# Just a Little Thing: At the Heart of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Must Be Reading

By Moira Ekdahl

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Teacher-Librarian, John Oliver Secondary School Teacher-Librarian Mentor, Vancouver School Board Liaison Chair, BC Teacher-Librarians' Association

#### **Context: Re-designing The Place for New Teaching and Learning**

John Oliver (JO) Secondary School is a medium-sized, extremely diverse, inner-city secondary school in Vancouver's East Side. It does not do well in measures of literacy or numeracy. Its location is unique, overlooking as it does the graveyard, the adjoining crematorium, and a busy but non-descript intersection; if you stand on tippy-toes you can just see the mountains. JO has been a school ready for change for a long time. The school's recent focus on technology has begun to shift the currents of local opinion.

Putting new life into a dreary library space and transforming it into a dynamic learning commons at the heart of the school took the school-based re-design team eight months. The JO learning commons intends to provide access to a "knowledge-creation centre" and invite every child and teacher into a new learning culture.

The re-design team incorporated simple principles in order to put new "light" into a structure that likely found its architectural influences in the Cold War and that in reality has not one window; new sightlines created a sense of openness; bright new furnishings were easily moved to build new learning contexts; the collection footprint was reduced as stacks and spinners were removed; old bulky furnishings and fittings that encumbered movement and flexible use of the space were removed. Paint, wiring, and custom-built fittings consumed the biggest portion of the budget.

Two features of the school library worked well to support a new "hub of learning" role: its location across from the school office near the front of the building and the remarkable amount of space. Today there are four kinds of spaces: quieter, more comfortable reading and study areas; an informal café-style reading and learning space; smaller multi-media production, storage, and work spaces; and large teaching areas. One of these is the Innovative Teaching Centre; furnished with ottomans, it offers a fullwall screen with surround sound and/or an interactive white board. Another, the Collaborative Centre, has light, mobile "wheely" chairs and colourful "wavy" tables that can be pulled together quickly into different learning configurations.

Within the Vancouver School District, there was also a real need for a district hub for technology-based professional learning and for a physical example of the possibilities for change and transformation of Vancouver school libraries into learning commons. Many of our school libraries are sadly in need of renewal; transformation into a learning commons "approach" that supports new ways of teaching and learning may offset the tendency in the new discourse of technology and of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, or personalized learning, to omit a place for the school library and inquiry-based learning.

## Action Research: The Community and Conversations

Each school's learning commons will be as unique as the educational community from which it draws its energy. Experts agree, the grounding principle for transforming school libraries into learning commons is that you start with the teaching and learning and then build the space you need based on the instructional program. Our re-design group hadn't done that. Instead, we had capitalized on a serendipitous convergence of a number of factors rarely found in public education: administrative support for renewal; visions, not necessarily shared, for re-energizing teaching and learning in a technology-enhanced learning environment; a generous community donation to address a real opportunity to make a significant difference in kids' lives; the previously noted need for a district model and centre for professional learning about teaching with technology; and the willingness and expertise of a "team" of teachers to work collaboratively to address the aesthetics, the technological shortcomings, and the learning agenda. We had, it turns out, left the harder part to the last: it was now time to re-design the program.

I was new to the JO teaching staff in September. I had advised, in my district mentor role, on the physical transformation of the old school library into a "learning commons" space and now worked there to build the program. Long-established patterns of understaffing, barriers to communications, and insufficient access to technology continue to provide challenges to change, and I was acutely aware that instructional practice did not have the solid collaborative foundations for teaching and learning built over years of collegial conversations and connections with the school library. To make matters more complicated, the 2011-12 school year has seen a very politicized work environment in BC; teachers have had little inclination and few contexts for the conversations about educational change, few opportunities to discuss, share, or present understandings, about what a learning commons – or anything else for that matter -- could be to a school.

The JO teacher-librarians have been acutely aware that the renewed facility, the books and resources, and the technology do not constitute the program.

