***Engaging Students in the Heritage Christian Schools Learning Commons***
February 2014

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Ten years ago I hesitantly responded to a calling for a position as a virtual teacher librarian for Heritage Christian Schools, based in Kelowna B.C.   Heritage Christian Blended Commons serves a [physical campus](#) of 300 students, a [distance learning school](#) of 1682 Grade K-9 students and 438 Grade 10-12 students, and [BC Online School](#), our cross-enrolled division of 2500 students.

Having worked as a public librarian and teacher librarian for the Surrey School district, I was nervous and excited to find myself in this unique, distance, learning environment.  In many respects I felt a little like a duck out of water; working from home, and having to rely on different technologies to connect with my staff and students.  There was no "one" library or web portal I could research on virtual libraries in Canada.  I felt like the blind leading the blind!

The physical commons started as a small, campus school library, incorporating physical books, and other media.  Library staff and teachers had initiated the creation of physical resource kits, based on BC learning outcomes, to send to distance learning patrons all over the school district via Canpar.  We needed to come up with an overall hybrid plan and create  a three year long-term goal, where physical space would not be an issue.   We also began to think of ideas which might lead to building a new culture in our school, where we could share digital citizenship skills in a safe environment.

Our first task at hand was to establish our library work as academic, current, reliable and valid.  We had to start with baby steps.  Distance learning has its own culture, and part of that culture meant engaging our teachers and families in a trusting and collaborative relationship.  We had to  ensure that sharing information with staff members was personal and friendly, Canadian and from a Christian perspective.  Service and discipleship have always been our motto, but recently we added INNOVATION to our work ethic!  We enjoyed working one on one with families and students supporting them in bibliographic skills, whilst running virtual classrooms on Blackboard Collaborate and Skype to share research skills, book clubs and technology training.

With our techie team we established a [web-linking database](#), which would contain all the pertinent links needed for reliable retrieval of information for all school topics.   We started sharing these links with teachers on a current awareness basis, and within a newsletter.  [Content Curation](#) became a reliable solution to searching online, and sharing efficiently, via [Scoop it](#), [Pinterest](#) and [Mentor Mob.](#)

Along with these links for current awareness, our team added 21$^{st}$ century databases such as [BrainPop,](#) [Discovery Streaming,](#) [Ebscohost,](#) [Scholastic Expert Space,](#) [Enchanted Learning](#), The [Canadian Reader](#) and for reading and adaptive technologies, [RAZ Kids](#), [Reading Eggs](#), [Gizmos](#) and  [IXL.](#)  Many of these programs enhance accurate, reliable and academic information retrieval, and allowed for learning in multi-sensory platforms based on correlated BC learning outcomes.   As our school grew, so did the need for a 21$^{st}$ century [digital learning commons,](#) which would encourage collaboration and inquiry based learning.
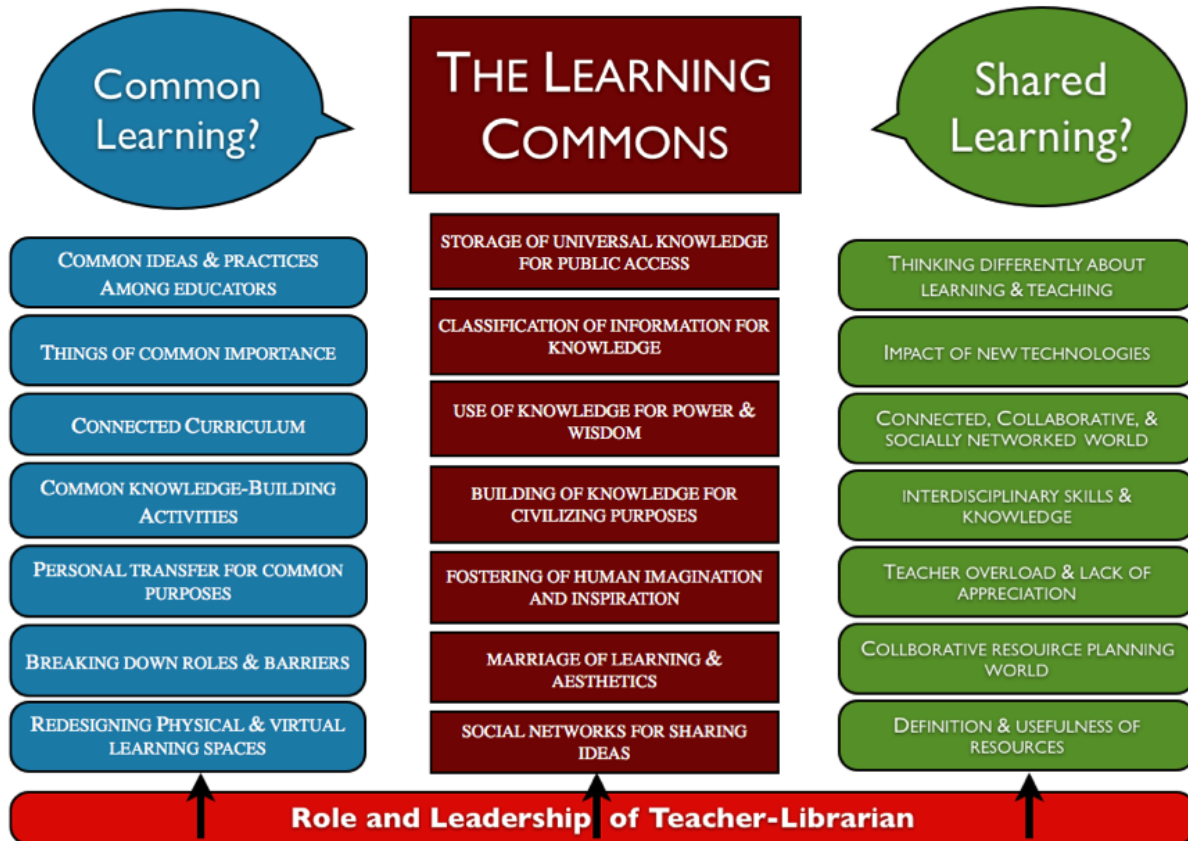
**Philosophy of a Learning Commons**
Enter the philosophy of a learning commons, and the book Building a Learning Commons, written by Carol Koechlin and David Loertscher. This book was a turning point for our library going from a separate online and physical library into one virtual blended hub! The beauty of this theory was that we could envision a new world based on enhanced communication and information retrieval. We wanted a theory that would meet the needs of our whole school body, and provide a safe space for our students to explore e learning from a social perspective!

