

Equity and Social Justice in The Library Learning Commons

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A long time mentor of mine often spoke about the importance of proving our worth and value to all stakeholders in our school communities. This idea stuck with me for years but I now see a deeper, more powerful potential in her message. Aware that some elementary school boards had eliminated teacher librarians, I always saw this as a version of self-preserving job security. Making our role invaluable and our practice transparent seemed enough.

But can we challenge ourselves to take that thinking even further?

I wonder if the real value of the library learning commons and those of us charged with its care, is the potential to empower learners to identify and deal with issues of equity and social justice.

A carefully, intentionally designed library learning commons is intended to be a completely safe, accessible environment for the entire school community. This does not mean we can be viewed as neutral. With each choice we make in our collection, our schedule, our decor, our language, our routines, we have the potential to take an equity stance. Whether we realize it or not, we are sending a message about what we value with even the tiniest decision. If our mandate is to include all members of our community in a school-wide hub of learning, then we must foster inclusion and equity to be successful. As we evolve and grow we can offer learning experiences and spaces for open dialogue, debate, questioning, inquiry and discovery in any area of interest. Putting aside for a moment the logistical challenges of scheduling, if our doors are always metaphorically open to opposing views, new ideas and creative initiatives, then it only makes sense that addressing issues of equity and social justice is already embedded in our practice.

Here is the truth though - all of that sounds lofty and lovely but let's be honest, it also sounds a bit overwhelming!

I encourage all of us to resist the urge to let that feeling sidetrack our equity journey. The library learning commons is the ideal space for students who feel silenced, disenfranchised or outside the perceived norm to find solace. It can also be the perfect setting for students to discover and question confusing inequities or injustices facing our society. We can encourage and foster critical thinking and inquiry in a safe, thoughtful manner. Supporting our students to develop deeper understandings of the world, themselves and their own power to become agents of change is an amazing opportunity.

Author Libba Bray is credited with the following quote about libraries:

The library card is a passport to wonders and miracles, glimpses into other lives, religions, experiences, the hopes and dreams and strivings of ALL human beings, and it is this passport that opens our eyes and hearts to the world beyond our front doors, that is one of our best hopes against tyranny, xenophobia, hopelessness, despair, anarchy, and ignorance.

(Bray, 2010)

Although her reference was not directed at school libraries themselves, for me it certainly applies. Occasionally I feel overwhelmed creating a library learning commons that acts as a safe space for these important discussions around power, oppression, bias, injustice and social awareness. In those moments I find I often return to the vision set forth in OSLA's [Together for Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons](http://togetherforlearning.ca/t4l-vision-document/) <http://togetherforlearning.ca/t4l-vision-document/>

I also ask myself reflective questions and revisit resources that help me to consider each of my choices through the lens of equity and social justice. Obviously each educator must partake in their own equity journey and develop their own list of questions and resources to support their work, but hopefully the ideas below may help along the way.

Reflective Questions and Equity Resources:

Fostering Equity and Social Justice in the Book Collection

Questions to consider:

- Is there obvious or hidden bias?
- Whose voice is being heard?
- Whose voice is left out?
- How are power and oppression addressed?
- Are we reinforcing a stereotype or “single story”?

Resources & Inspiration:

“The Danger Of A Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Adichie, 2009)

This Ted Talk is a fabulous reminder of the subtle daily messages we send to learners in the texts we select and celebrate. It clearly highlights the dangers of giving a “single story” version of the world around us.

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=tedspread

“Building on Windows and Mirrors: Encouraging the Disruption of “Single Stories” Through Children’s Literature” (Tschida, Ryan & Swenson Ticknor, 2014) is a great article that I return to often to remind myself that text can act both as a mirror and window into the lives and experiences of ourselves and others. Like the Ted Talk it helps us reflect on the risks of the “single story”

http://www.childrensliteratureassembly.org/docs/JCL-40-1-Article_Tschida.pdf

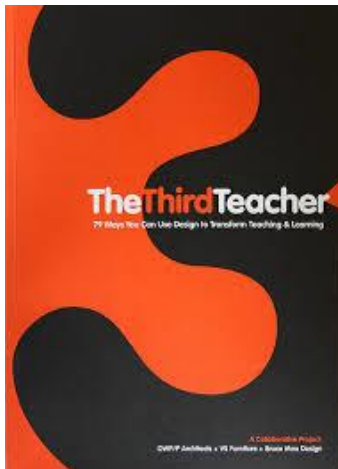
Creating an Equity-based Environment through Decor and Language

Questions to consider:

- Is the space authentically inviting to all who enter?
- Does the space reflect a wide range of learning needs and opportunities?
- Can the students change and adapt the space to meet their evolving learning needs?
- Upon entering the space would others be able to identify our values and beliefs about how children learn?
- Whose needs are being met? (Mine or the kids?)
- When we discuss the space do we use language that clearly indicates student voice and ownership are at the centre of our planning and practice?
- Does our signage, wall decor, entry doors, etc., represent our students' thinking, creativity and communication needs?

