

# Real Learning in the Learning Commons

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**E**ditor's note: Warning: To appreciate the message of this month's column, you will need to access a number of articles/presentations on the Internet.

I have tried to make this fairly simple by converting all of the urls to Tiny urls that have just a few characters. I have also created a copy of this article in a Google Document with the urls active for easier access at: <http://tinyurl.com/whatworksapril2013>

In the February 2013 What Works column, I discussed the creation of a personal learning network and recommended some special sources I personally listen to with examples. In this column, I would like to review some of the fundamental theoretical ideas undergirding the concept of the learning commons. As we watch the development of the learning commons concept around the world, it becomes very evident that a major change of vision drives those who are able to adopt the concept and make it successful as opposed to just changing the name on the door.

Here are a few very recent articles/videos that are central to a shift in education that favors the growth and development of a learning commons in the school. Voices such as these seem to be growing louder and louder as international thinkers propose ideas for educational change. It is best to access the following links in the order they are listed.

1. To set the stage, listen to this TED talk by Sugata Mitra and his experiment with children in southern India who had a computer kiosk set up for total discovery learning:

<http://tinyurl.com/cl7wvd7>

2. Listen to a group of students in the United States who have created their own school within a public high school to pursue their passions for learning what they want to learn:

<http://tinyurl.com/c5389ke>

3. Read about the building of deep understanding in a K-8 school in California where student ownership of their learning makes a major difference:

<http://tinyurl.com/ch84zcv>

4. Now, back up these important ideas from Henry Jenkins, a well-known education scholar as he discusses his four C's: Connect, Create, Collaborate, and Circulate:

<http://tinyurl.com/ck9glvq>

5. Does it work in a real school? How does this happen? Try this article concerned with collaboration across the various disciplines at:

<http://tinyurl.com/bmx8ywt>

6. However, you say, we are focused on the Common Core Standards and is this type of learning acceptable? Consider this article that gives a resounding Yes!

<http://tinyurl.com/a24ycl7>

Then, you might want to sample a variety of others to deepen your sense of the possible.

7. High Schoolers use participatory learning to study *Moby Dick*: <http://tinyurl.com/dxlyrva>

8. High school seniors help sixth graders learn to write better: <http://tinyurl.com/brvveqr>

9. A parent discovers that his young daughter wants to direct her own learning: <http://tinyurl.com/cqnwn5e>

10. When kids are failing in school, teach them to grow gardens: <http://tinyurl.com/cbpy4d5>

11. Change an entire rural school district through maker spaces: <http://tinyurl.com/2buhfse>

12. Kids learn science using play dough: <http://tinyurl.com/3wqu68p>

This list could go on and on, but what is the take away idea for the creation and sustainability of a learning commons? It is very rare to have any of these major presenters mention the possibility that a librarian or a library might be a partner in any of these kinds of learning activities. Indeed, our stereotypical image as collectors, organizers, and disseminators of books is a difficult one to shake. However, the potential to have the learning commons be at the heart of active learning, experimentation, effective use of technology, personalized learning, maker spaces, and collaboration across the curriculum is not only a vision or dream but is beginning to play out in many locations.

We still hear horror stories like the one in a school district with eight librarians, seven of whom had retired in their jobs a decade ago. Facing so many new challenges, administrators decided to fire them all as the best way to level the playing field and start fresh. In our mind, the best defense of this profession is a vibrant offensive demonstrating what real learning looks like in a learning commons environment. Certainly, there are a few teachers and a large number of bored students ready to change what is going on. These can be our experimental groups who not only break with tradition but also announce their experiments to everyone who will listen in a fresh new approach to advocacy.

I recently interviewed a teacher who constantly transfers learning from the traditional top down approach to a student driven / question driven and inquiry approach. He said that worries about "the test" disappear, because his students always outscore any other classes in the school.

Imagine a series of great learning experiences that track simple things like enthusiasm, deep learning, great use of information and technology, impact of school culture, personal excellence, and finally, collaborative intelligence. Blast these experiences into every eye and ear ready to pay any attention. It will transform not only your job, but bring sustainability back to the world of teacher librarianship.