

# The Potential of the School Library Learning Commons

by Heather Daly

This photo you see below is part of what school library service looked like in the early 1930s in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. This was the first regional library in the world, and it operated the first bookmobile in Canada.



Fig. 1 – Image from the Fraser Valley Regional Library, reproduced in “The Library Book: A History of Service to British Columbia”, page 95

I think the photo demonstrates...passion.

When we say a library is a “space with books”, we need to consider why the books are there.

In fact, what makes it a library is that the resources are there for a *purpose*—they are there for action—which we call “circulation”... movement...of ideas and stories from one person to another; from one place to another.

The library in this case is literally the vehicle. It, and its librarian, are the interface between client and content.

## **Movement *is* the Purpose**

In general, libraries exist to provide access—with a purpose; that is:

- To enable the transmission of ideas, stories, and knowledge from one generation to the next;
- To establish a baseline of information from which to develop further—creatively—and to do better;
- To provide a shared community space; for discovery and opportunity—a gathering place;
- To support self-improvement; such as job opportunities—for the individual, for the common good;
- To enable citizens in full democratic participation, such as through the teaching of functional literacy skills, to skills to enable an individual to assess the accuracy of certain information; and,
- To uphold values including, but not limited to, access, education, equity, service, sharing, and community.

These are all...good things?

And thus, I believe that we shouldn't seek to reject libraries as being traditional and out of touch in modern times, but rather, that we need to embrace libraries for being *fundamentally* relevant and critical in the information age.

Libraries reflect communities; ours reflect our learning communities, and libraries are *supposed* to continually evolve as part of regular practice to meet the changing needs of our clients.

But that evolution can be gradual.

School library learning commons conversion represents a directed and supported acceleration of the school library evolutionary process.

Why accelerate? Well, we know that:

- Once computer technology became mobile, books ceased to be the primary source of information;
- In fact, that the transmission of ideas, stories, and knowledge has *never* been resigned to just the print format;
- That there are stories, experiences, narratives, and creators missing from collections;
- That the standard classification scheme—the Dewey Decimal System—is problematic;

- That the world we are preparing students for is complex; that we don't know what jobs will exist in the future and for this, students will need growth mindset and flexibility; and,
- Last, but not least, that First Peoples Principles of Learning belong authentically in all our spaces.

For all these reasons, and more, many school districts are investing in school library learning commons conversion, a process of implementing decisions informed by research and best practice.

### **Technology vs. Literacy**

We know that some are challenged with the discussion of technology, and the school library learning commons.

"I want to be in the library", one teacher told me, "because it is the last *sanctuary* in the school"...free of the "pressure" of technology integration.

This would mean that the role of the teacher-librarian is to defend students from technology and especially screen time, that the library exists to promote a specific definition of literacy in which technology plays no role; and that technology and literacy are in fact two separate and competing domains.

Is it defense? Or...is it preference?

I would argue that this is a definition of library that is based on myth rather than reality.

It means substituting what you believe the library *should be* for what our learning communities *need it to be*.

*Because* libraries are not, and never have been, about content. They are about connection.

### **Authentic Challenge and Success**

I am going to connect here to an example—my story—at an elementary school in SD43 Coquitlam, British Columbia.

It is a school where students, families and staff want to be; it is a leader in self-regulation with strong learning services support.

And, as validated by my colleagues, it also has had a very strong school library learning commons.

Here are some of the factors of that success:

1. Training: both I and the lead student services teacher are fully trained in our areas of specialty.
2. Team: why did those fully trained staff choose this school? We were recruited.

My job interview consisted of a few questions and then became the principal promoting the school to me.

Rather than being assessed for how I might fit into the existing team and culture, I was offered the opportunity to come onboard and be part of *creating* a team and culture.

I was part of a leadership team with the principal, counsellor, and lead student services teacher. We worked together towards the same goal.

