Developing a Learning Commons
Sydnye Cohen

Sydnye Cohen recently retired from teaching. She began her career as an English teacher, then worked as a teacher of the gifted and talented, a library media specialist for grades 9-12, and in her last year of teaching, a technology integrator for high school students. She also served on the faculty of the Alternate Route to Certification for Library Media Specialists in Connecticut. One of her primary goals with her students, whether they were high school aged or adults, was to make them more discerning users and producers of ideas and information. To that end she strongly emphasized information literacy in all her classes, as well as finding the right tools for seamless integration of curriculum and technology.

Cohen began her library’s metamorphosis into a library learning commons in 2009. The library learning commons had both a physical and a virtual overhaul. She also was instrumental in pioneering the 1:1 initiative in her school, which began in 2012 with the ninth-grade class. The school won an Apple Distinguished Program award for its 1:1 program, and Cohen authored articles and presented PD regionally and at AASL about working with iPads for teaching and learning. Some of the most inspirational ideas she encountered in her career happened at Treasure Mountain research retreats, and Cohen was fortunate to cochair the 2014 Hartford Treasure Mountain.

Cohen works as a volunteer for 826Chi, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting student writing skills. She spends time with the students and works as the 826 unofficial librarian, as she organized their library after they moved into a new space. Because Cohen will never retire from learning, she takes classes at Northwestern University.

A learning commons is a place where creativity, collaboration, and innovation happen every day. Moving your traditional library forward to this kind of place is a win-win situation for all the members of your school community. Creating a learning commons requires purposeful intention, a vision beyond physical walls, and support from your administration. Once you take a few steps toward turning your library into a learning commons, there is no going back, and your administration will work hand in hand with you as they see transformational teaching and learning in both the physical and virtual spaces.

Think about the things that you spend your day doing as a library media specialist. Are you busy enforcing rules? Are you cleaning up after kids who sneak food into your library? Are you chasing down students for overdue books or fines? Think about why you wanted to be a library media specialist. Were any of these things on your top-ten list of reasons to get certified as an LMS? Probably not. Revisit the things that were on your list of reasons. Perhaps they were working collaboratively with teachers, or guiding student research, or fostering a love of reading. It is difficult to achieve those goals if your library is filled with rules and regulations. I had a principal whose philosophy was that it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission. That is one route you can take as you think about how to innovate your library and change the status quo. This first step to building a learning commons is to let the rules go. I am not suggesting you create chaos or anarchy, but redefine what is important to you and your students and teachers. If you put your focus on the students and teachers and center them at the heart of your vision, magical things can happen to your library.

My “forgiveness” principal was also one who believed in positive thinking to move our school forward. The rules you have for the library have probably been in place for a while. Develop a mission/vision statement for the library learning commons and throw away the old rules. Our vision/mission philosophy was a simple statement encompassing everything we wanted the library learning commons to be. It was, “[insert your school’s name here] library learning commons strives to be an academically and socially exciting and worthwhile place for all members of its community.” The new rules were short, just two: respect the space, and behave responsibly. I told students they could eat in the library, but if I was cleaning up after them that privilege would disappear. An army of freshmen was so excited by the freedoms they were given, they became the food police. My principal was supportive of these changes.

The Latin root word for commons is the same as the root for community. Originally, a commons, like the Boston Common, was a gathering place for people to meet, graze their cows, or view public punishments—a place for gathering with a common purpose. The library learning commons has its roots in this tradition, a place where there is a shared vision, where learning in all sizes and shapes happens. It should be an academically, socially, exciting, and worthwhile place for students and teachers to be. As Loertscher (Loertscher and Kroecklin, 2014) suggests, “the word ‘commons’ could reflect a shift from a top-down organizational structure to the flat networked world where the clients, both teachers and students, consider themselves to be in command of knowledge building.”

FLEXIBILITY

One of the keys to moving forward with your transformation is to think about flexibility in both the physical and virtual spaces, in
the ways they are configured for learning. Are there places for students to work collaboratively? Are there places for students to work independently? Are there enough devices connected to the Internet? Are there places for teachers to work collaboratively? Can furniture be moved so a speaker can address groups of students? Is there a virtual place where students can add ideas to a class research project just as you probably have a shelf or a cart of physical resources where students keep books that are useful to the greater good participating in an assigned project? Is there a universal and easy password for everything? Is there one entry page or the same password for your databases? Do you have virtual pathfinders for all of the research assignments that are going on in the school, and do the students know how and where to find them? Some of these are easy fixes. Start with those.

