from library to learning commons: a metamorphosis

by valerie diggs with editorial comments by david v. loertscher

In August 2008, Carol Koechlin and Sandi Zwaan, and David Loertscher published a book proposing to the school library community a major shift in the foundational ideas of the school library. They proposed a shift to a Learning Commons concept based on client-side principles. Unknown to them, Valerie Diggs had been doing such a transformation in Chelmsford, MA. Loertscher visited her Learning Commons for its dedication in December, 2008 and asked Valerie to document the development of the Learning Commons in her school as a case study for major change in the concept of the school library. The following is Valerie's account. Editorial comments (in the shaded boxes) have been placed throughout to provide some analysis of how teacher-librarians can actually move into the center of teaching and learning.

RECENTLY, THE CHELMSFORD HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARY (CHSL) IN MASSACHUSETTS UNDERWENT A TRANSFORMATION THAT WAS NOT ONLY LONG OVERDUE IT WAS ALSO A METAMORPHOSIS THAT WAS TO HAVE TREMENDOUS EFFECT ON THE STUDENTS, ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

Although I knew the physical transformation of our facility was important and would certainly have a positive effect on the school, I did not expect the response it received from the community. We unveiled the new space in a special celebration that drew the press and such giants in the field as Dr. Ross Todd, associate professor of library and information science at Rutgers University, and Dr. David Loertscher, professor at San Jose State University, who came to see what we had done.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines metamorphosis as "the action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance; *esp.* transformation by supernatural means". The slow metamorphosis of CHSL into a space we now call a Learning Commons was deliberate and involved substance, form, and shape; and as for the supernatural—well we think so!!

This is a story of transformation in the truest sense, from the traditional media center to the not-so-traditional Learning Commons now occupying the third floor of Chelmsford High School (CHS), right where the library used to be.

I would like to be honest and open; I did not arrive in school one day and say: I think I would like to renovate this physically tired space known as the library and, while doing so, I think we will start calling the space a "Learning Commons". There is much more to this transformation than just a name change, new paint, carpeting, and furnishings.

There were numerous environmental factors involved in the decision to renovate the library. I must make it clear, however, that the condition of the physical facility was subordinate to the programmatic changes that made this transformation one of substance and meaning.

What, then, exactly happened?

We must recognize that program is paramount in the foundational principle upon which Valerie sets off on her long journey toward the center of teaching and learning. We will draw attention to significant markers along the journey. As you read this case study, make your own list of important leadership principles and then compare your list with the ones we notice in our comments.

BACKGROUND

Chelmsford High School was built in 1971. Then principal, George Simonian, whose tenure at CHS was nineteen years long, presided over the planning and construction of the high school with a

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

Before the transformation

tenacious hand. He ensured, to the best of his ability and despite being limited by funding, that all programs had adequate space. One of the programs was library services. Back then, the library was called the *Instructional Media Center* (IMC), and 12,500 square-feet were set aside in the middle of the building that included a large workroom and office.

The IMC was state-of-the-art for its time. The storage room housed 16mm Elmo projectors to show the numerous reels of film in the library's collection. Film loop players and film loops were stacked neatly on bright yellow metal shelving. Filmstrip projectors of many types were also kept in the storage room, along with hundreds of boxes containing little round plastic filmstrip containers. Vinyl records lined the slanted yellow metal record bins framed by case after case of record players, all with neat black handles. As technology slowly changed, VHS tapes began to fill the empty shelves.

In 1971, the Building and Equipment Section (BES) statement of the function of a school library or IMC came from the 1969 standards for school libraries published by AASL. These standards envisioned, like the 1960 standards had, a place where the full range of books and multimedia were made available to the school as a whole. At the time, women were generally hired to build library book collections and men were hired to handle the new array of audio-visual equipment and materials that were emerging rapidly. Thus, the principal was taking a bold step in merging all formats in a single location in the school.

In the library space, books were housed on the same bright yellow shelving with walls painted to match. Most of the shelving was 84 inches high and positioned to block the natural light from the library's rear windows. The six rooms on the periphery of the IMC, built to accommodate student work groups, were barricaded with wrought iron gates and locked to prevent students from misbehaving within the glass-enclosed walls. The same wrought iron was used to fortify each of the two main entrances to the IMC.

