

# Dear Teachers: The Learning Commons and the Future of Learning

## Response to a Canadian Study

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**T**he 21st-century learner needs communication skills that transcend writing essays and technical skills that go beyond setting up margins for printing.

A recent Canadian research report published by the Media Awareness Network provides another opportunity for school librarians to speak directly to all teachers about the future of learning and the role of the learning commons in facilitating the best teaching and learning. This cross-Canada study, *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Teachers' Perspectives*, brings to the fore concerns that we hear from classroom teachers around the globe, thus it is appropriate and necessary for us to respond.

The exceptional teachers selected for this study offer individual success stories in response to the key concerns uncovered in the research analysis. Their stories reveal excellent solutions and a real understanding of the potential of technology in learning environments. It is important to keep in mind that these individual teachers are making a difference in their classrooms and trying to transfer their expertise to others. Just imagine if these teachers were working in a learning commons school where collaboration and a growth mindset are the norm.

The future of learning is so exciting. Technology for learning and new approaches to knowledge building and creation are reforming education as we have known it. There has never been a time when leadership and expertise from you, the school information and learning specialist, has been needed more. Capture the collective expertise of your teachers and students and move forward with a learning commons approach for your school so everyone has a chance to win at learning.

We have taken the key findings of the executive summary of this report to frame our "Response of the Learning Commons." We address the key concerns identified in the report: five factors that limit students' proficiency with digital content, as well as potential solutions, and four ways networked technology can enrich

students' learning. We hope you will find ways to have a frank and innovative discussion with your administration, staff, parents, and students about their concerns regarding these issues and work together to build a whole new way of learning with a learning commons approach.

### NOT SO SAVVY SURFERS: THE OVERALL CONCERN FROM THE REPORT

All of the teachers in the study indicated that their students loved working—and playing—with smart phones, iPods, iPads, computers, and networked devices of all kinds. But they also agreed that simple access to networked technology has not made their students better learners. In spite of the fact that young people demonstrate a facility with online tools, many students lack the skills to effectively use those tools for learning. There is also a real propensity on the part of students to take what they find online as "given."

*Response of the Learning Commons:* 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 think 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. In keeping with the collaborative spirit of the learning commons, they often assemble iSquad students who serve as tech gurus across grade levels and classes to promote academic uses of technology and social media throughout the school.

### Identifying Problems and Solutions

The teachers from the study identified five factors that limit students' proficiency with digital content and provided solutions for each.

### Teaching Tech vs. Using Tech to Teach

Many Canadian school boards continue to focus on training students how to use technology instead of providing students with learning opportunities that are enhanced through technological tools. Instead, our informants spent little to no time teaching students *how* to use a particular piece of software or hardware; instead, they focused on teaching them *why* the technology would be useful to their learning.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* A common approach to professional development is to equip each teacher with a kit of tech tools and Web 2.0 apps that could be used for a wide variety of tasks. The learning commons professionals take the opposite approach and embed the best tools in a learning experience to achieve maximum impact on learning. For example, for both individual and collaborative writing, teach the Google Document where personal writing and collaborative writing are built into the technology. Students can compose writing as a group on the

same document, edit each other, re-arrange sentences, leave comments, write in different colors, and allow access to that document as they wish. When teachers experience collaborative writing and editing in real time on a real assignment, they begin to understand that they can mentor both personal writing ability and collaborative composition. If the teacher is open to suggestions from the students themselves, the entire group builds expertise together. This is an example of a technology that cannot be duplicated in the physical world using paper and pencil. With other tools, collaborative data gathering and analysis using Google Forms and/or Google spreadsheets builds amazing collaborative data analysis and experimentation in real time. This is the time to insert a quick professional development tutorial at the point of need. The requirements of the learning experience drive the selection of a technology and when its features need to be learned.

### **“Drill and Kill” Experts vs. Facilitators and Colearners**

The “drill and kill” approach to teaching, where the teacher is the classroom expert who talks at students from the front of the room and gives them all the same exercises at the same time, does not work well with networked learning tools because the technology entails a certain loss of control over what the students are doing. On the other hand, a teacher who is willing to share responsibility with students, learn from students’ technical proficiency, and facilitate the learning process is more likely to be comfortable with networked learning tools.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* The professional staff of the learning commons are exemplary mentors and facilitators of learning who coteach alongside the classroom teacher in a learning experience. They embed both information and technology into a learning experience in such a way that everyone benefits and the learning increases exponentially. We recommend the use of knowledge-building centers for topical explorations and Book2Cloud digital spaces when a particular text is being studied in depth. If a Think Model is used

to push up thinking and the experience ends in a Big Think, a very different kind of learning experience develops that is collaborative and engaging and effective. Higher level thinking, along with the embedding of twenty-first-century skills, should result in major boosts to learning as the foundational element of a learning commons.

