Implementing Library Transformation:
Creating a Learning Commons

A Guide for Chinook's Edge Schools

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Why Are Schools Transitioning Their Libraries to a Learning Commons?

There are a few issues related to our current practices involving libraries. For the most part, our libraries, in their current structure, represent an early 20th century model of information storage and retrieval. Whether in search of fiction or non-fiction materials, the student must physically visit the library and while there, abide by a set of rules and procedures created to ensure control of the collection and the space. This model has been slow to change with the changing nature of information access and the changing nature of learners.

In many cases, our libraries, for a variety of reasons, are not connected strongly to the learning outcomes of our classrooms and by consequence, have become incidental rather than essential to student learning. Further, we have de-professionalized our libraries. The majority of our library staff have no formal training for the roles they perform. This means that their roles are more closely associated with inventory control rather than learning support.

The move to a learning commons approach gives recognition to the changing nature of information access and the changing nature of our learners. The 21st century learner is one who is accustomed to using technology to support their learning, to collaborate and to communicate. These learners have been raised in a culture of learning that is technology rich, one that allows them immediate access to information and social interaction. The competencies that are required by these learners to function well in this environment represent high level thinking skills and processes, such as: critical thinking, problem solving, collaborating, innovating and communicating.

The learning commons is much more student centered, promoting engagement through active inquiry and collaboration. The learning commons environment facilitates interaction between teacher, student, learning goals, content and technology. It incorporates the advantages that technology provides by ensuring a safe and vital virtual presence. This virtual space gives the student access to reliable and appropriate resources 24/7 from any location that has web access. It broadens student learning and collaboration beyond the textbook, the classroom and the community, creating a much more global experience.

"Look at your learning space with 21st century eyes: does it work for what we know about learning today, or just what we knew about learning in the past?"

Sir Ken Robinson
The Third Teacher (2010)

What is a Learning Commons?

There are a variety of definitions of a learning commons, but basically it is both an environment and a philosophy. The environment is both physical and virtual and both are intended to support student learning. It is flexible so that it can accommodate large group efforts, presentations, smaller collaborative clusters and also individual students needing a quiet space. It has a variety of areas to serve the different learning needs of its users. It is accessible to individuals and to whole classes to pursue learning goals on an as need basis, not a weekly schedule. It employs technology to facilitate students in their efforts to discover, create and share knowledge. The virtual site is safe, reliable, accessible and flexible to serve the needs of all learners. Philosophically, it is student centered, a comfortable and inviting place for students to be actively engaged in their own personalized learning. The teaching pedagogy is varied and includes inquiry and experiential learning. The learning commons is a place where students are supported in their inquiry by other learners and by adults. Books and literacy are still highly valued and supported, but the focus shifts from managing the collection to supporting the learner.

> …seamless access to library services for students through the "school library learning commons" perspective; an initiative using both physical and digital resources to support the school's efforts to respond to each student's learning needs. The school library learning commons is a concept that helps schools innovate and collaborate within a design that adapts to student and teacher needs.
>
> School Library Services Initiative

> The learning commons philosophy is a means of increasing student engagement and improving student achievement. The learning commons promotes personalization, inquiry, and the integration of technology through the implementation of innovative curricular design and assessment. This space, which is a blend of physical and virtual environments, transforms teaching and learning by allowing both staff and students to co-create knowledge. Within the learning commons, technology supports the construction of new understandings by the learner rather than the learner passively consuming information.
>
> Calgary Board of Education

The Vision for Library Learning Commons in Chinook's Edge

The Learning Commons will be a dynamic, collaborative environment for inquiry, with unlimited accessibility, where all learners are welcomed, engaged and supported in their personalized learning pursuits.

A Closer Look

Dynamic – changeable and flexible

Collaborative – with fellow learners both close and far

Environment – both physical and virtual

Inquiry – to discover, understand and share knowledge

Accessibility – 24/7 online from anywhere, availability of the physical space as needed

Learners – students, staff, parents, community groups

Welcomed – inviting and warm, able to accommodate various needs

Engaged – social, institutional (routines of the school) and intellectual

Supported – teacher as designer and facilitator of learning, library staff member as co-facilitator

Personalized – relevant to the student, accommodating choice and ability

What Are the Key Elements to a Learning Commons?