Resources & Inspiration:

The Third Teacher: 79 Ways You Can Use Design to Transform Teaching and Learning (OWP/P Architects, VS Furniture, and Bruce Mau Design, 2010)



This book is a valuable resource for reflecting on our learning environments. It challenges us to rethink and consider the choices we make as we design our space, select furniture, signage, function and honour student voice and usage of the library learning commons.

“The Third Teacher: Designing the Learning Environment for Mathematics and Literacy, K to 8” (Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2012)

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_ThirdTeacher.pdf

Although this monograph separates mathematics from the literacy, I love the questions for educators and other stakeholders to consider when intentionally designing a learning space to foster success for all learners.

Embedding Equity in Scheduling and Routines

Questions to consider:

- How can we make the library learning commons truly open to all learners and learning needs?
- Does our technology access model help to level the playing field for all students to have the tools required for 21st century learning?
- How can we support collaborative instruction while keeping student interest at the centre?
- What structures do we have in place to foster love of reading and develop literacy skills?
- Are the scheduling methods and other routines designed for adult convenience or to encourage independence in our learners?
- Is flexibility to meet changing learning needs a foundation of the structures in place?

Resources & Inspiration:

Dr. Stuart Shanker and self-regulation

Using the core belief that we can trust children and the message of Dr. Shanker (2017) that there is no such thing as a bad kid, our scheduling and established routines can send a daily message of equity and value to our learners. <https://self-reg.ca>

“Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Towards Equity and Inclusivity in Ontario Schools” (Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2013)

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_ResponsivePedagogy.pdf

Truthfully this monograph could support many aspects of the creation of a library learning commons that values equity and social justice. The reason I selected it for this section is that I often find the systemic structures we put in place lack the cultural awareness and thought that would benefit our students. Using the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy we can carefully consider and give voice to the identities of our learners by establishing schedules and routines that support equitable access and varied learning opportunities.

“Introduction to the SAMR Model” (Common Sense Media, 2017)

<https://www.common Sense Media.org/videos/introduction-to-the-samr-model#>

Although this video is just a simple introduction I find it is always important to remind myself that as wonderful as technology and our board’s BYOD policy can be, it does have the potential to create/highlight gaps in privilege and access. Balancing this access out through collaborative, thoughtful planning requires us to consider where technology is essential to our learners’ success.

But there is always a “so what?” moment...

So what does all of this look like in action?

What initiatives/examples can we share to demonstrate this approach with staff and students alike?

What do our students say about all of this?

In the short time since our school opened, we are just starting year 3, we have worked to co-create initiatives and pedagogical practices that reflect a learning stance grounded in social justice and equity. This means that we will not always get it right and that the initiatives at our school will look different than those around us. Recognizing that this work is messy and challenging and ever changing I often refer to this powerful quote from author Maya Angelou:



<http://emilysquotes.com/do-the-best-you-can-until-you-know-better-then-when-you/>

The work of equity and social justice has taken many forms in our library learning commons and throughout our school. These include but are certainly not limited to the following:

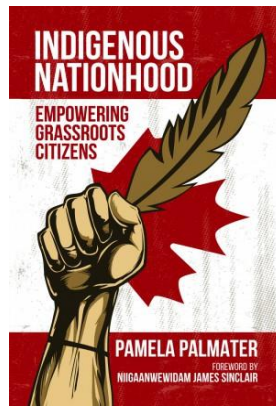
- Intentional and critical collection building
- Free flow access to the library for all learners
- Multi-lingual student created signage and dual language texts
- Student-led Social Justice Club
- Middle grades GSA
- Partnership with Right to Play Canada <http://www.righttoplay.ca/Pages/default.aspx>
- Large scale events such as Orange Shirt Day, Black History Month, Day of Pink, Asian Heritage Month, PRIDE and more
- Numerous staff inquiry-based PD
- Multiple anti-bullying initiatives
- Mental health initiatives
- Open Learning Makerspace initiative

For the purposes of this paper I have selected two of these initiatives to highlight in the appendices below. My hope is that the descriptions will inspire readers to face any fears they may have about dealing with issues of equity and social justice in their practice. Seeking support from colleagues and valuing student voice throughout the process of placing equity at the forefront of library learning commons design allows for long-term growth and capacity building. It reminds us that we are not expected to have all the answers for our school community members but, rather, that we are expected to encourage and foster a learning environment that helps others to find and create those answers themselves.

Appendix 1 - Staff Wide Inquiry into Embedding First Nation, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Our Practice

During the summer of 2016, I made a conscious choice to re-educate myself about Canada's long ignored history of cultural genocide against First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples. I began by connecting with a group of interested students, the Coordinator of First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education for our board and reading, reading, reading!

My first read was *Indigenous Nationhood: Empowering Grassroots Citizens* by Pamela Palmater (Palmater, 2015).



