

The Learning Commons: Leading Libraries to be Leaders in Learning

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Abstract

With the digitalization of information and the ability to access knowledge at one's finger tips, some educational leaders have reconsidered the role of the library in the 21st century. Terms such as learning or information commons suggest a physical space in which learning takes place with the aid of technology and people so as to integrate currently disparate resources, such as the library, computer lab, tutoring center, and instructional media to promote student success. In this paper, we will describe the impetus for this evolution, discuss the characteristics and features of a learning commons, and consider the role of authentic leadership for helping students, staff, faculty and librarians move from their comfort zone and embrace this new vision of learning and education.

Introduction

It is said that institutions of higher learning are conservative organizations that are often resistant to change. After all, a didactic approach to pedagogy is still the norm over five hundred years after the lecture was made obsolete with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1447.

What about the other mainstay of teaching and learning at the heart of many college and university campuses – the library? As the repository of knowledge and artifacts of culture, the library is a storehouse of collective wisdom, a practice that dates back at least to the founding of the Royal Library of Alexandria in the 3rd century BC. “In fact, the typical library of the twentieth century reflected a traditional model largely in intact since the time when an earlier technological revolution – *printing* – transformed it from even older archival and scriptorium models built around collections of clay tablets, papyrus scrolls, and illuminated manuscripts” (Beagle, 2006, p. 3).

In our time, the revolution in information technology, computers, and digital media is transforming every aspect of our society and culture. In 2006, *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year was “You,” specifically, “user-generated content” disseminated by internet sites such as *YouTube*. According to Beloit College's (2006) Mindset List, “*Google*” has always been a verb for students in the graduating class of 2010. These examples are part of a trend in the decentralization of the control of media and the

democratization of the availability of knowledge. Are such developments at the beginning of the 21st century a threat to that bastion of the academy – the *library*?

We believe that a confluence of factors may transform the library from *signature edifice* to the *center of education*. As is said of a church, it is not a building, but a place where people congregate to do God’s work. Similarly, libraries are a physical space, but, more importantly, they provide “place” for people to engage in the human enterprise to learn and grow. Within the library’s confines you might find people working in quiet isolation as well as people in conversation, small groups collaborating, and assemblies of scholars engaged in intellectual pursuits.

What might the “library” as a “center of education” look like at the dawn of the new century? We are advocates of the concept of the *Learning Commons* (LC). Historically, a “commons” was a community’s open civic space, or town square, both a market place for the exchange of goods and services, and common ground where members of the community gathered to trade ideas, stories, and comradeship (Beagle, 2006). The Learning Commons describes a physical space where students, teachers, librarians, and other educational staff meet to utilize resources from around the world accessible with technology to create learning communities in the pursuit of knowledge.

In this new vision, what was once a library will become the center of learning on campus, at once adaptive to individual needs and responsive to collaboration among members of the academic community. Such an organization may be more attuned to the educational needs of “digital natives,” students for whom the computer and its hi-tech progeny have been part of their world view and daily experience since birth. Given the transient experience of community college students on campus, the LC provides a gathering place to study, do research, get tutoring help, check email, surf the web, have a cup of coffee, meet with classmates, meet with friends, meet with faculty, read for relaxation, read for learning, and chill out, thereby connecting to a community of learners and strengthen the “community” in community college.

Students in the 21st Century

Today’s community college students are extremely diverse in terms of age and experience. In any given class, an instructor may face students that cross many generational lines: Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), the oldest of whom recently turned 61, Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1979), and the new Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000). Each generation was reared in a different historical-socio-cultural environment, resulting in distinct cohorts with different perspectives on society and life.