Learning in the twenty-first century has taken on new dimensions with the exponential expansion of information, ever-changing tools, increasing digitization of text, and heightened demands for critical and creative thinking, communication, and collaborative problem solving ..... All learners must be able to access high-quality information from diverse perspectives, make sense of it to draw their own conclusions or create new knowledge, and share their knowledge with others. (AASL)

The school library constantly seeks to improve services that enable access for the school community (Brooks-Kirkland 3). Teacher-librarians understand access must be both physical and intellectual. Refreshing a space will wear thin if common principles for access aren't developed, especially as demand for access increases. "[While] every member of a school's population will ultimately participate in the creation of a Learning Commons, ... the concept's early co-ordination and leadership will rest with school library expertise" (3). Change, even when grounded on broadly understood common principles around the operations of a school library, is challenging.

The teacher-librarians looked daily at the patterns of use and sought opportunities for conversations with staff and students about the ways tools, resources, and their own expertise could craft a new program that would be "a flexible, responsive approach to .... [expanding] the learning experience" (Brooks-Kirkland 3) for students at JO. In fact, the students "get" how it works and participate readily in the new learning culture. They come to work and read; they love working there. Everywhere there is evidence of student engagement. Usage is two to three times what it was last year.

How then, we asked ourselves, do we begin the collegial conversations that will inspire collaborative re-design of the learning commons program? How can we best extend the professional invitation to explore new learning opportunities with us and re-focus our collective approach to ensure our teaching has an impact on our particular JO students with their unique skills, interests, and learning needs?

# Inspiration for Change: "Just a Little Thing"

Working to develop a program in the JO learning commons program must begin with recognizing the very real commitment teacher-librarians have to reading, at the heart of learning, and acknowledging the shared sense amongst the JO teaching staff that there is work to be done with reading. To be an independent and inquiring learner, using digital or analogue tools, you must be able to code and decode, construct and

deconstruct texts in many formats and across many platforms; an inquiry-based approach provides the perfect framework for such a focus.

Demonstrating what working collaboratively and seamlessly integrating technology with inquiry learning looks like in "TL terms" was the first challenge. Who could resist a small reading assignment with a little Web 2.0 enhancement, simple in its construction, yet profound in its capacity to enact and empower disciplinary reading and conversations to "personalize" the learning?

A 3-minute video, "just a little thing" like its creator Hazel, is a perfect example of how a kind of "magic" can take over when a content-area teacher and a teacher-librarian collaborate to empower learning, in this case, for a truly gifted student. [See Appendix I: Chemistry Assignment] "Chemistry 12 Newsflash - The Drive to Inquire: What's New" is linked to February 2012 *TLSpecial* blog post entitled "Meet Hazel":

#### http://tlspecial.blogspot.ca/2012/02/meet-hazel.html

Mr. Leung (Lester), the teacher featured in the video, is the tech-savvy Science department head who undertook the proposed "newsflash" assignment with his Chem 12 class as an alternative to the sometimes-daunting research or inquiry-based project. Big projects can worry teachers of senior academic courses -- too many learning outcomes, too little time, and until recently, a final provincial exam – the suggestion of these create a refrain teacher-librarians hear often: "I simply don't have time to bring the class down to do a research project." Yet, Science teachers from Vancouver secondary schools had heard in June from UBC Science faculty that our graduates need to be more literate scientifically, that is, to read and talk more about science. This assignment was a response to these tensions and to the need to offer something manageable for senior academic students. Lester agreed: his students needed to learn to use the databases to find the latest scientific information, engage in inquiry, and practice reading deeply in order to be able to understand and then converse about "scientific" topics.

The assignment integrates the inquiry-based approach to reading deeply for knowledge and understanding in science with curriculum outcomes, literacy goals, print and digital resources, and technology as a tool, one that also builds in opportunities for greater student achievement and engagement. Students were to become, in this case, young chemists, read up on one new advance or study or finding in Chemistry, and present it for the consideration of their classmates in a chatty video summary. This "newsflash" assignment is easily adapted for Physics or Biology, Psychology or Geography, as a way to begin to help students script and practice academic conversations. The teacherlibrarian helps students with access to credible, reliable news, magazine, and journal articles. Students are advised to search the databases of digital resources for articles from "popular" science or other news magazines, as opposed to scholarly science research articles, to avoid their becoming discouraged.



