"A Learning Commons is a common, or shared, learning "space" that is both physical and virtual."

The Virtual Learning Commons and School Improvement

DAVID V. LOERTSCHER AND CAROL KOECHLIN

Note: This article is an extract from a new book: Loertscher, David V. and Carol Koechlin. The Virtual Learning Commons. Learning Commons Press, 2012. It is available at http://lmcsource.com

Do you have a library website? If so, how often do the students and teachers in your school explore and utilized the great links you provide for them?

Do they go straight to Google? If you feel that your webpage might be losing out to Google, then consider creating and building a new environment that better mirrors the participatory digital world your students and teachers like to work and play in. Start fresh and build a giant collaborative learning space for the school known as the Virtual Learning Commons.

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. This concept was introduced by the authors in *The New Learning Commons Where Learners Win*[1], published in 2008.

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 an infrastructure that is ubiquitous and persistent. "A library as platform is more how than where, more hyperlinks than container, more hubbub than hub."[2] 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. Because of this perspective, each individual and group uses it for their own varied purposes:

For the school administrator, the VLC is the center 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 center of the push to make information and technology actually boost the quality of teaching and learning.

For the athletic coach, it is the place for 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. The VLC represents the culture of the entire school. It 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

MORE EXAMPLES

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

The entire school district is adopting the Common Core Standards or some other major initiative across all levels. The VLC is the center for forming research teams, planning, experimentation, news, professional development, and assessing progress.

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 program. 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 state or province.

The student iStaff team (like a geek squad) is promoting several new Web 2.0 tools to be used by students and teachers across 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 center 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 center to organize 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 to help pay 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 organizational fervor is well known by most during some part of their lifetimes. As growing Internet Communities develop, we see the same comradeship and engagement in all types of cases 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 create school spirit by focusing on sports, around which students can thrive and community members and parents can participate in as well. Building the same sense of participation and pride around academics has proved much more difficult.

With young people claiming that boredom is the main problem with school, some have suggested a variety of ways to engage students in order to combat high dropout rates in middle and high schools. Michael Fullan strongly suggests that if schools are going to truly improve, the solutions for teachers and the solutions for students must come as a package.[3]

The VLC is a package that provides 'solutions' for teachers and students to learn, play, and grow, when technology is leveraged in ways that encourage participation. In the visual below, we outline a few of the transitions that can evolve in a VLC.

BUILDING THE VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMONS

In the past three years at San Jose State University, instructor David Loertscher and graduate students have been constructing Virtual Learning Commons sites using a va-

isolated classrooms	• collaboration across classrooms, with specialists, across the school, and the world
single teacher directed content lessons	• collaboratively designed and facilitated guided inquiry and problem based learning experiences
individual assignments	• to collaborative knowledge building, creating and sharing
only in school	• 'always on' learning through personal learning environments
specialists teaching their own curriculum in isolation	• to the merging of specialist and classroom teacher agendas
mandated professional development sessions	• agendas led by professional learning communities
prescribed goals	• to school improvement that is dedicated to experimentation, trial, error and building success together
administrators with a top down approach	• to a philosophy of participation
IT directors 'in control'	• to consultation and committed attention to providing access, access, access

riety 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 decentralized 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 2012, the class at San Jose State University analyzed a number of creative efforts and combined all the efforts into five main sections or portals:
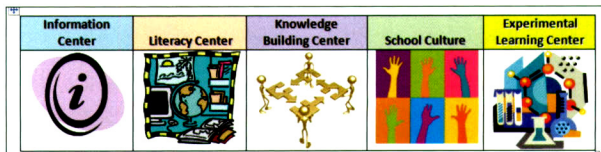
Here is a brief introduction to each major portal. As you read about our ideas for each portal, consider your own school needs and where you would start in the construction of a VLC. What is important for your school and district right now? How could a VLC enable and engage students and teachers and drive improvement for your school? You might link into the VLC template and follow along. It is at: https://sites.google.com/site/templatevlc

THE INFORMATION CENTER

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 to 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 page features a 'hook' in the center which draws in the user to the entire site.

THE LITERACY CENTER

This is the arena where a whole school culture is emerging around reading, writ-

ing, 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 center 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 CENTER

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 CENTER

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

A PERPETUAL BETA CULTURE

We recommend that you experiment 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 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 Google 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. 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 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, try Firefox or Chrome—or whatever seems to work best on your system—as a browser, but beware of Internet Explorer. Next, look 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. If you get stuck, just get in the habit of searching for a 'help site' or tutorial about your problem with Google Site construction.
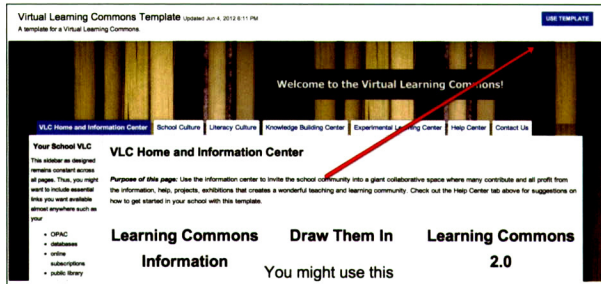
Download the Template

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.

