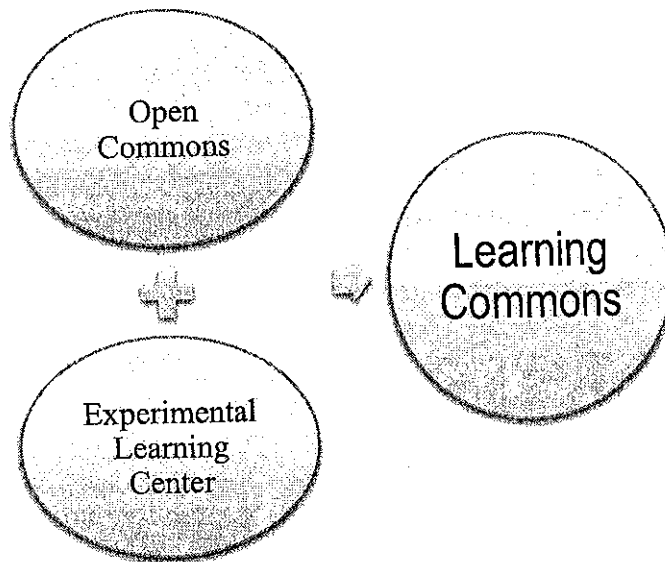


The Learning Commons

A Tour

As one enters the Learning Commons, the first impression differs greatly from that of the traditional library or computer lab. Immediately, we notice a completely flexible learning space where neither computers nor books get in the way. If we were to come back in an hour, we might see a completely different configuration of individuals and groups of youth, adults, or both, busily working, consulting and collaborating. The buzz in the air is both purposeful and casual and it is a mix of learners both adult and student engaged in a wide variety of activities.

Upon further examination, we discover that two major functions are being accommodated simultaneously in the Commons. The first is the Open Commons, and the second is the Experimental Learning Center. Each is controlled by its own calendar of events but coexists in a busy real place while also extending into virtual space. The faculty, in consultation with the learners, creates a powerful learning environment through a combination of innovation, learning tools and learning science. Thus, it is a micro R&D center of testing, experimentation, and exhibition connected to a larger network of educational research and practice.



