

## A Participatory Action Research Approach to Developing Understanding of The Learning Commons in an Elementary School as Explored by Students

Diana Maliszewski

Toronto District School Board / University of Alberta

In 2009, I was honored to become a part of the rewrite team for “Together For Learning”, a document produced under the auspices of the Ontario School Library Association and with the support of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of the Ministry of Education for the province of Ontario. As described by Thomas, Maliszewski and Henley (2009), the vision document “establishes the key concept of the entire school as a learning commons, with everyone having a role to play and everyone being a learner.” (Thomas, Maliszewski, & Henley, 2009, p.25). As a teacher-librarian from a K-8 school, it was part of my job on the team to ensure that the elementary perspective in the document was evident. The five months I spent working with the talented and hard-working team of school library professionals to hone this document taught me a lot and also revealed where I needed more professional development. I wanted to have a solid understanding of the concept of the learning commons. I wanted to see how a learning commons philosophy would operate with younger members of an educational community. I also wanted to be true to the philosophy of “everyone a learner” and involve my students as equal participants in this learning journey. Examining the concept of a learning commons in conjunction with my students mirrored the purpose of participatory action research, which is:

“to improve the quality of people’s organizations, communities and family lives (Stringer, 1999). Although espousing many of the ideas of teacher and school-based practical action research, it differs by incorporating an emancipatory aim of improving and empowering individuals and organizations in educational (and other) settings. Applied to education, the focus is on improving and empowering individuals in schools, systems of education, and school communities.” (Creswell, 2008, p.603)

I was required, in the 2009-2010 year, to see every class in the school for one thirty-minute period per week to provide a “prep” for the classroom teacher. This class did not require any subject-related evaluation and was up to me to decide the “library-related” content. This was the first time the intermediate students had a regular library period in their schedule since I began teaching at the school in 2004. I wanted to guarantee that this was not “wasted time” and so I devised my unit plan for first term around a big inquiry question: What is a learning commons and how would the idea of a learning commons impact our school? This question was for me and for the students to answer collaboratively.

My means of collecting data took several forms. I videotaped a couple of the lessons I conducted with the grade seven and eight students. I also

videotaped several impromptu interviews and conversations with the students, as well as filmed “students in action” as they had discussions with each other and researched the idea. The quality of the audio recordings was not optimal because of the background noise. Students were required at the end of the unit to share their findings in whatever way they felt most comfortable, echoing the belief held in a learning commons that individuals can showcase their learning in multiple ways, all legitimate. These student products became concrete evidence for me of their understanding. Finally, I had a pair of “critical friends” who came to visit my students and me. They provided a different view of what they observed and gave helpful advice on how to handle misunderstandings and possible next steps to take.

### Launching the Unit

My introductory lesson (see Appendix A) was repeated three times, for the three intermediate classes. This was helpful to me because I could see when my explanations fell short and needed more structure. I modified my original lesson plan so that the entire class sat in a circle and we threw Koosh balls around to brainstorm our ideas surrounding the words “learning” and “commons”. After the first class, I discovered that this approach, although it tapped into the students’ background knowledge at the time, led them to misunderstandings about what a learning commons could be. When we used the “free association” exercise, many students in the first group became fixated on the idea of “common” being “the same”; it took a lot of conversations to dissuade some of the students that it was a one-size-fits-all prescription to teaching and learning and some never overcame their original imagining. My subsequent classes still used the Koosh ball activity, but after pondering the words in isolation, I combined them and gave my own suggestion – the Gryffindor Common Room in *Harry Potter* novels. This helped the other students widen their ideas.

### Student Approaches to Research

As I predicted, after the initial questions surrounding the task were answered (including the traditional “are we being marked on this?”), the majority of the students raced to our mini-lab of computers in the library to have search engines (mainly Google) find articles for them.

“Tennyson”, a grade seven boy, chose to work alone while he searched because “it’s much more easier and you don’t have so many obstacles”. He made some astute observations when I talked with him about his findings. The concept of a learning commons, according to him, was only for university students. He explained that, “It’s physically in the library and combines two types of studies, individual and group studies. They provide you with study space. It’s different [than our current set-up at school] ‘cause it’s for higher grades, like universities or high schools”. He elaborated, “You’re not really going through a lot of text, which would help you to get a job ... you need to be more self-dependent ... in

elementary school, there are people to guide you.” I then gave him a probing question, “What if this wasn’t just for university students? Could this approach be used for high school or elementary schools?”

