



Once you know a student, he or she no longer feels anonymous and is much more likely to ask for help.

# Concord-Carlisle Transitions to a Learning Commons

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**I**n 2007 our library was dedicated to books, and it showed.

Concord-Carlisle Regional High School (CCHS) is in a high performing district 20 miles west of Boston with an enrollment of approximately 1400 students. Built in 1975, the CCHS Library is quite large with a three story open plan connected by ramps. It is the first space you see upon entering the main entrance of the school.

However, our library was a dark and cavernous book museum. Bookcases blocked so many of the internal and external windows of the library that whether one was trying to look in or out, the only view was of books.

The collection was quite large with 38,000 titles that had an average age of 31 years (we had books from 1976), which were spread non-sequentially over three floors. There was almost no way to find anything without a teacher-librarian taking you by the hand and leading you to the hiding place within the stacks. Microfiche machines sat cloaked under a thick layer of dust alongside thirty years worth of *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (2008), decades of magazine back issues, and obsolete card catalogs.

There was one cramped area for class instruction, which was not a problem since so few classes came in for instruction. Student use of the library was very traditional, focused on silent individual study. There were so many rules and punishments that the library was a place of continuous conflict. The only bright colors were from laminated signs that could be found everywhere in the room:

Please Do Not Move Chairs!

Penalty for Eating in the Library—After-School Detention!

Penalty for Drinking in the Library—Washing Library Tables!

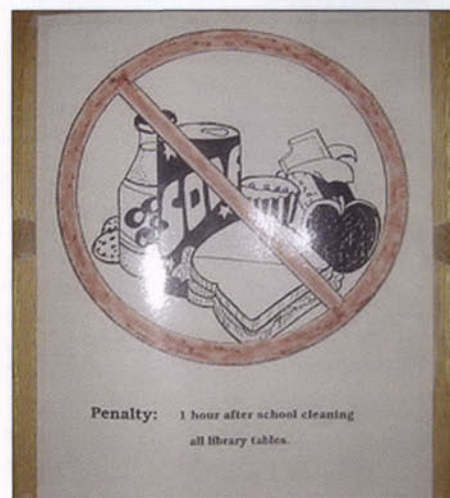
Put Textbooks Back!

Silence!

No Group Work!

Don't Talk!

One had the feeling that the library would be a wonderful place if it were not for the students.



## WE DECIDED TO CHANGE

In September 2007, I was hired as the CCHS teacher-librarian. From the very first day, I had the full support of an administration that thought as I did that the library could



play a rather dynamic role as a learning commons—a center for learning and creativity for students and staff.

We are in the third year of our transition to a learning commons, a model that embraces the programmatic and space changes required to support learning information skills, critical thinking skills, collaborative work, creativity, and the joy of reading. Most important, it is a model where student learning comes first.

Here are the steps we have taken over the past three years to make these changes, followed by a discussion of our results.

## REINVENTING OURSELVES

Before we could even begin to address the physical needs of the facility, we needed to change ourselves. With the help of our very supportive human resources department we rewrote all job descriptions, focusing on student services and professional development. We went from having three generic assistant librarians to positions that covered specific areas of expertise:

- The description for my position, the school library media specialist, was adapted to reflect that as a teacher my content area is information and media literacy and I should possess the skills and technologies associated with those responsibilities.

- The reference librarian position became student services specialist, which meant reference work would now cover books, databases, web resources, online training, and tutorials.

- The position handling clerical tasks was changed to Accounts Specialist to include account administration and vendor communication, which was previously handled by the teacher-librarian. This made the accounts specialist position more critical and freed up time for the teacher-librarian to teach. Purchase orders and budget accounting also shifted to this job description.

- A new position of media production specialist was created to have a professional manage the partnership between CCHS library and our local cable television company. That individual keeps our technology department humming and provides advanced support for student digital and



**Photo 3.** The old main desk was not welcoming.

media projects.