While the vision of the merger was made between books and AV, note that the facility was constructed with tight control in mind and signaled a suspicion of teen behavior. Bright colors were thought to counter such anticipated attitudes. However, the facility's ambiance signals negativity.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE PROGRAM

When I was hired to be the high school librarian in 2002, I began to seriously look at what we were offering students as they entered the library. Before my arrival, study halls were eliminated with the introduction of block scheduling. Study halls had been held in the library because of lack of space elsewhere. However, those structured classes were eliminated and teachers were free to bring classes into the library at anytime.

Then the District of Chelmsford received a grant from Sun Microsystems for 60 desktop computers, 40 of which were placed in the high school library. The introduction of computers brought more teachers and students into the library.

Notice the very late introduction of computers into the library. For whatever reason, it is fifteen years behind in the adoption of a new information world. Upon adoption of current technology, interest begins to revive for both students and faculty. It is now five years until the actual emergence of the new Learning Commons.

ALL ABOUT THE PROGRAM

However, the mere existence of computers and available space is not enough to meet the students' programmatic needs. On my arrival, I began to work more closely with teachers. They became familiar with my questions, requests for assignments, as well as requests for time to look closely at assignments to determine how I could help. With the introduction of two new courses in the English Department, *Writing for High School* and *Writing for College*, as well as a deliberate movement by all departments to require more writing, I became more and more involved with the curriculum and instruction. Student learning became

Valerie Diggs with the new Learning Commons in the background

Variety in seating offer students flexibility

the focus behind everything we did, and teaching information literacy skills in the library, in computer labs, and in classrooms flourished. Our library began to play a key role in students' literary lives and was central to their learning experiences. Teachers began thinking about projects with the library in mind. The culture of teaching and learning changed over time to include the library as a major player. Was not this enough? Is this not what all teacher-librarians strive for?

At this point, the facility with its negative ambience is 30 years old. The introduction of computers provides the excuse for Valerie to make a major push into the center of teaching and learning in spite of barriers both real and perceived.

What were we offering students and teachers? Reliable information? Yes. Technology? Yes. Help with assignments? Yes. I began to think this was all we could do. Yet something nagged at me. There had to be more; but what?

Note that Valerie is uncomfortable as she tries to turn stuff into productive learning. For the next five years she is constantly trying new ideas and she provides a list of things that begin to work. Undoubtedly there are failures along the way, but persistence and creativity will pay off.

With one small step at a time, I started to build an assortment of events, ideas, and ways of doing things into our program. One of the first changes we made was to serve coffee one day per week in the library. Every Wednesday, from 6:45 a.m. to 7:24 a.m., coffee, hot chocolate, and tea were available. We developed a collaborative arrangement with a local coffee shop that allowed us to purchase their coffee and cups at a discounted price and the Chelmsford High School Library's *Java Room* was born.

On Wednesday mornings in the library, pots of steaming coffee and hot water for tea and hot chocolate were lined up on the aging classroom desks, which were placed side-by-side in the center of the library to serve as a reference desk. Trays of pastries and bagels donated by generous Chelmsford businesses beckoned the hungry students and staff members. The lines were long, the laughter loud, and soon the gathered students were enticed by the books on display to browse and check out while they waited for their hot drinks. Students also sat and talked while teachers and administrators readied themselves for a day of teaching and instruction by recounting events of the previous days and catching up on daily news.

It's the old bait and switch technique. You come for coffee and end up with a book. But a large change is taking place. The culture of the place is turning around. The direction is toward a client-side focus.

Almost at the same time, the Chelmsford Public School community began a professional development initiative to introduce the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) into all seven of its schools. The theory behind PLCs is a perfect fit for any library program. Simply, a PLC encourages teachers to work together collaboratively. The book *Reinventing Project-Based Learning* tells us that "Creating a professional learning community means making time for new ways of working with colleagues" (Boss, Krauss, & Conery 2008). The concept of this *new way* had come to CHS; new to

Student work groups interact comfortably

Students interact in the many comfy chairs of the Learning Commons

some, familiar to others, and frightening to a few. From the library's point of view, it was a welcomed initiative. What a perfect fit for what we had already been doing with teachers: collaboration with a focus on student learning and results (DuFour, 2008). I began to think of ways in which different departments might work together.

Notice that Valerie does not invent ways to move toward the center of teaching and learning. Rather, she links her vision to a major school improvement initiative. Her client-side initiative is not thought of as an add-on but a collaborative push across the school.

