Designing a New Learning Commons
By Pippa Davies

The purpose of a well-defined school Learning Commons space is to create a warm, welcoming hub that fosters collaboration and interdisciplinary learning. Our school, Heritage Christian Online School, is envisioning a hybrid campus school including planning a new Learning Commons space that embraces the philosophy of hybrid education and serves the diverse needs of our students. Currently, we serve over 4000 students in different parts of British Columbia and the world, offering blended learning hubs, online learning, and a small campus school in Kelowna. A quarter of our students need adaptive technologies to complete their learning, so we are constantly looking for ways to find just the right resources and environment for inclusive education.

Michael B. Horn, in his book *From Re-Open to Re-Invent Recreating School for Every Child,* shares that today's school system does not work for everyone given the complex demands of a technologically driven world. He suggests that the way forward for schools is to be customized for different needs, helping students build their passions and develop their human potential, moving from time-based in a traditional classroom to mastery-based in a hybrid classroom. Students would come to school for a set amount of instructional time and group collaboration, and then have days to develop their technical skills or cross-disciplinary skills at home or in the community. The BC curriculum with its inquiry focus and multi-disciplinary approach is well suited to empowering students to make important decisions about their learning, encouraging a hybrid approach.

The past three years have taught us that COVID can play havoc with school schedules and many teaching staff have been forced to become versed in digital teaching. Many teacher-librarians took on the challenge of creating virtual learning environments for their students with considerable success. Having established a virtual presence in our school over the past 17 years, it is now time for us to turn our attention to the physical space of the Learning Commons.

Our school-wide focus this year is to foster relationships in our community as we endeavour to develop our new hybrid school and implement a new learning management system. We are also in the process of redesigning our Learning Commons website, with a focus on improving our navigational access and incorporating our school's branding.

Our problem at our current physical school is we need to move from a typical campus-style facility, which has a standardized linear approach to education, to a more student-centric flexible system. Our online learning program, with almost 20 years of experience, offers excellent infrastructure to support this hybrid approach, delivering the online classroom component to meet the needs of our students. But our students still need a physical place to come together for creative thinking, technological and media literacy, communication skills, and problem-solving.

In past years, our digital Learning Commons has played an instrumental role in our library sustainability, following Carol Koechlin and David Loerscher's philosophy included in *Building a Learning Commons* book. We designed our [website](#) to exemplify the most important aspects of a blended learning commons, focusing on research tools, digital content, our unit study kits and our many excellent subscriptions or streaming media. We also added a [student corner](#) which offers contests, games, and story times to encourage critical and creative thinking skills. Our live chat option has been wonderful for daily reference queries by students, parents, and teachers.

Whether starting from scratch or redesigning an existing Learning Commons, patron needs should define the initial factfinding and end process. Consulting with all stakeholders is important to build trust and create a sustainable future. We completed a survey a year ago inviting feedback from campus patrons and staff and built that feedback into our design ideas.

Our current Learning Commons physical space is small and cramped, serving both campus and online students in their home learning environment. Currently, we ship kits and educational materials all over the province. We are desperately short of space for materials and student access. We need to envisage a space welcoming both our hybrid and our online learning students, one which connects the indoor to the outdoor space and invites natural light. Most importantly, we need to ensure the space has different activity zones that allow for multiple learning modalities.

"Spatial fluidity plus spatial diversity equals a kind of spatial agility that responds to the real-time needs of kids and adults alike, making them ideal places to cultivate dynamic communities built on relationships, belonging, and agency." ([Randy Fielding: Getting Smart](#))

