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LEARNING COMMONS :
A CREATIVE LIBRARY ENVIRONMENT FOR
COLLABORATIVE LEARNING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT :

Collaborative learning is a trend in 21ˢᵗ century teaching learning process. The developed system that provides a space to the students, teachers and teacher-librarians to take part in the learning process is learning commons. Modern information technologies like Internet, 4-G mobile phone, social networking, Wi-Fi, etc. are also intervening as major factor in the collaborative way of learning. The present paper focuses on the different aspects of the learning commons, its need, relevance, functioning, technologies, and other aspects. The Learning Commons not only serve as a platform for discussions and deliberations but also a base for promotion of collaborative teaching learning process.

Keywords :

Learning Commons, Commons 2.0, Collaborative Learning

Introduction :

The initiative of creating learning commons as a space for students, teachers, research scholars and others to meet and work with technology has been a trend for collaborative learning. Though not being a new concept learning commons is gaining popularity in academic establishments due to advent of Web 2.0 technologies. Many university libraries to remain significant in the academic lives in campus have created such common environment using social networking services and Web 3.0 technologies. As libraries have been traditionally providing reading rooms for users to access and work with print collections, now they are providing common physical as well as digital spaces for them to access and work with digital collections collaboratively. The learning commons is a normal extension of traditional mission of the library to provide service in a technology enabled academic campus and must adapt and evolve to meet changing expectations and technological capabilities.

Learning Commons :

Learning commons, otherwise known as library commons, information commons, digital commons, is a learning space like library that share space for information technology, online education, tutoring, collaboration, content creation, meetings and reading or study. It is the mixing of various student related activities into the library of a university or a college such as Writing Center, Math Resource Center, Career Center, Testing Center, Information Technologies Help Desk, Faculty Development, etc. The learning commons evolves a functional and dynamic learning experience for students at one central location. Learning commons are more popular in academic and research libraries, whereas some public and school libraries have also adopted the model and providing innovative, creative and collaborative learning environment. For a collaborative learning environment the architecture, furniture and physical organization on the whole are important for a learning commons, as spaces are regularly to be rearranged by users according to their specific requirements.

As it is tried to build twenty-first century learning skills...collaboration, creation and communication it is needed to look at how to support this by creating an environment that meets that need. The Learning Commons concept takes libraries that one step further to support digital students and learning and the Teacher-Librarians have a huge role on student achievement, increasing literacy rates and 21st century learning skills. He has to use the tools in the digital toolkit links to help him to find resources, develop lessons, use inquiry learning and explore Web 2.0 tools with faculty and students.

History and Development :

The learning commons have developed across the United States and other countries in academic libraries for a few decades. They have developed and morphed in response to Web 2.0 technologies and the continuous evolution of libraries and librarians' functions. Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, social networking sites, video sharing sites and web apps, have radically impacted the way that information is exchanged and engaged in. A learning commons takes these technologies into consideration and then adapts to provide the best possible services to the new 2.0 users and students. A driving force for the institution to place various services in the library are caused by two major reasons. The first reason is the reduction of space used to house print materials which are of little use to students and faculty compared to digital resources rapidly accessible through internet based services. The second reason for learning commons advances is the prime location on campus that most libraries have managed to secure. The library often frees up space through weeding of the print collections. A synergistic service can develop in support of

students with other service departments.

Why a Learning Commons :

Students appear to have natural abilities to use emerging technology. But the reality is, while students easily grasp the entertainment and communication value of the devices they use, they need to be taught how these tools can be used in learning and critical thought. This is a task for the Learning Commons.

There is growing consensus among educators that students need to learn transferable skills in order to work efficiently and successfully in our future world. To achieve this, students will need to become critical consumers of information, effective problem solvers, capable decision makers and innovative communicators as well. They will require the skills and ability to flow with change. And most of all, students will need to understand that these transferable skills give them the capacity to make a difference in this world... personally. A Learning Commons provides boundless opportunity for growth. It is based on a cross-curricular perspective that recognizes literacy, numeracy, knowledge, thinking, communication, and application as foundations for learning how to learn. A Learning Commons becomes the physical and virtual catalyst where inquiry, imagination, discovery, and creativity come alive and become central to growth — personal, academic, social and cultural.

Learning Commons Purpose :

A learning commons in academic establishments provides wider range and more consistent services to students and teachers. Mixing a number of services maintains the conventional reference and research elements of the traditional library while adding innovative new services that support new technologies and services in a larger and more integrated environment. The learning commons reflects a marked shift in our conception of the library, a shift that is driven by our evolving understanding of the library's role in supporting student learning. The emergence of the learning commons as a central element in contemporary library design offers an opportunity to transform the library's role on campus from a provider of information to a facilitator of learning.