SOCIALIZE THE LIBRARY?

The fine arts department consists of many talented teachers and students, but I had not had the opportunity to work with them other than on a very superficial level. Why not draw on the talents of this department and offer these students a venue to showcase these talents in a positive way? I met, talked, and brainstormed with some of the staff members of the fine arts department and our discussions led to the birth of the *Listening Lunches* program.

Named by the students in the fine arts department and supported by both the library and fine arts staff, this new collaborative program changed the culture of the high school and has become central to the life of the school. On at least one Friday per month, students pour into the library carrying trays of food, bottles of water or sports drinks, and paper bags bursting at the seams with sandwiches, fruit, and cookies. On Listening Lunches day, students love the opportunity to have lunch in the library while listening to their peers read poetry, sing songs, perform skits, play musical instruments, and more. Large rolling barrels stand ready to accept half-eaten lunches and empty bottles; round tables adorned with tablecloths and vases of artificial flowers are arranged in the back corner of the library; and rows of red folding chairs are usually stacked awaiting the throngs. For two and a half hours the library is filled with the sounds of student talent. Students and teachers sit, stand, eat, listen, and socialize in the space called the library.

Clever. Clever. The change in culture is not Valerie's program. It pushes the fine arts into the center of school culture. But what about the food, drinks, and noise? And all of this on the new carpet that is in Valerie's future?

Socialize in the library? Here is a concept often thought to be in comparative opposition to learning. Henry Jenkins, in his white paper entitled *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, speaks of students in a participatory culture, one which requires a new set of literacies that "...almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking" (Jenkins 2006). One of these skills Jenkins describes as "Collective Intelligence"—the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal" (Jenkins 2006). The school library should give students the space to work with each other, I thought. A place to go that offered technology, some privacy, and the atmosphere conducive to learning experiences. Someone nearby to answer questions could also help.

With an aging facility and rooms originally meant to be group study rooms now full of old AV equipment and locked to students, helping our students work in groups, collaborate on projects, and develop this skill of collective intelligence was difficult, at best.

The new image is not just about culture or a social place. Valerie is worried about the library's central role in learning and she reaches out to the best theorists in education for ideas.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE FACILITY

As hard as I tried to convince our administrators that renovating the library would

Students perform for their peers during a Listening Lunches program

A packed Learning Commons for the Listening Lunches program

benefit every student and staff member in the school, my detailed reports, requests, budget submissions, and pleadings were in vain. All I was hoping to do was transform a facility that was dreary and tired.

While I was busy trying to convince everyone, the District of Chelmsford began a 31-million dollar renovation plan, which included plans for a new performing arts center, new science wing with sparkling new labs, technology classrooms, and instructional spaces. The two middle schools received new libraries: 5,000 square-foot wonders that soon became the "place to be" in both buildings. Other schools were outfitted with new flooring, roofs, boilers, etc. Through all those renovations and building projects, the high school library remained as is: a tired, 34-year old space, with duct-taped carpet, bright yellow shelving and walls, and desks with broken drawers and peeling facades. I admit, I did whine. But, whining did not seem to work. Now what?

How does Valerie inch up the priorities ladder for a facility to match the major change in her program? The squeaky wheel is beginning to turn.

The Town of Chelmsford hired a new town manager, Paul Cohen, who had been taken on a tour of the town's buildings and facilities by the search committee during the interview process. He saw the high school and its new science wing, the new performing arts center, and the two beautiful new middle school libraries. The search committee did not dare bring him near the high school library. It had become so embarrassing a space that avoiding it was an accepted practice.

However, in May 2007, I invited Paul Cohen for a special visit to the library. To hear him tell the story, it was the first time he had ever been called by a teacher-librarian in his over 17 years of public service. I gave him a tour, served him coffee in the workroom, and told him all about our programs, services, and student learning experiences. He saw for himself not only the duct tape but the entire, sorry mess. That fall, the capital budget was announced and included over $200,000 for the renovation of the high school library. In this case, a tour was worth many thousands of capital funding dollars. Our Learning Commons was on its way.

When the frontal assault does not produce results, Valerie does an end run. Notice that we are now five years into the transformation.