Our staff was totally re-energized as they bought into the changes. They are less disciplinarians and more professionals who actively engage in supporting student learning as an integral part of the school community.

## FIX THE SPACE

While revising our job descriptions and responsibilities, we were also addressing the physical challenges presented by the space and the sprawling collection. The initial focus was on streamlining the collection and clearing the floor of extraneous junk. These two space goals would give us the ability to host classes more effectively, bring in light, and create extra space. Between the heaps of old furniture and equipment, the dust, and the signs everywhere, it felt like a cluttered prison.

Before moving the bookcases, we began an ambitious weeding campaign and removed over 5,000 books. We said goodbye to the microfiche machines, the *Reader's Guides*, the back issues of magazines, the card catalogs, and the excess 'stuff' that had been stored all over the library, and filled two twenty-foot containers for removal.

Our goal was to consolidate fiction on the second floor, with nonfiction and reference on the third, while placing everything into sequential order. This reorganization would allow students and staff to more independently navigate the collection and find material with guidance from, rather than reliance on, the teacher-librarian.

As we removed books, we reorganized the bookcases to clear space for students and classes. Without a budget for renovation,

we moved some of the smaller bookcases ourselves. This impressed (and amused) our custodians so much they became great partners and moved the larger bookcases when they found time in their day.

Suddenly, the front entrance hallway of the school actually looked into the library and not just at 105.12–237.38. We could now see historic Walden Woods out of our second story windows and not Fiction A-G.

Tables were spread out, signs came down, and light that had been blocked streamed into a facility that suddenly looked very different.

## GRANTS HELPED A LOT!

We wrote grant applications to local community groups and received funds for soft reading chairs, student supply carts, more than a dozen large potted plants, as well as new English and foreign language dictionaries.

Since then, our grant writing requests



**Photos 4 & 5.** Old Shakespeare has been replaced by urban art created by students



have expanded to include additional technology capabilities such as external hard drives for student work, higher quality digital video cameras, as well as light and sound kits for student productions. There are also plans for more new furniture as well as a moveable stage for student performances. Through the partnership with our local cable television company we have received training and support for the new media tools, and the result is an increased flow of student and school related media for broadcast.

## NEW TECHNOLOGY

Our district had already invested heavily in technology, but little of it had ever made its way to the library. In 2007, the library had eight aging PCs. During my first year, we added ten desktop iMacs, a laptop cart of twenty Macbooks, and quickly installed a Promethean ActivBoard in the first floor instructional area. Each subsequent year has seen the addition of more technology and wireless capability.

We mounted a large LCD screen above the circulation desk and hooked it up to a computer to run a digital display. There was always something new scrolling to catch student and faculty interest such as school news, teacher news, student activities, new books, and library contest promotions. This was a powerful symbol that there were new things going on in the library.

Our staff development was critical during the first year as we added new computers and began introducing web-based tools to the school. Moving from PC to Mac was a big step and we spent time learning about the laptop carts and basic trouble shooting. The library staff was encouraged to take a laptop home for the weekend and 'play' with it, uploading photos and making movies with iMovie.

We reallocated space to create an eight-station, state of the art media lab. Students now work on media rich projects alone or in groups, for classroom projects in all disciplines.

Our filters opened as well. After initial debates on the merits and drawbacks of social networks, we gained support from our forward-thinking administration to allow

access to Facebook and other platforms. This openness has not proved problematic and instead makes the library pertinent to our students' daily lives. They have a space where they can continue their busy online lives as they access their academic work supported by librarians who guide (and often troubleshoot) rather than police and constrain.

## THE COLLECTION

Though book-buying budgets have been tight over the past three years, we have been able to add to and diversify our collection, particularly with the addition of graphic novels, urban literature, MP3 Playaways, Flip digital video cameras, and eBooks.

