The Learning Commons Landscape

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Abstract

Library professionals have been questioning the transformation of the school library to a learning commons for many years now. With the explosion of technological resources, all that is new, impacts the existing school library. It is about a conceptual notion of a landscape for learning beginning within any school and not bound by its walls. What is this new learning commons? The purpose of this paper is to examine the landscapes of the learning commons as part of a whole. This paper will discuss a learning environment including the school library learning commons and its surrounding community. It will also propose questions for consideration.

Introduction

The school library learning commons needs to be the anytime, any pace and any place that students and teachers access for information, collaboration and knowledge building that they need as learners. The world of learning has shifted and will continue to change. The time is now to witness and partake of the reinvention of school libraries in Alberta schools and across Canada.

As new technologies evolve to engage learners, promote learning, and provide access to information at an astonishing rate, the learning commons under the guidance of a trained teaching professional is critical. In fact, many school libraries appear to be trapped in a time box of tradition, in part due, to a lack of service by a qualified lead teacher. Is yours one of them? My experience as a trained teacher-librarian and Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) library consultant has been in schools where there is little to no leadership in the library. The traditional school library has often needed its collection weeded; reorganization of the physical space and dialogue with school staff about the way the school library is utilized for learning. Out with scheduled book exchange times every Tuesday at 10:30 am. Goodbye to student assignments that simply require them to regurgitate facts. It is time for critical inquiry, flexible scheduling, creative use of the physical space blended with 24/7 access to virtual databases and other quality resources for learning and teaching. These new reforms are not just about the library. A new, transformative culture for learning needs to prevail throughout the school beginning with transitioning the school library physically and also more importantly to a learning commons, philosophically. I believe that the emerging direction of what school libraries in the 21st century will strive toward is to be part of a whole school learning commons.

What is the current context of learning and the school library learning commons in your school? In your school district? What is currently being done to support students, allowing them access to dynamic and engaging learning spaces that will enable them to be productive, participatory citizens in this new global century? Is your school library currently a warehouse of print resources and digital equipment? It is time to rethink, redesign and reimagine the library and the school.

Students

At the forefront of my thinking is to consider that the learning commons is a philosophy not simply a place in the school. Let's look at four proposed facets of a learning commons. Consideration for the students and their needs is at the priority for decision. All students in the school would develop personalized strategic toolkits that they will require as a foundation to becoming lifelong learners. It is clear in much of the research that today's students are exposed to emerging literacies and require authentic opportunitites to develop strategies enabling them to manage and engage with copious amounts of information. Our students require further strategies for interacting with multiple formats of resources allowing them to create new information for themselves while reflecting upon their learning processes. Assessment, both for and of learning is a critical and necessary part of teacher planning. Students in schools today are becoming consumers, collaborators and producers of information. (Farquharson, 2009) With a collarborative planning process between teacher and a learning commons lead teacher in place, students have access to 'just in time' teaching that fosters a community of learning. (Koechlin, Zwaan & Loertscher, 2008) These authentic learning opportunitites link students to their communitites and the global world. Once again, creating that sense of transparancy and access to learning beyond the classroom.

School Staff

A second facet if one believes that the new learning commons is not just a place but also an integral part of the school learning culture, then one needs to examine the ways the adults in the school learn too. In your school, how has your staff expanded their professional knowledge and practice? Historically, many teaching professionals have accessed their learning from site-based professional development, systemic learning opportunities, yearly teacher conventions or professional conferences. Current trends of practice are moving to an action research model involving a professional learning community. Action research is founded in a belief that there is expertise within one's own school and school system with an added advantage of a local focus aimed at school improvement. The staff must deepen their professional knowledge of inquiry, critical thinking and developing their own personal toolkits for technology use and knowledge of effective, quality resources for learning. Critical thinking and inquiry are central to student and teacher learning. (Farquharson, 2009; Koechlin et al., 2008; Loertscher & Diggs, 2009)

