

From School Libraries to Learning Commons: Reflecting on a 180° Shift in Thinking and a Personal Learning Journey

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When it came time to revise, *Taxonomies of the School Library Media Program* for the third time, I came to the realization that the half-century old foundational theories of school libraries needed radical re-thinking. Yes, those two great pioneers, Mary Gaver and Frances Henne, of the 1960 standards for school libraries, who I knew personally, had set us on a great path for the last half of the 20th century, but times had changed.

Consider some of the major trends, challenges, and opportunities that have faced us as a profession in the very recent past:

Challenges	Opportunities
Students “Google around” the school library, avoiding us and questioning our very existence.	Use Google itself to get inside the head and imagination of every teacher and student
Over the last half century, school libraries have never entered the mainstream of educational theory and literature.	The rise of 21 st century skills and the need for critical thinking and creative thinking provides new opportunities to “move to the center” with our expertise.
The No Child Left Behind program caused many teachers to lock their doors to any outside influences in favor of coverage and direct teaching.	All specialists in the school, including teacher librarians, could team up to break down those locked doors to demonstrate that two heads are better than one while students not only pass the test but develop lasting skills and knowledge.
The stereotype of school libraries as tightly controlled, print-only, and one-dimensional info skills teaching, led to a marginalization and replacement of many professionals with support personnel, particularly at the elementary level.	A new breed of high-tech and web 2.0 savvy professional provides a refreshing opportunity to place school library programs directly into the center of teaching and learning.

¹ Thanks to Carol Koechlin and Sandi Zwaan who read and made contributions to this personal reflection.

Library facilities became mostly storage of “stuff” with a very few spaces for individuals, small groups, or even large groups to explore, test, develop, and collaborate independently of scheduled classes.	New trends in architecture and furnishings provide lots of open space and flexible configurations to offer a sense of client ownership rather than institutional dictates of function.
Classes were withdrawn to computer labs in the school where they were taught computer skills in isolation.	Computer labs join the learning commons calendar and teacher technologists work collaboratively with teacher librarians and other specialists to make technology a seamless tool for teaching and learning
Learners are asked to power down when they come to school and leave their hand held technology and communication tools at home.	Teacher librarians help teachers to design learning experiences that make wise use of the tools kids love and use effectively.
Teachers and students are denied access to social networking sites and firewalls block access to needed resources.	The learning commons ensures safety of students through digital citizenship instruction and careful planning of learning instruction in Web2.0 spaces.
Time and energy is wasted by teachers fighting with compatibility issues and the downtime of local servers	The learning commons provides a ‘cloud computing’ space where learners can work, share, and present their learning 24/7, free from network issues. Teachers can plan, monitor, coach, and assess learning all in one space.

For these and many other reasons, I began to question just how long we could, as a profession, continue to promote the concept of the school library that has become out of touch with what this decade of students and teachers need. The thinking at the Treasure Mountain Research Retreats 13 and 14 spurred me and others to action. Allyson Zmuda, Ross Todd, Vi Harada, Carol Kuhlthau, and Joyce Valenza were just a few voices saying to all of us that radical change was our only option. We need to reinvent.

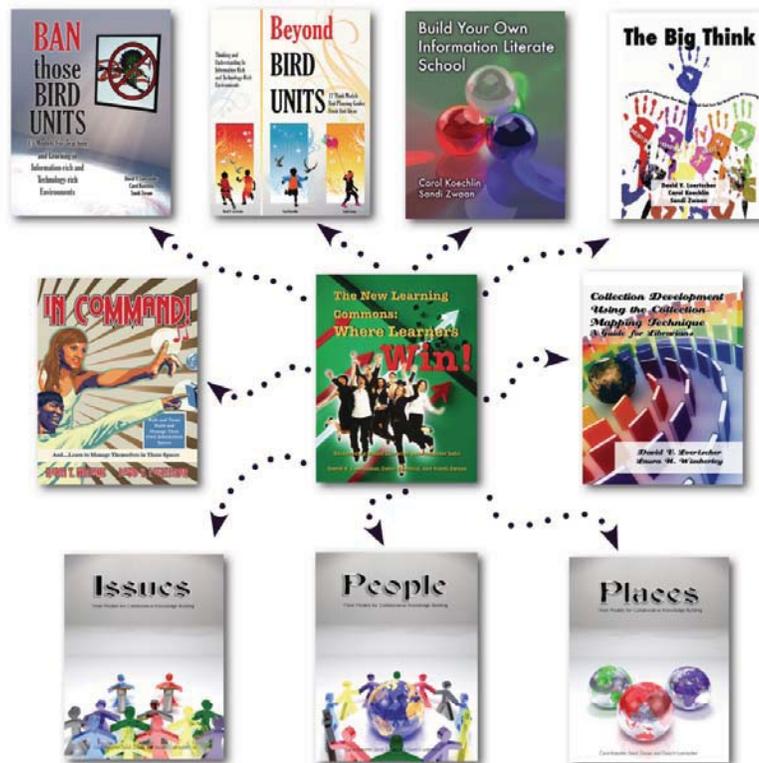
Having made connections with Carol Koechlin and Sandi Zwaan in Ontario, Canada, the three of us began our frequent three-day exhausting but exhilarating think tanks that have resulted in a number of publications reinventing everything about school libraries.