The experience of reading the blog posts gathered in the book was just that - an experience. I was immediately emotionally connected to the text. I was felt angry and sad and embarrassed and most of all - ignorant! To that end I wrote my own post at the time entitled "Owning My Ignorance" <http://mrsjbrown1975.edublogs.org/2016/07/08/owning-my-ignorance/>

Since then I have found myself keenly aware of the importance of this conversation - on Twitter and Facebook, at baseball games, on newscasts, in school hallways, staff dialogue, classrooms, during the morning announcements and most of all in the school library learning commons. I have continued to read, reflect, engage and ask questions. I am so incredibly far from being an expert on this topic that I would say I am just scratching the surface. But I can say that I am conscious and I am aware. My ongoing reading list thus far (see list at the end of this section) has reflected this desire to deepen my own understanding.

I recently read *The Comeback: How Aboriginals Are Reclaiming Power And Influence* by John Ralston Saul (Saul, 2014).

FOR THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS, ABORIGINAL PEOPLES
HAVE BEEN MAKING A COMEBACK- A REMARKABLE
COMEBACK FROM A TERRIFYINGLY LOW
POINT OF POPULATION, OF LEGAL RESPECT,
OF CIVILIZATIONAL STABILITY.
A COMEBACK TO A POSITION
OF POWER, INFLUENCE
AND CIVILIZATIONAL
CREATIVITY...
THE COMEBACK
JOHN RALSTON SAUL

The quote below stuck with me.

“We must reinstall a national narrative built upon the centrality of the Aboriginal peoples’ past, present and future. And the policies of the country must reflect that centrality, both conceptually and financially.” (Saul, 2014).

School libraries revolve around narrative. Sharing of long-told fairy tales and fables, the inspiring images of adventure found in graphic novels, the seemingly effortless settings described in the fantastical worlds of magical tales and the popular early novels that transition the learner to independent reading are at the heart of every thriving elementary school library.

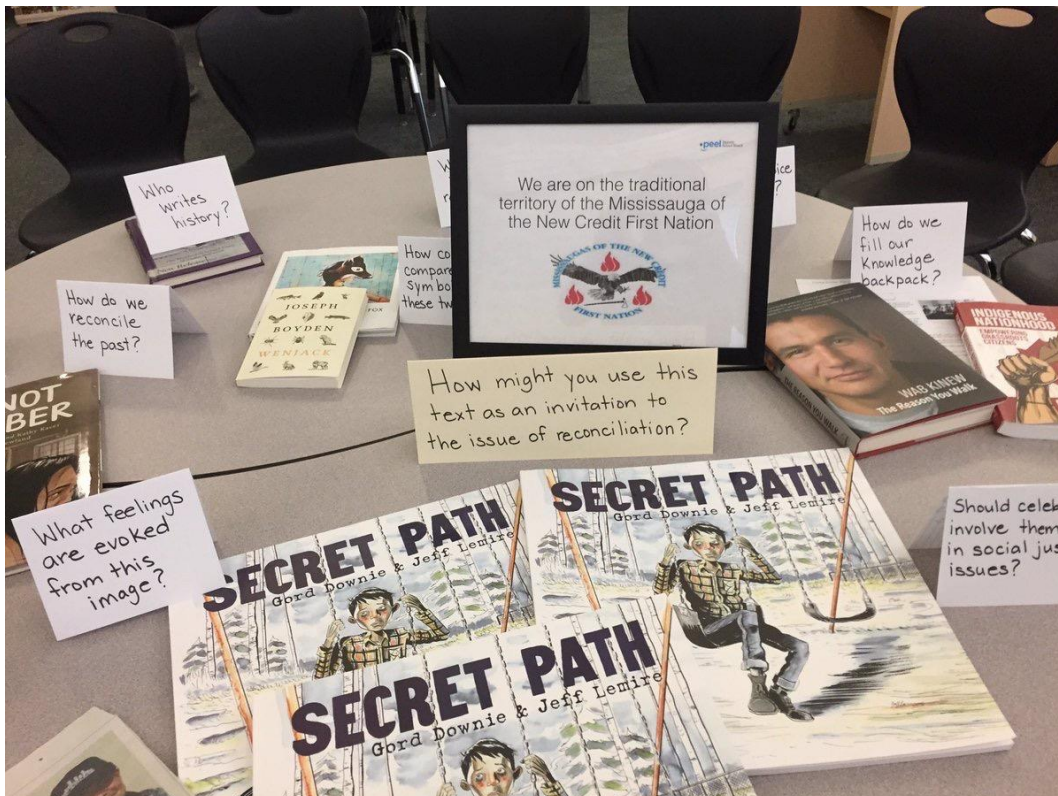
But another type of narrative exists and that is the narrative of our own history. Non-fiction texts are, I could argue, a form of narrative full of powerful information shared through the lens/bias of the author, editor, publisher and more. In my current practice no narrative is more essential to our future as a country than telling the honest, painful truth about how Canada came to be and how that legacy continues to impact the daily lives of children, youth and adults who are members of First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities.

