

The Virtual Learning Commons: A Facility Designed for Students to Experiment with Meeting the Challenges of Everyday Life and Learning

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Note: A URL is available to expand this paper: <https://sites.google.com/site/balivlc2013/>

Until the mid-20th century, most school libraries in the U.S. were collections of books. A concern for the need to provide a better education particularly in the areas of math and science led to a funding for materials for schools in those areas. Then President Lyndon B. Johnson created the Great Society and even more funds were given to schools for materials, some of them dedicated to school libraries and the addition of audiovisual media to their collections.

At the end of the century, computer and Internet technology had expanded to allow access to time-saving management tools and access to information in digital formats. School librarians, welcoming the Internet as a way of moving library resources into the teaching and learning in their schools, created library websites for their teachers and students. These websites were designed to help students link in the OPAC and various helpful databases useful for their assignments. This was, however, a one-way resource recommendation leaving the library isolated and invisible when students seemed to prefer that Google search engine rather than the resources supplied by the school librarian.

We are now living in a world where one can download information onto smaller laptops, notebooks, and even cell phones. This opens the school library to the wide world, and, for school librarians, it requires them to rethink their role in the lives of students. Loertscher et al in their *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win! Reinventing School Libraries and Computer Labs* describe a physical facility with a “completely flexible learning space where neither computers nor books get in the way.” (p. 11) This open, flexible space has two major functions, the Open Commons and the Experimental Learning Center. The central focus was to transform the idea of a library as a storage and retrieval space into a fresh new learning space. By opening up the space and using various movable pieces of furniture, the space could be re-arranged at any time of the school day to accommodate individuals, small groups, and large groups while balancing the need for quiet, purposeful group work, mobile technology, project-based learning, and even performance.

The Open Commons has been designed by the potential users, students and adults who will be consulting with the students. These adults include the teachers, staff, and also volunteers as well as learning specialists. Any “rules” or policies and behavior guidelines for the use of the space are developed by students to provide a “collegial social environment.”

Another major change proposed for the Learning Commons was that it no longer be the kingdom of the librarian who had an office there. Instead, other specialists in the school would join the Learning Commons staff for a more central program pushed by all the specialists into the various classrooms of the school. In the movie, *Casablanca*, the

policeman is always lining up the “usual suspects” and the Learning Commons is the meeting area of all the “usual suspects” within the school, those “special” teachers who are always so vulnerable when positions are cut: school teacher librarian, technology specialists, reading specialist or literacy coach, art, music, and physical education teachers, counselors and the school nurse. However, by combining their special strengths, this “army” of specialists could create a different and collaborative school culture in ways that they could not have done by themselves in separate departments.

By broadening the program of the library into a Learning Commons, the entire culture of the facility would change. In addition to the traditional functions of reading and researching with instruction in information literacy, one might observe other activities:

- A group talking with an expert to plan that expert’s school visit.
- A counselor explaining the practice software available for students who are going to take the PSAT or SAT at the school in the coming weeks.
- Students crowding around a “genius bar” getting advice on their computers from volunteer student iTeam members.
- A docent from the local museum talking to the art teacher, three classroom teachers, and three students whose classes are going to visit the local art museum the next week.
- The choir director with the 26 chamber singers and the 10 chaperons who will be accompanying the tour to Italy over spring break looking at information about the cities and their treasures where they will be visiting.
- A group of students who are practicing for their participation in the city-wide storytelling event.
- A maker space where a group of students are building a robot for a competition.
- The school nurse reminding a kindergarten class of the reasons for washing their hands regularly.
- The school teacher librarian and a group of students on an interactive conversation with students in Australia discussing their holiday celebrations.
- A teacher with a final consultation with the library technician on mounting her e-book for the next semester.

The second function of the Learning Commons was to be the Experimental Learning Center which is “the heart of professional development and school improvement initiatives.” (p. 14)

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, focusing on instructional improvements that deserve full implementation based on pilot testing.

A former library classroom might be converted into the Experimental Learning Center and could also be used as a general meeting area where the superintendent presents information across the school district at times during the school year meeting all the teachers without their having to dismiss school early and drive to a central location. It is the place where new teachers in the building are given orientation to the school and where that beginning of the year meeting of all teachers is held to remind them of legal responsibilities related to students and to discuss new rules and regulations from the state department of education or the local school board. Here is where all teachers are given updates on the new trends in education and the new technologies available to them for the coming year.

This center could provide the meeting room and research support for teachers who want to write grant proposals or to write their own e-books. They have the technical and information staff to help plan what to add to their management sites for their classes. Changes in the curriculum can be discussed with teachers in the grade level or those before and after the grade level so everyone is informed. It is the place to demonstrate good teaching and good behavior management practices.