This diversification has been of particular importance in servicing the needs of our special education students. Alternate sources for information and texts including audio and graphic novel adaptations for visual learners, are helping tutors and students access academic content. Adaptive technologies like Kurzweil and other text-to-speech features are part of our growing suite of student services.

## OUTREACH—FACULTY AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Never underestimate the power of the cookie.

During that first year, I sent out a monthly group email to the various department chairs featuring a cookie of the month. The first department chair to invite me to one of their regularly scheduled department meetings got a double batch of cookies for their staff while I talked to them about the new library program. There was a bidding war the month I offered Whoopie Pies.

Administrators made sure I was told they felt left out and so we extended invitations for them to join the department visits. It was fun and an incredibly effective way to get in the door to promote the library, explore collaborative opportunities, and investigate databases specific to their content area.

The library became the site for professional development and now supports faculty in developing wikis for their classes and embedding Google Custom Search

engines to guide students toward the best and most appropriate web-based resources for their curriculum content area. The professional development offerings we've provided through the library over the last two years has included instruction on Vokis, Web 2.0 Smack Downs, widgets, and specialized databases.

Most exciting is the rise in requests from faculty for assistance in advanced web searching and databases for class material and course content. This increase is evidence that the learning commons philosophy is influencing pedagogy. An additional benefit of providing professional development for faculty is that it creates opportunities for collaborative planning. Using the learning commons as the location for professional development gets teachers out of their classrooms, their departments, and their regular patterns. It is a neutral space dedicated to new ideas, new skills, and becoming a location for a new kind of collaborative learning experience.

## COMMUNITY

Central to everything and more important than I realized back in 2007, is what a pivotal place a true learning commons becomes in the school community. Creating an environment of caring, genuine student support, and trust takes stepping outside your comfort zone on occasion, taking risks frequently, and trying new things always.

I also cannot emphasize strongly enough how important it has been for me to learn student names. Once you know a student, he or she no longer feels anonymous and is much more likely to ask for help. It also allows for an ongoing dialogue about how projects are going and a greater appreciation of student needs, challenges, and frustrations. It even allows me to engage in the endless Edward vs. Jacob debates (Twilight, 2008), adjudicate fascinating disputes, and laugh with the students as part of a community.

When we are asked by desperate students to chaperone a dance, we always try to accommodate. The students deeply appreciate when we chaperone their dances because it creates a common ground. This year, we are moving beyond dances and I



will be chaperoning a trip to Japan. Additionally, the library's media production specialist will be traveling with a school group to Turkmenistan, to help document the trip on video. Traveling and learning with our students and other faculty members, as well as incorporating social media to share our experiences with parents will model the communication skills and behavior we want for our students.

Another wonderful partnership came about when a representative from our student senate approached us for help with school-wide elections. They wanted to move away from inefficient paper ballots and use an online tool. We happily checked out laptops and the elections occurred in the cafeteria during lunch blocks, monitored by students, with library staff rotating freshly charged laptops as needed. This initial collaboration has spawned many more opportunities for involvement in student life. As engaged partners, we can also guide students in collaborative, technical, and communication skills. Our integration into their community helps students feel that the learning commons is theirs.

## **OVERHAULING THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM**

Most important of all was of course the transformation of the academic program.

Using standards from the American Association of School Librarians (AASL, 2009), our Massachusetts State and School Library Associations, as well as guidance from curriculum areas such as Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 1996) and the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS, 1994), it was crystal clear we needed to improve our information and media literacy skills. While we overhauled the space, we also overhauled the program.

In 2007, there was little history of collaborative work. Teachers sent classes to the library when they were out sick, or they occasionally sent students down with the vague mission to "find a book." There were established research projects that required a visit to the library for a review of databases

built into the lesson map, but there were no discussions about the goals of the class.

