

Improving Learning, Engaging Students and Changing the Collaborative Culture of a School Through the Learning Commons

*for the Canadian Scholarly Literature and Research Regarding School
Libraries in Canada*

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The Learning Commons is not a school library using technology but a learning "space" that integrates physical and virtual collaboration. Consequently it both improves learning and changes the culture of the school. This cultural shift occurs because the Learning Commons provides a structured mechanism for teachers to work as teams instead of the traditional model where teachers, for the most part, work in isolation. The Learning Commons brings teachers together and provides support through experts, that not only fosters an improved working environment but also enhances the learning environment for students. Also the Learning Commons provides multiple ways for students to collaborate with each other which opens up a world of exploring and sharing ideas. Collaboration is the key to running a successful Learning Commons.

The Learning Commons has no physical walls and is conceptually everywhere with both physical and virtual spaces from learning centers and classrooms to laptops and cell phones which access the virtual Learning Commons through interactive web 2.0 tools. The key to this space is collaboration where Web 2.0 tools allow the whole school community to share, explore and build on new ideas and learning.

The Learning Commons should be the school's dynamic learning center where teachers collaborate with other educational specialists : literacy experts, technology experts and educators that support both at-risk students and students with disabilities. As a teacher-librarian of a Learning Commons in a grade 7-12 public school I try to bring together different experts to help support learning for the whole school. Under this model I find my work, physically, in "the old library" is decreasing as the whole school has now become part of the Learning Commons physical space. I am now often in classrooms, around the school, collaborating and working virtually with teachers from any location. Other technology experts and myself help students and teachers build their own virtual, collaborative learning spaces which are linked to the Learning Commons web page.

Collaboration is the Key to the Learning Commons

I collaborate with many teachers on educational projects. An example of this is my work with the student success teacher. Her job is to support disengaged students who are at-risk of failing or dropping out of school. Our Learning Commons is unique because the student success teacher, Cynthia Sargeant has placed her office in the Learning Commons. "Originally, when my office was next to the vice Principal's office and I called a student out of class to see me, they arrived at my door anxious and defensive because they immediately assume they will be getting a reprimand, a detention, or possibly a suspension." Students now were put in a comfortable situation and I soon noticed these students would voluntarily come to the Learning Commons on their own time to read for pleasure.

I also work closely with teachers involved with preparing students for provincial standardized literacy testing. The Learning Commons supports these teachers in a number of ways. We provide space for reading tutors, help select reading material and provide on-line resources with links off the Learning Commons web site. These resources now include on-line practice literacy tests that are marked automatically with results shared electronically with teachers on the literacy team. Most of my collaboration is either helping with research, selecting resources or helping students and teachers integrate technology into their learning.

Learning Commons Initiates and Integrates new Technology into the School

According to research done by the Ontario Public School Boards Association which is published in the What If Report , the two major problems for teachers learning technologies is that they "are working in isolation, and there (is) no structure to integrate the many parts of this work, which involves hardware and software, regulations and classroom management, building structure and school culture." Through collaboration the Learning Commons would go along way to solving both there problems.

The Learning Commons should lead the school in the integration of new technologies into the curriculum. Over the last few years my Learning Commons has introduced a wide variety of technologies including podcasting, digital photo stories, blogs, wikis and most significantly Google Apps.

The model I use for integrating technology into the curriculum is based on the main concepts in the new 2010 document Together For Learning, developed by the Ontario School Library Association (OSLA), with support from the Ontario Ministry of Education. In this document the teacher-librarian and classroom teacher work as a team and the teacher-librarian helps guide the teacher with resources available to improve the curriculum. The document has a heavy emphasis on technology.

When I first introduce a new technology to a teacher, I always check to see how the technology will fit in with the curriculum. This new technology must engage students and should not be embedded unless it improves learning. Some teachers are very apprehensive about using new technology so planning and having a proper time-line are very important.

