

Making the Learning Commons Happen at the Ottawa Catholic School Board

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TMC2 Call for Papers 2012

May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012

## **THE VISION**

Newly appointed Superintendent of Learning Technologies, Student Success, Thomas D'Amico created a vision document for 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning for the Ottawa Catholic School Board. The vision was to increase the use of technology in our schools, to empower students to become future digital citizens and to prepare them for workplace realities. To do so would require a whole new philosophy.

Mr. D'Amico's vision was strongly influenced by the *OSLA Together for Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons* document. He agreed that the Learning Commons model would be a great starting point for transition and change in our school libraries. It was a good fit with his mandate.

Combining the *Together for Learning* vision with our Board's 21st Century Learning mandate resulted in a transformation of our libraries into Learning Commons.

We began by asking ourselves guiding questions.

- How to sell this vision to traditionalists?
- Can we sell this vision to upper management, to trustees, to our library staff?
- Where do we get the funding?
- How do we engage with our students in their digital world?
- How can we engage and encourage our students to use the library?

Thus began our odyssey to transform our libraries into Learning Commons.

## **THE TEAM**

The Learning Technologies team Donna Presz (Library Services Supervisor) and Gabriel Massicotte (Learning Technologies Consultant) partnered with various key personnel in Purchasing, Planning & Facilities to execute the plan.

The Superintendent actively began campaigning for funding by presenting to senior executive. He enlisted the support of Sarah Murray, a teacher-librarian to promote the concept to trustees at a budget meeting.

## **THE PROCESS**

When budgeting and agreements were secured, it was time to start the project. The Learning Technology department partnered with Planning and Facilities, our main contributor to the budget for this project, and created an online application process to facilitate the process. Purchasing played an integral part, providing us with vendor and pricing information, purchasing and accounting processes. At the start of the project purchasing dealt directly with the schools but as the project grew in scope, the Library Services Supervisor became the "go-to" person.

In June of 2011 we began a pilot project with three high schools which were given a one month timeline to implement the transition plan.

The pilot schools selected technology and furniture with budget and purchasing guidelines. The requests were submitted to the team for approval.

The Planning and Facilities department visited each school to look at infrastructure and electrical change requests.

The Purchasing department assisted with respect to vendors, furniture selection and pricing.

Each high school received \$20,000 for tech purchases and \$10,000 for furniture. An additional amount was granted to purchase a wall-mounted SMART board, arm and projector. The SMART Board was intended for student collaboration.

Elementary schools received the same funding for technology and received \$5000 for furniture, plus a SMART board.

## **THE APPLICATION**

An online shareable (Google doc) application consisting of instructions and required information to link the process to school improvement plans was created. It served as an order form for technology and furniture as well.

It was crucial that the whole school participate in the change. It was vital that we had administration, teaching and library staff, students and parents on board. After all, we were advocating a whole new concept in libraries; increasing more digital resources and access to devices and open networks. The vision also included a less restrictive atmosphere where the emphasis was learner centred, inclusive and welcoming with permission for noisy, productive collaboration.

Our mandate was to:

- Reduce the print collections by 1/3 (many schools surpassed this amount by judicious weeding) and to provide readers with more fiction, high interest non-fiction and graphic novels
- Create collaborative and open spaces for daily, weekly, monthly events
- Create the look and feel of an Internet café
- Add a plethora of mobile digital devices
- Entice teens to use the space for both social and educational purposes
- Upgrade the ILS to enable a virtual library space

The lessons learned from the pilot projects allowed us to revisit our original process and fine tune it for the full implementation board-wide.

Funding has been approved to expand the project to 30 schools for the 2011-2012 school year. Our goal is to transform 81 schools within three years. Funding will be crucial to complete the remaining schools.

The scope of the project is enormous and the three departments continue to work together to make it a success. Implementation is further complicated due to the collaborative nature of coordinating infrastructure and purchasing request and building consensus of the vision.

### **POST MORTEM**

The Learning Commons school committees comprising of staff, students and parents has been very successful. The commitment by parents has been phenomenal. Parent councils have jumped wholeheartedly into the project by promising funds directed annually towards the Learning Commons. There is also the added benefit of bringing school administrators closer to the work being done by our library staff.

Not everyone is happy. The traditionalists disapprove of the “noisy” library. A disconcerting trend is the shift away from the emphasis on literacy and print resources to circulating devices and maintaining equipment. Are we becoming a larger more comfortable computer lab?