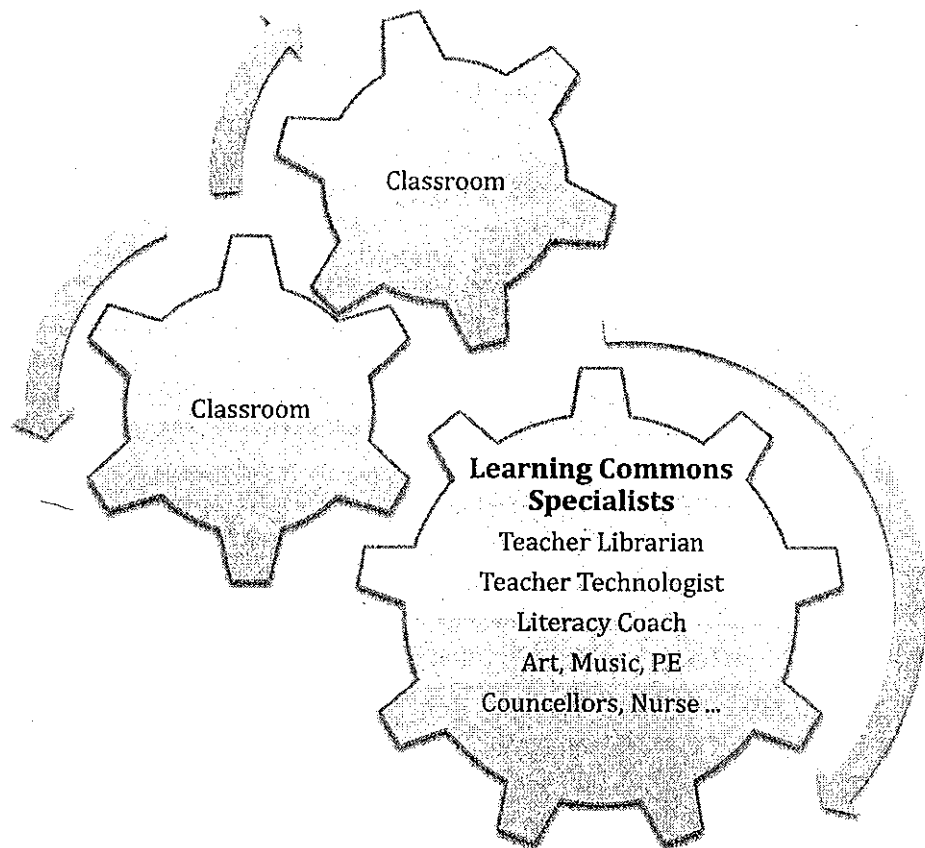
The Open Commons

Constructed around client-based principles, the Open Commons is a service center planned by both the youth and the adults, drawn there by its inviting and collaborative atmosphere. Obviously equipped with wireless access, both students and adults are using personal digital devices as individuals, small groups, or as large groups. Students stream in and out of the Open Commons during the day and are virtual

visitors at night as they take advantage of the vast array of information sources, various service centers, production capabilities, and communication possibilities.

In one area, we notice an expert bar staffed by students and adults who are consulting with individuals or small groups needing assistance with software and hardware. In another area is the mentor bar where adults—faculty, staff, and volunteers—are providing individual group guidance on projects, assignments or just personal advice and encouragement. At any given time we notice that beyond the support staff and volunteers, learning specialists are also coaching.

It is easily apparent that the Open Commons is an extension of the various classrooms of the school; a place everyone owns, works, and collaborates in a collegial social environment. The space runs on its own calendar to avoid chaos and overcrowding. Students have been major players in the creation of policies and behavior guidelines that make the environment inviting and conducive to learning. These same policies exist not only in the physical space of the Commons but also into its virtual equivalent. These emphasize a welcome and purposeful enticement rather than a practice of exclusion.



Instead of a single person in charge, one notices the various specialists of the school coming and going as they consult with individuals, small groups, and whole classes as they co-teach alongside the classroom teachers.

The types of activities co-existing simultaneously, is long and might include:

- A group of students gathering print and digital resources for a temporary classroom collection on a topic of study.
- A student team editing their own documentary on homeless persons in the school's neighborhood.
- A student technology expert seeking advice to work out connection problems to networks in the classroom.
- A classroom teacher and the music teacher who are helping learners compose original music for podcasts of their own stories.
- A class working with their teacher and teacher librarian to select both biased and unbiased resources on a controversial topic to be analyzed by the group.
- A single student linked into an online experimental study being done in the rainforest of Brazil.
- A small group of students having a brown bag lunch as they discuss the latest book in a fantasy novel series.
- Students in one corner receiving instruction from an artist in residence.
- Students in a conference room practicing for their poetry reading scheduled for the next day in the Commons during lunch and slated to be videotaped to upload to the community performance digital site.

The Experimental Learning Center

Constructed around teacher-centered principles, the Experimental Learning Center hosts professional development, experimentation, and exhibition of exemplary teaching and learning experiences in the school. Centered in this space that no one owns but everybody owns is the laboratory for testing new curriculum initiatives, experimental technologies, collaborative strategies, and cross grade-level or cross-curricular initiatives.

Governed by its own calendar, it draws upon the expertise of school, district, and outside experts and learner representatives who coach, do action research, and test new ideas for implementation throughout the school as a whole. Administrators walk through regularly to monitor initiatives and provide guidance and encouragement. This

is the center of the school's professional learning community who are focusing on instructional improvements that deserve full implementation based on pilot testing.

The Experimental Learning Center is crucial to the orientation of new faculty members. Here they can consult the various subject specialists, teacher technologist, teacher librarians, coaches, counselors, and any other specialists serving in the school. The Learning Leadership Team may arrange job embedded staff development opportunities with outside experts. Other faculty may develop new technological skills, classroom management strategies, safety training, or perhaps refresher courses on legal responsibilities.

School-wide initiatives, projects, or grant writing happen here, as the faculty pulls together in a purposeful agenda for change and improvement. Issues across grade levels and disciplines such as literacy programs are planned, carried out, and evaluated. It is the learning laboratory of the school; a center of creativity, and innovation. Specific activities that might be happening at any given time in the Experimental Learning Center might include:

- Demonstration Lessons to model the teaching of student questioning skills to promote critical thinking across the curriculum.
- The district/board technical director (teacher technologist) meeting with the student tech team to teach them about new network procedures so that they can teach the protocols to the entire school.
- Writers of a new course meeting with the teacher librarian to select resources to meet the needs of all students.
- Teacher representatives meeting with a consultant via videoconference to plan an inservice day for the next month.
- The superintendent of school facilities discussing potential new policies with a class that has been studying vending machine usage across the district.
- Students writing in a blog environment are monitored and assessed for skill development, growth and fluency by the Literacy Learning Team and the classroom teachers.