The Physical & Virtual Landscape

Simultaneously, the third element of the transition of the landscape needs to occur. The physical space of the school library learning commons and the classroom need to transition into flexible, engaging learning spaces under the modeling of a teaching professional. The landscape of the learning commons is not really new. Schools have worked to keep up to the ever-changing world of information as best they

can. What is new however impacts the existing school library and its users. It is about the conceptual notion of a learning commons both physical and virtual. The visionaries, Carol Koechlin and David Loertscher identify two clear aspects of the new learning commons that are both the physical space and a virtual space (Koechlin, Rosenfeld & Loertscher, 2010; Loertscher et al, 2008; Loertscher, 2008). Students will need and have ready access to both, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. The physical space needs to be a flexible learning environment that is open and serves multiple purposes during the school day (Bentheim, 2010; Loertscher, 2008; Loertscher & Diggs, 2009). Koechlin et al. (2008) view the learning commons as a space where students are actively engaged with emerging technologies. Alongside the physical learning commons within the school is the equally important virtual space. This a way to extend resources and access beyond the walls of the school. (Loertscher, 2008) He describes this virtual space eloquently as a "giant, ongoing conversation and a warehouse of digital materials" (Loertscher, 2008, p.47). Beyond the space what else defines a learning commons?

What about the other spaces in and around the school? What about the classrooms? How are they arranged to meet the personalized learning needs of all students? What about the outdoor natural spaces? Many schools today are creating enviromental learning gardens on their grounds. These too need to be considered as integral parts of the learning commons philosophy. Do your teachers and students access a local public park or the community at large? Do you have access to an Open Minds program such as what is available in Calgary? The thirteen Campus Calgary and Open Minds sites include the Calgary Zoo, Fire School, Cross Conservation, The University of Calgary, Glenbow Museum to name a few. These authentic community sites allow students and teachers to be involved in unique, one week visits to engage in hands-on learning, observing and reflecting to foster attitudes and understandings of cultural awareness, community responsibility, and stewardship. (Campus Calgary Open Minds, 2012) Taking into consideration the physical community at large expands the concept of a learning commons well beyond the school library learning commons walls. It allows students opportunities to grow and learn as individuals within their own world.

Leadership

To enable and action these ideas into your school requires one more idea. The final aspect of the shift of school libraries to learning commons is about leadership. It is apparent that this shift requires two levels of leadership that of the administration within the school and the leadership skills of a learning commons lead teacher. Sullivan (2010) speaks of Malcolm Gladwell's three rules of change in her work. They include connecting people, understanding the data and then salespeople are needed to promote the change. This is exactly what the learning commons needs. It brings together stakeholders in the school to move forward. Like any other change, mission and vision are needed to set a path for this journey. (Koechlin et al., 2008; Bentheim, 2010) Instead of everyone in a school working in isolation, the learning commons success is hinged on collaboration of teams. The learning commons lead teacher requires this collaboration to enable a shift to a student-sided focus. (Loertscher & Diggs, 2009) The administration collaborates and supports these collaborative teams.

The teachers collaborate with the learning commons lead teacher ensuring that students in the school are the central focus of the work. Koechlin et al. (2008) clearly defines this role as one who "turns the age of information into the age of understanding, critical thinking and learning to learn" (Koechlin et al., 2008, p. 6). In doing so, the role of the learning commons lead teacher transforms to a coach and leader versus one who is responsible for direct teaching of library or information skills. Their knowldege of curriculum is extensive and they play a critical role in the cultural shift of the school. (Loertscher & Diggs, 2009)

Challenges

So if this is what a learning commons requires, what possibly could challenge this change? Due to the fact this concept is new, there is limited work on the issues. Both Koechlin and Loertscher (2010) are honest in their understanding of the work and role of the learning commons lead teacher alongside the administration to transform the tradional concepts of an 'institution.' Koechlin and Loertscher (2010) described three possible issues. First that many schools are still in a traditional mindset thus making it harder to move forward. Secondly, libraries have seen both major budget cuts and staffing cuts which have affected the ability to be progessive in the work. Finally, Loertscher explains that the curriculum delivery in the class is often separate from the school library learning commons. Each of these three issues would have a direct impact in the implementation of a learning commons philosophy in a school. However with leadership, experience and wisdom of those who have done the work first to provide a guide of sorts, anything is possible.