On our team were three principals, and six librarians. Thankfully the vision was embraced and supported, and although the changes were consuming and sometimes overwhelming, our team was united to work towards the vision in both physical and virtual commons. Working from a virtual design space (which included play, comfort, light, different seating patterns, community, multipurpose spaces/rooms, portable technology, and different learning needs) we would move towards a mirror image in the physical commons.

Some of the underlying principles as shared in this diagram below, were based on the research done by Koechlin and Loertscher to establish the library as the meeting place for; common and shared learning, research, technical expertise, experiential learning, literacy, new multi-disciplinary spaces and the storage of information by a group of teachers, leaders, students and others who would be bound by a common goal. This goal was to create a new community that was social, democratic and collaborative. The virtual and physical space would embody an information centre, a literacy centre, a knowledge building centre and also an experimental learning centre.

## The Learning Commons: Two Key Questions
Tim Gauntley 2011©

**Common Learning?**

**THE LEARNING COMMONS**

**Shared Learning?**

| Common Learning? | The Learning Commons | Shared Learning? |
|---|---|---|
| COMMON IDEAS & PRACTICES AMONG EDUCATORS | STORAGE OF UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE FOR PUBLIC ACCESS | THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT LEARNING & TEACHING |
| THINGS OF COMMON IMPORTANCE | CLASSIFICATION OF INFORMATION FOR KNOWLEDGE | IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES |
| CONNECTED CURRICULUM | USE OF KNOWLEDGE FOR POWER & WISDOM | CONNECTED, COLLABORATIVE, & SOCIALLY NETWORKED WORLD |
| COMMON KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES | BUILDING OF KNOWLEDGE FOR CIVILIZING PURPOSES | INTERDISCIPLINARY SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE |
| PERSONAL TRANSFER FOR COMMON PURPOSES | FOSTERING OF HUMAN IMAGINATION AND INSPIRATION | TEACHER OVERLOAD & LACK OF APPRECIATION |
| BREAKING DOWN ROLES & BARRIERS | MARRIAGE OF LEARNING & AESTHETICS | COLLBORATIVE RESOUIRCE PLANNING WORLD |
| REDESIGNING PHYSICAL & VIRTUAL LEARNING SPACES | SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR SHARING IDEAS | DEFINITION & USEFULNESS OF RESOURCES |