For a number of years now, this trio of authors has waged war on bird units being conducted in classrooms and libraries across the world. Accused of being

enemies of nature, we have begged forgiveness of our feathered friends for creating this metaphor for substandard learning experiences. Teachers recognize them and all learners seem to have been subjected to them at some time in the past.

Our definition of a bird unit is a learning experience wherein kids or teens choose some sort of topic to research, copy out a bunch of facts from books or from the Internet, paste those facts onto worksheets or into PowerPoint slides, and finally subject their peers to boring oral reports. If those types of assignments were bad in the era of the printed book, they are now dreadful in the era of the Internet. We find evidence that these zero learning experiences have infected the world of Web 2.0 tools where they are as disastrous in the world of high tech as they are in the world of pencil and paper, including those ubiquitous posers or brochures of copied text or illustrations. They involve no analysis and at best “thin-sesis”, never synthesis. No wonder critics of technology decry the use of a 747 to deliver a bon bon across town!

The following illustration demonstrates the set of publications that have been designed to transform the library/learning commons into a major force in teaching and learning:





For our arsenal, we first published *Ban Those Bird Units* where 15 think models of instructional design made their debut. These models were designed to be grounded first in major educational theory and research but push thinking far beyond what both teachers and librarians commonly did during library research.



Then came *Beyond Bird Units* that expanded the think models to 18 and provided all new examples of high-level units of instruction. We wanted to put enough examples out there so that readers could begin to see patterns in what high-think and high-tech learning experiences looked and felt like. As we worked with teachers, we were very pleased that practitioners were following the models fairly closely as they began, but after getting the idea became very creative with the models. Nothing could have pleased us more.



Along the way we dropped the bomb *Build Your Own Information Literate School* that enriched the concept of teaching information literacy embedded in real learning experiences. This book came at a time when many in the field began to advocate for a separate library curriculum in the narrow focus of research skills as a subset of a broader conception of information literacy. The foundational idea of this book was that content knowledge is enhanced when students learn how to learn with “just in time” research skill instruction. We were rejecting the notion that separately taught skills had the desired effect of producing learners ready for college and even everyday life. Instead, when content and process skills were intertwined, both were enhanced further than if separated. We did not realize it at the time, but we were laying the foundation of a major switch in program. If the teacher librarian concentrated first on having a parade of high quality, high-think, high-tech learning experiences coming through the library, good things were more than likely to emerge.



Next came the actual centerpiece of the redesign of school libraries into learning commons as both physical and virtual spaces in the school where clients claim ownership and propel the learning commons into the heart of teaching and learning. As a trio, we systematically took the library media program and did 180 degree thinking – turning each concept from an organizational point of view over into a client-side model. Such thinking challenges everything you have ever known or learned and practiced. Our conversations were intense and productive. We were trying to respond to what we saw educational theory and research crying out for. In addition to the book, we created a companion wiki: <http://schoollearningcommons.pbworks.org>. We used this site to continue to add major educational works and research to our bibliographies and to invite comment from readers. Both features have been well received by readers. In addition, we began a free learning commons seminar during the fall semester of

2009 involving over a hundred individuals across the U.S. and Canada. We also did a major webinar attended by over 300 people and that webinar is still available for viewing. We have also made frequent presentations at conferences and in school district professional development sessions.



Along the way, we noticed that practitioners were having difficulty understanding and creating the Big Think as a culminating activity to the end of a major learning experience. Thus, we created *The Big Think* book where nine metacognitive strategies were presented as the capstone of a learning experience. This extended the thinking and learning in the think model volumes far beyond what we had witnessed in the educational literature.

Finally, we have created a trio of books that pull together learning experiences on the three most common topics that teachers bring to the learning commons. For convenience, we brought together these previously published units into topical packages and revised them to meet the specifications of our later thinking.



People



Places



Issues

Two other publications came into existence during this period. The first, *In Command* written by David Loertscher and Robin Williams taught and urged teacher librarians to assist the learners of today who are overwhelmed with the juggernaut of the Internet to take control of their own information space and to allow into that space their teachers and teacher librarians who could coach them through various learning experiences. The second book, *Collection Development* written by David Loertscher and Laura Wimberly, was a revitalization of collection mapping that I had written a decade before. What information spaces should we build in this new world of information glut?