To that end members of our staff introduced a staff wide inquiry opportunity into embedding this narrative in our daily practice. We were not quite sure where to begin so we started with a gathering student voice about their understanding of the history and current lived experience of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples. We are a school board that reads an Indigenous land acknowledgment each morning prior to singing O Canada and even prior to this had posted the land acknowledgement and a treaties map at the entrance to the library learning commons. Yet we worried that our students and staff were not completely sure about the true significance of these gestures. We were afraid that without deeper dialogue they would become daily “white noise” in our school environment. A simple long sheet of brown paper was hung on the bulletin board at in the hallway outside the library with markers left close by for students to record their thinking. On the paper was a copy of the daily land acknowledgement and a simple question:

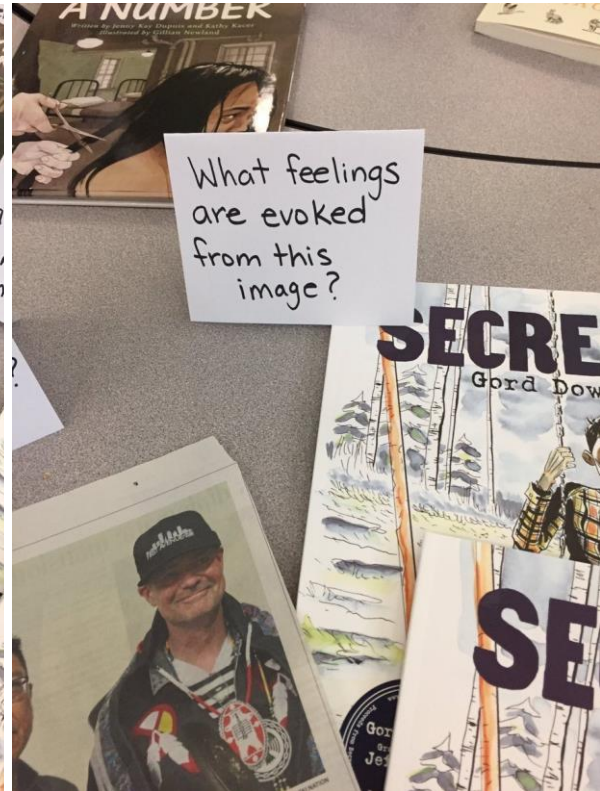
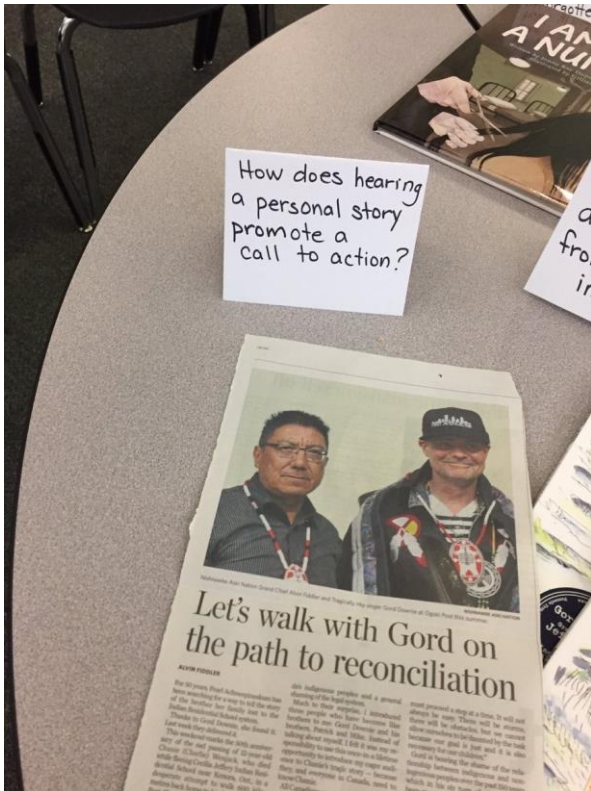
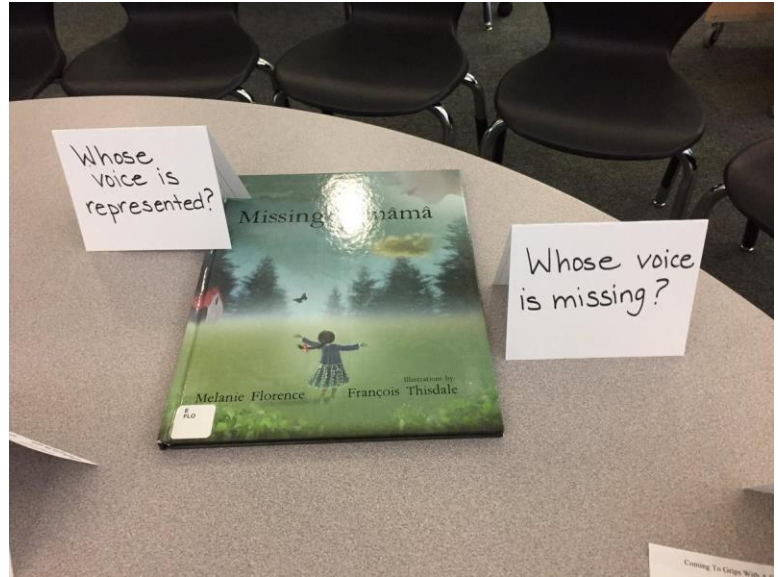
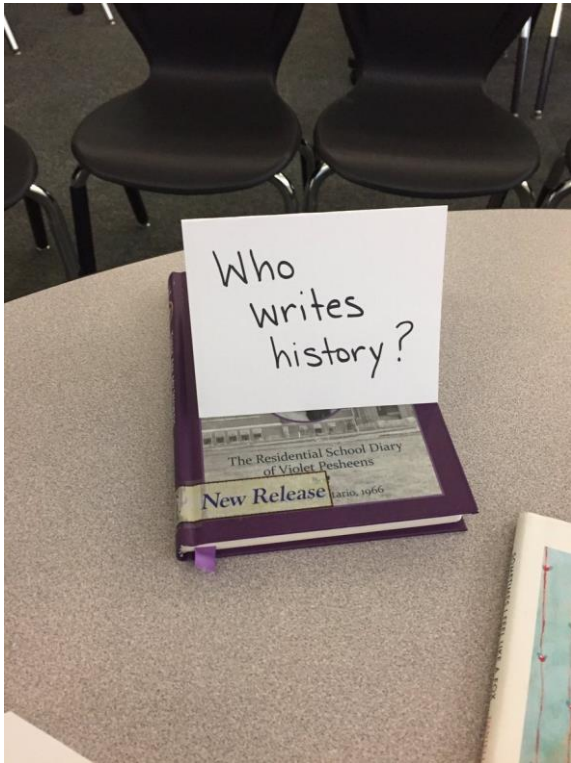
“Why do we read this each day on the announcements?”