Many people have asked me how I was able to create such a space. How did I decide to call the library a Learning Commons and why? My response is that I did not decide; the program did. A recent article in *Teacher Librarian* describes the vision of a true learning commons as "... the showcase for high-quality teaching and learning—a place to develop and demonstrate exemplary educational practices. It will serve as the professional development center for the entire school—a place to learn, experiment with, assess, and then widely adopt improved instructional programs..." (Koechlin, Zwaan, Loertscher, p. 10). Our program defined us and the definition of what we did every day transformed our space into one that we now call a *Learning Commons.*

Notice that the vision for improvement keeps evolving and pointing toward excellence. It is a path to constant school improvement that is really never finished.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE LEARNING COMMONS

A Spanish Honors Six class is investigating the current immigration policy in the United States. What do they need to know about United States policies and why should they even want to know? These senior students came to the Learning Commons with their classroom teacher to find out.

At this point, Valerie could have taken us on a tour of architects, design, problems with vacating the library and construction, etc. Rather, we are taken on a tour of what this space is designed to accomplish—the tour of a fine learning experience. The facility must support the central focus of the program.

COLLABORATION WITH THIS NEW MODEL

The class came into the Learning Commons interested and ready to ask questions. How did this come about? Why was I not facing a group of disinterested students with the typical "Can't wait to get through this assignment" look on their faces? It is because, prior to coming into the Learning Commons, the students spent time with their classroom teacher discussing their own roots as a way of making the lesson personal. This discussion got them hooked and interested. Then they read a story called "Cajas de Carton" (Cardboard Boxes), a true story about illegal migrant workers in California in the 1950s, and discussed it as a group.

The students then participated in an activity to consider four different positions the United States could take regarding the immigration problem, and were encouraged to come up with a fifth option. The learning and engagement with the topic continued when the students listened to three songs about immigration and saw the respective music videos. They discussed the songs and videos in

small groups and made voice recordings of the discussions for future reference.

In her own words, the classroom teacher Merrie McIvor said she got what she wanted from the activity; she "wanted to have them consider immigration seriously and individually" and "wanted them to write something" (personal email communication, January 7, 2009). So, the students were left to develop answers to their own questions. The activities leading up to the writing helped the students refine and define exactly what they needed to know and why they needed to know it. The short story, the songs, and their brainstorming of alternative positions taken by the United States on future immigration policy helped these senior Spanish students prepare. Not only did we have unique papers, but we had students who were invested and interested in what they were asked to investigate. The resulting inquiry process was a natural progression.

FOR AN INFORMED AND STIMUTATED STUDENT

Organizing inquiry-based units around question development is a practice described by Wiggins and McTighe in *Understanding by Design* as being essential to providing "...teacher and students with a sharper focus and better direction for inquiry." They go on to tell us that developing personally meaningful questions "...render the unit design more coherent and make the students' role more appropriately intellectual" (2005, 27).

In our daily practice, how often do we see units based on essential questions, particularly those developed by students? How many units or projects such as the one on current-day immigration policy attempt to inform and stimulate students and bring them to the point where they can ask the question, and know why it is they need to ask it? There are too few such experiences for students today. What can we, as teacher-librarians, do?

The answer to this question is nothing new, and certainly nothing any library school student or current practitioner hasn't heard time and again. It is collaboration. Not simply pulling books, or book-marking web sites, or even creating pathfinders. But it is sitting down with teachers and saying "How can WE improve on this unit so our students can learn not only more, but better?" It is the "WE" in this equation that is important. Students will do only what is required of them; they will think thoughts only as deeply as we require of them. It is OUR job, alongside the classroom teacher, to offer our students today the opportunity to think critically and develop questions that they really want to answer; questions that will lead them to turning information into knowledge and subsequently that knowledge into wisdom for a lifetime.

SIGNS DO MORE THAN POINT THE WAY

In our newly renovated Learning Commons, a quote from John F. Kennedy is drawn across the wall of the group work area: *We set sail on this new sea because there is knowledge to be gained.* It is with this mindset that we (and I include teaching staff, students, administrators, and library staff) conduct business. Knowledge can only be gained through the process of true and unadulterated inquiry. The inquiry process is crucial to our students' experiences and central to the culture of our space. According to Loertscher, Koechlin, and Zwaan, "Inquiry in the Learning Commons is a dynamic learner centered process" (2008).

Above our central information desk are the words "*Ask, Ask, Ask*" and in the Café area the words "*Think*" and "*Create*" appear above the counter-top seating. We encourage our teachers to make learning meaningful by requiring students to think, ask, and then create. Learning becomes meaningful and lasting, and students come away with a wonderful skill: the ability to think for themselves.