“Donna”, a grade eight girl who regularly set high academic goals for herself, was convinced that there was a “right answer” out there. She suspected that I already had a definition in mind and insisted on interviewing me as part of her research efforts. In an interesting twist, she chose to interview other teachers in the school to determine what they knew about a learning commons. Her slideshow quoted the teachers and aptly demonstrated the uncertainty they felt surrounding the term. (See Appendix B.) Even the writing group and I were struggling with a working definition of a learning commons that would be short, make sense, and show how teacher-librarians could fit into the equation.

Several students took a very visual approach to trying to answer the question. These students conducted Google image searches and theorized that a learning commons was a special type of room in a school. “Rocky” said, “I got a pretty scientific answer ... it sounds pretty good and I think it is, and it makes sense – where we talked about it, over there [referring to the community circle], it’s kind of mostly what it says”.

Some all-female groups chose to discuss their ideas among themselves extensively before doing any readings. They took notes of their own discussions and wrote things such as “learning common things in different ways”.

A few students decided to take “the old-fashioned” route and scoured the library bookshelves for any books or encyclopedias on the topic. They started to become frustrated at their lack of success, until I explained that this was a relatively new concept to the field of education and that this was a very specific topic that usually wasn’t directed to the general public or to younger readers.

This highlighted for me one of the difficulties with jointly understanding and possibly applying the learning commons concept. Most reading materials were aimed at educators already familiar with technology and focused on application in universities. I purchased *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win!* by Loertscher, Koechlin, and Zwaan to help my students who were struggling to find age-appropriate material on the topic. Donna commented that the book “was a bit long and boring” and even I found it overwhelming in some portions.

My ESL students found this assignment particularly challenging. They dutifully copied the text of the articles they found into translators and became even more confused. Eventually, I just sat down with a small group and described what I had discovered about the concept and answered their questions. I worried that this framed me too much as the “expert” instead of as a fellow learner but I accepted this tactic as a necessary step in this experiment.

## Findings of the Community on Learning Commons

The final presentations were of mixed quality. The students were told right from the beginning that they could choose whatever method they wished to share their findings and that this would not impact any of their letter grades but would act as supplementary information for the learning skills portion of their report card. I theorize that, because of this, and partly because they did not have a say in the topic of study (learning commons), several groups made half-hearted attempts at sharing their ideas. Many chose to stand up and tell the class orally what they thought a learning commons was. Others submitted their point-form notes as evidence. Donna created a PowerPoint presentation to show the class. (See Appendix B.)

Some students did not feel comfortable sharing their knowledge in front of the class and asked to talk in private with the teacher. On October 9, 2009, Peggy Thomas, president of the Ontario Library Association and Carol Koechlin, author of *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win*, came to listen to the last set of presentations. One of the groups took control of the class and stopped the presentations so that they could play “Doo Wacka Doo Wacka Doo” with our guests. The students felt it was important for our visitors to get to know them using this very kinesthetic name game and they wanted to have some fun.





Carol and Peggy chatted individually with some of the shyer students to probe their understanding. Unfortunately, I did not get to videotape these encounters, but they were rich in the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

Some of the students had difficulties articulating a definition.

Some misunderstandings about the idea of the learning commons still emerged at the end of the unit. “Katie” wrote “I think learning commons are a large room where you can study or learn quietly. Like a library, but mostly are made for universities. ... I don’t think we need a learning commons because we already have a library and most of us study in our own homes. Our library is big enough for most people who study. Not most people study in school.” “Jennifer” and her group wrote “a teacher teaches a class the same thing therefore everybody is learning in common”.

Those who had more than a superficial interaction with adults in addition to their peers and readings seemed to have a firmer or more complex grasp of what a learning commons could be.

## Learning Common

- Learn in any time, any where and anyone.
- Learning is not only in school. We can learn in home, library, museum ... .. any where.
- Learning is not only from books or text, we can also learn from TV, radio, internet and circumstance, too.
- Learn from each other, like classmates, teachers, family, and friends.
- Learning common is not like some serious school, only study and test, study and test. We can learn from many fun activity, just like our school – Agnes Macphail Public School
- Learn from failure
- Every one can be a learner, student, teacher ... ..