The Virtual Learning Commons

Running simultaneously, 24/7/365 is the school's Learning Commons built by the students, teachers, learning specialists, and administrators with the two learning specialists, the teacher librarian and the teacher technologist as enablers and shadow leaders.

Like the physical space, the virtual space is constructed in two major configurations that constitute what the directors of technology might call instructional computing. This

is quite different in nature from the administrative computing space where access is tightly controlled.

The Virtual Open Commons

The virtual space supporting the Open Commons is a very busy connection of projects, resources, tutorials, advice, repositories, as well as a tool source, assignment center, and a project production collaboration center. While there is a recognizable front page, this virtual space is a collection of links, sources, and projects being developed by learners, teachers, and learning specialists simultaneously. It may have originally been the library home page, but now it is constructed by the users who support each other in the overall learning community. Rules of behavior are supported and enforced by everyone. Various safeguards are in place to make the community functional and open to those who are working within its confines, including parents, partnering groups and schools, and anyone else who has a reason to be there.

Here, one might observe:

- Learners taking tutorials on how to cite various information sources in their productions and writings.
- Small groups in a class building a knowledge base on a topic they are studying.
- A team of learners uploading videos they have created to demonstrate to the faculty and students on how to upload their materials to the school's digital showcase.
- Learners taking online courses that could not be offered at their school.
- Teacher librarians preparing personal tip sheets that connect to teachers' assignments and uploading them to automatically appear on the home page of each student in a particular course.
- Virtual discussions of the latest award winning books in preparation for voting virtually in the state readers' choice awards program.
- A list constructed by a student club of best sources about bullying where they are asking for recommendations from others before they construct a school-wide policy.
- Areas where parents can collaborate as experts on various learning projects when they cannot be present in person.

The Virtual Experimental Learning Center

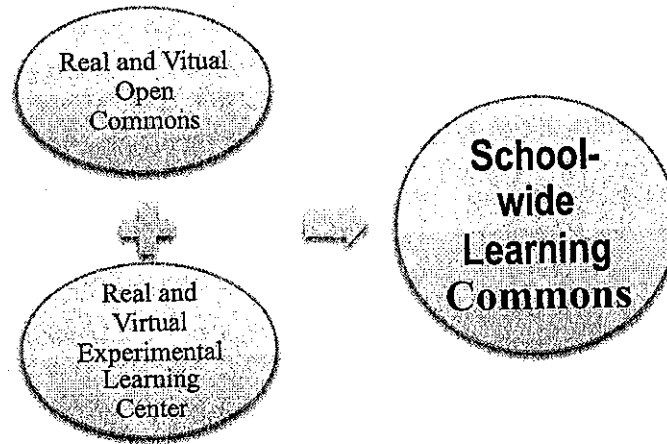
As the place where professional development, experimentation, professional learning communities, and learning initiatives are centered, this virtual space is communication

central for learning improvement in the school. Announcements, calendars, and progress reports, plus the tools needed to support the ELC are located in the Center. This center provides the virtual glue that makes collaboration and school improvement work. It is constructed by the various leadership teams of the school—the administration, the faculty, and even district personnel—under the leadership of the teacher librarian and the teacher technologist.

At any given time, one might encounter:

- A group of teachers and learning specialists constructing a collaborative learning project, carrying it out, performing collaborative assessments, and reflecting on successes and challenges for the future.
- Administrators providing the first glimpses of a new statewide initiative that will be discussed with the Learning Leadership Team.
- Teacher librarians uploading a list of professional resources to a virtual chat space where the professional learning community can access them for an upcoming discussion.
- Schedules for an experimental classroom learning strategy that the entire faculty is invited to observe and reflect on as it progresses.
- The calendar of the ELC where all the learning specialists of the school can be invited and scheduled for collaborative development of learning activities by any faculty member.
- Announcements of local, state, and national conferences and professional learning opportunities.
- Grant opportunities for individuals, groups, and the school as a whole.
- Connections to major research, documents, forums, and other opportunities relevant to the focus of the individual school.
- Access to various assessment data sources of student performance.