We know that signage has always been important in libraries, but in this one, we are not directed to things or equipment; we are encouraged to learn. The first thing you see when entering the learning commons sets that new ambience.

THE LEARNING COMMONS AS A CULTURAL CENTER FOR STUDENTS

Groups of students sit in a circle on our new eggplant-colored lounge chairs, discussing the beginnings of World War I and how they would like their project to look. Smaller groups of three or four students sit in the restaurant-style booths completing projects, working on homework, and collaborating on assignments. Some students sit on the cafe-height tables and talk among themselves, while others use the counter. Students check out one of 29 laptops received as part of a grant from a large technology firm in our community. These laptops are wireless and connect to the Internet anywhere in our Learning Commons. The group workrooms have been opened up, providing space for students to work together and for staff to meet.

A remedial reading class gathers each day to read a book of their choice, while sprawled comfortably on the soft furniture. Their teacher could easily have kept them at desks in the classroom, but she understands the students are much more at ease with themselves in the act of reading by sharing our space, the Learning Commons. Classes of foreign language students file through the Learning Commons to examine our art exhibits, take notes, and absorb the immensity of the works.

Students in the Learning Commons on Inauguration Day 2009

After school hours find the Learning Commons busy accommodating many students. Club members meet here, groups meet to complete projects or assignments, and peer tutors instruct at our tables, while other students find a quiet spot to read or think. Every day when we give the five-minute warning for closing, the announcement is always greeted with groans and pleadings of "just five more minutes." If the budget allowed, our closing time would be much later than the hour-and-a half we are now open after school.

One gets the sense that the learning commons is not only a flexible learning space but one that is full all day long with multiple groups and individuals using a very welcoming space that is both social and intellectual.

The fifty-eight-inch flat-panel LCD TV mounted on the wall across from the main information desk serves to enhance our connection to students and staff by providing informational, entertaining, collaborative, and educational messages. We use the television to showcase the projects and talent from all constituents. As students enter or leave the Learning Commons, they may check out our daily schedule, watch and listen to music videos created by the graphic arts students, see public service announcements produced by our health classes, view slide shows on just about anything, and absorb breaking news through a crawling banner. In our media-saturated environment, digital signage captures the attention of students. It is also the perfect medium to capture the wide variety of products our students create in the Learning Commons as well as throughout the school.

Capturing and archiving student creations reinforces the notion that if they help build the learning commons, they will use it. Ownership transfers to both teachers and students.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The new Learning Commons has been the recipient of continuous support from community members both within and without the school. Our grand opening event was held on December 5, 2008 with huge attendance, a long list of speakers, and a virtual landslide of donations of food, time, money, and wishes for success. From our principal, to principal emeritus, to town manager, chairperson of the board of selectmen, state senator, school committee chair, to library gurus from across the nation, as well as teachers, parents, community members, and fellow teacher-librarians from across the state, we were honored by everyone's presence. Our Learning Commons was launched, speeches were made, and the general consensus was that we had created a space that had become the center of learning. Our impact on the culture of Chelmsford High School, the teaching staff, and our students, was beginning to be felt by all.

Why will dignitaries, parents, students, and teachers flock to a learning commons? I was there. It was community pride, an electric sense of excellence, and opportunity to pay tribute both to a visionary teacher-librarian and to everyone who had participated in its creation.

The Learning Commons provides CHS students and staff members the opportunity to ask questions, think about answers, and create new meanings. We have become central to teaching and learning because our mission is tied to the mission and ideals of our school and district, and we are committed to offering our services and space to all of our constituents.

If we read any of the major works on leadership and innovation, we can find lists of characteristics that make transformation possible. We have noted many of those characteristics in our marginal notes but there are others to think about and list. The end result in this case study is the turning from an organizational model to a client-side model. It is about turning 180 degrees from thinking the needs of the user are subservient to organizational needs. And, if you ask Valerie whether this learning commons has arrived, she will admit a certain sense of pride but with that nagging feeling that the evolution is still happening.

My advice is to build your program first. This may take years to accomplish, as it did for us at CHS. However, remember a strong program is the foundation for a true Learning Commons.

For more information on the project, and to see the before-and-after slide show on the school's web site, visit **http://www.chelmsford.k12.ma.us/chs/library/index.htm.**

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