The Benefits of a Participatory Learning Environment In the School Learning Commons

By Patricia Baker

The Ontario School Library Association through the Ontario Library Association published the document “Together for Learning” in 2010. “Together for Learning” outlined the need for a change in school libraries to become an environment that reflects the needs of students and the wider community. The change was due to the advancement from a print-based to a technology-based society. The learning commons, as the library became known, was to transform how students and staff used the space founded on participatory learning.

Today’s schools are experiencing a great deal of change. Just as the rest of the world’s political, social, economic, and scientific realities have been shifted by swift advances in information and communication technology, so too has education. These forces are altering the way people work, play and learn.
*(*Ontario School Library Association*,* 2010, 2)

Why change now? According to Louise Osland with Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, *Everything in the school has purpose and intention. Change is deleting what is not working to support students’ learning success and adopting a new way that has the promise of increased student learning results.*
(Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium - ERLC, 2016)

So the question arises - what is participatory learning?
The word participatory comes from participation, which refers to the action of taking part in activities and projects, the act of sharing in the activities of a group. The process of participation fosters mutual learning.
(Seel, 2012)

Participatory learning may look quite different in the learning commons than the classroom. The learning commons provides the space and resources for students to practice critical thinking, collaboration and design thinking skills, which then can be transferred to the classroom and beyond. The 30 minute scheduled class time for storytelling, exchanging books and silent reading becomes a time for exploration, collaboration and sharing innovative ideas.

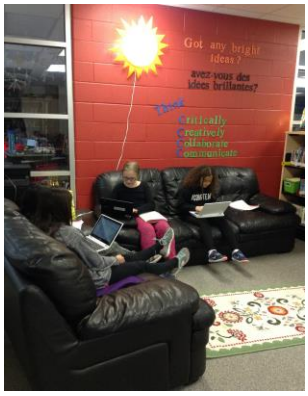
When I hear the term 'library' now, it is synonymous with books on shelves (all tidy and quiet). However, our learning commons, which also has books on shelves, is far from anything quiet. It is a place where exploration reigns; robots beep, collaboration is heard, and deep learning is embedded in student-led discoveries!
D. Labrash, Grade 3 teacher, Ottawa Catholic School Board

Flexibility

To make a participatory learning environment in a learning commons possible, the first item that is needed is flexibility. A flexible space, furniture, schedule and even mindset of staff and students are essential when transforming the space. Naturally this may take a few years to accomplish but when completed the change is inspiring.

Flexibility in space refers to the ability of users to change the learning commons space according to their needs. Shelving on wheels, furniture with gliders, folding tables and benches all help when the space needs to transform for large groups and presentations. In the document *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada*, the standard "Designing Learning Environments to Support Participatory Learning" first discusses the physical space to suit the needs of students. "Physical LLC spaces are flexible to facilitate spontaneous groupings." (Canadian School Libraries, 2019)

Small niches or collaboration zones intermixed with individual work areas allow staff and students to be separate from other groups using the same space. This not only helps with volume in the learning commons but also helps students focus on their own work and not be distracted by other groups.

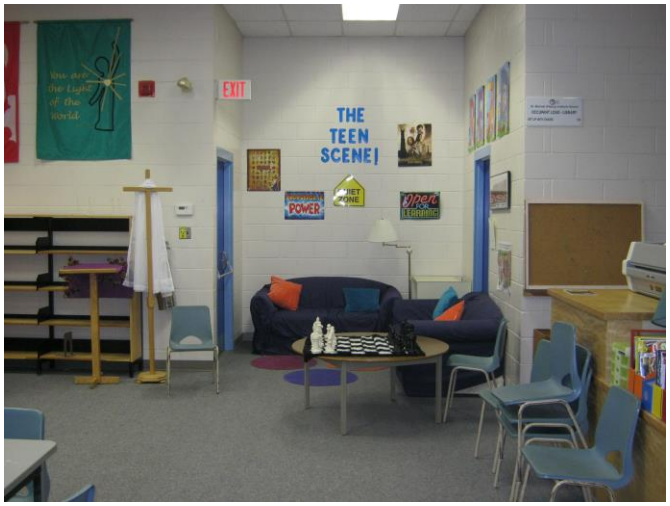


The idea of "library" is transformed from a physical space of storage and retrieval functions to flexible learning areas for individuals, small groups, and large groups working to not only consume knowledge but create knowledge. Books and computers are still there, but they don't get in the way. The space is governed by the immediate needs of students and teachers.
(Loertscher & Koechlin, 2017)