It is important that teachers realize that "they do not have to learn the technology themselves" or teach the technology. I or another teaching expert will teach the students how to use the technology. The only thing the teacher needs to know is what the technology can produce. Many times I will also make a rubric on the technology as part of the student's assignment and will help the teacher mark the assignment. I am careful to make the introduction of new technology a very positive experience for the teacher, if not that teacher will reject the use of

technology in the future. It is important that the teacher is not concerned about learning and teaching technology, but instead on creating good curriculum that engages students.

Teaching students the use of technology is made efficient by the use of on-line tutorial videos that are all posted on the Learning Commons web site. When I am teaching students how to create a podcast I show them an eight minute tutorial video which I produced with a colleague and is posted on Youtube. By having the video on-line, students can access it for reference from school or home. I will often see students creating their podcast with both the podcast software running along and a window with the tutorial video. Also if students asks me how to do a certain technology I give them the link for the video. This is usually all the support they need.

Creating "geek squads" of students who are naturally good at the technology is another way of quickly building up your technology knowledge base in a school. I will often just train the "geek squad" of 3 to 4 students from a class and they in turn will guide the rest of the class. I find this works very well in lower grades, specifically grades seven and eight.

I find it important that students demonstrate their projects in front of the whole class using a Smartboard or LCD. Students are far more motivated to do a better job when they have to present in front of their peers as opposed to just handing their projects in to the teacher.

When students produce podcasts or digital photo stories I will often post them on the Learning Commons web page as a class project web page (see links below for examples) and I test to make sure that all the student projects will work properly. This has three advantages. First, all the projects are in one place so when students demonstrate their projects, usually using a Smartboard, it is easy to go from one project to another. This works much better than the clumsy system of bringing in projects on memory sticks, CDs or through emailing. Many times these projects will not work because the school computer may or may not have software to run these projects or students have different computers, either PCs or Macs.

Secondly, these projects can be used as exemplars for future classes. For example the grade 12 English teacher will play a podcast done on Hamlet from a previous class and tell students that this is a level 4 project (level 4 is the highest level in our system). This helps students get a clearer idea of how their project will be evaluated. Lastly these projects are available on-line outside the school so parents can see the excellent projects students are working on. This helps the school communicate with its community and promotes the Learning Commons as the projects are posted on the Learning Commons web site.

Digital photo stories posted as project web page on the Learning Commons Web site from Mr. Robert's class and Ms. Dunlop's class.



The Learning Commons supports Cloud Computing

The 2009 Horizon Report "introduces six emerging technologies or practices that are likely to enter mainstream use in learning-focused organizations within three adoption horizons over the next one to five years." According to leading experts in education the two most important trends defining trends in education for the next coming years in technology are cloud computing and portability.

Cloud computing is where all programs and data are held on Internet servers or "the cloud" as opposed to individual computer hard drives. This means that word processors, spreadsheets, presentations software (like PowerPoint), calendars, web pages and other data are all accessed through a browser, so users are not tied to one computer running specific software. Users can also access their cloud on browsers running on Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) such as the Ipod Touch or some cell phones.

In January 2008 I registered my school for Google Apps Education Edition which is based on cloud computing and implemented it through the Learning Commons. Google Apps Edition is free for non-profit educational institutions and provides schools with the same tools as Google Apps Professional Edition. It allows students and teachers to create documents (Word, Excel, PowerPoint), share calendars, email, chat, create web pages, video and more. It is secure as everything stays within the registered domain and cannot be accessed by people

who do not have a school login and it also provides the Postini professional security suite.

Cloud computing is popular because it has many advantages over traditional computer systems where programs are located on a computer's hard drive.

- Software is available for free and it does not have to be installed. Also programs do not take up hard drive space on the computer.
- Software versions are automatically updated when new features are added.
- Documents are automatically saved. No more lost documents even if the computer crashes.
- Documents can be shared in real time with other users. Students can easily collaborate for group projects. It also allows the teacher to access their students documents while they are working on them.
- Documents can be published as web pages.
- It reduces the need to print. This helps the environment and saves schools money.

