Savvy School Library Design to Facilitate 21st century Literacy Skills and the Common Core

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(This article is based on a professional development workshop offered by the northeast Ohio region of the Ohio Educational Library Media Association in winter, 2013.)

School libraries are uniquely poised to become an essential and integral element in student acquisition of 21st century literacy skills and in helping educators address Common Core standards. They have an unprecedented opportunity to assume an instructional leadership role and create a facility that promotes instructional collaboration that will have a dynamic impact on academic achievement.

School librarians can demonstrate their leadership, knowledge, and commitment as integral players in the learning process with a redesign of their library space, both physically and virtually, to facilitate and accommodate changes necessary for students to engage in a participatory learning environment. Immediately implementing the best ubiquitous design practices will transform and move one’s school library from being perceived as a traditional warehouse of information, to being seen as the “hub” of the school.

For many school librarians, envisioning their school library space as a learning commons is the first step to creating a facility that will retain vibrancy and relevancy for today’s digitally connected learners. The concept of a learning commons has been embraced by many post-secondary institutions and has been spurred by changes in student assignments that require collaborative and creative learning space. At the heart of the learning commons is the idea that a flexible space can support multiple types of activities. According to Educause, a commons space begins with an analysis of student needs, considering the activities and work that should be supported. A key concept of establishing a learning commons is the types of social engagement the space will support.

“...the successful learning commons does not depend solely upon adaptable space configuration or the latest technological gear. Its strength lies in the relationships it supports, whether these are student-to-student, student-to-faculty, student-to-staff, student-to-equipment, or student-to-information. Effective learning commons are alive with the voices of students working together, establishing the kinds of connections that promote active, engaged learning.” (Educause, 2011)

For many school librarians, the concept of a learning commons addresses their ideas of the library being more than just a place to house and access resources; more than a study hall
for students; and more than a computer lab. A learning commons encompasses the multi-functionality of a library, lab, lounge, and collaborative space that will ideally support real-time learning and instruction in addition to virtual, mobile, and online learning. The concept of a learning commons is likely to be one that school librarians can sink their teeth into. At its core, the concept is meant to be an evolving, non-static ideal of flexible learning space. As student needs change, so will the space and the services provided. It is highly likely that emphasis on the virtual world will take precedence in the physical commons area. Initial challenges, such as those that appear in most redesign projects, have cost as their root: the cost of providing new technology, equipment, and services, and the cost of retrofitting existing infrastructures to support technology and collaborative learning.

Another challenge to implementing a learning commons is the lack of a standard model. For some, the obstacles include knowing which services to offer among a myriad of options, time, and knowledge acquisition in order to make the most informed decision, based on the unique needs of the school and its stakeholders. School librarians can begin their deliberations about creating their own learning commons with some reflection upon their students’ learning, 21st century literacy skills, and connection with Common core standards.

Creating a library facility that incorporates the purpose and design of a learning commons may best suit the 21st Century learner. School librarians may also question: What does it mean to be literate today? What are 21st century literacy skills? How do students and teachers interact, and how is information accessed, evaluated, and created within and outside the physical walls of the library? School librarians are compelled to address common themes and issues associated with innovations in technology that have influenced how students are accessing, evaluating, and using information increasingly from a host of mobile devices. The BYOD or bring your own device movement has brought forth new challenges in policies and practices of accessing information in schools.

In Teaching 21st Century Skills, author, Beers, (2011) suggests, “The 21st Century requires us to create a generation of thinkers, learners who think creatively to solve problems and who collaborate with others at home and in the workplace. The ability to learn and create new ideas is essential for the 21st Century.”

Emphasis on collaborative learning and providing the space for collaborative use of technology to support student creativity has led to many libraries developing makerspaces. Makerspaces are another non-standardized, learner-centered space, not easily defined because the activities and spaces for makerspaces vary widely. However, a common purpose of makerspaces is instruction, empowerment, and centered on creativity utilizing technology.

Hull and Nelson (2009) succinctly state in The Future of Literacy Studies what it means to be 21st-century literate: “Being able and willing to communicate and understand across differences in language and other modes and media for communication, in ideology, in culture and in geography is at the heart of what it means to be literate now.” So what does this mean for school library design? School librarians need to survey their school libraries with a fresh perspective, and consider the emphasis of 21st century literacies. 21st century
Literacy skills include information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy and transliteracy. When considering how to create the physical and virtual space that will facilitate 21st century skills, it is helpful to understand how these literacies are enacted in the school library.

Information literacy is considered by many school librarians to be a foundational skill for students as they synthesize meaning from abundant information sources and formats available from a wide range of information creators. The American Library Association defines information literacy as the “set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ALA, 2000).

Information and media literacy are often considered the filters for which students evaluate and interpret information. Media literacy has become a key component to 21st century literacy, as media has proliferated to the extent that media accompanies the majority of information students access in the school library. Media literacy was defined by the Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute in 1992 as, “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms” (Center for Media Literacy, 2011). The definition has evolved in the two decades since to include an understanding of the role of media in society and an emphasis on students as media creators rather than merely consumers of media. The school library that has adopted a learning commons approach may be the most effective environment for assisting students with these important skills that will be applicable throughout their life.