Millennials, a.k.a. the Internet Generation, Generation Y, the Net Gen, or Digital Natives, are the biggest and most diverse generation in American history. According to the *Pew Foundation’s Internet & American Life Project* ([Life Online: Teens and Technology and the World to Come](#)), Millennials comprise 36% of the total population, and 31% are minorities (Rainie, 2006). Most important, their behaviors, beliefs, and values have been shaped by a world that has always been digital, the first cohort for whom the PC has been as pervasive in the home as the TV. Thus, according to Rainie (2006),

- Millennials are immersed in a world of media and gadgets (p.3)

- Their technology is mobile (p. 6).
- The internet plays a special role in their world (p. 8).
- They are multitaskers (p. 11).
- Their (and our) technology world will change radically in the next decade (p. 14).
- And the way they approach learning and research tasks will be shaped by this new techno-world and will differ from that of earlier generations (p. 15).

Given this socialization, Digital Natives want something more than the traditional library to support their academic endeavors and facilitate their education. Because they live in a world of advanced media, technology, and electronic conveniences, these students come to higher education with the expectation that learning resources will be delivered as quickly and conveniently as possible by the most advanced technology available to consumers (Rainie, 2006).

Not only are Millennials the most networked cohort via technology, they also may be the generation most networked with each other. *MySpace*, *YouTube*, and *FaceBook* make clear that these students not only want technology at their fingertips, they also want to interact online. Such unprecedented connectivity may spill over into a preference to work in teams and hang out in groups. Thus, they desire a physical space, as well as a virtual one, to meet, socialize, and collaborate (Rainie, 2006).

The long term significance for education of this socio-cultural change has been recognized by the MacArthur Foundation, which recently launched a five-year, \$50 million initiative to investigate the implications of digital media on learning (The MacArthur Foundation, 2006). As significant, the Foundation is supporting research to determine how information technologies are changing the ways young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life.

Soon, we will face a flood of students entering the academy with technology skills that exceed the skills of the faculty and whose styles of work may differ from their elders. If we are to meet the needs of Digital Natives and the generations that will follow in their keystrokes, institutions of higher education must change. For those colleges and universities that get ahead of this curve, rather than play catch-up, the long-term benefits may yield significant returns on investment for higher education.

Characteristics & Features of the Learning Commons

To meet the needs of students in the 21st century, the Learning Commons is not just “a library with more computer terminals,” but a planned community with an alternative method for service delivery. It is an example of “built pedagogy” (Monahan, 2002), a concept that emphasizes the way in which architectural features reflect educational philosophy and structure influences the learning processes that take place therein (i.e., we all know that the teaching which occurs in a room filled with rows of chairs is different from that which takes place when the chairs are arranged in a circle).

As an example of built pedagogy, Beagle (2006) defines the LC as a place in which a cluster of information technology tools are “situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning,” (p. xviii) and focused on helping the institution and its members achieve their academic mission and learning outcomes.

Thus, the LC provides students and teachers with the space and resources to promote education, a place compatible with the needs of today's learners, and the opportunities provided by information technology (Oblinger, 2006). For example, rather than individual study carrels with high walls isolating individuals, many of today's students desire meeting spaces of varying sizes in which to collaborate; i.e., small rooms for one-on-one with a peer or tutor, medium spaces for small study groups, and larger places where assemblies can congregate. Unlike the traditional library, the Learning Commons is not a place where librarians say, "Shhhhh! Instead, it offers a space conducive to the human desire to dialog and interact, so necessary for the social construction of knowledge.

The Learning Commons also provides appropriate technologies scattered throughout the space, i.e. computers, software, projectors, printers, wall mounted flat screen TVs, desktop teleconferencing equipment, pod casting, MP3 players, as well as standard white boards, marker pens, and flip charts. Architecturally, the LC is designed with movable walls that can be adjusted to meet the needs of various groupings, and rooms are equipped with comfortable, modular furnishings, flexible enough to adapt to various working groups.

A comparison of the standard features of a traditional library and the learning commons can be found below:

Comparison of the Characteristics of a Traditional vs. Innovative Facility	
Library	Learning Commons
Hard Copy & Physical Artifact	Electronic & Digital Information
Materials Either On-Site or Unavailable Immediately (Inter-Library Loan Required)	Materials Created & Integrated by Downloading from Multiple Sources on Demand
People Working in Isolation	People working Together
Individual Carrels & Workstations	Collaborative Environments & Social Settings for Work
"Shhhhhh, No Talking!"	Conversation Promoting Thinking & Learning
No Food	Cybercafe Provides Food & Drink
Accessible Only When Open	Available 24 X 7 X 365
A Place for Students to Work	A Place for Students & Faculty to Collaborate
Reference Desk	Help Hub (Reference, Information Technology, & Tutors)

What are the features and characteristics of the Learning Commons?