The BC Teacher-Librarians' Association's document, *Points of Inquiry: A Framework for Information Literacy and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner (*Ekdahl), identifies as inquiry processes both reading for deep understanding and what is traditionally called research. Reading that is deeply linked to inquiry goes beyond learning to read – that is, fluency and decoding – to understanding, creating increasingly complex worldviews, and reading to learn. The *Points of Inquiry* graphic is a five-pointed

star, each point codifying the messy and recursive dimensions of information-seeking behaviours that transform information into knowledge. The inquiry model and the graphic expressly intend to create opportunities for students to be "stars," not only of their own learning but also of discovering something new in themselves.

The "newsflash" assignment, in using an inquiry-based approach to reading, seeks to *connect* the content students are learning, their interests or what they *wonder* about, their peer relationships, and their understanding of what is relevant and current in science. Students select an article they find interesting enough to share with their classmates and *investigate* by reading it carefully. They *construct* an account of this new and newsworthy development in the discipline, *expressing* it, in this case, using a Web 2.0 screencasting tool. They *reflect* throughout the process on the nature and quality of such aspects as the process, product, audience appeal, content or message, and so on.



What is apparent in the video is Hazel's unerring sense of her audience. Our young chemist wondered about peanut butter: was there was any hope of sharing her love of "said" product with her "unfortunate" teacher who is allergic to it? Hazel, an adventurous and confident learner, did not heed my advice on scholarly articles but saw it as a challenge. She jumped into pure science, choosing to read and "distill" for her classmates the results of a study conducted by US government agricultural researchers specializing in peanuts, Si-Yin Chung and Elaine Champagne, as cited at the end of the video presentation included in my blog. To be clear, the video is based on the reading of an article written for food researchers, that is, an article significantly beyond the reading level of just about everyone in the school!

In this study, [write Chung and Champagne], we examined three different monomeric phenolic compounds for their ability to irreversibly complex with the major peanut allergens. These compounds were caffeic, ferulic and chlorogenic acids, respectively, commonly found in fruits and vegetables (Naczk & Shahidi, 2006). Our objectives were to determine if these monomeric phenolics form irreversibly insoluble complexes with the major peanut allergens in peanut extracts and liquid peanut butter, and if such a complex-formation process reduces the allergenic capacity of the extracts and liquid peanut butter. (Chung)

Contrary to the perception created in the video that she found the article in her high school's digital library collection, the article Hazel settled on turned out to be a bibliographic citation; that is, the full-text version is actually not accessible in that EBSCO database. As a measure of her persistence with this task, she asked her teacher to help her find the article; many would not have asked. It is not likely that many teachers in the school could have helped her, but having just completed his master's degree, Lester still had access to the digital resources at the university!

Screencasting presentation software cut out some of the most serious and annoying limitations of student presentations; in "performance mode," students could practice and perfect their performances for the camera. Tools like Knovio (http://www.knovio.com) or Screencast-o-matic (http://www.screencast-o-matic.com) enable students to put their own "talking head" as a picture-in-picture alongside a powerpoint presentation.

Hazel thinks the class should do more things like that to get them ready for university. Another of her classmates liked it because it was so "studious." In February, Hazel talked confidently about this project with 100 teachers who were focused on inquiry, technology, and student engagement at the District Technology Day. When you watch the video, it should come as no surprise that Hazel instantly became a "star." Teacherlibrarians adored her confident entry into EBSCO's Academic Search Premier database to seek an article of authentic current research on a topic of genuine interest. Teachers loved her smooth navigation of complex terminology and complicated concepts, her easy and practiced delivery, her strong connections with her teacher, her sense of the fun of learning, and her playing to the camera and her audience, the class of young chemists.