Digital literacy is defined as “the ability to use the technology available to accomplish given tasks, demonstrating skills and knowledge. Youth are able to find the information they need, analyze the appropriate materials, and even evaluate which media is the right one for the given task.” (Jenkins, 2009)

School librarians create opportunities for students to experience a variety of media in order to hone their discerning digital literacy skills about choosing the best medium to use to accomplish their goals. Media literacy promotes responsible and ethical use of information, both from within the media and from other multimedia sources. Increasingly students are encountering information in digital content, thus digital literacy frequently is the means through which all other literacies may be applied. Digital literacy encompasses the skills of creating and manipulating information. Students must understand the power of using digital technologies as a medium to create change, and solve problems. Digital literacy is an essential building block for students to develop transliteracy skills.

Transliteracy, as defined by the Transliteracy Research Group is the ability to read, write, and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks. This definition may be an accurate observation of how students are engaging with information in your school library today. It is likely that students are currently accessing and engaging with a wide range of informational mediums simply through the use of their school library’s webpage or the physical and virtual collection of library resources, e.g. electronic databases, books, newspapers, journals, image collections or multimedia components.
Therefore, school librarians must consider how students are guided to and supported through the use of a variety of platforms. Instruction that helps students learn and incorporate a range of evaluation skills and helpful aids for access and use of these platforms is a must to facilitate and support learning across disciplines with a graduated approach to complexity and application to real world concepts as specified in the Common core standards.

Librarians must organize their library space in order to enable multiple mediums to be accessed and used, as well as create and provide authentic learning experiences that will enable students to apply their 21st century knowledge and skills within and outside the physical library space.

School librarians must not only consider the various 21st century literacies, but the changes in how students learn, as well. Researchers from the Beckman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University have labeled students today as born digital, or “those who grow up immersed in digital technologies for whom a life fully integrated with digital devices is the norm.”

Similarly, the Partnership for 21St Century Learners states that “Twenty-first century learners are always on, always connected. They are comfortable multitasking. They are multimedia oriented. Their world is Web-based. They want instant gratification. They are impatient, creative, expressive and social. They are risk-takers who thrive in less structured environments.” Some overall design considerations include:

**How to Manage Change**

How will you get “buy-in” for changes made to your space? How will you let others know changes have been made thoughtfully and are based on improving academic achievement?

**How Teachers Teach**

How does collaborative instruction take place in your facility? How does your virtual space support and connect to your physical resources and space? What types of “spaces” are needed to support instructional practices? What type of assessment of student learning is conducted, how often, and to what end?

**How Students Work**

What is the nature of student collaboration? How do students create and consume products of teaching and learning? Considerations include how students work within the library, between the classroom and library, outside of school within the community, outside of school with other local libraries, and virtually with other students and teachers.

**Resources**
How are resources accessed? How are they organized? What is the support infrastructure for use of resources in and out of the library facility? How are resources organized virtually? How are resources and services connected? What is the nature of communication about available resources and services? What types of student activities are supported by the available physical and virtual resources?

Planning for a change in your facility, whether it is a wholesale remodel or a simple reorganization and facelift, presents opportunities to share your vision of the library and create advocates of your program. Although it may be expedient to dive in and begin rearranging furniture, it is important to capitalize on the advocacy-building opportunities a facility design may inspire. Getting buy-in, soliciting opinions and involving the library community in the design will increase interest and attribute greater value to the library program. This process will also enable the school librarian to demonstrate how they have systematically and conscientiously documented the need for an improved space that will meet the needs of today’s students. Not only should your new space support collaborative learning, the process of design should be collaborative and inclusive of all of your library stakeholders.

Anticipating the conclusion and success of the redesign project serves as a natural guide to documentation of the redesign process and promotes a transparency to the design process. School librarians are advised to strategically plan how the “success” of the project will be communicated with library stakeholders, supporters, and advocates.

During this tremendous growth period, teens experience phenomenal change physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially. Thus, developing space to accommodate, facilitate and support growth and positively influence academic achievement is both challenging and essential. Authors Feinberg and Keller suggest, “teens come to the library for contradictory purposes and alternate between different sets of activities. They occupy a variety of postures…”

A fabulous resource for designing teen space is a set of guidelines developed by the American Library Association’s Young Adult Library Services Association. The national Teen Space Guidelines were intended to be, “a tool for evaluating a public library’s overall level of success in providing physical and virtual space dedicated to teens, aged 12-18.” While the guidelines were developed by a YALSA taskforce with opportunities for public comment, one of the goals of the guidelines was to spur conversation about “the importance of dedicated physical and virtual teen spaces for their continued engagement, growth and achievement.”
For example, Guideline 8.0 Ensure the virtual space reflects 21st century learning standards includes 13 points including, but not limited to, “support the development of multiple literacies including digital, visual, textual and technological informational navigation and use” and “use creative and artistic formats to express personal learning.”