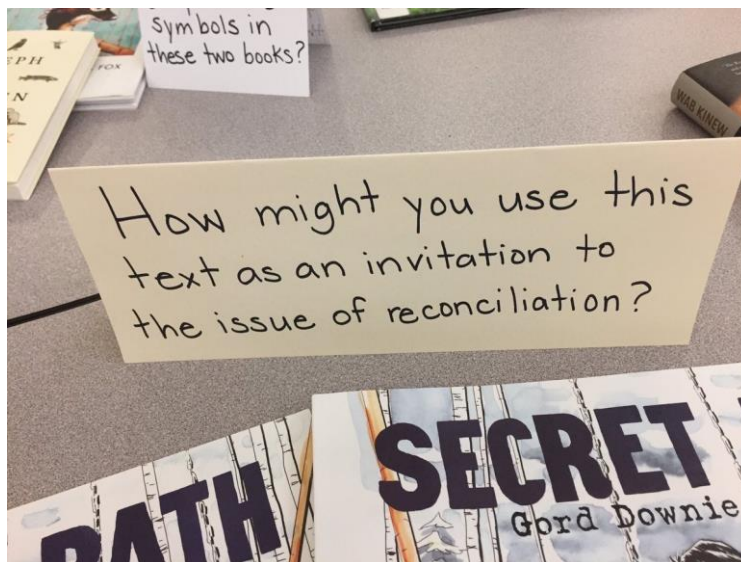
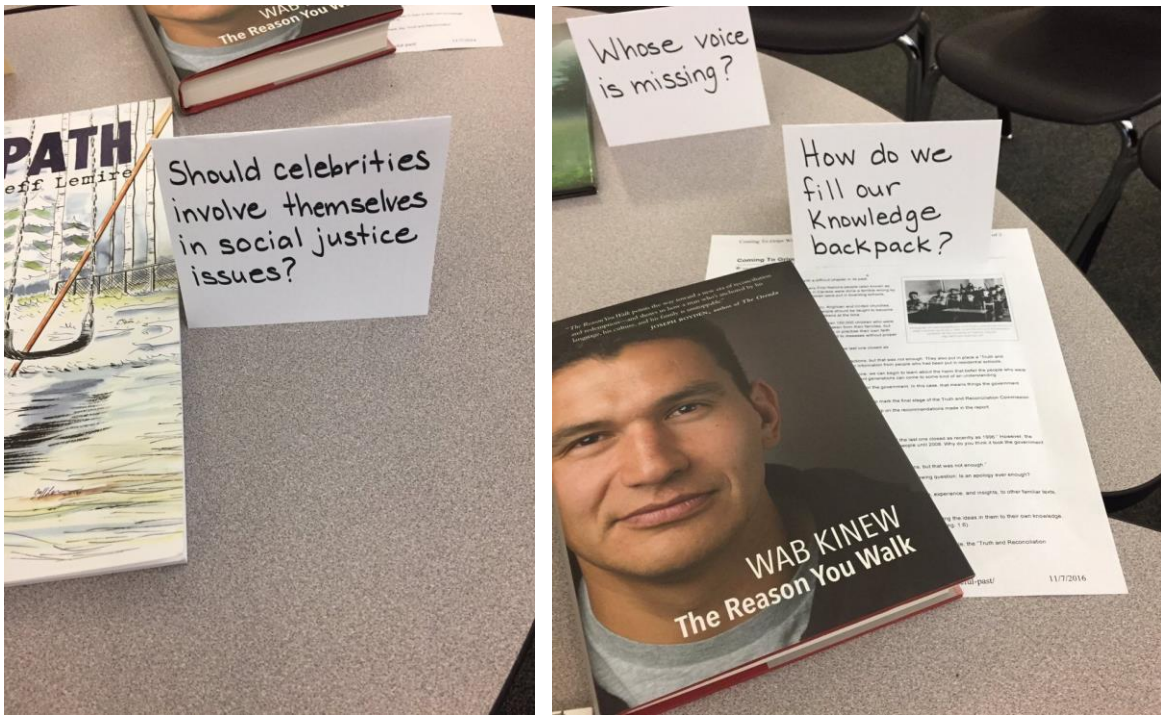
The answers showed what we already suspected. After about a week we reviewed the responses and found that our lovely and kind students thought it was important but that they had almost no idea why. So this simple but powerful land acknowledgement became the inspiration for our staff wide inquiry experience.