3. Support: my principal had faith in me. Her interactions with me and others, even the words she used about the school library learning commons, served as an example and influenced the staff in developing an understanding that my role was critical, important, and of high value. In fact, this extended to unconditional support for me around ideas or issues. I never had to convince my principal; she believed in whatever I was asking because it was *me* asking.
4. Students: this further extended to our faith in the capacity of our students. I have done coding with Kindergarten, Minecraft with Grade 1, measured carbon dioxide levels with Grade 4/5...
5. Tools: I had concurrent access to the computer lab scheduled against library prep times. This was eventually superseded by a dedicated class set of iPads and access to a class set of laptops, as well as an extensive range of other makerspace and STEAM tools and resources.
6. Schedule: over which my prep provision partner, the music teacher and I, had autonomy; I was able to schedule classes in a way to enable more complex class preparation. I had ample library administrative time, and in some years, collaborative time.

If you type [http://bit.ly/lc\\_prep](http://bit.ly/lc_prep) into a browser, you will see exactly what I did during library prep time from September 2018 to March 2020 which was the start of the remote learning period.

The document includes abbreviations that might not make sense because it authentically is my actual notes. I include it to be transparent and vulnerable about my practice.

Each class also includes book exchange time. You will see STEAM ways of learning represented throughout, and not in conflict but complementing other priorities of the role of the teacher-librarian.

You can see the progression from creativity, computational thinking, questioning, and making leading to full inquiry and design by Grade 4/5. *Differing information formats*, such as books, video, and technology, are integrated.

You will not see “read-a-story, get-a-book-out” each week. Week one might be “read-a-story-about-friendship; get-a-book-out”; but the next week will be, “tell a story about friendship using loose parts; get-a-book out”.

I was officially 0.3 library, and provided 40-minute preps.

*This* is not where I started at Moody.

So, briefly, how I discovered makerspace—was in consideration of a class where I had tried—I thought—everything. They came to the library right after gym; very excited, disruptive, and disrespectful.

Not long before this, I had attended an elementary science professional development event and I had been told that STEAM—hands-on, authentic challenges—would be engaging for my students; that if I tried it, things might be different for me, and this class.

So...“go big or go home”—I got some maker supplies and printed a one-pager of instructions showing how to make...a marshmallow catapult. I left the supplies and pages on the tables. When the class arrived, I didn’t say a word.

And...they just started...construction was happening; I was able to observe, nudge, breath. The students were engaged and focused.

I would see this continually with further experience. I find that makerspace is more prep work up front, for less intervention and *huge* engagement later.

After a time, marshmallows began flying through the air, and some went into mouths. My learning that day also included the answer to *why?* with this class—because they were coming in after gym...and they were hungry. And things did change for the better for us all.

Collaborative time, when we had it, allowed for longer sessions. For example, we challenged a Grade 1 class to—they thought—design marble runs in pairs; they had to get a marble from the top of a piece of wood into a cup using a required set of materials. But halfway through, came the twist. A Kindergarten class joined the proceedings. The *actual* challenge for our Grade 1 students, was to immediately and meaningfully integrate their new partner into their work, communicating their ideas, and

listening to new ones. Creative Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Personal Awareness, Social Awareness.

## **Further Connections**

So...why STEAM, and libraries?

Because when we are talking about what libraries value and do, we are talking about discovery, opportunity, creativity, future jobs, technology, flexibility, growth mindset; we are also talking about STEAM.

STEAM, which is a way of learning that makes connections between disciplines and transcends them with intent, is consistent with the purpose of libraries.

In conclusion, librarians are knowledge workers. The goal of the school library learning commons program should be to help our students and colleagues develop in their own right as knowledge workers, too.

Because the potential we are talking about with school-libraries-now-learning-commons is, once connected to stories, tools, information, and resources; what our students will DO.

## **References**

Obee, Dave. 2011. *The Library Book: A History of Service to British Columbia*. British Columbia Library Association.