When I started in this school the library was very closed to opportunities. Now the learning commons is more creative and allows you to express yourself in different ways. This will help me learn to be collaborative and more open minded when I am working with others. I like self-checkout because I can be responsible and independent for my own book exchange.
Grade 6 student

I like the learning commons because there are little niches for you to get comfortable, be separated from others, and not be distracted.
Grade 6 student

For the students to be comfortable in using the learning commons, the space needs to be bright, colourful and comfortable. Inspiring colours in paint choices may seem bold in schools these days but as the students are not in the learning commons space all day as with the classrooms, colour choices can more bold than beige.



Before

After

Students and staff need to be able to use the learning commons according to their educational needs in a timely manner, not waiting for a week until their class rotation comes around. This means a free flow area where students come, work, exchange books, and collaborate anytime. A flexible schedule is especially hard for people to wrap their minds around. Generally explained a school learning commons can run like a public library, where everyone may come and go as needed. Self-checkout is also a mandatory requirement for the transformation to be successful. When users are responsible for their own book exchange and scheduling management, they become empowered, responsible and take ownership of their educational needs. It also frees staff from sitting at a desk checking out books giving them time to teach and interact with students on a meaningful level.

Stay current with new technology and educational innovations. In addition to keeping our spaces flexible, we need to keep ourselves flexible, or we run the risk of making ourselves extinct in our own natural environments.
(Harland, 2011, 22)

I like to freedom that the learning commons provides because I can come at any time to exchange my books, use the space to work, read and collaborate with others.
Grade 6 student, Ottawa Catholic School Board

Collaborative and Critical Thinking Skills

So now that everyone has access to the space, resources, and technology needed for research, coding, collaborative and creative work, how do we encourage more than just free play? Free play is great when students are learning to use new technology. Once the basics have been learned though there needs to be a purpose to their creative work and room to grow in new concepts and skills.

What are the needs of the 21st century student? The education field calls them the 6 Cs (Collaboration, Critical thinking, Creativity, Communication, Citizenship, and Character). When makerspace, robotics, green screening, 3D printing are added to the library program, all these skills can be practiced when the opportunity is provided.
(Baker, 2018)

The *Leading Learning* document, as previously discussed, also references the theme "designing for creativity and innovation" under the standard "Designing Learning Environments to Support Participatory Learning". Goals include:
Learning experiences are explored and developed for hands-on learning
Learning experiences are developed to facilitate presentation productivity
Learning experiences are developed to engage learners in creative expression and communication
Learning experiences are developed to invite creativity and innovation
(Canadian School Libraries, 2019)

Programming in the learning commons needs to evolve to reflect these experiences of creativity, innovation and hands-on learning by providing participatory learning. Many learning commons staff are finding it difficult to accomplish this task both with limited time and resources. As discussed earlier, a flexible schedule and self-checkout will help free up time. As daunting as this sounds, stations or makerspace can be planned for the year. With makerspace, if there are eight challenges and a group rotates to a new challenge once a month then the logistics of arranging makerspace needs to happen only once a year. Each time a class visits the learning commons a new skill is discussed and modeled for the students to practice. Expectations are also posted for students to understand general behaviour that needs to be followed. It is also necessary to give time for students to reflect on their experience in makerspace as a team. What were the difficulties? What would they change next time? What went well?