Part-time library staff in our elementary schools worry that going digital will mean the loss of the rich content available to younger students in picture book format to support reading literacy development. Is story time is dead?

We've just begun this journey and we can only grow from the experience. We continue to ask ourselves questions as the project continues. Are we making a difference? Only time will tell. The shift to cybrarian has happened quickly and as staff adjusts to the reality of the Learning Commons we have many challenges.

It has been, and continues to be an exciting project and reaffirms the Learning Commons as a key component of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning model.

### **THE PILOT PROJECT-ST. JOSEPH HIGH SCHOOL (June 2011)**

St. Joseph has a student population of 1350 students. It is a Gr. 7-12 high school in an affluent suburban neighbourhood of Ottawa. Staffing consists of a full-time teacher-librarian and library technician.

Having participated in the implementation of the Learning Commons transition plan, below is our current status with regard to the *Together for Learning* document.

## Physical Space:

### Collaborative Seating

- 6 small group collaborative seating areas for students to sit on couches and comfortable chairs for reading, working and resting.
- 6 smaller circular tables to encourage small group collaborations.
- Three tall bistro tables and chairs which are very popular with learners.
- Floor outlets have been installed under the circular tables for additional power sources.
- 14 rectangular tables for student collaboration.

### Learning Spaces

The print collection has been moved to one side of the library to maximize space for furniture and mobility.

We have a SMART board seating area, a plasma TV seating area and an LCD projection area.

A silent seminar room is available to accommodate learners who require a quiet study space.

Harkening back to the open classroom concept of the 1970's, there are classes viewing media on the TV at one end of the L.C. while there is a book talk being delivered at the SMART board using YouTube at the other end of the L.C.

### Displays

Books are still prominently displayed on the circulation desk, around pillars, and in the "New Book" display case, as well as Books for Boys and Red Maple and White Pine displays. The SMART board and Plasma TV are being used to display on-line information i.e. our blog, themes for reader advisory etc.

### Atmosphere

The popularity of the Learning Commons as a lunch hour destination has increased dramatically for purposes other than silent study. Students, who eschewed the library before, now come to use the couches to sleep, to chat and use technology to view media, and play games. We must often remind students that it is a public space that is shared with those who wish to study. There is a tipping point between the social and the learning aspect of the space.

There are more relaxed library rules. In the past, students were asked to sit in groups of 4 and to be quiet and on task. Now, students are permitted to arrange furniture as they see fit and staff only intervenes when the noise level is too extreme. The space at lunchtime is both social and academic.

The experiment with allowing lunches into the L.C. was a failure. There was a tangible change in the purpose of the library from learning destination to cafeteria. The "no food

or drink” policy was re-introduced to protect our new furniture, carpet and expensive electronic devices. The rules are often bent to accommodate special events such as lunch hour book club meetings, special events etc.

**Virtual Space:**

- 24/7 access to our collection through Destiny with access available on Smart devices.
- Blog with links to research and reading information.
- Facebook page to share photos and videos of library events and activities.
- Blackboard course on the research process available to all students and staff
- Twitter account with the intention of tweeting about professional resources to staff next year.

Establishing a virtual presence and sharing it with our school community is the biggest challenge of our transition. Making our blog relevant to students and easy to locate and navigate is our mission. Although we realize we may never be able to compete with Google, it is our hope that if we build it they will come. Future plans include webinars to assist students on-line with the research process. Next year we will promote a Learning Commons club to give students access and control over the content of the blog and Facebook pages to encourage more student engagement.

**Equitable Access:**

- Wi-Fi
- Dell Netbook cart of 24 touch screen laptops. With parental permission, up to 12 students may take units to class or home for overnight use.
- 8 iPads and 2 iPods for student use in the library.
- Our minilab of 15 desktops will be updated with new devices in September
- Destiny allows for 24/7 access to resources and databases as well as reader advocacy through social networking capabilities.
- Expanded library hours.

**Assistance:**

- Speak Up Teen Tech club project, in collaboration with our elearning consultant, will focus on teens teaching teens using webinars.
- Increased troubleshooting for printing, password/ login, and equipment issues
- Creation of two circulation workstations at the desk to meet the increased demand to borrow devices.

**Personal Contributions:**

- Students and staff were represented on the Learning Commons implementation committee
- The school community was surveyed for input

**Experimentation:**

- Promotion of SMART board use by students and staff.
- Web 2.0 tools presented through Tech Tidbits to staff and students i.e. prezzi, bitstrips, volki, blackboard, jing, etc.