The video is used as a model now at other schools. The inquiry-based approach had unfettered the young female "Jeremy Lin" to whom Mr Leung alluded when he began his presentation of the project at Technology Day. How many more academic Lins and Lin-ettes have we sitting in our classes? Persistent and motivated readers take huge leaps to gain intellectual access to what interests them. For a brief moment, Hazel had joined the community of food researchers. As the project video has been shared with US agricultural researcher Si-Yin Chung who thought it was "awesome," a Skype call with Hazel's class is in the planning stages.

Hazel told the teachers that the assignment had scared and overwhelmed her at first, and then she had loved it. She quickly moved from mastering the content and creating the script to perfecting the look for this three-minute presentation. It took 48 tries. She had, she said, studied her own presentation and perfected it with a perseverance she wouldn't have used if this had been a written or oral in-class assignment. Hazel's assignment represented a kind of magic that can only "flow" from student engagement, à la Csikszentmihályi! The assignment was completed in a week. Two classes were spent in the learning commons. And having done it once, the "newsflash" assignment will be easy for them to do it again either by finding the article on a home computer or by coming to the learning commons for a single block.

Earlier this month, Hazel and five other students attended the two-day National Reading Summit III, held at the SFU Downtown campus here in Vancouver. Other Summit attendees included public and academic librarians, government officials, school district management and other educators, publishers, business representatives, even a Bare Naked Lady (Keynote Steven Page). The JO students, all avid readers, were the only students present; their "little voices" for youth spoke resoundingly and well about reading, both for pleasure and for information and learning. With few chances to be recognized for their love of reading, they rose to the occasion. Hazel tweeted her delight at being there to speak for young people engaged in the joy of reading and learning. Her video received great response when it was shown to the attendees to enhance their understanding of the scope and possibilities for reading in our schools.

## Theoretical Framing: Reading Driven by Inquiry, Joy, and Conversations

A look at reading theory generates more questions for consideration in building the learning commons program as the hub for a renewed focus on learning in a culture of reading.

Where, in theory, do we find the underpinnings for building of a culture of reading as the focus of a secondary school learning commons within a school community? How do we co-design the learning contexts that these underpinnings envision?

Educators, the research suggests, need to attend to "teaching students to read complex non-fiction texts ... and to master informative writing," begins Marge Scherer, editor, *Educational Leadership (EL)*, in her introduction to the March 2012 issue, themed "Reading"; they need to read like a detective and write like a reporter (Coleman). This particular *EL* issue, while filled with strategies for building a culture of reading in schools, is short on ways that teachers can work collaboratively with their teacher-librarians to construct meaningful "reading conversations."

## How can teachers and teacher-librarians collaboratively construct such conversations?

Recent discourse in the field of reading deepens the connections for teacher-librarians amongst processes for learning, knowledge-creation, and community. R. David Lankes argues for community-building and *connection*, as opposed to *collection*, development when he suggests "that a functional view of librarianship has led us to focus too much on collections and artifacts (books, web pages, and the stuff we can point to) and not enough time on our most basic collection: our communities." He draws on Conversation Theory and its implications for dynamic learning; that is, what is learned is a series of "tangles" or memory associations formed when participants engage in conversations that use common language and understandings to reach agreements or disagreements around new information that further shapes or re-shapes existing knowledge structures. As reading prompts internal conversations, readers make sense of the resources and artifacts collected in the context of inquiry-based learning. Teacher-librarians who understand how this works, suggests Lankes, construct learning as "participatory conversations"; they have something to contribute to the conversation.