Here are some images of the meeting design, resources and prompts we used to begin the conversation.









By starting with staff and intentional collection building it was our hope that they would bring their learning and further questions to their learners. Many educators in our school took this experience and these resources back to their classrooms and to their learners. The adapted the questions and lens to meet the needs of their students and move the dialogue forward in a meaningful way that goes below the surface to create deeper understanding. By starting with staff and intentional collection building it was our hope that they would bring their learning and further questions to their learners.

This year many staff are participating in Orange Shirt Day to highlight the horrific intergenerational trauma caused by Canada's residential school policies. <http://www.orangeshirtday.org>

We are encouraging students to ask us about the meaning of the shirts and many teachers are using picture books from our library collection to embed this narrative into their classrooms. We are sharing the stories of residential school survivors and their families through books and videos so that their own voices are heard. Each year we hope to embed this truth about the history Canada in a more and more authentic manner.



The school library learning commons has the power to change the narrative around First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. We must use that power to move the dialogue forward with staff, to engage our communities and to inspire our students to become a generation of leaders who will learn from the truth of first Canada's first 150 years as a country and make sure that we do much, much better. The individual stories and lived experiences of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples are not ours to tell but, their voices must come to the centre of our collections, conversations and collective consciousness.

Appendix 2 - Open Learning: The Power of Student Voice in the Makerspace Movement

When given the opportunity to return to the teacher librarian role in recent years, I knew that including a makerspace was on everybody's library "to do" list.

But here is the truth - I had no idea where to begin! I felt overwhelmed and honestly a bit intimidated. I assumed that everyone else had a deeper understanding of the maker movement and how makerspaces could enhance a school learning environment. I also made the assumption that successful makerspaces existed only if the teacher librarian had significant knowledge of and experience with high tech opportunities like coding, robotics and 3D printing. I questioned if the mere use of the word "maker" implied a value of product over process. I wanted to embrace new ideas and technologies as part of our evolving learning commons yet I felt completely out of my league.

And then I began to wonder...

Is makerspace an essential addition to the library learning commons or simply a trendy phase?

So began my journey to figure out this mysterious and popular movement known as makerspace. I have written many of my own blog posts detailing our makerspace journey but in the interest of brevity let me venture to share an overview.

1. I looked for and continue to gather a variety of resources to develop my own understanding of makerspaces. These included but, were certainly not limited to the following:

Twitter connections:

- Diana Redina @DianaLRendina
- Laura Fleming @NMHS_lms
- Mr. Pamayah @Mister_Library
- Mr. S @MrSchuermann
- Melanie Mulcaster @the_mulc
- Diana Malizewski @MzMollyTL

Book Resources:

- *Worlds of Making* (Fleming, 2015)
- *Invent to Learn: Making, Tinkering & Engineering in the Classroom* (Martinez & Stager, 2013)
- *The Art of Tinkering* (Wilkinson, 2013)
- *The Third Teacher: 79 Ways You Can Use Design to Transform Teaching & Learning* (OWP/P Cannon Design Inc., 2010)
- *The Big Book of Makerspace Projects: Inspiring Makers to Experiment, Create and Learn* (Graves & Graves, 2017)
- *Launch: Using Design Thinking to Boost Creativity and Bring Out the Maker in Every Student* (Spencer & Juilani, 2016)

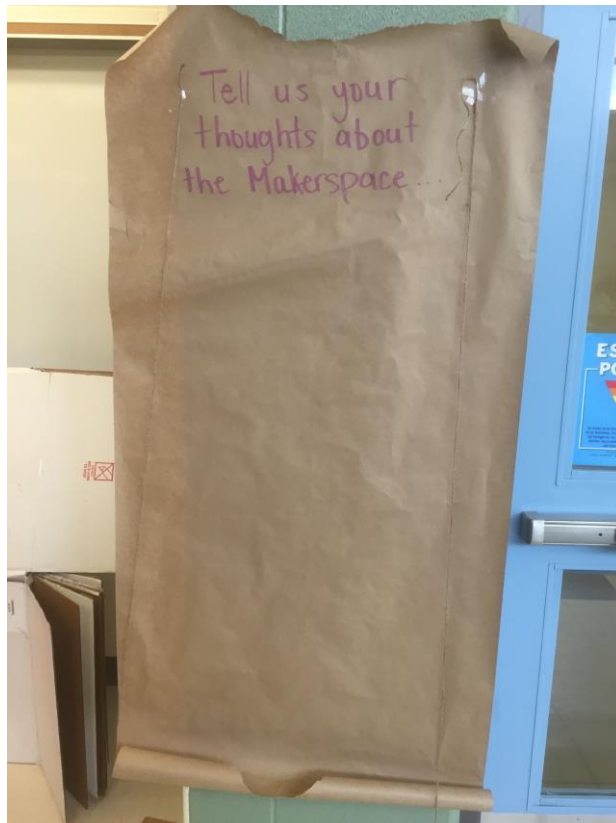
Human Library and Networking Opportunities:

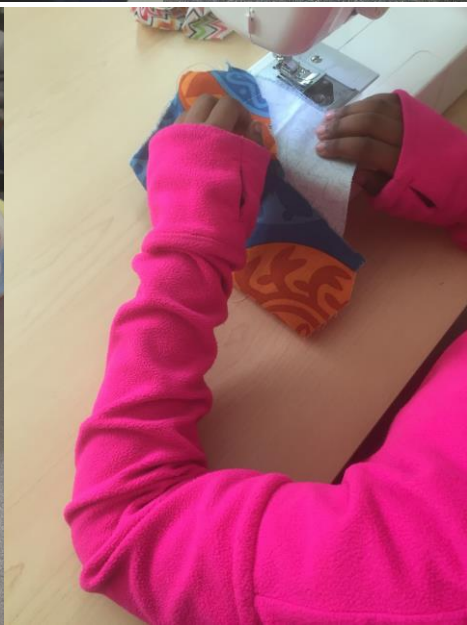
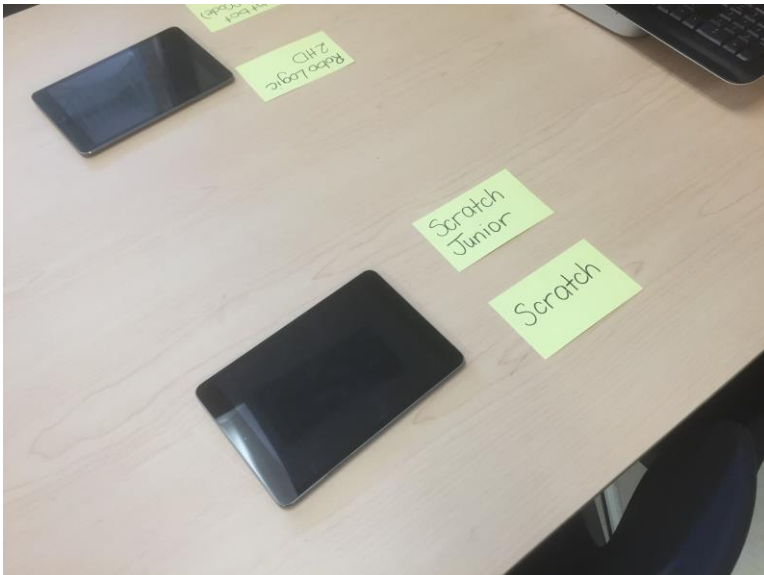
- MakerEd TO Conference <http://www.makeredto.com>
- Maker Festival TO <http://makerfestival.ca>
- OLA Superconference <http://www.olasuperconference.ca>

2. With an open invitation to all staff, a group of us gathered together to explore and discuss the concept of makerspaces and ideas for bringing it to our school community. From this conversation we decided the following:

- Student voice and interests needed to be at the centre of our planning.
- We wanted to offer both low and high tech experiences for our students.
- We reminded each other to pace ourselves and resist the urge to buy tech simply because it was “cool”.

3. We planned a four-day maker event for all of our students and staff to experience a variety of “maker” stations. Included in this experience was the unveiling of our LEGO wall, sewing, coding apps, origami, a disassembly station, loom knitting, sock puppet making and much more. During the event large sheets of brown craft paper were hung on the walls for staff and students to offer feedback about their experience.

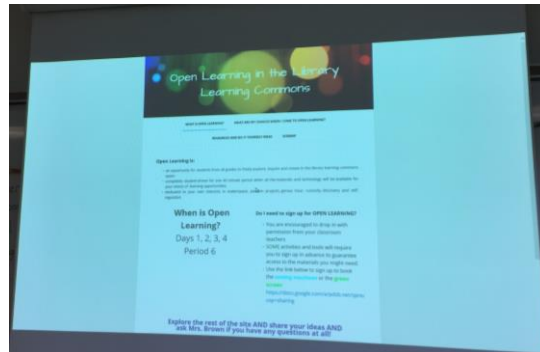




4. Based on the feedback from our 4-day event we began offering “Maker Monday” workshops about a variety of low tech and tech-based skills. Students of all ages signed up using Google Forms and each Monday we offered an 80-minute introductory session. As this evolved we began to get a huge increase in responses - almost 200 children for our session on learning how to sew. This was wonderful but became a logistical challenge.