When the virtual and real spaces are combined, then the total Learning Commons appears:



Checkup – Ask the Learners

If a visitor to the school were to randomly select a table during lunch and ask students about the role the Learning Commons plays in their school life, how would students respond? What sort of information would the students share? Perhaps something along these lines:

- **Environment** – A comfortable place where they can work, relax, learn, create or do.
- **Access** – A convenient, 24/7, source of materials, information, and advice they trust and contribute to.
- **Assistance** – They can comfortably obtain help from both adults and fellow students.
- **Personal Contributions** – They can voice opinions and give advice to assist in decisions about the construction of the Learning Commons. They have made contributions and feel some sense of ownership.
- **Experimentation** – They try new things, test technology or software, develop special projects, and see the adults doing the same.
- **Technology** – This is where you go to access and use hot new technologies and programs/software. The Learning Commons is the source of their connection to the digital world, and it is the center for discussion about that world and how they control it to their advantage.

- **Activities and Exhibitions** – They describe a variety of activities they have participated in or seen happening and know that many student productions are a part of the digital museum of the school.
- **A sense that adults coach and mentor them when they need help and that staff inquire about how they learn as well as what they know.**
- **It is a caring, supportive, place to learn without angst and pressure.**

In other words, the various learners recognize that the Learning Commons is a client-side organization where they have some say in what goes on and they are contributing as well as receiving as a user. They may not understand the impact that the Learning Commons is having on teaching and learning throughout the school, but they should recognize that they are engaged as they inquire, use, contribute, work and create.

Checkup – Ask the Teachers

Likewise, if a visitor to the school were to enter the teachers' lounge and interview random teachers about the Learning Commons, what sense of its value would be expressed? Perhaps something along these lines:

- **Environment** – as a part of their classroom – an extension of both work and learning activities; a model of environmental sustainability.
- **Access** – The source 24/7 of materials, information, and advice they trust and contribute to. That they can send individuals, small groups, and schedule the entire class there as needed.
- **Assistance** – A place where they obtain help from both adults and students who are sharing their expertise.
- **Personal contribution** – They can voice opinions and give advice to assist in decisions about Learning Commons construction of. They have made contributions and feel some sense of ownership.
- **Experimentation** – A place to learn, test and share new strategies, test technology or software, develop special projects; the center of professional development.
- **Technology** – Recognition that the Learning Commons is the source of their connection to the digital world that extends into their classroom.
- **Activities and Exhibitions** – They remember and could describe a variety of activities they have seen happening and know that their student's work and productions are a part of the digital museum of the school.

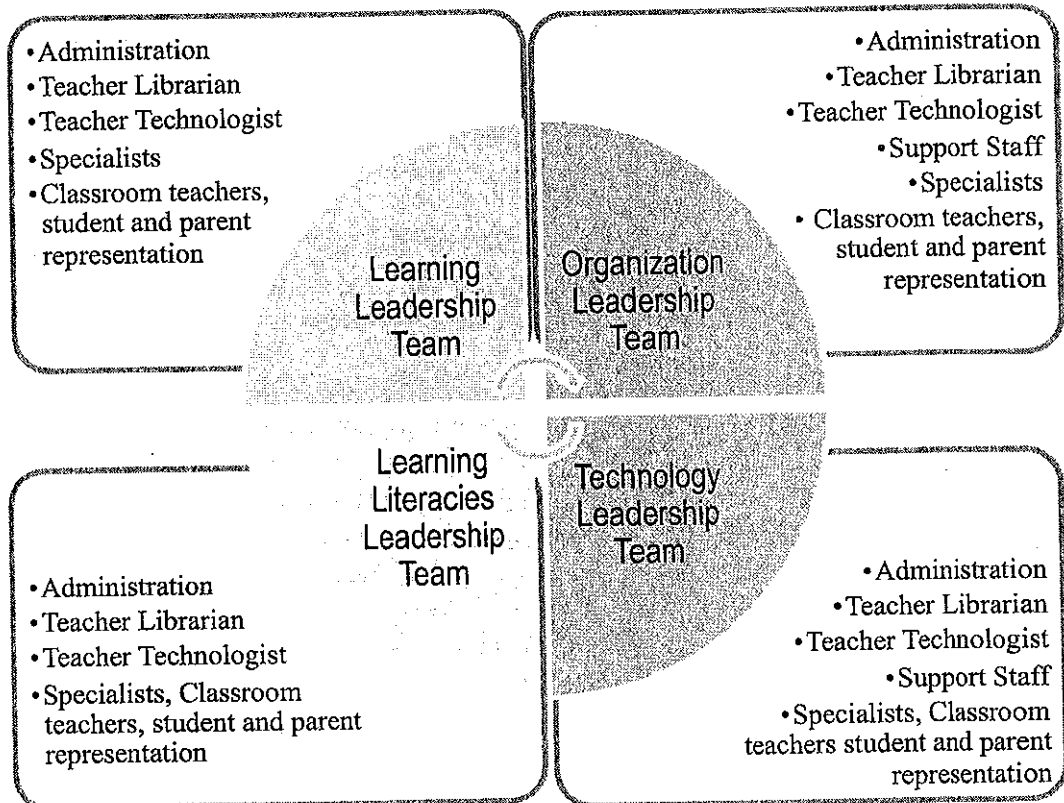
- Most importantly, they do not feel they are alone in the challenge of elevating every learner toward excellence. They are part of a teaching a learning team that merges classroom teachers and specialists in a mutual quest.