Expectations and learned skills

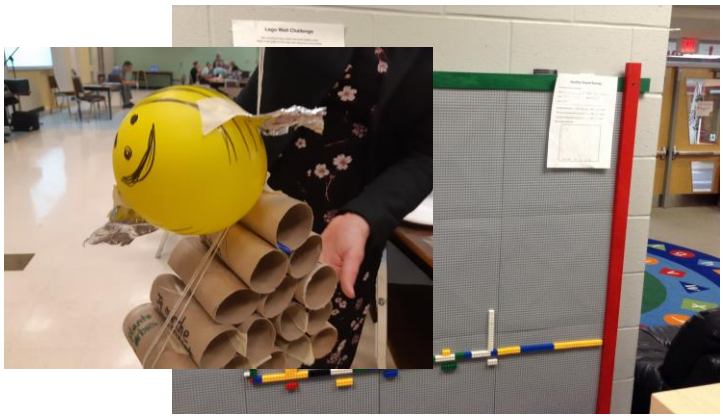
F - Focus (not talking about other things)
R - Respect (listen to other people's ideas)
A - Acceptance (cooperate with team's decisions)
M - Manners (be polite in what you say, share)
P - Positive attitude (be ready to learn, share and create)
A - Active listening (listen with your eyes, ears, hands and body)

These skills are the focus of makerspace and coding, not the actual making and building. The ability to work effectively in a team is a valuable skill that needs to be practiced often for it to be ready to use when the students leave school. It is critical when students are exploring, testing and evaluating their

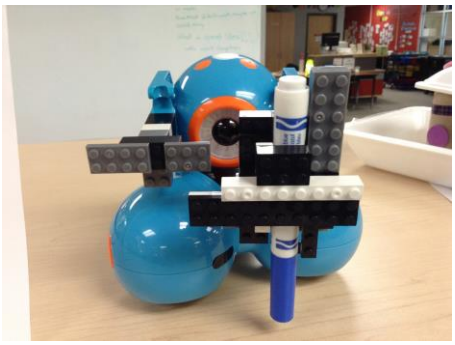
designs that there is no interference especially from adults. If students are allowed to make mistakes, identify the problem and make adjustments on their own or in a team, then the process of design thinking will be established.

I feel that Makerspace is a wonderful program within our learning commons environment. Makerspace offers students an opportunity to collaborate with each other, share ideas and work within smaller groups of 3 - 4 to work through problems that they do not normally encounter within the classroom.
T. Graitson, Grade 6 teacher, Ottawa Catholic School Board

Makerspace challenges do not have to be costly for those schools that cannot afford to buy the latest in robotics. Challenges can be as simple as using 20 sheets of paper to build a tower, creating a habitat out of recycled material, building the three pigs a house on a fixed budget where recycled materials are assigned a value, or doing a survey of the class and putting the results on the Lego wall with a bar graph.



Even with a few robotics students can work together to create unique ideas and solutions to challenges such as: Using Lego, create a structure that will hold a marker to dash, code dash to draw a letter. Create a paper boat to fit over an ozobot, code the ozobot to visit different countries on a map.



Companies today are looking for students who can think on their own, collaborate with others, solve problems with unique ideas and understand the process of design. So how can schools and learning commons provide students with the opportunities they need to succeed in today's workforce?
(Baker, 2018, 67)

As a teacher doing planning, I have found that I use the resources in the learning commons more frequently because of the ease of finding them and checking them out myself. Having a Maker Space available and participatory learning activities planned by our Library Technician is an awesome way to introduce my Kinders to a variety of STEM challenges while teaching me about the technology we have available.

S.Vida, Kindergarten Teacher, Ottawa Catholic School Board

With stations, students are free to choose an activity during their library learning commons time and may choose to continue work on their project in their own time. As with makerspace, stations are posted with specific challenges so students have direction in the beginning. As the year progresses, students become more comfortable with this process and start designing their own projects.

Possible stations:

Tinkercad - Create a medal to give to someone who is doing awesome things in our school.
Create a tool to help students keep their focus while reading.