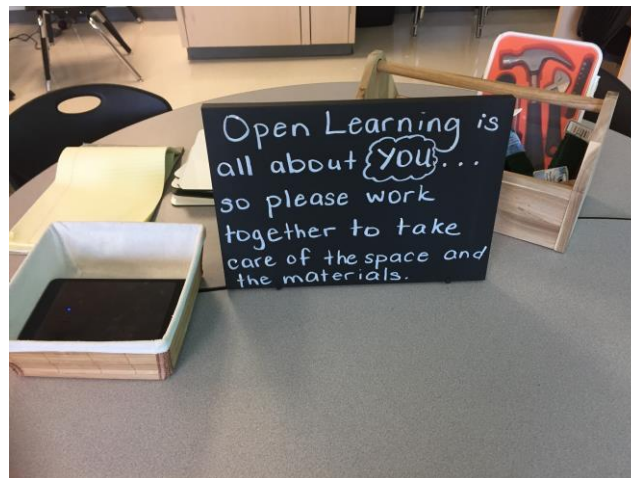


5. Currently our makerspace has transformed into a once a day 40-minute free flow experience that we are calling “**Open Learning**”. We have created a Google Site <https://sites.google.com/a/pdsb.net/open-learning-in-the-library-learning-commons/> which ideally will become a collaborative space for students to share their knowledge and maker experiences with our school community.



Through this process I can truly say that embracing a maker mindset and offering a makerspace learning experience is essential to our library learning commons.

“Open Learning” has become a highly valued and student-centred experience for our learners. We work together to keep the messaging simple and targeted. Each time students attend this sign welcomes them to the space.

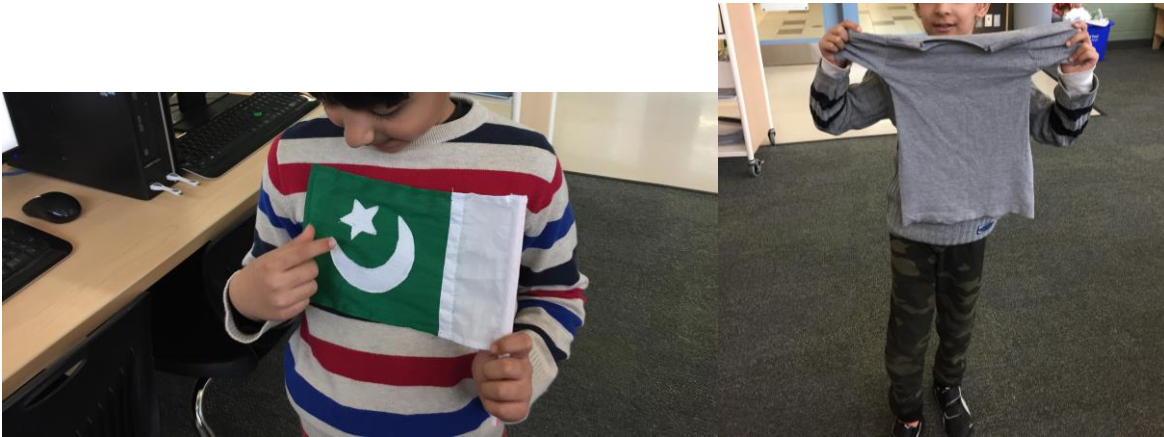


A few key ideals guide the work for our school community:

- Fostering a makerCULTURE throughout the school is much more important than the actual makerSPACE.
- Student voice and interests remain at the centre of our decisions around every aspect of makerspace.
- To ensure value is placed on the experiences makerspace learning can offer we use dedicated instructional time for students to access the tools and materials.

The biggest impact on our school is the realization that makerspace is really all about creating COMMUNITY. When our students recognize that they are at the centre of the learning they take ownership and responsibility for themselves and the entire learning community.

The unexpected impact is that we have found a way to embed culturally responsive pedagogy in making. My favourite examples of this are the numerous students who have shared their personal connection to sewing. Children of all ages have shared that multiple generations and family members in their home sew their own clothes and highly value this skill. After learning to sew simple seams in the library learning commons, two young boys went home shared their accomplishments with their grandmothers and found a new opportunity for connection in their own families. That weekend they each created and worked sewing projects with their grandmothers and then brought their finished products in to share with their classmates and me.



This moment was such a powerful example of how the lived experiences of our students and the learning opportunities we offer in the library learning commons can intersect and inspire.

For more images and information on the current status of our “Open Learning” journey you can access our presentation at the 2017 MakerEd conference in Toronto.

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1AU4P-bgkUdqKfkPSIMeXgczboPX8n9TGc3VVqo2-g8Q/edit?usp=sharing>

The “truth” I have uncovered about makerspace is that there is no “right” way to create one in your school. Each school community is unique and therefore each makerspace should reflect that uniqueness. This also means that it will not stay the same year to year.

So if you are feeling trepidatious about embracing makerspace in your school library I would encourage you to begin.

Start your own journey.

Discover your students’ interests.

Build your own maker community.

More than anything - **feel confident** that creating a makerspace that reflects your students and school community will always be more than a trendy phase even if as it changes over time.

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