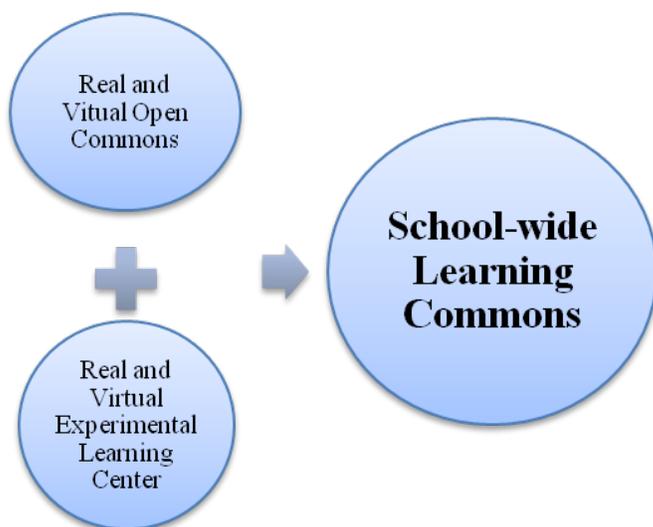


Chapter 2 (from: Building a Learning Commons by Koechlin, Rosenfeld, and Loertscher)

What is a Learning Commons?

A Learning Commons is a learning "space" that is both physical and virtual. As you might guess, a Learning Commons is about common physical and virtual places to experiment, practice, celebrate, learn, work, and play. But a Learning Commons is more than a room. Much more than that, it calls for the creation of new environments that improve learning. It is about changing school culture and about transforming the way learning and teaching occurs.

Fig. 2.1



The **Open Commons** is the physical space and the virtual spaces where learners meet to read, conduct research, test out ideas with others, and work to creatively share their new understandings.

The **Experimental Learning Center** is the center of school improvement; the physical space and the virtual spaces where administrators and faculty conduct action research and refine new teaching approaches. As well, it is here, in the Experimental Learning Center, that learners try out new technologies and digital tools before they are introduced in the rest of the school

As the center of the Learning Commons, the school library becomes more than the hub of the school where students and teachers gravitate to work on projects and find materials they need. The school library joins forces with the school computer lab(s) and is transformed into a vital catalyst for school improvement for staff as well as students. This transformation calls for physical, virtual, and pedagogical changes as well as a shift in mindset for all players (Koechlin, Zwaan, and Loertscher 2008).

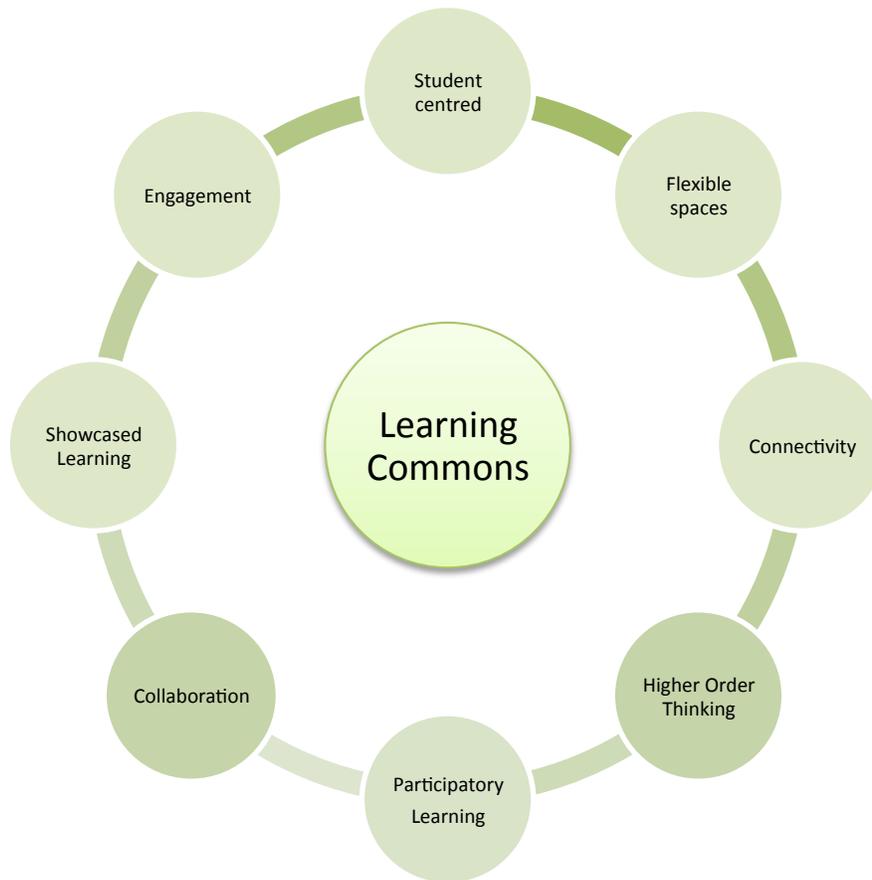
“The Learning Commons is the space where learners and technology merge... For learners the sentiment is that technology, as an extension of themselves, empowers them to know, do and understand.”