However, the Experimental Learning Center was not to be only a place where adults were learning, thinking, testing, failing, succeeding, and experimenting. Rather, it also included students, particularly the volunteer iStaff for the school, who would be testing out new technologies, Web 2.0 tools and then recommending them to the Learning Commons staff for implementation across the school. Another group of students might be testing various proposed online learning courses in order to recommend the best to the school administrator and department heads. Another group of students might be working with a teacher on flipped education models using Kahyn Academy or open source textbooks to test out this learning structure. Still other students might be creating their own learning experiences under the coaching of various mentors in the Learning Commons.

Thus, the concept of the Learning Commons transforms the former library into a vibrant school-wide culture of learning, creating, testing, experimenting, thinking, doing, and performing. It is a true extension of the classrooms throughout the school.

The Virtual Learning Commons

With this dramatic a shift in the physical space thus transforming the library into a Learning Commons, Loertscher, et.al. developed a Virtual Learning Commons (VLC) space just as radical but as a replacement for the traditional library website.¹ Realizing that the large majority of students bypass the school library website in favor of Google and Wikipedia, the authors envisioned a virtual space that would actually compete with Google and social media.

The authors defined the VLC as follows (p.2):

The Virtual Learning Commons (VLC) is the online force of the Learning Commons, a digital learning community in which the whole school participates. It is not a library website which only provides a one-way stream of useful information. Instead, both the instructors and the students of the school collaborate to establish the VLC as a place where individuals and groups are actively learning, communicating, and building together in real time. This participatory community of learners is powered by software, which allows many contributors, and it is as public or private as the school wishes it to be.

The idea stemmed from the question: "How can the library move into the center of teaching and learning rather than being peripheral to it?" And, if this virtual place was really to compete with the Internet and social media, how would it be constructed to be a truly participatory culture.

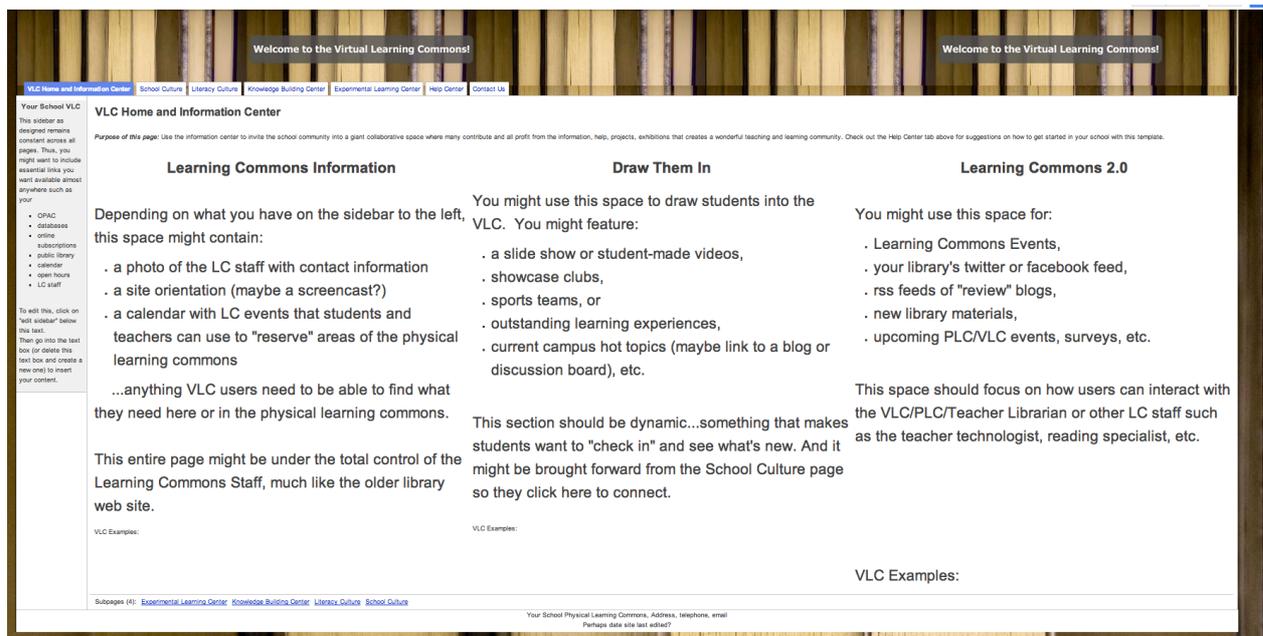
Fortunately, free and ubiquitous technologies now exist that make a participatory culture possible across the various devices available in the school and in the hands of students and teachers. In other words, a technology had to exist that would be at the fingertips of each user and available 24/7 if it had any possibility to compete in a crowded information world.

¹ Loertscher, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. *The Virtual Learning Commons*. Learning Commons Press, 2012.

A number of emerging platforms meet the criteria and more are appearing all the time. The authors considered WordPress and other free website construction tools, but settled on Google Sites as their experimental platform. This tool was selected because it is a part of the Google Apps for Education suite of tools that is free to educational institutions around the world and can be used with various native languages. While not as sophisticated as WordPress, early experimentation demonstrated that Google Sites was not only ubiquitous but also simple and sustainable. We were looking for a platform where editing rights to the various digital rooms could be given to selected individuals rather than editorship being given to the VLC as a whole. Like Wikipedia, there needs to be certain restrictions on who can actually post and edit various parts of a website.