### **Younger Teachers vs. Older Teachers**

Many teachers are cautious about tech because it can be disruptive. Networked devices can also easily distract students from the task at hand. Accordingly, strong classroom management skills are paramount to the effective use of technology in the classroom. This gives older teachers an advantage over younger teachers, primarily because they are more experienced and have stronger classroom management skills.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* Collaborative and creative projects and problems may look like chaos to teachers who want kids to be quiet and effective listeners with hands up rather than hands on, as explored in the Canadian Education Association article *Hands On vs. Hands Up: Technology-Enabled Knowledge Building in High School*. However, excellent managers of learning know how to encourage productivity through busy and exciting learning environments. Both the teacher librarian and the classroom teacher are at the coaching helm, either in a face-to-face or virtual environment. Learners have ownership and at the same time are stimulated, encouraged, and assessed as guided inquirers. When learners build their own deep understanding, they are building learning skills that become life skills that are vital in the arena of global competitiveness.

### **Tech Training vs. Curricular Training**

There are few in-course and professional development training opportunities to help teachers, young and old, learn how to use technology to meet curriculum outcomes. Training tends to focus on how to use a particular piece of software or hardware, so

teachers are largely on their own when it comes to figuring out how to use technology to support and enhance learning.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* This finding makes an age-old assumption about isolated teaching. It assumes that the only person in the room of a learning experience is the adult standing at the head of the classroom from which all knowledge and skill spills forth to be assimilated into the hearts and minds of human robots. If the specialists of the school take their place alongside teachers, then a wide variety of expertise comes into play, but it can also ignore the expertise of learners in the room. As David Weinberger suggests in his book *Too Big to Know*, in the current networked world, the expert in the room is the room. It is a collaborative culture that molds the skills that boost the learning exponentially.

### **Online Filters vs. Letting Students Make Mistakes**

School filters and policies that ban or restrict networked devices in the classroom make it difficult or impossible for teachers to use networked tools to enhance learning. They also imply that schools do not trust their teachers to exercise good judgment, which is out of step with the fact that teachers are frequently required to teach students how to deal with offline content and conflict. Learning how to exercise good judgment and act as good citizens is central to the development of digital literacy skills. Ironically, however, restrictive policies designed to protect students from online content take away the very opportunities they need to acquire these skills.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* Technology directors with an educational background understand the difference between administrative computing and instructional computing. The trend across North America is for more and more technology professionals to develop an understanding of open networks and deeply embed themselves in learning projects so they understand, build, and maintain networks that push learning rather than “control” it.



## ADULT BOOKS FOR TEENS

## UP ALL NIGHT

**Scavenger.** David Morrell. Vanguard Press, 2008. \$9.99 pb. 978-1-593-15483-7. Grades 9-12. Frank Balenger and his girlfriend, Amanda, find themselves entangled in a deadly scavenger hunt for an ancient time capsule. An excellent blend of action, mystery, and horror, this fascinating novel will especially appeal to video gamers and thriller fans.

**House of the lost.** Sarah Rayne. Pocket Books, 2011. \$9.99 pb. 978-1-847-39357-9. Grades 11-12. When author Theo Kendall inherits Fenn House from his murdered cousin, he relocates from London hoping for a peaceful place to write. Instead, Theo encounters vicious intruders and mysteries from the past. Rayne has created an enthralling, intricate puzzle for mystery fans to unravel and enjoy.

**Primacy.** J.E. Fishman. Verbitrage, 2011. \$24.95. 978-0-983-38090-0. Grades 11-12. Liane Vinson is happy in her job as an animal researcher until encountering a bonobo who seems to speak some sort of language. With the aid of veterinarian Mickey Ferrone, Liane fights to protect the ape from nefarious corporate and government forces. This action-packed novel also confronts the volatile issue of animal lab testing.

**The keep.** Jennifer Egan. Anchor, 2007. \$15. pb. 978-1-400-07974-2. Grades 10-12. Cousins Danny and Howard are inseparable pals until Danny abandons Howard during a cruel prank. Years later, Howard inexplicably invites Danny to a castle in Europe for a restoration project. With an additional story line about a prison writing class, this suspenseful novel is a *bona fide* page-turner.

## TURNING TECHNOLOGICAL ACCESS INTO ENHANCED LEARNING

The informants identified four ways in which networked technologies can enrich students' learning.

*A Wealth of Learning Resources*

Networked technologies give teachers easy access to a world of learning resources that provide information in interesting or engaging ways. Online interactivity also provides an opportunity to interact with that information to test skills and apply new knowledge.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* There is a wealth of learning resources today, but effective access and use are anything but easy. Every teacher librarian is trained and seasoned in the finding, evaluating, collecting, and disseminating of the best of the best information in all forms of media. This expertise is invaluable to any classroom teacher wanting to create a super learning experience. The two adults just need to find each other and capitalize on each other's strengths. Collaboratively they can organize the best resources for specific units of instruction in Pathfinders and help students and teachers build personal learning environments that take advantage of networking technologies.