**Activities and Exhibitions:**

Our space is used for university presentations, demonstrations, mass, authors/artist, guest speakers, workshops, performances, celebrations etc.

For example, we celebrated “Christmas in the Commons” by holding a Wii Dance, MarioKart and Glee Sing-along Challenge.

Future plans include a partnership with the Photo teacher to offer a digital display of work that will change each week

In June, as a year-end activity, we will re-create the Hunger Games for our gr. 7 and 8 students.

**Learning Commons Partnership Teams 2012:**

The Learning Commons has partnered with:

- Guidance to run the Careers Human Library with over 30 living books speaking to 190 gr. 10 Career students.
- The English department to host a Spoken Word Artist to celebrate Poetry Month. The L.C. ran an on-line Poetry Contest.
- Student Success and our School Council to run a parent-teacher book club using Dr. Neufeld and Dr. Mate’s Hold On To Your Kids.
- The Eng4C teachers to teach research and citation skills using interactive on-line tutorials at the SMART board and citations tools.
- The Technology Book club, reading Cellphones in the Classroom and shared a lesson plan for using the L.C. blog, audioboo.fm and polleverywhere.com to create QR code posters to advertise the Poetry Contest.
- The elearning consultant with funding from Speak Up to facilitate the Teen Tech Club students to share their tech expertise with other teens through webinars.
- Student Services and 7/8 staff to provide mentoring services for the Real Guys Read Club and the Real Girls Count Math Club.

### **Reading Engagement:**

Our high school has one of the highest circulation statistics for fiction in our board. This is in part due to a school wide silent reading program called FeVeR. The Learning Commons supports this reading program with daily written announcements to promote books from our collection. We also run a Red Maple and White Pine book club. We connect our book club members and the school community to the books on the reading list through a blog that lists author links, book trailers and other information. Next year we will actively promote the use of the social networking features of Destiny. Our Anime club uses the L.C. plasma TV for viewing and the SMART board for gaming.

### **Developing the Individual in the Learning Commons:**

This aspect of the Learning Commons is our biggest challenge. Our work is to capitalize on the tools and social media to further learning opportunities for critical and creative thought. How do we encourage students to become responsible digital citizens? How do we promote imagination and creativity when students are primarily engaged in the pursuit of entertainment?

### **Pedagogical Shifts:**

In a traditional library setting, the primary directive was to collaborate with teachers to support learners with print resources and the research process.

Before the transition, teachers had stopped using our print collection for research in favour of computer labs for Googling. As a result, we had less access to teachers for collaboration.

There is a paradigm shift from collaboration with teachers to connecting directly with students through the virtual library, mobile devices etc.

Ironically, as traditional computer labs become obsolete, we may see more teachers accessing the Learning Commons to use our Wi-Fi and devices to support learners.

The Learning Commons is available to teachers who wish to differentiate learning. . Currently, opportunities to collaborate are often feast or famine.

We have transitioned to a Learning Commons so quickly that there is a lag between our vision and practice. We will work to address this gap by marketing our new services next year.

### **Creating a Culture of Inquiry:**

The Learning Commons has an important role to play in supporting student Critical and Creative Thinking and teachers with Discovery and Guided Inquiry. We are still underutilized in this regard. Our long range goal is to create a school-wide Research



project with the all gr. 9 students to teach the four stages of the Research Process. We hope that the standardization of a school Research model will be adopted by all teachers in all subject areas. Presently, we work with interested teachers in an ad hoc fashion. We are also trying to reach students through our virtual library resources with just in time delivery of instruction when they need it for any aspect of the research process. This is another area of growth and challenge.

The investment in the library with the vision of the Learning Commons to support 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners has promise. Our school is well on the way towards realizing the potential.

### Author Biographies:

Sarah Murray is a qualified teacher-librarian, who began her career teaching English 14 years ago. She began her library career by building the library at St. Joseph from scratch and is celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school by piloting the Learning Commons transition. Sarah is also an active OLA member and is on both the Red Maple and White Pine Steering Committees.

Donna Presz is the Library Services Supervisor for the Ottawa Catholic School Board. Over the last 17 years she has worked in private, academic, special, and mostly school libraries at both elementary and senior elementary schools. Donna ran the Derry Byrne Teacher Resource Centre for 7 years and is now the key contact for the Learning Commons transition.

References

Together For Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons. (2010). Toronto: Ontario Library Association.