**DISRUPTION**

Disruptive innovation is a term introduced by Clayton M. Christensen, a professor at Harvard Business School, and Michael B. Horn. Christensen and Horn's (2009) theory of disruption innovation in schools states that "the impact of disruption has been to transform things that were so complicated and expensive that only people with a lot of money and time could access them into things that are so affordable and simple to use that a much larger population of less-well-endowed people can enjoy the products or services." Taking a cue from this theory of disruption and knowing that it leads to more democratic practice, think about how you can make things that were complicated, simpler, and more accessible to your students and staff. Does that mean letting them take out reference books? Does it mean having iPads or other devices available for them to use library resources? Do you have devices that convert text to speech for auditory learners?

In the transformation of our learning commons, we took disrupting the status quo to a new level. Other programs that were not previously part of the library's schedule, like Listening Lunches or coffee-house poetry slams, were introduced to the student body so they see the library learning commons as a place beyond the books and the computers to an arts center as well. A once a month Listening Lunch with a guest speaker promoting social action or political knowledge or an open mic with students signing up to perform for other students can make your space a popular site to visit. Teachers could choose to bring students if the topic meshes with their curriculum, like candidates and civics classes, or students could be free to come on their own. Scheduling these opportunities during lunch made them more accessible for everyone. Getting rid of the biography section made room for more flexible seating in one section of the learning commons space. Weeding biographies and shelving the remaining ones in the section of the library where they fit (e.g., sports icons in the 1970s and presidents in the U.S. history section) made these resources more visible to shelf browsers. By doing a thorough weeding of the collection and removing some shelving, more open space became available.

Disrupting the status quo got people interested in what was going on inside the four walls of our library learning commons, as well as in what was going on in the infinite walls of our virtual learning commons. In the physical commons we showcased multidimensional student work. In the virtual commons, Knowledge Building Centers also displayed student work. Wikis and websites became the showcase for products that were teacher and student created.

**JUSTIFY HOW THINGS ARE GOING**

If you are still asking forgiveness, you can convince the administration that what you are doing facilitates student success by measuring learning in the commons. Most librarians measure the people who walk into the library, the books that go out, the classes that use the space, but these measurements are not enough—they are seen counting. Assessment deeper than books and people is required. Look at the statistics for database use, or use of your website when you have a link on a virtual pathfinder or web page for a student research project. You will probably find increased use of good resources for learning. Publish your statistics. Explain in graphics and words to your administration, your school board, or to anyone who visits your website what you have been doing and how you have been working with students and teachers to promote Common Core standards or collaboration. Use your findings as guides for yourself. If three classes came in last week who you only worked with peripherally or only provided space for their teacher-directed activity, see if you can work with the teacher to make the lesson more collaborative or if you can offer resources for that assignment the next time they come. Move them up the scale from enriching their lessons with your space to developing lessons with them with some collaboration to transforming the lessons by planning and coteaching.

**WORK TOWARD A COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE**

One of the best things about the library learning commons is that it provides a place for teachers working collaboratively as a model for students. My principal felt strongly that all of the PLCs or PLNs (we called them CLTs, collaborative learning teams) meet in the library learning commons. When research projects were being planned, the library media specialists were on hand to participate. These meetings provided the foundations for building great research units and assessment of those units. New teachers are nurtured by the collaborative nature of these meetings and especially benefit from another point of view.

Students can also be partners in this participatory culture. We built Knowledge Building Centers online for many of the research projects and had students add resources to them by housing them in wikis or in Google sites. Students relied on one another's knowledge for both process and products this way. The resulting sites were a starting point for the teachers when we...
analyzed the lessons and made changes for the following years.

Professional development becomes an ongoing part of the culture of the library learning commons with a student technology team that uses the library learning commons as its home base. They are on hand to collaborate with teachers and students with new and innovative technological tools that enhance teaching and learning.

Because of the democratic nature of the learning commons, "everyone is an active participant in knowledge building and learning to learn. Both teachers and students are engaged in building their own personal expertise and contributing to the growth of others" (Loertscher and Koechlin, 2014).

BE A VISIONARY

In Connecticut, visionary administrator Fran Kompar is taking districts through a two-year process where district administrators, building administrators, and library media specialists from fourteen districts come together to shape the future of their library learning commons. Bringing all of the relevant players to the table to create the vision together is possible in Connec-

cut on a grand scale but can also be possible in your school or district with you as a visionary leader at the helm.

"We are now in an innovation age," Kompar said. "There's really been an 'a-ha' type of experience for many people who are saying we really need to have the spaces and learning experiences that will help our students innovate" (Schott, 2015).

Be that visionary leader. Jump in with both feet. Don't look back. Disrupt the status quo. You will be so glad you did.

SUGGESTED READING


REFERENCES


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