

# Conferences, the Learning Commons, and Elevator Speeches



David V. Loertscher

Convention season in the fall and early spring give an opportunity to sense trends that presenters thought might be important a year ago when they applied to speak at various conferences. I have attended state and national library conferences and national educational conferences including both ASCD and the best conference of all, the P21 Conference in Washington DC. Here are a few takeaways I heard and perhaps you can add others you have heard:

- The Browning of America - meaning that ethnic diversity is spreading and multiple ethnicity and cultural diversity is growing rapidly.
- The dream that technology can make a difference in education is alive and well (without a mention of libraries).
- Assessments need to be diversified; current testing is much too narrow.
- There is great interest in personalized learning, self-directed learning, differentiation, blended learning, global learning, creativity, and entrepreneurship (google Yong Zhao on YouTube to get a sense of this).
- Expectations are that Congress will actually pass a new education bill.

In the exhibit halls, book and database vendors predominate in state library conventions with little technology, but in the large national education organizations, our old friends such as Scholastic, Follett, Mackin, and others, are focused on selling directly to classrooms with classroom collections, an admittance that the school library is in decline. Then there are the hundreds of vendors who have this system or that to help individual learners achieve mastery of this or that and at bargain basement per-student costs that, when added up, cost a fortune. On the national scene, many presume that the school library is in major decline and even headed for extinction.

The stereotype of the library being a curation and dissemination organization is alive and well, but this function is now handled often by clericals. Charter schools and High Tech High folks don't have libraries and rely on the public library for resources. National recognition of schools doing innovative practices almost never recognize any contribution of the library or librarians. How-

ever, the idea that libraries are becoming centers of makerspaces is spreading fast.

This last idea is key. Authors of books, keynote speakers, and winners of exemplary awards seem to respond well to the idea that the concept of the school library is being reinvented. They are hungry for new ideas from our world that make sense in their world of dreams. Don't say the word library very loudly, though, with its connotation of distribution and dissemination of stuff; otherwise, the eyes will glaze over and the conversation ends.

So, if one is composing an elevator speech to revive interest in our work, what are the concepts to say in 15 seconds or less? Here is what I was practicing with authors such as Carol Ann Tomlinson, an expert in differentiation and whose mother was a librarian:

**Key idea:** School libraries are transforming themselves into Learning Commons (the idea that there is something new and exciting happening).

Then, if they are still listening, we need to define what we mean by the learning commons.

**Key idea:** While we still collect and disseminate knowledge, we are building something exciting up on top of that traditional concept. (We are reassuring the listener that books, information, and reading are still important, but...).

**Key Idea:** The learning commons is the center of the CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE (here interest perks up because we are pushing toward creativity, self-directed learning, differentiation, and all those other terms that push students far beyond the cookie cutter tested robot. (Oft times the listeners have heard about makerspaces so they suddenly grasp the idea of knowledge creation.)

**Key idea:** Recent research points to the idea that if classroom teachers co-teach with teacher librarians, there is a huge rise in the number of students who meet or exceed both adult's expectations. (That is a novel idea since all they usually think about is the isolated teacher in the isolated classroom trying to make a difference.) I told Carol that the learning commons was the key to differentiation across the school!

**Key Question from the Listener:** Wow! How exciting. Where can I see this happening?

**Key Result:** Ah Ha! If you can answer that one, they ask for your card.

This is where you come in. What is your elevator speech? What is the most exciting transformation of the concept of "library" that you are doing in your school, district, or state? How are you going to frame your program that demonstrates that you are both teacher and learner centered and the center of teaching and learning? What's happening not only in your physical space but in your virtual space.

Join us at *Teacher Librarian* in the Year of the Learning Commons. Take a look at the website:

<https://sites.google.com/site/yearofthelearningcommons/> or tiny url: <http://tinyurl.com/qhe6lx2>

Perfect your own elevator speech. What gets the non-library crowd excited?

Better yet: Can they come experience what you are doing?