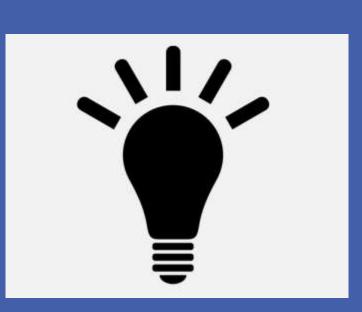# The learning commons in your school library: Why you should create a user-centered learning space

Sarah Macintyre & Ciara O'Shea

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 10 years, academic libraries have been moving towards the Learning Commons model. It is only very recently that elementary and secondary schools have begun to rearrange their institutions in the same way. We will address the following issues:

- What is the Learning Commons?
- What are the benefits of the Learning Commons?
- What does this look like in an academic library?
- What is being done in school libraries?
- How can school libraries create a Learning Commons?

WHAT IS THE LEARNING COMMONS?

Traditionally, libraries have had a rigid atmosphere which is not conducive to collaborative learning. The Learning Commons is the new way to take the library space into the 21st century.

Definition of the Learning Commons:

- The Learning Commons is a reimagining of the library space; a place where students are encouraged to collaborate, use different technologies and share information (Harland, 2011).

- It is a *physical* space for studying, learning and sharing; a *virtual* space where all of the information is at the student's finger tips; and a *cultural* space where information literacy skills are taught and relationships between students, faculty and librarians are created (Heitsch & Holley, 2011).

Benefits of the Learning Commons:

- Enhancing student learning through technology and courses aimed at them, which will hopefully lead to more participation (Gamble, 2011).

- Giving students the space that they need to complete their work, and collaborate. Since collaboration is becoming an essential skill in the workforce, the commons can improve people's futures (Gamble, 2011).

- Giving students a "third space" not home nor the classroom where they can complete work, and socialize (Harland 2011).

- Creates connections between students, faculty and librarians. These connections can increase the possibility of new knowledge being created. The more connections there are, the more likely it is that something new will be created.

- Makes the library a useful space for students, and helps them to see the other advantages of library materials (Harland, 2011).

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Key Features of the Learning Commons in Academic Libraries:

- Individual workstations in a quiet space
- Group workstations that allow for noise
- Group study rooms with computers or plugs for laptops
- Presentation practice rooms with projectors
- Adaptive technology for students with disabilities
- Classrooms for information literacy instruction
- Teaching and learning centers (Writing centres)
- Consultation areas (Reference)
- Scanning, printing and copying stations
- IT Service desk that may also lend technology
- Comfortable seating
- Café (Lippincott, 2009, p.22)

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Why is the Learning Commons being implemented?

Millennials are a unique user group, and their needs and expectations are different from those of previous generations.

- They have high expectations
- They expect customization
- They are technology veterans
- They utilize new communication modes (Moore and Wells, 2009)

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Students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Learning Commons in the W.E.B. Dubois Library were surveyed about their attitudes towards the learning commons. The results of the survey indicated:

- 85% of students preferred receiving reference and research assistance face-to-face
- 80% of students preferred to receive technology support face-to-face (Moore and Wells, 2009)

(http://www.flickr.com/photos/dnorman/5353324013/)

SCHOOL LIBRARIES

How are primary and secondary school libraries implementing the Learning Commons?

Beaufort Elementary – Media Centre and Learning Commons

- **Zone 1 - Big Book Beach:** Primary instructional space
- **Zone 2 - The Sandbar:** Seating for leisure reading
- **Zone 3 - Discovery Dock:** A listening area for audiobooks
- **Zone 4 - Computer Cove:** Computers for research
- **Zone 5 - Information Island:** Reference desks (Waskow, 2011)

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Glen Allen High School – Library and Learning Commons

- Stationary exercise bikes
- Work areas for group collaboration
- Kitchen for cooking activities
- Café tables to have snacks
- Interactive white board
- Sofa chairs (Martin, Westmoreland & Branyon, 2011)

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Marysville Getchell High School – Library Commons

- Low-level, movable shelving
- Self check-out system
- Strong website and online presence
- Collaboration with administration and teachers
- Leisure reading space
- Classroom and technology instruction in the library (Marcoux, 2011)

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Key Challenges

- Funding (New Software and Hardware)
- Staffing (Teacher-Librarians)
- Space (Renovations; Physical Building)
- Support (Collaboration with Staff and Community)

SIMPLE FIRST STEPS

The first few steps towards developing a Learning Commons are easy to implement!

- **User-Centered Services:** Let students borrow whatever they need – even dictionaries!
- **Trust Your Patrons:** Let students borrow tools, and risk not getting them back!
- **Be Flexible:** Try new programs, and don't be afraid to make changes if at first they don't succeed!
- **Reduce Barriers:** Create clear information sheets to help students use sophisticated software!
- **Buy eReaders:** Let the students know that we are leaders in technology! (Harland, 2011)

(http://www.flickr.com/photos/jiscinfonet/405736544/)

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CONTACT

Sarah Macintyre - sarah.macintyre@mail.mcgill.ca

Ciara O'Shea - ciara.oshea@mail.mcgill.ca