**Role and Leadership of Teacher-Librarian**

http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-kR3ukESBWN4/TtPANckhWFl/AAAAAAAAAIY/Shk-lvbVxjA/s400/LearningCommons2KeyQuestions.001.png

**Celebrating the learning commons as a Social Meeting place, and Leadership tool!**

We had already ventured forth into the world of social media. Having enjoyed blogging on Blogger, Twitter, Google Plus/Hangouts, and Facebook, for my own professional development, and having researched the effects of social media and digital locally and down south in U.S. Libraries I knew that our students needed help with developing a digital identity. Cyber bullying was on the increase, and students did not have the time to evaluate what they were searching online. Research from the Kaiser Report in 2012 showed the following results from their research amongst Internet users.

- 69% are social networking site users
- 59% share photos and videos
- 46% creators; 41% curators
- 37% contribute rankings and ratings
- 33% create content tags
- 30% share personal creations

- 26% post comments on sites and blogs
- 16% use Twitter
- 14% are bloggers
- 18% (of smartphone owners) share their locations; 74% get location info and do location sharing

This new learning space would not be defined in one traditional space, but would encompass many spaces where the net generation could use mobile technology to access information. Educause defines this goal as moving beyond the Industrial age of learning, towards an age of education in the cloud, with teacher as facilitator, and classroom engagement based on social constructivist theories.  In the book "*Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out"*, author Ito Mizuko shares the stats related to young people's use of digital technology: today's teens seem constantly plugged in to video games, social networks sites, and text messaging.  They are doing this because their learning has shifted from individual understanding,  towards group social interaction and engagement with shared cultural forms.

 Our first step was to launch a virtual identity with a Wordpress website, and a Ning - a private social network.  We established our own networking rules, created a moderation team, and launched our virtual spaces within two years of each other. The hcslearningcommons.org site would house the base from which our families, staff and students could connect over book clubs, curation, blogs and media.  Our hope was to help our students move beyond consumption towards content creation.

**Building Culture**
Ning was to become a community for all parents and students.   But we have discovered that our students would stake a claim to the Ning, whilst our parents preferred our school Facebook site.    Students share their media, connect over homework, write blogs, poetry, join in book clubs and love collaborating in the chat room. This is their social sandbox, or "Experimental Centre" where they can experiment, converse over issues, ask for help, and share media with friends and teachers.  Concurrently we can help guide conversations and encourage digital citizenship.  Peer based learning goes hand in hand with some of the Sugatra Mitra research in Hole in the Wall, where students help teach and coach each other to learn new concepts.

Events enjoyed on the Ning include Digital Photography, Poetry, Music sharing, Innovator's Awards, Readathons, Book Clubs, Informal reading and writing events, Design a School Logo, and virtual camps.  Teachers who have a gift in these areas help judge and coordinate these events.  Groups that originate from common interest include Grad groups, Chapel group, groups from different grades, groups that like specific books or music, groups that want to discuss politics, and other controversial topics like bullying, abortion and evolution/creation debates. Informal assessment happens on our Ning and we have recently started awarding digital badges. All content creation is shared via social media and on our newsletters.  Our students

have started their own [newsletter](#) produced on the Ning,  and shared on Issuu.  This is informal assessment at its very best, and encourages students to become content curators!  In the physical commons these events happen with live events, creative bulletin boards, tea and hot chocolate for high school and book club discussions, music and NOISE!
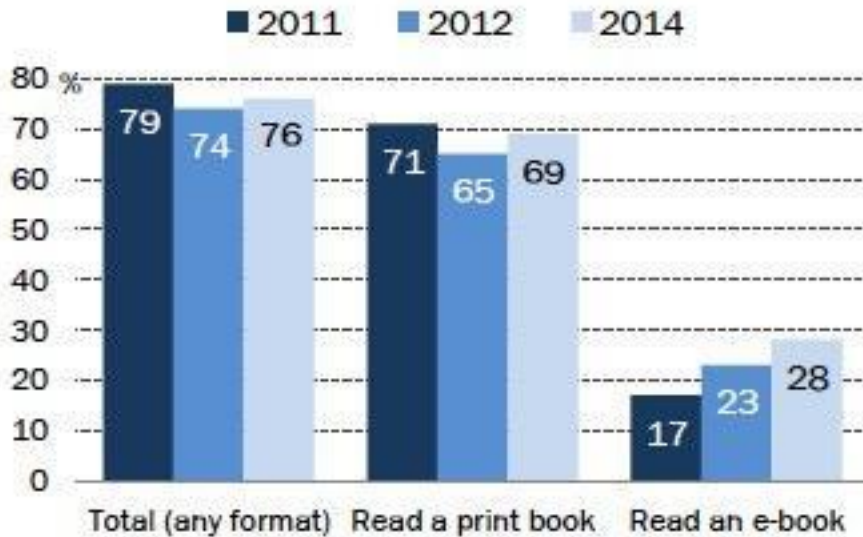
Our website,  [www.hcslearningcommons.org](http://www.hcslearningcommons.org)  continues to grow and develop as we add to our collection.  Editing it is an ongoing basis! We are not tech experts, but we are enjoying becoming lifelong tech learners.   Regular, blog postings keep patrons informed about learning commons promotions, and have become a starting point for all of our staff and patrons as they research and collaborate in the learning commons, connect with book clubs, catalogue, digital resources and social media.