Cherie Wai

Q: What is "Learning Common"?

A: .....write by Crystal W.....

- a. ● Learn from each other and share our ideas and opinions.
- b. ● Anybody could learn at anytime anywhere.
- c. ● Learning common means we don't always wait for teachers orders and learn we can learn at any moment and have fun in learning
- d. ● While we are learning, we can also encourage the others to enjoy learning or we can learning with our friends together.
- e. ● Go into the nature, experience the nature and we'll learn a lot in it.
- f. ● Talk more with our teacher, and ask more questions. this will help us a lot. Otherwise we have our own opinion or a brand new way to resolve the same problem. we can tell our teacher. And He/she can use our way or point out some mistakes.
- g. ● Love learning and keep learning whoever you are <sup>a</sup>child or <sup>an</sup>oldster.

There was a mixed reaction to the second portion of our inquiry question on the possibilities of implementing a learning commons at our school. One student made a pro/con list outlining the issues to consider.

“Amber” wrote:

“Advantages

- could improve learning skills
- have extra time to work on project, homework or research
- anyone can use
- everything found in one place
- gives the opportunity to improve
- suggestion / feedback

Disadvantages

- students could abuse it
- time disadvantage
- limited amount of space and resources
- requires careful cooperation”

What I discovered was that I did not have enough time scheduled to examine all of the findings, create a group definition, clarify and correct the various misunderstandings and decide together on the next steps. Some students did not use their time productively and began to lose interest in serious investigation.

I decided that my next step, despite the less-than-solid conceptualization by the group, would be to define it by living it. After reading Will Richardson’s book (2006), I created a wiki for us, titled “Macphail Virtual Commons”, for use inside and outside of school for various purposes. Our wiki can be found at:

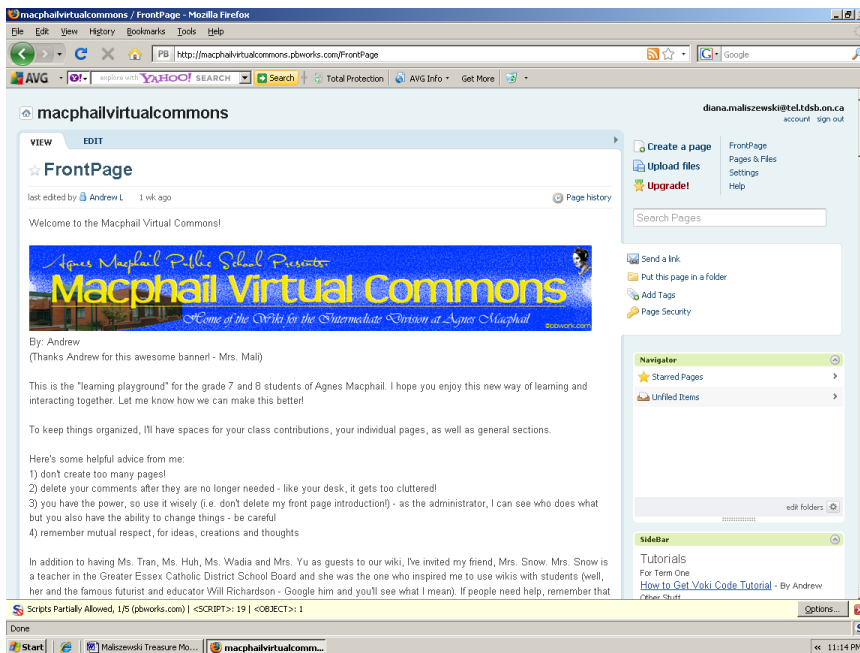
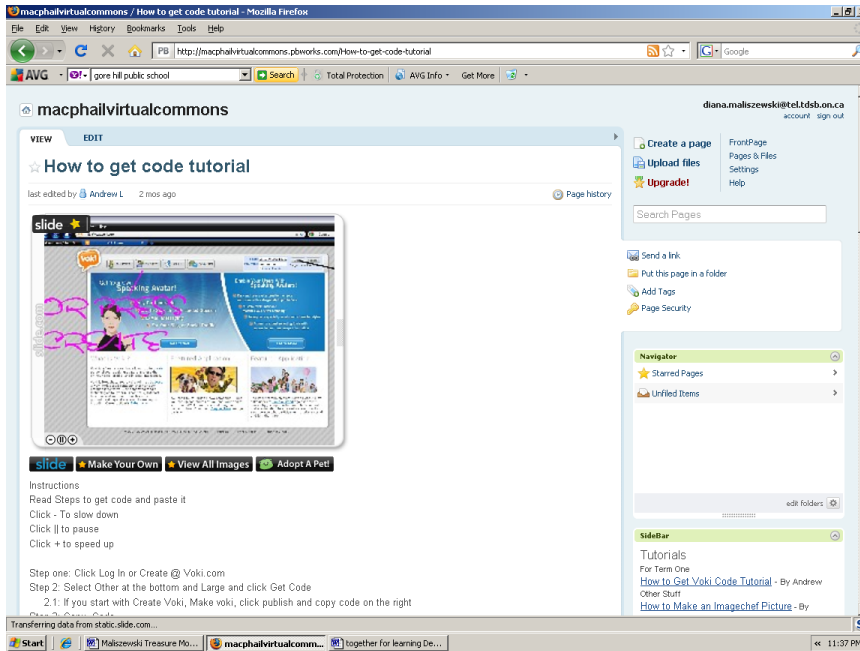
<http://macphailvirtualcommons.pbworks.com>