"Google Apps is helping Arizona State University become a highly flexible university that can provide extraordinary technology experiences for its students. Google's integration of webmail, instant messaging and calendaring is second to none." - Kari Barlow, Assistant Vice President, University Technology Office, Arizona State University

"Frantic troubleshooting by an overworked staff versus someone else fixing problems smoothly. A sliver of server space per person versus a five-gigabyte chunk. Half a million dollars versus free. That's what colleges are faced with as they decide whether to continue running their own e-mail services or outsource them to a professional service like Google Apps Education Edition" Chronicle of Higher Education, 1/11/2008

As a learning tool the most powerful thing about Google Apps is its collaborative ability to share documents in real time. Typically a teacher will create an assignment in a Google document (like Word) and share this document with all their students. If the assignment requires group work each group would create a document that would be shared with other members of the group and the teacher. When members of the group work on the document a revision history automatically keeps track of who created what. Students have told me they will often use the revision history to show other group members they are not pulling their weight. Students will also use Google chat while working on the shared documents. During this whole process the teacher can also edit the group's document and can type constructive comments before the group "hands in" the final assignment.

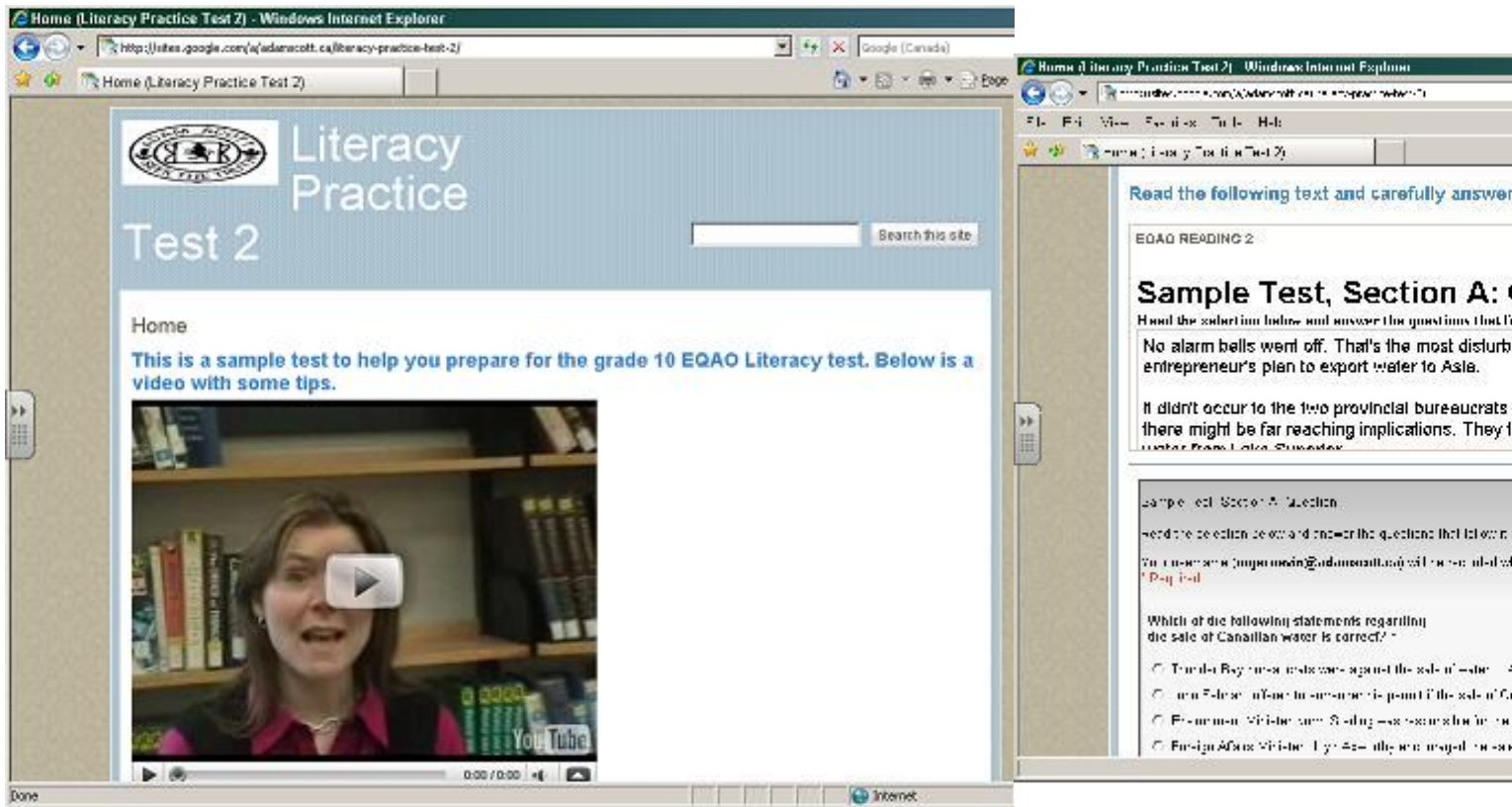
English teachers limit plagiarism by requiring students to do their entire essays using Google Docs, including their rough work. When the teacher evaluates the essay, which is shared with them, they can check the revision history. Typically a 3000 word essay should have between 200 to 500 revisions. If there were few revisions then the essay was probably plagiarized.