**E Reading and Digital Devices**


Recent research from Pew Internet reveals more young people are using mobile devices for e reading, 50 % of adults own a tablet or Ereader, and 28% of all those who read a book in 2014 read it on an e reader.  This is an 8% increase since last year.

# Most adults read a book in the past year; print remains most popular, but e-reading is on the rise

*Among American adults 18 and older, the % who read at least one book (in total, in print, or as an e-book) in the past year*



Legend: ■ 2011 ■ 2012 ■ 2014

Total (any format): 79, 74, 76
Read a print book: 71, 65, 69
Read an e-book: 17, 23, 28

\* "Total" also includes those who listen to audio books (not shown).

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet Project Omnibus Survey, January 2-5, 2014. N= 1005 American adults ages 18 and older. Interviews were conducted on landlines and cell phones, in English and Spanish.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/e-reading-rises-as-device-ownership-jumps/e-readers1/

## As tablet ownership grows, more use them for e-books

*Among all e-book readers ages 18 and older, the % who read e-books on each device*

■ 2011  ■ 2014

| Device | 2011 | 2014 |
|---|---|---|
| E-reader | 41 | 57 |
| Tablet | 23 | 55 |
| Computer | 42 | 29 |
| Cell phone | 28 | 32 |
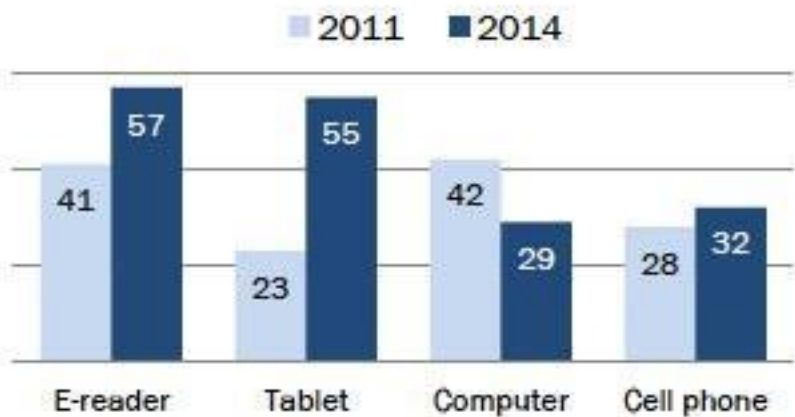
Source: Pew Research Center surveys, Dec 2011-January 2014. Interviews were conducted on landlines and cell phones, in English and Spanish.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

As a means to address this shift towards digital media the BC Ministry launched their own draft digital literacy learning outcomes in 2013.  These new outcomes will address grade by grade:

- How great books foster conversation, inviting critical and deeper thinking
- Non fiction can be blended into reading comprehension
- Reading across the curriculum captures struggling students
- Students read to learn, motivation is based on text
- Memory work is being replaced with analytical skills
- Technology can be used to foster educational purpose

 An E Library would imbibe many of these digital literacy outcomes and more!

We had already bought into the idea of a digital book collection, via E and Audiobooks, and

although the stats in 2012 were showing only 20 % of readers were engaging with digital media, we decided to take the risk and subscribe to [Overdrive.](#)  Our patrons needed help with learning how to use e readers, so we purchased e readers to send out to patrons with the idea of practicing before purchasing.  We marketed our small collection and as it grew, so did the technology, including changes in design and software. Overdrive launched [Overdrive READ](#) last year, which allowed patrons to read right from their browser, and removed the extra option of downloading software.  Students in our virtual worlds classes started ordering their curriculum for book clubs, our [book clubs](#) had instant access to online resources, as did our online teachers.

