heart of experimentation, testing, trial, success, failure, and projects of school improvement and action research in the school. It is not only a place frequented and constructed by administrators, but

the leadership team of the school, grant projects, or adoption of new initiatives such as Common Core evolve and thrive. Both adults and students are experimenting in the space; it is the place to take risks knowing that it is OK to fail and regroup for success.

### School Culture

This portal is the main draw for students because it is the living school yearbook. This is the home of the sports videos, club activities, trips, performances, contest winners, happenings, candid camera tours, and more. It is THE place to check every day to see what is going on. And, something from this page becomes the 'hook of the day' on the Information Centre front page.

## A perpetual beta culture

We recommend that you experiment for a bit with the template and structure that we have created. Form a focus group to look at a beginning structure and then brainstorm what will work in your school or online environment. We suggest that focus groups consist not only of adults but of the young people who will be using the VLC. Without their help, participation, and expertise, the VLC is likely to be ignored in the same way that the original school library website usually is. And, as the project begins to grow and flourish, we must all remember that it will evolve regularly as new needs arise, different people participate, and as the technology becomes more sophisticated.

## Build your own VLC with our template

You can use our free template to create your own VLC. We selected Google Sites as the main architecture for the Virtual Learning Commons, but there are other

platforms as well. We chose sites because it:

- Is free and available 24/7 across most platforms
- Allows differing participants to edit various pages
- Is fairly simple to learn
- Is located in the cloud
- Allows collaborative construction of a learning space
- Works both on the inside and outside of a Google Apps for Education school

So, while the reader might be limited to or more interested in a different platform and software application, we suggest that the features built into the Google Site platform be used to judge how well a different platform would serve. Thus, as you read how the template we have built would work, a different platform should be able to deliver the same or better features.

We suggest that the best way to get started thinking about a VLC is just to create a VLC for your school and start testing and experimenting with it to understand both the possibilities and the opportunities. And, then you can judge whether what we have created is better and more versatile than what you already have or want to have. And, if the following directions are insufficient, we have laid out much more extensive helps and directions in *The Virtual Learning Commons* book listed in footnote number one.

## Get started. Pull down the template

### Preliminaries

First, get a Gmail account. You must have a Gmail account to be the owner of a Google Site. Next, beware of using Internet Explorer as a browser; try Firefox or Chrome, whatever seems to work best on your system. Next, we suggest looking at one or several tutorials available on the Web

about how to create and use a Google Site if you have not used this tool before. And, if you get stuck, just get in the habit of searching for a 'help site' or tutorial about your problem with the Site construction.

### Download the template

Go to the following template address: <https://sites.google.com/site/templatevlc>. At the top, you will see 'Use this template'. Click that. It might look a bit different on your browser, but it is there. (see below)

When the new template appears on your screen with the new name, you are now owner of that site - the sole owner and you are ready to create and build. If you want to do this with a group, then you will have to share the site.

### Build your own

Now you are ready to play, experiment, and build. We have many more ideas and suggestions in our book but in the meantime we invite you to treat this as a sandbox for experimenting and developing ideas before actually constructing the real thing.

## A basis of school improvement

School improvement initiatives occur in every school with the hope from adminis-

trators that either continuous improvement or radical change might increase the bottom line of schools: learning. What is happening in your school? Who are the key individuals spearheading that change?

We suggest that the Virtual Learning Commons become the centre place for improvements and progress of all kinds and that this effort is a collaborative one among those initiating the change, administrators, the teacher-librarian, the teacher technologist, and other specialists in the school. To capture this central virtual place along with the participation of those concerned from teachers to students, to specialists, etc., is to move the concept of 'library' into the heart of teaching and learning and make it the ubiquitous and persistent learning infrastructure that Weinberger suggests.

It becomes common knowledge that such school improvement initiatives are one important piece of the learning commons and everyone knows that the VLC is the place where the work, experimentation, and the showcasing of results is positioned.

## Moving forward

As authors of the Learning Commons concept, we are very pleased to discover

adoption of our work on many levels in the US, Canada and Australia. Still we continue to advocate for the Learning Commons concept to press deeply into the centre of teaching and learning in a school. It needs to be at the heart of the learning community and be recognised for its contributions to education. The learning commons in the school evolves from a place of storage and retrieval of materials; it is now the transformation center where 'all the good stuff' turns into learning.

No longer should the teacher-librarian and other specialists in the school find themselves on the outside of the classroom door knocking to get in; instead, by establishing a giant collaborative community, the virtual learning commons elevates the classroom into participatory learning experiences within and beyond the school community. The Virtual Learning Commons naturally knits the library resources, computer lab, reading skills center, technology center, and maker space all into a truly new phenomenon that is bound to drive improved teaching and learning and thus school wide improvement.

We were honoured to present workshops to SLAV during the summer of 2014 on the VLC and other Learning Commons concepts. We archived our presentation materials at <https://sites.google.com/site/slavlearningcommons/home> and we invite you to visit this space to add to the background information we have provided in this article. We urge experimentation and communication with us as you initiate this new learning environment in your school. The VLC is an opportunity to establish a whole new dimension to learning in your school. It is the authentic fusion of learning and technology educators need and is not to be shelved!

**Welcome to the Virtual Learning Commons!**

VLC Home and Information Center | School Culture | Literacy Culture | Knowledge Building Center | Experimental Learning Center | Help Center | Contact Us

**Your School VLC**  
This sidebar as designed remains constant across all pages. Thus, you might want to include essential links you want available almost anywhere such as your

- OPAC
- databases
- online subscriptions
- public library
- calendar
- open hours
- LC staff

To edit this, click on 'edit sidebar' below this text. Then go into the text box.

**VLC Home and Information Center**

**Purpose of this page:** Use the information center to invite the school community into a giant collaborative space where many contribute and all profit from the information, help, projects, exhibitions that creates a wonderful teaching and learning community. Check out the Help Center tab above for suggestions on how to get started in your school with this template.

Learning Commons Information	Draw Them In	Learning Commons 2.0
Depending on what you have on the sidebar to the left, this space might contain:	You might use this space to draw students into the VLC. You might feature:	You might use this space for:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a photo of the LC staff with contact information</li> <li>a site orientation (maybe a screencast?)</li> <li>a calendar with LC events that students and teachers can use to "reserve" areas of the physical learning commons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a slide show or student-made videos,</li> <li>showcase clubs,</li> <li>sports teams, or</li> <li>outstanding learning experiences,</li> <li>current campus hot topics (maybe link to a blog or discussion board), etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning Commons Events,</li> <li>your library's twitter or facebook feed,</li> <li>rss feeds of "review" blogs,</li> <li>new library materials,</li> <li>upcoming PLC/VLC events, surveys, etc.</li> </ul>
anything VLC users need to be able to find what they need here or in the physical learning	This section should be dynamic, something that	This space should focus on how users can interact with the VLC/PLC/Teacher Librarian or other LC staff such as the teacher technologist, reading specialist