The guidelines are available virtually and in a convenient Pdf. document for review and distribution from the website, http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/teenspaces

Overall, redesigned or new space should be multipurpose, flexible and reflect the interests and developmentally appropriate behaviors for the students served. The same can be said of the furniture, the technology and resources that fill the spaces both physically and virtually. The following list of suggested activities will pave the way for creating your ideal school library space.

**Phase 1:**

1. Determine if you will be redesigning your space or beginning with a clean slate. Set a desired time frame or timeline for the design process.

2. Clearly articulate for those involved in the design process, the resources you will be able to commit to this process; this may be your time and energy, or that of your staff or a budget, if one has been allocated.

3. Identify barriers as well as opportunities and advocates in the making.

4. Become involved in the information/communication loop if you are not the one initiating the process. Communicate your interest and professional knowledge to decision makers and key players.

5. Gather information, conduct your research this may include gathering data from your library stakeholders, conducting a needs assessment, align goals of the redesign project with the district, school, building, or library’s mission and goals. This information gathering phase is an opportune time to consult with your fellow school library colleagues, be proactive, seek the advice of others, gather words of wisdom and identify best practices as well as those potential obstacles. Learn from the mistakes of others!

6. Articulate an action plan that includes a cost analysis, timeline and major goals of the project.

**Phase 2:**

1. Gather information about the current infrastructure, structural (window, doors, floor, ceiling) and utilities available. Reminder, a significant consideration with redesigning space is how your library will be powered-up to accommodate a variety of mobile technologies and plethora of digital content. Identify any immediate needed improvements and address any historical problem areas.

2. Identify and map space for zones of activity.
3. Do take time to determine measurements, square footage of furniture, technology (actual size), pilot test furniture and activities, and plan for mobility by designing a mock-up of the space. You can then have a birds-eye perspective and evaluate how changes in the space will affect access to resources, traffic flow, and support for multiple simultaneous activities. From this vantage point, access to power sources, logical placements of zone activities, safety and security issues are easily identified.

4. Furniture considerations should include flexibility, mobility, design aesthetics and sanitation (promoting a germ-free, healthy environment).
5. From this vantage point, the placement, location of furniture zones can be manipulated, new arrangements tested, discarded or refined. One also has the opportunity to think creatively and practically about how students’ senses will be engaged throughout the school library environment through lighting, seating, management of sound, and displays or exhibits of student work.

6. Additional considerations would include the implementation of “green” practices. Your redesigned space can serve as a role model for others, and educate your students and staff about ways they too can become more “green”.

Phase 3:

1. Proceed with your timeline of activities. Gathering and documenting the change process over time with both anecdotal and formal assessment.

2. Celebrate your successes and share widely with others. Don’t forget to keep those key decision makers informed and aware of the positive influences on student learning and achievement.

21st century school libraries need to be designed with the ubiquitous user in mind; to accommodate and promote 21st century literacies and competencies for students; and must be collaborative, hands-on, and multifaceted in their design and in their delivery. Authors, Moss and Petrie (2002) concur, “Public spaces for children are designed for the childhoods children are living here and now, as well as creating relationships and solidarities between children, between adults and between adults and children...,” specifically, a space that supports relationships between and among your school library’s most important stakeholders.

Perhaps it is in your future to re-imagine your school library as a learning commons for students. Ultimately, the best environment will be one that ensures learning is multi-sensory, engaging students’ hearts and minds, and preparing students for real-world concepts and application in their lives.

Further reading:

ALA’s annually produced volume of American Libraries that features “winning” designs of libraries. (Check online repository and not just the print volume.)

Library Design Showcase 2013 (September/October) | American Libraries Magazine

WBDG Whole Building Design Guide: a program of the National Institute of Building Sciences - This site deals with the physical space and design of a library, as well as emerging issues to consider when designing your space and relevant building codes which will require your compliance. http://www.wbdg.org/design/school_library.php

NCEF Resource List: Library and Media Center Facilities Design http://www.ncef.org/rl/libraries.cfm - This list curated of the National Clearinghouse for
Educational Facilities provides resources and information on the design and planning of K-12 school libraries and media centers.

Doug Johnson: Designing Digital Libraries
http://www.doug-johnson.com/dougwri/designing-digital-libraries.html - Written by a school library professional and consultant, this article provides insight into common pitfalls in library design and how you can avoid them.

Designing Libraries: http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk/?PageID=89 - Focuses on design information for school libraries, as well as providing information on how to furnish, re-locate to, and photograph your newly designed area.

Designing for the future: http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA198862.html This PowerPoint suggests successful design principles for elementary school libraries.

References


Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) (2012). National Teen Space Guidelines Available at http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/teenspaces

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October 16-18, 2013 @ Kalahari Resort - Sandusky, OH

The theme for this year’s conference is “Connecting to the Common Core - Ohio’s Learning Standards” and will showcase how school librarians can collaborate with their colleagues to become curriculum leaders in their buildings and at the district level.