Virtual Space
- Safe & Reliable
- Accessible
- IT Supported
- Centralized e-book collection
- Adaptable as new technologies emerge

Physical Space
- Flexible
- Welcoming
- Available
- Technology rich

Pedagogical Variety
- Inquiry driven
- Higher order thinking
- Experiential
- Highly engaging

Needs of the Learner
- Student centered
- Collaborative
- Personalized
- Supportive
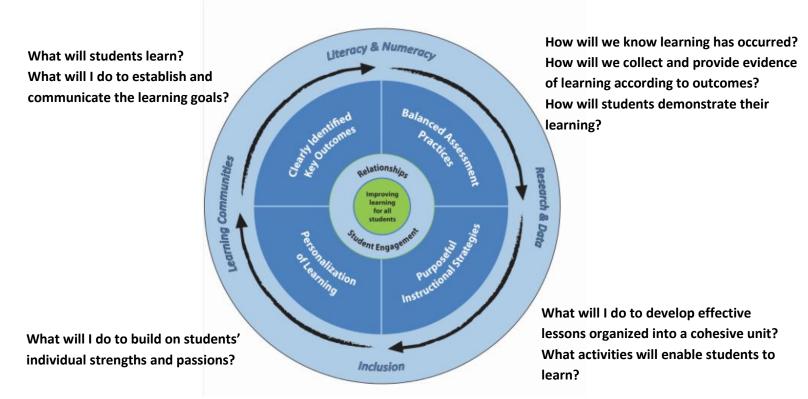
The Learning Commons, Inquiry
and the
Quality Learning Environment

What will students learn? What will I do to establish and communicate the learning goals?

How will we know learning has occurred? How will we collect and provide evidence of learning according to outcomes? How will students demonstrate their learning?

What will I do to build on students' individual strengths and passions?

What will I do to develop effective lessons organized into a cohesive unit? What activities will enable students to learn?

The Learning Commons is an instructional area, an extension of the classroom, both physically and virtually, and as such, should be a quality learning environment. The Learning Commons concept and philosophy align well with the intents of the QLE and genuinely support student engagement, personalization and 21st century teaching and learning strategies. If we are not treating our Learning Commons as a quality learning environment, we are not getting full value of the resources we are filling it with.

http://www.chinooksedge.ab.ca/Learning%20Services.php

The use of inquiry as a pedagogical approach is supported by the intent of the QLE, to improve learning for all students. When one examines the essential questions from an inquiry perspective, the alignment is very clear. With a couple of minor wording changes, the essential questions could be used to design a research assignment.

> Research suggests that using inquiry-based learning with students can help them become more creative, more positive and more independent (Kühne, 1995). Other academic research shows that inquiry-based learning improves student achievement (GLEF, 2001).

Focus on Inquiry

The new Education Act speaks to the use of inquiry and experimentation.

> Whereas an engaged Thinker knows how to think critically and creatively and makes discoveries through inquiry, reflection, exploration, experimentation and trial and error.

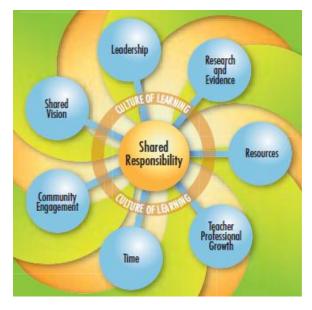http://education.alberta.ca/department/policy/standards/goals.aspx

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What Does Transition Look Like at the School Level?

The transition from a school library to a learning commons looks somewhat different in each school depending on a number of factors. Listed below are some basic questions that may help schools to understand the breadth of the transformation they are embarking upon.

- What are our current practices and culture within the school with library utilization?
- What components within our current library practices and culture speak to the purposeful support of student learning?
- What is our current utilization of the virtual environment to support student learning?
- What environments and pedagogy works the best for the grade levels of students we serve?
- How do we overcome challenges with physical space?
- What is the level of expertise of our staff members? What skills can we take advantage of and what skills may need to be augmented?
- How do current pedagogical practices incorporate inquiry and experiential learning?
- How do we get teachers on board to ensure that we use the learning commons, both physically and virtually, to support student learning?
- How can we make proposed changes and stay within the current budget and staffing allocation?
- What supports do we need?