To our delight, and parallel to our thinking and efforts, Valerie Diggs, the teacher librarian at Chelmsford, MA High School developed and built the first school learning commons we had seen anywhere. We were fortunate enough to attend the dedication of the new learning commons in Dec. of 2008 where Ross Todd was one of the dedicatory speakers. There are a number of articles that have now appeared defining the concept more clearly. "Flip This Library," an article in *School Library Journal* in Dec. 2008 probably has been the most widely read, but a number of articles in *Teacher Librarian* are now extending these ideas.

We have been impressed with the number of school administrators who are looking for a breath of fresh air in the revitalization of seemingly antiquated library programs that are no longer relevant. We have been interested in watching technology directors just in the past several years become more and more interested in teaching and learning rather than concentrating totally on network construction and maintenance. We are impressed with developments in

networks using the 802.11n standard of IEEE that allow wireless access to as many students and teachers as you can cram into a learning commons space. We are troubled with the continued fear campaigns that prevent access to web 2.0 tools and information much needed by students and teachers. We worry about teacher librarians who are not comfortable in the world of web 2.0. But we are encouraged that in the fiscal downturn Google has produced the Google Apps Education system that is a free, and “safe” environment for the use of many web 2.0 applications. We are encouraged that cloud computing is making substantial progress across the continent as opposed to locally home-grown networks that have poor track records of reliability and capacity. We are disappointed at those who cling to evolutionary change, not realizing that there is no time left to take it slowly. We are encouraged by tech-savvy professionals who become learning specialists using web 2.0 tools. These are the folks that will lead this profession into the center of teaching and learning.

Having reviewed the development of the learning commons, let us take a look at the central elements that constitute this major shift.

1. Libraries must move from an organizational emphasis to a client-based model.
2. The learning common has two presences: both virtual and physical. Distance education and online learning are supported by a virtual learning commons.
3. The physical space of the learning commons contains two elements: the open commons and the experimental learning center.
 - a. The open commons brags of a parade of exemplary teaching and learning experiences co-taught by classroom teachers and other specialists in the school including the teacher librarian, teacher technologists, reading coaches, counselors, art specialists, and administrators charged with instructional improvement.
 - b. The open commons is the cultural center of the school in which students and teachers claim ownership.
 - c. The open commons facilitates individuals, small groups, and large groups simultaneously doing, thinking, creating, planning, studying, producing, and improving.
 - d. The open commons is a wireless environment that supports any and all devices of choice with reliable access to the Internet.
 - e. The open commons is a flexible space where book stacks, banks of stationary computers, stationary tables and chairs do not get in the way. Instead, the configuration of the facility adapts at any given time to the demands of teaching and learning.
 - f. The experimental learning center is the focal point of school improvement and is endorsed and supported by administrators.

Professional development, professional learning communities, study groups, experimentations, trials, action research, demonstrations, and large scale assessments are planned, carried out, and implemented.

4. The virtual commons transforms the one-way communication of school library web sites into giant conversations, construction centers, exhibit galleries, and help centers where teachers and students feel a sense of ownership and in a place they all feel they contribute to and build.

Examples might include:

- a. Knowledge construction centers that transform rigid assignments into conversations between classroom teachers, students, specialists, administrators, and parents – all acting in the role of coaches as everyone pushes toward excellence.
 - b. Virtual book and media clubs where everyone is talking about a wide range of reading, viewing, and listening, the product being a literate and engaged school.
 - c. Virtual Geek Squads consisting of students who provide solutions and assistance with various forms of technology.
 - d. Reference centers providing all types of helps, tutorials, and suggestions in a collaborative atmosphere that says: you help me, I help you, we all help each other, and we all get better and better.
 - e. The virtual cultural center of the school where archives of the best of creations, projects, examples, and models reside and are exhibited to everyone.
5. Organizational support
 - a. The learning commons is staffed by accredited full time teacher librarians, other professional specialists in the school, and by technical and paraprofessional support.
 - b. Budgets are sufficient to build and maintain a rich information and technological environment.
 - c. Responsible access is the principle that governs over fear and denials.

The Challenge.

School libraries have enjoyed sporadic success over the past fifty years. Although many excellent programs have emerged we still cannot say that as a field we have been successful. In spite of all the research that provides evidence that strong library programs make a positive impact on teaching and learning we have made few converts among administrators and system planners. Every teacher librarian still continues to fight for time, budget and staffing. Library programs are nowhere in mainstream educational professional literature and

marginalized in school improvement initiatives. As a team, we have spent the last three years rethinking everything about library media programs as they exist and how they need to change to add value to education in the current information and technological environment. School libraries should be leading the way into the future and the inevitable changes in education needed to address global realities.

We invite you, our fellow professionals to join us in a quest to reinvent; think, write, develop, test, and research bold new ideas that will push this field into the center of teaching and learning.

What have you done already?

How will you participate?

What ideas do you have?