When the new [2015  BC learning outcomes](#) came out this year in draft form we were ready to research curriculum, and discovered to our great joy many downloadable e books in open PDF format.  Our patrons could have free online curriculum at their fingertips, and the distribution rights allowed a certain percentage to be photocopied.  This would encourage our families to have easy access to digital curriculum.  Our learning commons staff, have begun the process of moving our [physical commons kits ](#)(which are made up of physical resources along with teaching and parent guides) to virtual kits which are open access.  We hope to have all our teachers contributing in some aspect of this big think tank.  Experience has shown over time that with excellent marketing strategies, and educational webinars, our patrons are now using e books more than ever (approximately 30-40 % of our users).  Immediate access (24 hour time delay in requests and additions to the collection) is part of the winning combination.  This year Overdrive has added many more educational publishers to the mix, and is constantly negotiating to add Canadian content.  We are hoping to see some of the big name curriculum publishers' move towards this type of digital sharing.

**Physical Commons**
As our virtual presence increased digitally, so did our campus learning commons, which housed our collection of books, media, e book readers, iPads, and new this year Chromebooks.  [1:1 Learning on tablets](#) was already showing excellent results in our campus high school, and our high school administrator did his [research on Chromebooks](#), before helping us move these into our learning commons space.  By the end of year three in our long term goals we will have enough technology to make a classroom teacher excited about bringing their class into the learning commons for project based learning.  The purchase of a digital reader, and a large screen television meant we were able to transmit live storytimes for distance learning patrons.  Our campus team is pursuing inquiry based learning at the next level, with an [iBuddy program](#) which is a student to student exploration using iPads and educational apps.  The outcomes include community building, tech-literacy and leadership development.   For an inviting approach to book reviewing, student led investigation and promotion leads to peer inspiration!  Student creations are shared around the learning commons for all to see and admire.  Their purpose is to inspire creativity, participation and peer affirmation.

Along with the new virtual space our physical spaces needed to support the same vision.  We began replacing older furniture in the commons with more interactive tables and newer shelving.  Space constraints have caused some minor issues, even with constant weeding, so we are

constantly researching new space/s within our virtual commons.  Adjoining the physical campus book club in grade 6/7 we have virtual book clubs from grades 4-9 which run on Blackboard Collaborate and integrate perfectly into the **Literacy component** of the learning commons. High school students in grades 11 and 12 have helped moderate these book clubs.

Going one step further last year we incorporated a global vision and collaborated with a school in New Guernsey England.  The collaboration around literacy and culture was illuminating as we shared via blogging and virtual/physical classroom. The cultural nuances were highlighted as we shared in differences in cultural expressions from a British, and Canadian author perspective.  Virtual camps on Google Hangouts, and Blackboard help our  students connect using Google Drive and Google documents .

**Special Education**
New this year we added a special education library component, and now have special education consultants who advise us regarding the latest in curriculum and adaptive technologies.  Based on their advice we are now growing a large collection of materials to help students learn with multi-sensory devices.  We have an extensive Susan Barton collection, Dyslexia kits, books on different gifts and differences, and other technologies to assist multi-sensory learning.

**Alberta**
In the fall of 2013 our schools partnered with an online school in Alberta, ACOS.  We are currently researching a decentralisation process to help provide digital and non-digital resources.  Right now we ship materials all over the province and also to Alberta.  As we incorporate libraries from a distance we realize the value of keeping media digital.

We are now enjoying year three as a learning commons.  The beauty of the learning commons vision is that libraries are not only the vibrant hub of the school, but are also the center for innovation, cutting edge technology, and inquiry based learning.  Students and families will flock to the learning commons because they have a sense of community and belonging.  They have found a place that will encourage intellectual conversation around literacy, and discipleship. Within our schools we also run an immersive technology program which allows for students to learn, create and research in virtual worlds.  Finding a niche within this program is also on our list for the future.

Change is the epitome of learning, and the learning commons theme resonates with this in mind.  We realise that in a year or two we will need to research the statistics again, and move forward to welcome new ideas and technologies.  Change has occurred not because of one thing we did right, but because the tide in libraries had changed, and we needed to ride that change. This vision has allowed all of our library team to become digital leaders in their own areas within the commons. We are thankful to a new learning commons vision, an amazing learning commons team, a super community of student content creators, and an incredibly supportive administration team who have helped make our learning commons dreams possible!

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