## How will the JO learning community construct learning as such conversations?

Teacher-librarians understand the need to work collaboratively with colleagues to attend to the joyfulness of reading, or such would be the implications of the recent study conducted by the Ontario-based research group People for Education; elementary-aged children surveyed reported a decline in interest in reading that correlates positively with the emphasis on the more traditional literacy strategies in classrooms and with the decline in numbers of teacher-librarians. "We learn to do well what we learn to love" (Allyn 16). Richard Allington advises educators to eliminate worksheets and workbooks, using the saved funds to buy books that prompt student-centred reading and writing, literary conversations, and read-alouds (14). Allyn suggests that we are all struggling readers in one context or another. Yet, "reading enjoyment is not only associated with high student achievement. Research shows that 'engaged' readers are also more likely to be socially and civically engaged as well." (People 2). In more concrete and corollary terms, poor adult readers have trouble finding and keeping work and completing day-to-day activities like reading and writing letters, email, and forms, as well as helping their own children learn (Allyn 18).

#### How, in light of these understandings, might we re-think the literacy agenda at JO?

The field of reading theory is also beset by the new discourse of digital reading. "Debate still rages about the extent to which reading in digital contexts is really new or different" (Biancarosa 25). Research shows there is a loss of reading efficiency, possibly due to the added complexities in reading digital text, a non-linear reading experience that offers ready hyperlinking to definitions, background information, and other inquiry choices.

It is going to continue to be important for students to have teaching for reading in each content area:

If our adolescents are to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations for reading, all students must have opportunities to learn specialized reading habits and skills. In short, struggling readers who need basic skills instruction should receive it *plus* instruction in adolescent literacy .... Funding and accountability policies must anticipate the incorporation of disciplinary and digital literacy into reading instruction and practice. (Biancarosa 26)

Building skills and motivation to enable reading complex text will hinge on providing students with opportunities to practice fluency, understand vocabulary and sentence structures, including those that are domain-specific, recognize the connections amongst and organization of ideas, and develop background knowledge that is developmental, experiential, and cultural (Shanahan).

Another thread in the discourse of digital literacy worries about the impact of the digital environment on reading and learning; it is characterized by writers such as Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains,* and Mark Bauerlein, author of *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or Don't Trust Anyone UNDER 30).* 

Will more technology in high school classrooms help? Not in the crucial area of reading. When teachers fill the syllabus with digital texts, having students read and write blogs, wikis, Facebook pages, multimedia assemblages, and the like, they do little to address the primary reason that so many students end up not ready for college-level reading. When they assign traditional texts -- novels, speeches, science articles, and so on -- in digital format with embedded links, hypertext, word-search capability, and other aids, they likewise avoid the primary cause of unreadiness. (Bauerlein)

How can these threads in the reading discourse help to initiate and inform a critical look the importance of an inquiry-based approach to reading as we integrate technology with teaching and learning here at JO?

Stephen Krashen offers simpler sociopolitical analyses. His is a strong and persistent voice advocating for narrowing the achievement gap by eliminating poverty and for diverting the costs of testing, monies paid to the publishing industry, to improving libraries in high-poverty areas. To Krashen, the public's faith in the skill-building approach to literacy is wrong:

... mastery of the components of language is acquired as a result of understanding what we read and hear. [The Comprehension Hypothesis, as opposed to the Skill-Building Hypothesis] claims that grammatical competence and vocabulary knowledge are absorbed as a result of listening and reading, and that writing style and most of spelling competence is the result of wide, self-selected reading.

Noted for his pithy common-sense approach to the promotion of reading and free choice, Krashen advises educators that reading improves with reading; reading anything improves reading; children are more likely to read if they have access to books; kids need to be immersed in opportunities to read and, in Krashen's view, school libraries are the hottest tool in the literacy kit. The better the school library, the higher the reading scores.

How can we attend to the needs of students at JO to optimize learning as we construct a learning commons program and learning contexts that turn on the "light" that engages our students with reading, reading to learn, and learning?

#### Conclusion

While the "newsflash" assignment and Hazel's three-minute video are unquestionably just little things, they are huge in the insights they provide into the power of reading and

inquiry, teacher collaboration, seamless technology integration with curriculum, and student engagement as well as achievement. Hazel's learning experience affords us an opportunity to reconsider and re-affirm the centrality of reading to creating meaningful learning in any context.