Teachers can also create assignments that would have been impossible without Google Apps. A good example of this are the geography teachers who can now tell a group of students to create a PowerPoint presentation over the next few days as homework and show it in front of the class. Before Google Apps many students would not have PowerPoint (or the same version) on their home computers. Also without a cloud model of shared documents it is difficult to keep track of the latest version of the latest PowerPoint document, if students are emailing the individual files back and forth.

Google Apps also allows students to create on-line surveys that automatically keep track of responses in a spreadsheet and results can even be displayed on the the student's web page. Teachers use these same tools to create on-line tests which can automatically record who did the test as well as automatically mark them. I have been using Google Apps to create on-line sample tests to help students prepare for the Grade 10 Literacy Test (standardized government test that students must pass in order to graduate). The tests are posted on the Learning Commons web page and include embedded videos on tips for writing the Literacy Test. These tests were made with the collaboration of English teachers from different schools around my school Board.

On-Line Literacy Practice Test
Posted on Learning Commons web page - Video Tips

Example of a question



Learning Commons supports students virtual spaces

"The Virtual Learning Commons replaces the library web page which has always been a one-way form of communication between librarians and their patrons." Dr. David Loertscher

Through the Learning Commons web site students can now access a pre-made template that gives them their own virtual space. Below is a screen shot of the template which gives students virtual space to save assignments, multimedia projects, reflections, calendars and other resources in an organized and structured manner. Teachers find it easier to navigate through student virtual spaces if they have the same structure.



Learning Commons Web Page

The Learning Commons web page is the central resource for the use of technology in the school. Further it acts as a communication tool for sharing resources and providing services such as searching data bases and the book collection. We use the web page to showcase student work, class trips, links to both student and teacher web pages, tutorial videos, common calendars and tutorial videos The Learning Commons web page is also used as a collaboration tool where students can fill out surveys, do on line practice tests and even recommend books to buy.

Learning Commons - Physical Environment

The Learning Commons should have an inviting environment and be designed for collaboration. Round tables where groups of students can collaborate in open areas along with spaces to do small and larger presentations should be provided. Technologies such as Smartboards and wireless should be prevalent. Reading material that students enjoy should be made highly visible. Students should be able to sign out microphones, headsets, memory sticks, LCDs and even netbooks. If possible teaching experts should have an office area in the Learning Commons.

Conclusion

The traditional school library must move toward the new Learning Commons model and embrace technologies that foster a culture of collaborative in a school. The Learning Commons supports teams of teaching experts to work together to improve learning and engage students. Conceptually the Learning Commons

physically embraces the whole school, not just the library area, and has many virtual components which can be accessed anywhere, any time. The Learning Commons must stay relevant to the new "wired" generation and instill a love of learning, exploring and creating.

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