### Establishing a Wiki and Starting Steps to a True Learning Commons

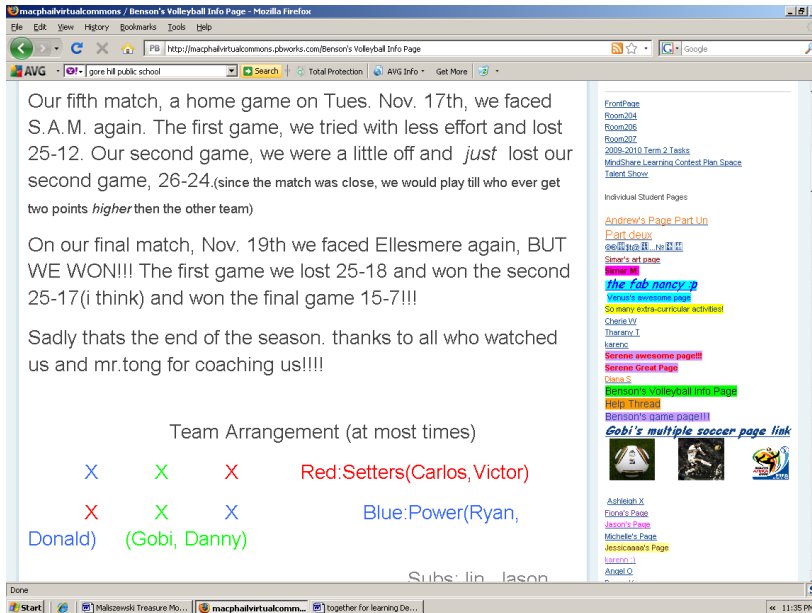
It was in the creation of the wiki that the students finally began to understand what we hoped to accomplish by creating a learning commons.

We read an article about wikis and summarized the key points. Immediately upon launching the wiki, students began to explore what it could do. Individual student pages began to pop up on a variety of subjects near and dear to the students’ hearts. Our first term media assignment was to create an interactive avatar that represented you symbolically or physically and to describe to the fellow wiki users “what makes you, you”. Some students had difficulty posting their avatars to the wiki and other students became experts and offered to help.





The wiki did much more to develop the students' understanding of the potential of a learning commons than the initial research inquiry project. They discovered that everyone was a learner, instructors and students alike. They discovered that their own interests fueled the learning commons and learning happened during the instructional day and beyond it, at school and at home. Some of the personal pages the students created showed devotion and dedication.



They enjoyed learning from each other and sharing their discoveries. Tennyson commented, “We’re just getting better and better, one day we’re all new to this, next, we’re all making our own pages and posting things 24/7, this just gets better and better right.” The students appreciated the easy access to teachers and fellow students at all hours of the day or night and there were many messages for clarification or feedback, such as this typical one from “Wanda” regarding a point-of-view pre-assessment task in third term, given using [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com): “Ms Mali, I don't get the last question in the survey. What is it asking??? And btw, when is it due and is it fir marks??”