Ubiquitous Technology

Email & Internet Surfing Hubs

Technology Training Center

Media Production Center

Computer Center – Workstations that access both electronic library resources & a full suite of software applications

Computer Lab Dedicated to Teaching Information Literacy, Bibliographic Instruction, & Software Training both during scheduled classes and on demand.

Wireless Access

Laptop check-out
Ports for Laptop Network Outlets
Teleconferencing & Distance Learning Facilities

Group Spaces

Tutoring Center
Computer workstations arranged in clusters
Academic & Language Labs
Carrels with low dividing walls
Large tables
Group study rooms
Conference Rooms
Lecture Theatre
Social Space
Private Space
Cybercafe

User Friendly Environment

Central Information Desk – Shared by Reference & Information Technology Staff
Modular & comfortable furniture
High Volume Printing Services (copiers, printers, scanners, fax machines)
Smart card enabled
Space conducive to Working & Learning Collaboratively and in Teams
An environment that is well-lit, warm & inviting

Library Resources

Permanent Collection
Electronic Journals, Digitized Books, and Multimedia Materials

Leadership

While we have stressed the architectural and technological resources thus far for creating a Learning Commons, the ultimate success of the LC is dependent upon the ability of the constituents of the traditional library to expand their expectations as to what services should be provided and what roles they might play in this new vision of higher education (e.g., Rader, 1998; Weber & Flatley, 2006). Faculty, students, staff and administrators may be resistant to change if the impetus for innovation is top-down and the change being suggested is not perceived as meaningful. Change without buy-in from those who must implement the plan may inevitably fail. Establishment of the LC requires the collaboration of many individuals serving in various roles and positions that to date have operated as independent silos with disconnected services and activities. Previously “sovereign” components must be transformed into a unified organization that functions together to achieve the institutional mission of enhancing education.

All have a part to play. Student work-study aides and tutors will need to be cross-trained and multidisciplinary in their familiarity with subject matter content and information technology resources if they are to service their peers well.

Paraprofessionals will be needed who bridge the gap between media, technology and pedagogy. Technology experts will be required to keep the machines running smoothly, help individuals in need of assistance, and simplify as much as possible the man-machine interface so as to make the information technology as seamless and invisible as possible, accessible to the staff, students and faculty dependent on them. Librarians may find themselves in need of abandoning their traditional roles as reference and circulation gurus so as to develop new relationships as teachers and researchers essential for scholarship in the information age. Directors of libraries with degrees in library science will need to be transformed into visionary leaders of higher education, a position in which these individuals assume the role of chief learning officer. Facilitating collaborate among students, faculty, staff, and administrators, with the aid of technology and the resources of the library, will be the most significant charge entrusted to those chosen to lead the Learning Commons in the 21st century so as to advance the institution's mission of teaching and learning.

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Brief Biographies

Dr. Michael B. Reiner is the Executive Dean at the Kent Campus of Florida Community College in Jacksonville. He has been an administrator in academic affairs in community colleges for the past eight years. Before that, he was a professor of psychology for seventeen years at colleges and universities. While at Kennesaw State University, he was awarded the Distinguished Teaching Award and was named University System of Georgia Board of Regents Distinguished Professor for Teaching and Learning.

Billy Thomas is the Director of learning Services at the Kent Campus of Florida Community College at Jacksonville. He has been an administrator of the Adult Degree Program at Jacksonville University, a director of faculty and curriculum and an academic advisor and adjunct professor since 1988. Mr. Thomas has worked with young people in a variety of capacities for the past 30 years and has been in private practice as a Life Coach and Counselor for the past 5 years. Billy is often called on to speak in corporate and community settings on cultural and religious diversity.