Teacher by teacher and visit after visit, we began to change the dialogue. We analyzed assignments for the skills we wanted students to build and tried to determine how these could be assessed. We suggested new tools for search, organization, and synthesis to incorporate more technology and provide differentiated instruction.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND OUR PROGRAM**

Many teachers were nervous and afraid they could not possibly allow their students to use applications they did not know themselves. Partnering with teachers and providing close support has been important; many teachers are now trying new things with their students, confident we will support them.

Today classes that visit the library learn about our databases and deep web searches, but they also learn about tools such as Google Wonder Wheel. We teach numerous Web 2.0 tools as needed, such as widgets, Animoto, VoiceThread, Glogster, Prezi, Flickr Creative Commons, RSS feeds, iGoogle, PageFlakes, and other tools that will help students create and personalize the Web to their individual information needs.

For management and organization of academic projects, we teach platforms such as NoodleTools and Diigo. Online journaling with blogs and discussion forums using wikis are also taught and supported. Copyright, attribution, and creative commons licensing are frequent lesson topics as classes cycle back to the end of a research project to begin focusing on the synthesis of their work. We also teach students to discriminate among online sources and demonstrate critical evaluation of any source they use in their work.

Analyzing our database statistics and surveying the faculty led us to make some changes in our databases. JSTOR was added for teachers and students looking for higher level academic content, and we added access to primary source portals such as the National Archives. Oxford English Dictionary Online was added at the request

of English teachers who wanted to delve deeper into language and etymology with students. Teen Health and Wellness was added to support life skills research projects for our junior Health and Fitness classes. The Concord Free Public Library has been a wonderful partner and hosts workshops in their Science Resource Center and collaborates to offer training for our Science Department and their reference staff.

The increased activity is not only about technology. Our circulation statistics are up in large part because requests for book talks have also increased. More teachers are bringing their classes to get ideas for independent reading projects. There is nothing as rewarding as a rush for the table after a presentation of the top, new young adult novels. Listening to teenagers talk about books and seeing them walk out with one in hand is as deeply satisfying now as it has always been for teacher-librarians.

## **THE RESULTS ARE FANTASTIC!**

We have tracked, quantified, and documented the results of our changes. Using Goggle Docs we created forms to enter and aggregate data in a simple way. One quick way to assess our progress in building a space and program valued by the community is by tracking patron visits. Figure 1 shows the remarkable increase in the number of visits.

Circulation statistics for the same period also tell a rewarding story. Students are checking out books in substantially greater numbers each year.

Keeping tallies of visits by department tells us where outreach has been effective and to which departments we need to focus our support and energies. As of October 2009, we have excellent integration with the English department. Visits from our foreign language classes are higher than they were last year and social studies is only a bit lower. This is good information that will guide our plan for outreach throughout the year.

Tracking the technology skills we teach over the course of the year helps guide instruction and self-assesses our progress in collaborative planning with teachers. This



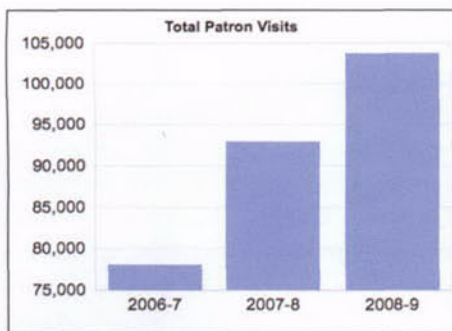


Figure 1

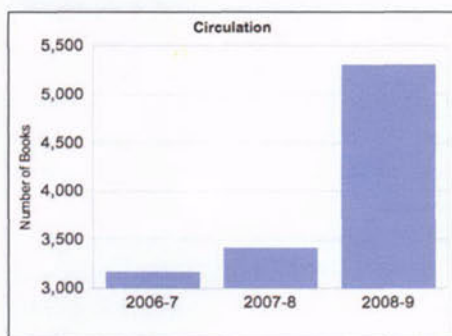


Figure 2

data reflects the integration of technology in class visits for September to October 2009. Students are using class time to access web-based resources for video production and social media platforms. Once research projects begin in January, we expect to see the database numbers increase. Data collection allows us to track, monitor, and respond as needed.