Technology played a key role in creating both physical and virtual spaces in which to work. Partnerships were created with many different and unexpected people. For instance, I invited Margaret Snow, a teacher-librarian at Gore Hill Public School in Leamington, Ontario, to be a member of our wiki. I met Margaret while running Library Camp OTF for the Ontario Teachers Federation on behalf of the Ontario School Library Association. Margaret showed the camp attendees her wiki and how she used it with her intermediate students. She was able to help me with technical issues surrounding Voki (the interactive avatar software) and Pbworks (the wiki hosting site). In one comment she left on the wiki for everyone, she mentioned that her students were using Image Chef to create their own banners. Within days, many of my students began creating their own Image Chef banners. They weren’t required to for a project; they were simply interested in learning something new and took it upon themselves to learn how. Then, they taught the rest of us how to do it.

The wiki took us in even more daring, exciting avenues. The students decided how to evaluate the term two wiki-related media and oral communication assignments and designed the marking scheme with the teacher. Volunteers chose the oral texts to use for analysis. When a small group of students and I

entered the Microsoft-Mindshare 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning contest, part of our planning was on the wiki. The end product was a YouTube video that actually touches on many of the concepts behind a learning commons and can be seen at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwG3Oo5RShc>

### So What Is it Really?

Defining a learning commons is not a simple task. It is a pedagogical and philosophical construct. It encompasses location, technology, democracy and group dynamics. What follows are two of the main definitions I came to embrace.

“the various learners recognize that the Learning Commons is a client-side organization where they have some say in what goes on and they are contributing as well as receiving as a user. ... they are engaged as they inquire, use, contribute, work and create.” (Loertscher, Koechlin, and Zwaan, p13)

“The Learning Commons is a flexible, responsive approach to focusing a school on learning collaboratively. It expands the learning experience into the real and virtual spaces inside and beyond the walls of the school. This vibrant, whole-school approach affords new and innovative opportunities for collaboration among teachers, teacher-librarians and students, which reflect the rapid pedagogical and technological changes taking place in learning now and in the future. The school library provides the natural dynamics for working together to facilitate this change to a Learning Commons.” (Together for Learning, 2010, p.4)

Like my students, I was learning about what it meant to be in a learning commons along with them. I believe that the exploratory inquiry learning research at the beginning of the school year was a good start but I needed to provide more reason and purpose for the investigation. Their initial background knowledge was insufficient for them to launch into an inquiry project – if I was to do this unit again with a different set of students, I would give them the collaborative learning experience first, and then have them research the Learning Commons with some “people resources” identified beforehand for them to access. I have already addressed the first portion of this recommendation by creating a blog for the grade 5 & 6 students to use. (The private blog can be found at [macphaimavericks.blogspot.com](http://macphaimavericks.blogspot.com)) Another option, which we actually used in the second and third term for other assignments, would be to design the research assignment as a collaborative learning experience in a wiki so the students could feel it as they learn it. Using the wiki provided the engagement and motivation, as well as paradoxically both the freedom and structure, for the students to experience what it meant to be in a learning commons. Our journey still continues.

## References

- Creswell, John W. (2008). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Columbus, OH: Pearson.
- Diggs, Valerie. (2009) From Library to Learning Commons: A Metamorphosis. *Teacher Librarian*. 36 (4), p. 32-39.
- Koechlin, Carol. (2009). Leading the Way in the Learning Commons. *The Teaching Librarian*. 17 (2), p. 20-23.
- Loertscher, David V., Koechlin, Carol, & Zwaan, Sandi. (2008). *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win!* Salt Lake City, UT: Hi Willow Research and Publishing.
- Macphail Virtual Commons*. <http://macphailvirtualcommons.pbworks.com>
- Ontario School Library Association. (2010). *Together For Learning*. Toronto, ON: Ontario School Library Association.
- Richardson, Will. (2006). *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Sargeant, Cynthia and Nevin, Roger. (2008) Using the Library Learning Commons to Reengage Disengaged Students and Making it a Student-Friendly Place for Everyone. *Teacher Librarian*. 36 (1), p. 43-46.
- Thomas, Peggy, Maliszewski, Diana & Henley, Roberta. (2009). The School Library Document: The Long and Winding Road. *The Teaching Librarian*. 17 (2), p. 25.