As we envisage our new space, we need to be cognizant of different learning styles and design our Learning Commons with open spaces and mobile furniture that serves many purposes and different groups of patrons. A connection to the outdoors will be
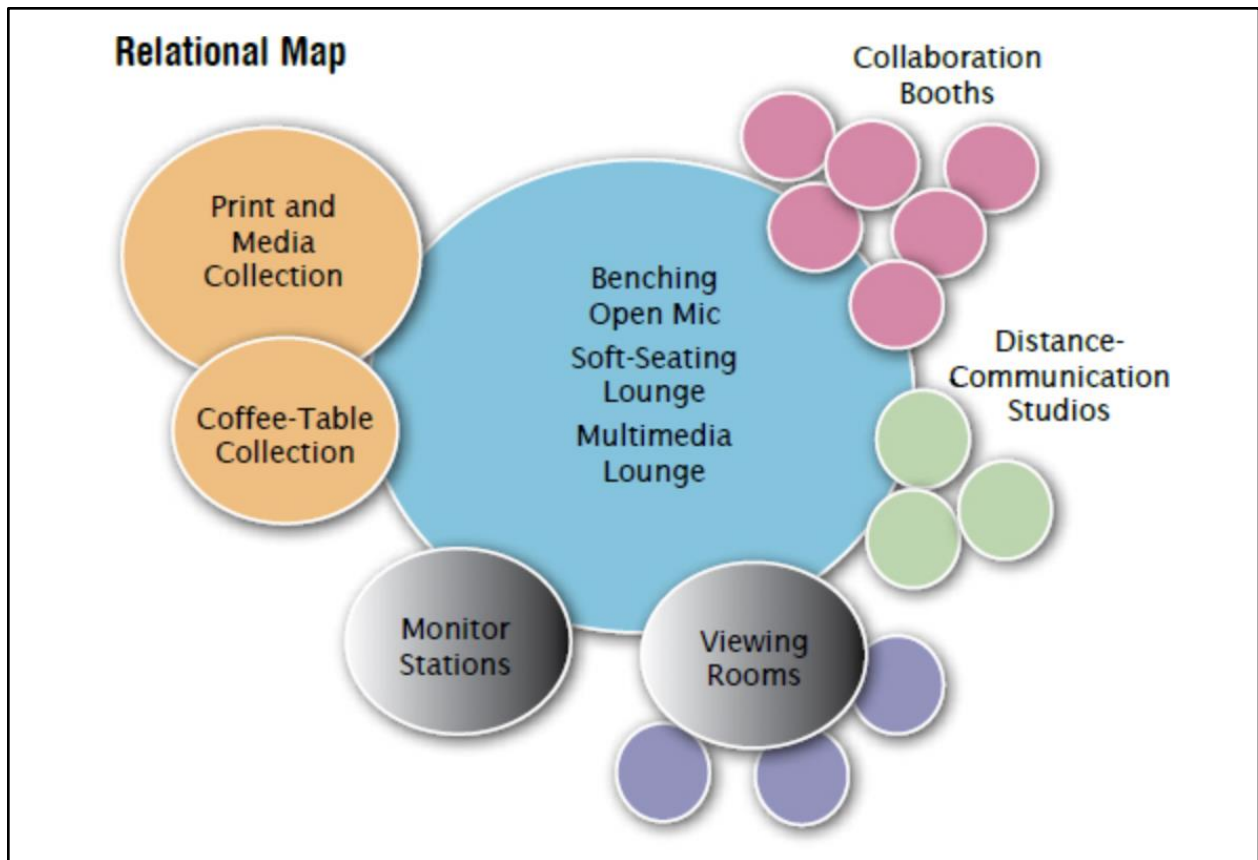
vital both for our shipping/receiving staff and as a means of bringing in natural light and extending learning opportunities outdoors. For our quiet students, we will need spaces or cubicles which include computers, headsets and comfortable seating. Our collaborative students will need group stations for Maker Education purposes and creative spaces for a green screen, 3D printing, music making, gaming, reading, and reference nooks. These spaces could be interchangeable based on the day and theme of learning. Other criteria such as sound attenuation, glass walls connecting the Learning Commons to the rest of the school and allowing for permeable barriers such as glass walls in other areas will need to be considered.

Other important aspects to consider include:
- Computer access, Wi-Fi access, IT access
- Mobile storage carts
- Mobile whiteboards and electronic whiteboards
- Raised ceiling
- Interactive Learning Lab for online learning classes
- Tables should be a mix of sizes with power access
- Shelves and tables on wheels
- Utilize windows for workspaces
- Include eReaders and adaptive technologies
- Install self-checkout stations
- Include bright primary colours on walls
- Display artwork and slat walls for thematic events
- Display structures for merchandising new books at the entrance of the Learning Commons

Furnishings and fixtures should reflect simplicity and innovation for creative learning, inviting students to dream about the possibilities! Mobile furniture, durable fabrics, different heights for chairs, and vinyl flooring would provide some sustainability, along with rugs to divide spaces.

Finally, mapping out the lay of the land either with your design team, Heads of School or architect will ensure your goals are achieved. Here is an example of mapping taken from the book *Library Spaces for 21st-Century Learners* by Margaret Sullivan

Relational Map

Print and Media Collection

Coffee-Table Collection

Benching
Open Mic
Soft-Seating Lounge
Multimedia Lounge

Collaboration Booths

Distance-Communication Studios

Monitor Stations

Viewing Rooms

In June this year, I enjoyed a day exploring the Richmond school district with their lovely Teacher-librarian District Lead, Rebeca Rubio. I would like to include some of the photographs I took during my field trip which accentuate the current trends in Learning Commons architecture. These photographs illustrate the importance of simplistic and creative design allowing for more thinking space, creative storage, natural light, flexibility, and sustainability.

As we start the process of imagining the design of our new 2000-square-foot space, we will need to be cognizant of the changing world we live in, and make sure that sustainability is at the forefront of how we furnish the interior. We are excited about this next stage of the Learning Commons journey, and the creative challenges along the way. Budget will play an important role as well and may dictate the outcome.

Our school supports the enrichment program of our Learning Commons and the vital role it plays in empowering youth to find inquiry-based solutions; we hope that this will have a powerful influence on determining the results.

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