Over a period of three years, students in the Master’s program at San Jose State University’s School of Library and Information Science began experimenting with the idea of a VLC. At first, they built prototypes but soon began to create actual VLCs that worked in actual schools.

What emerged was the creation of a Virtual Learning Commons template freely available as a Google template that anyone in the world could download and begin creating their own VLC. This template is at <http://sites.google.com/site/templateVLC> or, you can just google: virtual learning commons template. Here is a picture of the template:



The template, when downloaded and renamed now belongs to the user and can be modified and changed in any way to fit a local school. Or, as an idea template can be used to fashion a VLC using any technology that is available and would provide access to the entire school community.

As envisioned, the VLC contains five major “rooms,” each with a group of editors having the rights to edit and upload content:

Information Central	Literacy Center	Knowledge Building Center	Cultural Center	Experimental Learning Center
				

As pictured, the five rooms are: The Information Center, The Literacy Culture, The Knowledge Building Center, School Culture, and The Experimental Learning Center. Each room was created not only to supplement what should be going on in the Physical Learning Commons, but could provide unique learning opportunities and participatory features that could not be done in physical space.

The Information Center

The Information Centers is something like the old library website. It contains information that everyone needs access to immediately such as the OPAC, databases, links to other libraries, etc. It may have calendars, people to contact, etc. It also should contain a hook from the school culture page where something happening today draws the viewer to the VLC as a whole

The Literacy Center / Culture

There are all types of participatory activities connected to reading, writing, speaking, listening, digital citizenship, technology literacy, etc. Of course, a list of books to read or new books in the library are shared here, but students and teachers need places where interactive activities are happening. These might be digital book clubs, writing centers, places to contribute student-written books, showcases of work that can be commented upon, reading initiatives, and places where older students are commenting or helping younger students construct digital storytelling, presentations, or anything else connected to literacy projects throughout the school.

The Knowledge Building Center

This center is where all the units of instruction that are collaboratively created by any of the professionals in the Learning Commons are featured. It is not only the link to those collaborative projects but also a museum and record of the intervention of the Learning Commons staff in teaching and learning across the school. It is the place where administrators can collaborate on learning experiences and watch the track record of the interventions of these interventions grow over the year. Learning experiences can be designed with the help of another free template on Google known as Knowledge Building Centers at: <https://sites.google.com/site/knowledgebuildingcenter/>

School Culture

This room draws students and adults into the VLC. It is the living school yearbook where selected editors are posting sports events, music concerts, poetry readings, individuals or groups who have won awards, school initiatives, celebrations, and anything else of interest that is going to draw a crowd. If there is a yearbook team or club in the school, they can have this as their project in addition to the production of a printed volume.

The Experimental Learning Center

Adults and students are testing technologies, teaching techniques, and piloting school initiatives in this center. It is the virtual compliment to the physical space where school

improvement and professional development is happening. And this room includes not only adults but students who are helping and experimenting on their own.

Here are three brief video tours of existing Virtual Learning Commons:

- Video tour of a learning commons, Hancock School
at: <https://sites.google.com/site/loyolaschoolvlc/home/vlc-video-tour>
- Video tour of the VLC from Malibu High School, California
at: <http://screencast.com/t/eoepjcukA>
- Lincoln Middle School VLC video tour
at: <http://screencast.com/t/hHva1sem8j1b>

More examples are being built all the time and a contact message to the authors can provide more examples over time.

What Is the Expected Impact of the VLC?

For a half century, librarians have been talking about a collaborative outreach and moving to the center of learning. It has remained an elusive role. Many claim that there is little time to plan and carry out joint learning experiences or that the teachers are unwilling to collaborate. Now, the free technology exists that can revolutionize the role and actually bring it into existence.

What is a participatory culture? How and why would teachers collaborate virtually? How could we attract children and teens into such a collaborative space? How would such a space be organized so that many contributors could be working simultaneously without bringing the entire site down or adding inappropriate content? Each question has its own set of challenges worth experimenting around and not merely discarded as an improbably idea. The VLC is always in beta. That is, it is constantly evolving as the participatory culture arises. It is simple to construct. It is free. It is available 24/7. It can be accessed on most current devices. It begins to transfer ownership of the library from the librarian over to other specialists, the faculty, and to the students in the school. It is a flat community rather than a top-down place that students google around rather than enter. It is a place to teach digital citizenship. It is a place to collaborate across the globe. It is a place where a single professional teacher librarian can make a difference in multiple schools. It can be created at the district level. It can be created at the state/provincial level; at the national level, and at the international level. It is certainly the place where students can learn to meet the challenges of everyday life while they are in school and when they leave. It is a frontier worth exploration and leadership.