Loertscher, Koechlin and Zwaan (2008)

“A Learning Commons is a flexible and responsive approach to helping schools focus on learning collaboratively.....Within a Learning Commons, new relationships are formed between learners, new technologies are realized and utilized, and both students and educators prepare for the future as they learn new ways to learn.”

Ontario Library Association (2010)

Fig. 2.2: **Desired Elements in the Learning Commons**



The Learning Commons is Student Centered – Students are empowered to contribute to the building, the maintaining and the functioning of the Learning Commons. For example, students create tutorials to help others working with new digital applications and tools or equipment in the Commons; students book Learning Commons spaces to showcase their accomplishments such as holding a poetry slam or inviting the community to see the winning projects of the science fair competition.

The Learning Commons has Flexible Spaces – To maximize a wide range of teaching and learning potential, both physical and virtual spaces are designed for flexibility. Shelving and furnishings are portable to allow for quick transitions for uses by different groupings. Desktop computers are replaced with portable notebooks and other portable devices linked into the wireless network.

The Learning Commons facilitates Connectivity – The Learning Commons facilitates natural easy communication throughout the school community. Technologies and systems are also utilized to connect to other learners, experts and ideas around the globe. For example, a collaborative common calendar for teachers and students is accessible 24/7 for booking the open and experimental learning spaces, equipment, and specialist support.

The Learning Commons promotes Higher Order Thinking – Activities are designed to teach, apply and demonstrate critical and creative thinking skills and processes. For instance, students are taught how to develop effective questions to not only help them to evaluate sources of information but also to guide analysis and deepen understanding. Students learn how to develop excellent presentations and how to evaluate their own learning.

The Learning Commons encourages Participatory Learning – Groups of learners work collaboratively, develop their own learning paths, build collective knowledge, and co-create the sharing of their new understandings. For example, students seek out others interested in their inquiry topic and work in Web 2.0 virtual spaces (Knowledge Building Centers, as explained in Chapter 3) to collect, question and synthesize information and ideas with others.

The Learning Commons enables Collaboration – Going beyond traditional forms of collaboration, teaching partnerships and networks model and promote student collaborations. For example, Knowledge Building Centers exist virtually where teacher directed assignments are turned into conversations among the teachers, students, teacher librarians, and other teaching specialists as they work together on a topical exploration. The teacher technologist helps learners to utilize video conferencing in their collaborations outside of the school. The school literacy coach tests out a new reading strategy targeted by the professional learning community before introducing it to the whole school.

The Learning Commons Showcases Learning – Activities and displays in the Learning Commons demonstrate excellence in teaching and learning. New technologies and learning approaches are tested in the Learning Commons and refined before they fan out into the rest of the school. The Learning Commons celebrates and displays individual, group and school-wide accomplishments in both physical and virtual spaces. Student projects and creations “go viral” throughout the school and out into the community.

The Learning Commons furthers Engagement – Authentic learning experiences are designed to emulate real world process and use of effective technologies. Lessons and units are ignited with problems, challenges, questions and scenarios that spark the desire to know. Social learning processes and tools are utilized and students are taught how to build and maintain personal learning networks. For example, students work in teams using Google Forms to design and conduct a survey on a topic, analyze results and investigate possible causes and effects of their findings.

“Participatory learning includes the many ways that learners (of any age) use new technologies to participate in virtual communities where they share ideas, comment on one another’s projects, and plan, design, implement, advance, or simply discuss their practices, goals, and ideas together.”

Davidson and Goldberg (2009)

“Effective teaching practice begins with the thoughtful and intentional design of learning that engages students intellectually and academically.

The work that students are asked to undertake is worthy of their time and attention, is personally relevant, and deeply connected to the world in which they live.”

Friesen (2009)