In other words, teachers recognize the advantages of building and maintaining a client-side Learning Commons and feel at ease in the give and take of the idea of the Experimental Learning Center.

The Leadership Teams

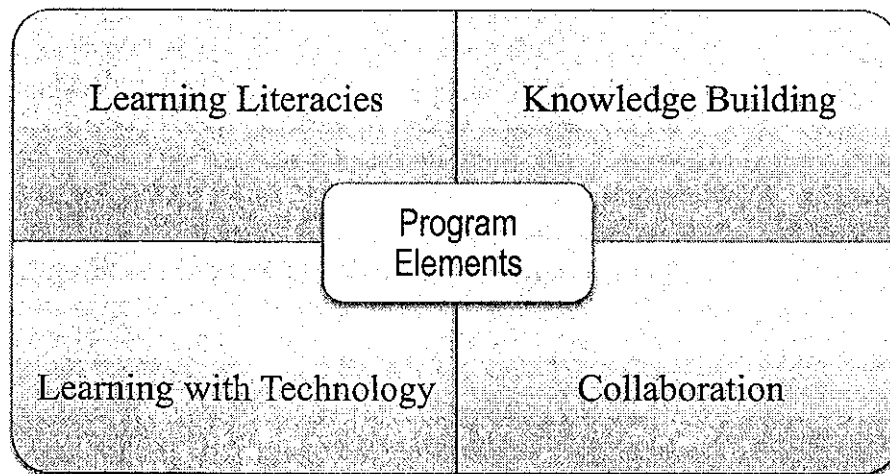
A visitor might well ask: How has this all come about? What is the organizational structure that keeps it all running? In a prominent location, one might observe an organization chart similar to the one below that details the collaborative nature of a team of a school community:

The Learning Commons Partnership Teams



This diagram is one example of the possible orchestration of a school leadership organization. Each school will need to design their own partnership structures based on school improvement goals and specific school needs. The triad of administration, teacher librarian and teacher technologist need to be the constant element for each team. Other specialist, support staff, classroom teachers, students and parents enrich the dynamics of each team with their particular expertise and interests.

The sense that the school is a learning organization becomes quite clear here at the center, the hub, the place of excellence. As we continue our tour we will examine program elements in the Learning Commons.



Scenario

- **It's Actually Happening.** In her annual report Joyce Valenza, teacher librarian at Springfield Township High School captures a moment in time in her center. "Visitors to our library continue to note its energy, its spirit, and its coziness. During the video our students produced for the State Legislative Breakfast promoting school libraries, one student noted, "It's the closest thing we have to Starbucks" During a single block you will see students working in groups or independently as they create instructional videos, record podcasts, search scholarly journal databases, tell digital stories, present with our SmartBoard, write posts in curricular blogs, and collaborate using such on-line applications as wikis and Nings and Google documents. You will also see our students writing traditional papers and reading books and magazines."

Over to You. Discuss with Us at: <http://schoollearningcommons.pbwiki.com>

- Are there any features of your own school library or computer lab that pushes it over toward a client-side environment?