*Communicating with Others Outside the Classroom*

The ability to connect with the world outside the school in real time is the single most powerful benefit of technology-enhanced learning. Communicating their own ideas and connecting with others down the street or around the world deepens students' engagement with their learning and helps them think more critically about the world around them.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* Connecting via the learning commons is a central element of knowledge building. Using a virtual knowledge-building center where adults and learners are engaged in a learning experience usually raises the question, "Who else could we invite into

our learning experience?" As the group expands its reach, the possibilities excite the imagination and the prospects for excellence far beyond the walls of a single classroom or school.

*New Opportunities for Collaborative Learning*

The ability to communicate with others brings new opportunities for collaborative learning. Students who discuss issues and share their knowledge with others online are able to learn from each other and participate in the kinds of public debates that are central to lifelong learning and the exercise of democratic citizenship. The technology also makes that collaboration visible, so students can see their own contribution to the group. This enhances their sense of connectedness, which deepens and enriches their learning by making it both more personal and more social. Collaborating with students from different cultural backgrounds helps students develop compassion, understanding, and appreciation for different cultures.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* The most innovative tools in educational technology today are those that allow for the building of collaborative ideas, projects, writing, and thinking in real time. In the learning commons, these tools predominate since they allow for the development of personal expertise alongside collaborative intelligence. We refer to tools such as a Google Document; a Google Form used as input to a Google Spreadsheet; Google Draw, where students are creating collaborative drawings; Google Presentations, where up to seven students are creating a slide show together. Beyond the Google family is a growing number of collaborative tools for developing mind maps, project work, editing multimedia, and curating sources around ideas. Learners who understand the power of such tools share their expertise to build collective understanding and create new knowledge.

*Working with Individualized Learning Styles*

Networked devices help teachers provide learning materials matched to the various

learning styles of their students. For example, podcasts and online auditory dictionaries are helpful for auditory learners, and iPads and touch-sensitive smart boards are helpful for visual, tactile, and kinesthetic learners. Networked technologies are also particularly helpful for special-needs students; students who have difficulty concentrating often work better when they are listening to music on an iPod, and students who have trouble sitting still respond well to tools that enable them to move while they are learning. Technological tools can also provide special-needs students with an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in new ways.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* The creation of excellent materials that appeal to individual learners with a host of different abilities and interests increases exponentially over time. The task is to build a collaborative team that can discover the best and discard the rest. Teacher librarians have expertise in doing this but also stimulate everyone in the school to discover and

share the best of the best to everyone else in that collaborative environment known as the learning commons.

## MANAGING TECHNOLOGIZED SPACES

Technology can enhance learning when it focuses on pedagogy and students' needs. However, networked devices can also complicate the learning experience when students use them to open up the privacy of the classroom for their own purposes. Not only does this interrupt the learning process, but it also affects the social relationships that are at the core of learning by dissolving the boundary between the classroom and the outside world, making it more difficult to create the trust that is central to learning. The potential embarrassment of being exposed on the Net is enough to make many students disengage from the learning process itself, and teachers are more likely to censor fun activities with students in case their actions are taken out of context. The end result is that it is more difficult to build community and trust in the classroom because the learning and interaction that takes place in that private space is coaxed into the wider public sphere.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* Yes, information overload, confusion, data smog, undesirable content, inaccurate content, advertising, misleading advice, and even danger abound in this new networked world. Everyone in the learning commons helps everyone else develop their own personal learning environments where individual portals screen out the unwanted and allow for the best of the best. There are behaviors that evolve with becoming great digital citizens. It is one of the central missions of the learning commons to be the center of those habits of digital mindfulness.

## MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS: DIGITAL LITERACY AND ONLINE CITIZENSHIP

Technology can only enhance learning if students are taught to think critically

about online content and evaluate their own behavior against a set of shared social values. Digital literacy is not about technical proficiency but about developing the critical-thinking skills that are central to lifelong learning and citizenship. To meet the challenge, schools must focus on pedagogy and provide training and support to help teachers incorporate technologies into all elements of the curriculum in ways that facilitate individualized learning and teach students how to collaborate with learners within and outside the school community.

*Response of the Learning Commons:* Here lies a foundational element of the learning commons. It is all about learning. It is all about a commons. It is a community, yet it is also a place of personal growth and development. It is all about me, and we, and winning at learning.

*Note:* Watch for a similar "Response of the Learning Commons" to an important U.S. study in the June issue of *Teacher Librarian*.

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