Alberta Perspective

In Alberta, there is an increasing movement to transfrom school libraries to learning commons. Alberta Education (2010) has drafted a new policy document awaiting the government review and approval. Each of the learning commons identifiers discussed above and within the literature are addressed in some way in this draft document. This includes the student inquiry and creation of new knowledge, student access to qualified library professionals, and the physical and virtual spaces. It references the role of the principal as a member of the school library services professional learning team and this team is tasked with creating a school library learning commons plan. (Alberta Education, 2010) This forward thinking document is clear in its direction toward learning commons.

Checklist

The place to start is where you are right now. An analysis of your school and your stakeholders' thoughts is a good place to begin this transformational journey. Consider the following questions. Many of us are well aware of the "sense of tone" that individual schools project. It is that "feeling" you get when you walk into a school. It is evident the moment when anybody walks into your building. When someone walks through your school, what evidence exists that your school is nurturing 21st century

learners toward becoming productive active global citizens? Is there evidence of inquiry? Critical thinking? Are students actively engaged with a wealth of technological resources? Are tasks in the learning environment authentic? Is there evidence of multiple formats of resources?

You may wish to consider the following questions as you begin to think about the transition of your school library learning commons and school.

School	What is your school's mission and vision? Who are your learners? What are the current identified needs of your learning community? Specifically your learner needs? Where are the gaps in your academic achievement as indicated by use of standardized tests? Do you have a school website? Staffing?
Learners	Size of your school? Student population demographics? English Language Learners? Special Education Needs? Learner support?
School Library/ Learning Commons	What is the current status of your library staffing? Who leads the instructional component? Collection size – number of volumes? Types of resources available? How is the library currently being used? Access for students? Staff?
Technology	Which platform do you use? What sever is in use and how is it set-up for community access? What access is there in the Learning Commons? Classroom access? Assistive technology use? How and what? What tools are available? – scanners, digital cameras, video, green screen, e-readers, mp3, iPods, iPads? How is technology funded in your school? What district support does your school access? Is there a school website? Is there a learning commons website?
Resources	What is your annual budget for the learning commons? Classroom resources? Curriculum resources? Online databases? Use of district or provincial databases for digital content?
Digital	Does your school have a digital citizenship plan?

Citizenship	Is this in line with your district policy? What work is being done for students about information literacy? Digital literacy?
Inquiry	What does inquiry look like within your school? Is there a common understanding of inquiry? How is it connected to your provincial/state curriculum? How is the Learning Commons used to support this learning?
Access to community resources	How does your school utilize the community at large? How is learning communicated to your family community? Does it involve technology and print access?
	What do you believe is missing at this time? What solutions would you suggest?

(Adapted from a variety of resources including Asselin, Branch & Oberg, 2003; Koechlin, Rosenfeld & Loertscher, 2010; Loertscher, Koechlin & Zwaan, 2010; McKenzie,1998)

Conclusion

Schools are at a turning point. To meet the complex and ever-changing needs of students and to keep up with the information age, a learning commons philosophy is needed right now! A learning commons is more then just a place, it is is way of being. The learning commons "supports a school-wide culture . . . fostering 'habits of mind'" (Koechlin et al, 2008, p.6). Sullivan truly sums it up by saying,"Will school libraries fuel the growth of 21st century learning or will they wither. . .?" (Sullivan, 2010, p.1) She is correct. Withering is not an option. Students need to be empowered to become lifelong learners building an ongoing strategic toolkit that begins in kindergarten. Educators cannot be shy about embracing the 'new' way of doing things. School staffs need to work together to seize the opporunity to bring together the very best of what we know about our learners and the very best of the available resources to meet philisophically and in reality in the learning commons.

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