Students need support for inquiry-based reading and learning if they are to become effective and ethical users of information, able to work with increasing independence and with critical competencies. Technology hasn't changed this. Simply put, it's not about the "toys" or teaching technology; it's about using technology to teach:

The professional staff members of the learning commons take a leading role across the school in the transformation of social media skills into academic skills. Teacher-librarians teach learners to question and thinking critically about all information, both print and digital. They model implementation approaches and conduct professional development with teachers in the instructional use of technologies to achieve curriculum objectives .... [They] embed the best tools in a learning experience to achieve maximum impact on learning. (Loertscher 51)

How then do we prompt the "participatory conversations" that will inspire and enable the re-design of the learning commons program? How can we best work with our teaching colleagues to explore building and sustaining a culture of reading in order to have a real impact on our particular students with their unique skills, interests, and needs?

Framing discussions in and about the learning commons are best framed in the broader contexts of inquiry-based learning and student success, especially as these correlate positively with both reading and strong school library programs; herein lies the solid ground for building the foundations together that will inspire and sustain good practice at the core of a school-wide culture of reading.

Pedagogy, when grounded in an inquiry approach, assures a sustained and energized focus on students reading for pleasure and/or learning. In our technology-enhanced teaching and learning contexts, it's ultimately not about the tools or toys but about the teaching and learning that takes place. Unquestionably, the inspired conversations and programs developed in 21<sup>st</sup> century school libraries and learning commons recognize that students will find their places amongst the new digital environments for work, learning, and play. Their success depends on teachers and teacher-librarians arming them well with skills for reading and responding critically, creatively, and comprehensively to what they have read across multiple platforms and through various formats.

#### **APPENDIX I: CHEMISTRY ASSIGNMENT**

## CHEMISTRY-NEWSFLASH

## THE DRIVE TO INQUIRE : WHAT'S NEW?

Books cannot keep pace with the daily advances in the Sciences; books, by virtue of the publication process, are always dealing with information that has had some time to "congeal" and take shape. Keeping up with advances in CHEMISTRY and chemistry-based research areas requires a MIND FOR INQUIRY, a constant drive to know more, think more critically and deeply, and apply more recent information and findings to new problems and new solutions. Keeping up to date requires the scientist to become a reader, especially of the journals that present the latest research particular to his/her field.

#### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

As a young chemist, you are studying the \_\_\_\_\_\_. Your work will extend from recent findings ... but what's new?

- 1. You may start with Google or Wikipedia to get the "scope" or broad summary of the field and then to narrow the broad topic to some *key terms* to search.
- Find a current (last 2 years) journal article in the Academic Search Premier or Student Research Centre databases that presents new findings, direction, or developments for one aspect of ( "\_\_\_\_\_" – chemistry-related term here)
- 3. Select an article for its *credibility / reliability*. That is, does it have merit both for your audience and for science? Your presentation should include details about why and how you selected the article: Is it current? Is it written by someone with "authority" and/or published by a recognized body? Is the article "accessible" for you and your classmates? That is, can you read and understand it, then present it simply but effectively for your audience? Is it relevant to your work as a young chemist? What interested you about it? Does it reflect sound scientific methodology?
- 4. Prepare to make a simple, concise, and interesting presentation of this new research-related development to your classmates. Be sure to begin with an explanation of the topic of your research in relation to "\_\_\_\_\_\_" (chemistry foundational topic). Summarize the new information you have found, include an account of your choosing the article, and conclude with what interested you about the new developments you have read about.
- 5. Hand in a copy of the article you have chosen to review findings from, including the citation in MLA Style.

ASSESSMENT: /15	ОК	G	VVG	
Article chosen has "credibility" according to criteria listed in #3	1	2	3	
Presentation was "accessible" and interesting for audience	1	2	3	
Student demonstrated understanding of and interest in the topic	1	2	3	
Topic / article was relevant and selection process was clearly described	1	2	3	
Key terms and concepts were well chosen for sharing new findings	1	2	3	

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