Sign in with your Gmail address if you are asked.

Next, click on the Virtual Learning Commons Template. It will have a red box around it—as illustrated below if you succeed. Next, name your template. This could take several tries because you have to name the template something that has not been used before and because you also have to figure out the picture password. After you type the code in successfully, you may have to wait up to a minute; this is a good sign that you have succeeded, so be patient. The picture below shows the critical information you should pay attention to.

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.
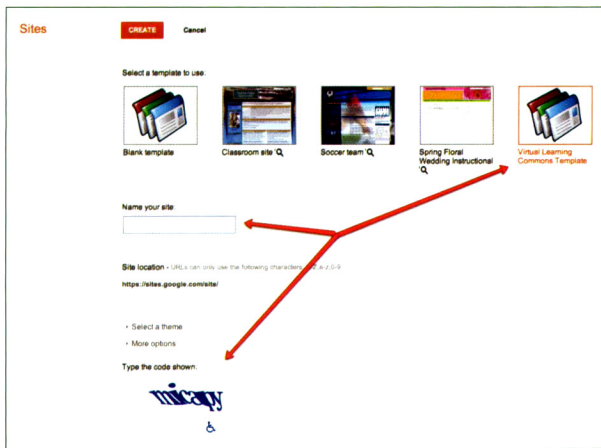
SO WHAT AND WHAT'S NEXT? USING THE VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMONS AS THE BASIS OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

School improvement initiatives occur in every school with the hope from administrators that either continuous improvement or radical change might increase the bottom line of schools: learning. In many of the U.S. states, the current initiative revolves around Common Core. What is happening in your school? Who are the key individuals spearheading that change?

We suggest that the virtual learning commons become the center place for improvements and progress of all kinds and that this effort is a collaborative 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

We hope our examples from Common Core will spur ideas for your own program.

One challenge of Common Core is for students to encounter complex texts in short research projects that involve technology. Users of various multiple sources of information are to not only understand the texts but build arguments, take positions, and write their responses intelligently and persuasively. A few examples might help:

space all into a truly new phenomenon that is bound to drive improved teaching and learning and thus school wide improvement.

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 not to be sh

[1] Loertscher, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. *The New School Learning Commons where Learners Win*. Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 2008. A second edition of the book was published by Learning Commons Press in 2010.
[2] Weinberger, David on the library as platform in *Library Journal:* http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/09/future-of-libraries/by-david-weinberger/
[3] Fullan, Michael. 2012. *Stratosphere: Integrating Technology, Pedagogy and Change Knowledge*. Don Mills, ON: Pearson Canada Ltd.

David V. Loertscher is a professor in the School of Library and Information Science, San Jose State University. Loerstcher is co-editor of *Teacher Librarian* and a valued author and publisher of many professional texts in the field of school librarianship. He is a past president of the *American Association of School Librarians* and an international consultant.

Carol Koechlin is an experienced educator who to contributes to the field of information literacy and school librarianship through writing, consulting and facilitation of professional learning.

Teacher librarians, knowing that many classroom teachers will be faced with this challenge, volunteer to create a space in the virtual learning commons under the experimental learning center for experimentation to materialize, success showcased , failures analyzed, and teachers and students grow together.

Several of the faculty and the specialists of the school use knowledge-building centers to construct collaborative learning spaces where both adults and students grapple with topics that utilize complex texts to build deep understanding and produce sophisticated written responses. Such experimentation is the foundation of the professional development taking place in the school, and because the virtual learning commons is available 24/7 and open to only those who are participating, the space becomes a true collaborative learning community bent on improvement.

Another example from Common Core is the increased use of non-fiction to augment reading by students across the school. Here, the teacher librarian—along

with reading specialists and teachers—creates all types of reading clubs, digital storytelling, book clubs, and other enjoyable initiatives across the school to stimulate the wide reading of more non-fiction. This push is highlighted in the literacy center of the virtual learning commons.

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 U.S. and Canada. Still, we continue to advocate for the Learning Commons concept to press deeply into the center of teaching and learning in a school. It needs to be at the heart of the learning community and be recognized 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