A Guide to Implementing Change

The following is borrowed from A Guide to Support Implementation: Essential Conditions. This was developed by a provincial working group of education partners to support positive change in Alberta's schools and classrooms. http://www.essentialconditions.ca

Examining the Essential Conditions

According to their research, the following seven points have to be considered as essential conditions to the success of any new endeavor.   The related questions may act as a guide as you move forward around each of the seven dimensions.

Shared Vision

- How will our learning commons be driven by CESD's learning commons vision?
- How do we envision our learning commons serving students in our school?
- How do we involve our stakeholders in a process to create a vision for our school?

Leadership

- What steps are necessary to make the transformation of the library possible? How are these steps prioritized?
- What will be the priorities for the physical space, the virtual space, the teaching pedagogy and staffing skills?
- What supports will be needed to make this work?
- How does this transformation fit into current school goals and plans?

Research and Evidence

- What does current research indicate and how will this help us to move forward?
- Are there current models that would be helpful to look at?
- What evidence will we gather that will tell us whether the learning commons is supportive of student learning?

Resources

- What is the state of our current collection? What changes need to be made to support the transformation?
- Are there changes to our physical space that are required to support the transformation. If so, how will we accomplish those changes?
- How is our virtual environment being utilized? Do students and staff get full value from what we currently have available? Are there other appropriate virtual tools that would support our learners better?
- What budget and staffing allocation are needed to support the transformation?

Professional Learning

- What skills and pedagogical practices are needed for a learning commons philosophy to take hold in our school?
- How will we support our staff in refining their skills and practices to take full advantage of the learning commons as a support to student learning?

- How do our current endeavors with literacy and student engagement, and the consequent staff development, merge with a transition to a learning commons?

Time

- What is our overall timeline, based on the priorities we have laid out?
- How will we create time to work with staff, students and other stakeholders to ensure that they understand the changes we are proposing?
- Will the learning commons, as we envision it in our school, necessitate changes to scheduling and timetables?

Community Engagement

- Which stakeholder groups should be involved in the transformation process and what will their roles be? How will we engage these groups and bring them up to speed to ensure they have a meaningful role?
- How will we communicate the transformation process and the reasons for it to our stakeholder groups? What are the key messages to each of our stakeholder groups? Are there avenues to collect feedback and solicit support?
- Is there a potential partnership opportunity with our public school library?

How Will We Be Supported As We Move Forward?

Although the transformation of libraries will look somewhat different in each school, there are some common supports available to schools as they journey forward.

- Consultation with CESD Library Leaders
- Access to the Library wiki
  http://cesdlibrary.pbworks.com/w/page/32820972/CESD%20Library%20Policy%20and%20Guidelines
- Continued communication to administrators, library staff members and teachers around learning commons practices
     o Sharing of research and resources
     o Sharing of contacts of schools where Learning Commons are actively evolving
- Ongoing and targeted PD opportunities for staff members around identified needs

Resources

Link to the CESD Library Wiki

        http://cesdlibrary.pbworks.com/w/page/32820972/CESD%20Library%20Policy%20and%20Guidelines

Links to Alberta Education Documents

        The future of libraries in Alberta

        http://education.alberta.ca/media/1293749/slsi_research.pdf

        Alberta Educations FAQ page on School Library Services Initiative

        http://education.alberta.ca/media/1160658/slsi_faq.pdf

Links to Exemplar Videos

        Medicine Hat: CHHS Learning Commons Parts 1 and 2

        http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo0gaTzU0qw

        http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVipfjDk6A8

        Elizabeth Rummel School Video

        http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpwhQYafNp4

Links to Articles Contained on Our Library Wiki

        Linking the Information Commons to Learning

        The Blended Librarian

        The New Learners Common Chapter 1

        The Start of the Learning Commons Approach

Link to Our Consultation Day Resources, Including Articles, Videos and Power Points

        http://cesd-libraryvisioning.wikispaces.com/