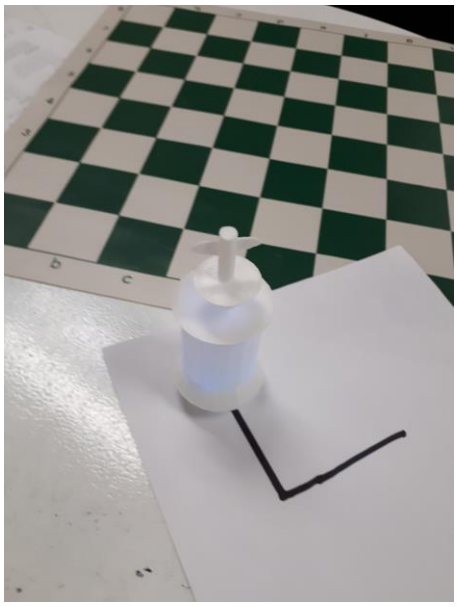
Micro:bit - Code the Micro:bit to display your first and last name with a 3 second delay between.
Code the Micro:bit to play rock, paper, scissors and keep track of the results.

Sora - Find and listen to an audio book. Find and open an e--book.

WeVideo - Create a weather forecast and change the background using green screening.
Create an anti-bullying video and change the background using green screening.

Read - Read a book of your choice.

Google Slides - Create a slideshow enticing someone to read a book of your choice.



Students created chess pieces in Tinkercad to print with the 3D printer. The pieces fit over ozobots that were then coded so the pieces played chess by themselves. This activity was entirely student driven and initiated.

I find that our learning commons is very spacious and everything is very organized. I like all the flexible comfortable seating and we can work in this space anytime we want easily. I like that we don't just sit for 15 minutes for silent reading, we have other stations to practice green screening, 3d printing and looking at books online. These stations allow me opportunities to learn how to collaborate and be more creative with my mindset. Our learning commons works because it allows me the freedom to work on projects according to my needs.
Grade 6 student, Ottawa Catholic School Board

Gonzales (2016) describes how all these changes in space and participatory learning changed how the library was used by the students. It didn't decrease the usage or make the library obsolete but dramatically increased students using the space and learning skills for the future. I have found the same results in my learning commons after the transformation. The space is so busy with everyone working on collaboration, learning new skills and yes, still book exchange; that I am sought out by principals to help change their schools to this new model.

Life Skills

A recent study from the University of Illinois showed that ten years after graduation, people who had honed their teamwork skills while still in high school had significantly higher earnings than classmates

who had failed to do so. In fact the mastery of collaboration skills correlated more closely to annual income than standardized test scores.
(Harvey, 2009, 10)

It is important to remember that as staff within the education field, we are working for the students. It is our job to provide the resources, space and skills needed for our students to excel in life when they move on to higher education and the workforce. This means in today's society all staff need to be on the leading edge of technology. Frequent professional development is necessary to keep abreast of all the new and innovative ideas and technology that is now and will be available. Students are great at this task of keeping up with technology and also a great resource for those who need some tips and new ideas. It is then our job as educators to harness the students' enthusiasm for technology into learning, sharing ideas and evolving as 21st century students. Flexibility, collaboration, critical thinking and design thinking are all life skills that are being asked for of our students to understand and demonstrate in today's workforce. This can be accomplished through participatory learning environments in today's school learning commons.

Our learning commons has become a place where children come to be challenged, engaged and learn through a myriad of opportunities. There are multiple entry points, for the varied learners, and multiple learning styles. Students enter this place filled with various materials, a wonderful collection of books, open-ended building materials, technology such as B-bots, Chromebooks, ipads, coding tools, and math tools to name a few. Children are active participants in constructing their understanding of concepts and skills. They learn to collaborate, problem solve and think critically about ideas that they are excited to pursue, not simply meeting the Ministry Expectations. The old school library model simply does not meet the needs of the 21st century learner.
E. Silva Cinanni, Grade 1 Teacher, Ottawa Catholic School Board

Resources

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Patricia Baker is a consultant and library technician with the Ottawa Catholic School Board. Her new book *Creating a Learning Commons for the 21st Century with Design Thinking* has been recently published. Patricia works with other schools to help transform their space and make purposeful makerspaces to introduce design thinking and teamwork skills.