Finally, every class is matched to the AASL Standards (2007) and providing data

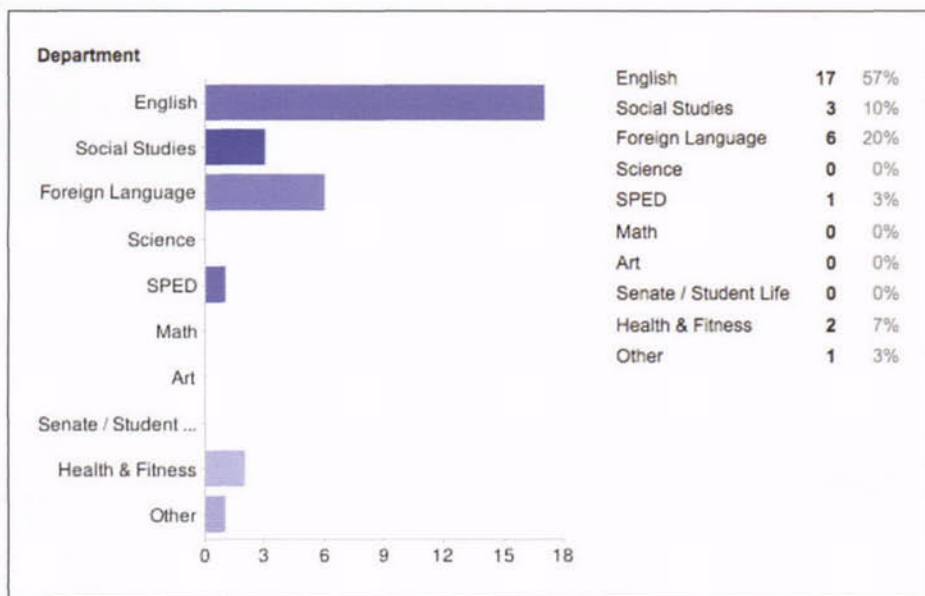


Figure 3

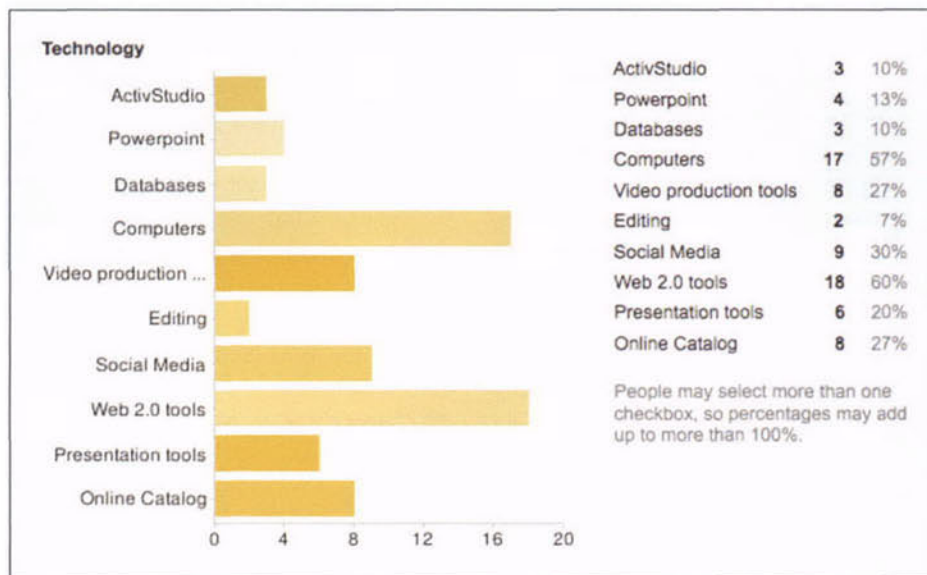


Figure 4

on which skills are being addressed is very helpful. Student learning is the priority and documentation is evidence of the specialized instruction and support provided through our program.

### WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Two and a half years into the process, our physical space now serves the many needs of our students, staff, and community. We have gone from being a warehouse of books to a busy, vibrant place for students and faculty to gather and learn in a connected and collaborative environment. The cost of this transition to our district has so

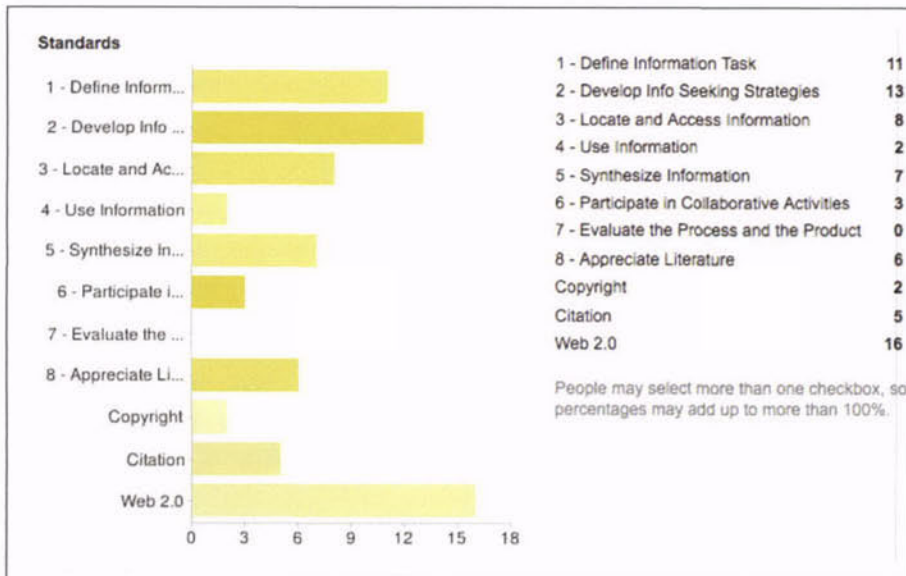
far been minimal. It was done with sweat equity, small grants, and cookies.

Light pours in through windows onto students curled into comfy chairs with a laptop or playing Scrabble in groups at a table. Our wireless network is open and many students work on their personal netbooks or read on their iPods. There is ideal space for diverse creative learning, group work, and the various kinds of academic or personal creation and production. Double and often triple class bookings keep the entire staff busy, and student visits continue to climb.

We host Skype events—most recently with a humanitarian aid worker in Pakistan. Student art has replaced posters of authors on our walls and we have had art installations from our Japanese sister school in Nanae (<http://www.town.nanae.hokkaido.jp/english/default.htm>), as well as photographic exhibits from UNICEF. Our digital displays promote school activities and new clubs and groups regularly use the facility. After school, the Taiko Drum Club meets twice per week in our space, with the boom of the drums heard all over campus. Nothing symbolizes the change from a traditional library to a dynamic learning commons like Taiko drumming!

The CCHS Library has been transformed both in space and program from where it was three years ago. Yet, the changes will never stop occurring as we continue to adapt to the changing environment and the





**Figure 5**

needs of our students. Next year though, we plan to mark our transition and officially rededicate our space as a Library Learning Commons.

Since attribution is a skill all librarians should model, I'd like to credit the following people for helping to provide the vision for our transformation. Special thanks

to Valerie Diggs and her Chelmsford High School Learning Commons for blazing the trail, the Massachusetts School Library Association, David Loertscher, Joyce Valenza, Doug Johnson, and the many other teacher-librarians and educational technology bloggers who, via my RSS feed, provide me with the inspiration and professional development to bring the best to our students, every single day.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

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**Photo 7:** Look at the new Learning Commons now.



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