Often, libraries and learning commons share responsibility for delivering college-wide outcomes: developing effective research strategies, finding and evaluating the appropriateness of resource materials for a particular topic, honing effective oral and written communication skills, and promoting good study and learning habits. The goal of a Learning Commons Librarians' work should be to encourage all students to engage in substantive ways with multiple services in the organization. Properly implemented in an academic library, this model of library service benefits

all parts of the institution. A cohesiveness and purpose among the diverse elements of the library allows both the library and the school to run more smoothly and efficiently and students' needs are met in an environment that is designed to provide multiple services in a single location.

The "Commons 2.0" :

The "Commons 2.0" amalgamates wide range of elements like new Web 2 &3 services, mobile, Wi-Fi, on-line, digital space and other technologies to promote student learning in innovative, creative, and collaborative ways. Learning Commons is not merely a stationary computer laboratory rather incorporates the Wi-Fi communication, flexible workspace clusters that promote interaction and collaboration, encourage creativity, and support peer-learning and collaborative learning. The Commons 2.0 becomes a one-stop collaboratory for out-of-class assignments, writing, research, and group projects of students and researchers.

With the advent of Web 2.0 and social networking services a major shift is witnessed in the ways students approach, access, retrieve, download and use information floating all across the world. Now users are not merely downloading and consuming information rather they are increasingly participating in the information creation process. The platform, software, digital spaces, and instruction provided to today's students encourage them to become well-equipped participants in an online global community, skilled in written and visual communication and critical thinking. Social networking platforms in the form of blogs, wikis, facebook, twitter, WhatsApp, MySpace, Flickr, and YouTube are extension of socialization in Web generation, through which the students create group among themselves for interaction.

Commons 2.0 and Constructivist Learning :

Because faculty commonly assign projects with collaboration in mind, learning spaces should align with current pedagogy. The Commons 2.0 supports new ways of learning, particularly the emphasis on team-based problem solving that more closely resembles the ways in which successful organizations and businesses operate today. The Commons 2.0 supports constructivist learning, a philosophy which asserts that real understanding and knowledge are constructed through personal experience and reflection rather than conveyed passively through a classroom lecture. Beginning to think of the whole campus, not just classrooms, as a learning space also marks a shift. Shared spaces like the Commons 2.0 place the learner front and center. These informal environments are no longer "mere containers for a few, approved activities"; instead, they represent "environments designed for people" where the availability of food and drink, comfortable chairs, and furniture support a variety of active and social learning activities.

Teaching Learning Implications :

The learning commons is not merely a gathering place for students, but it offers a great deal to the whole academic community for learning through interaction. Academic campus resources like libraries, media labs, and experimental classrooms can be clustered in a single space, enabling students to make connections between them and direct their own learning. Faculty members can enjoy more flexibility in assigning projects because the learning commons offers spaces for work to be done either individually or collaboratively, with media support or without. Perhaps most importantly, the commons invites students to devise their own approaches to their work and to transfer what they learn in one course to the work they do for another. A well-equipped learning commons says to a student, "Here you have tools, room to collaborate, equipment, advice, research options, and access to expert information. Now it is up to you to build something worthwhile: a paper, a presentation, an education."

Collaborative Learning :

The learning commons has evolved from combination of library and computer lab into a full-service learning, research, and project space for students and teachers to act collaboratively. In reply to course assignments, which have taken a creative and often collaborative turn, the learning commons provides areas for group meetings, tools to support creative efforts, and on-staff specialists to provide help as needed. Its strength lies in the relationships it supports, whether these are student-to-student, student-to-faculty, student-to-staff, student-to-equipment, or student-to-information. Effective learning commons are alive with the voices of students working together, establishing the kinds of connections that promote active, engaged learning.

As a place where students can meet, talk, study, and use "borrowed" equipment, the learning commons brings together the functions of libraries, labs, lounges, and seminar areas in a single community gathering place. And yet the successful learning commons does not solely depend upon adaptable space configuration or the latest technological gear. This face-to-face forum supports the sharing of student ideas outside the classroom, complementing the shift in pedagogy toward collaborative media and team efforts. As a bonus, the learning commons can be an ideal venue to blend face-to-face with virtual meetings, allowing the broad population of students who commute or telecommute to join their teams in project discussions.

Guiding Principles :

The Commons 2.0 adheres to the following five guiding principles: it is open, free, comfortable, inspiring, and practical.

Open refers to the unconfined nature of the space. Study carrels have their place for quiet, individualized work, but not here. Glass walls may separate spaces if needed as sound buffers or to set off group study rooms along the periphery. *Open* suggests a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas as well. The space should encourage the coming together of disciplines that are typically isolated from one another. For example, shared workspaces for students engaged in computer graphics, 3D modeling, and computer visualization can bridge the arts and sciences and encourage mutual discovery.

The untethered exchange of information made possible by wireless networks is liberating. The Commons 2.0 is *free* in that it downplays the fixed workstation and concentrates on flexibility and mobility. Wireless laptops give students the freedom to explore the commons or anywhere in the library—to group themselves as they see fit and not as decided for them. Wireless technology facilitates multitasking by allowing for the layering of new technology with the old. For instance, students can venture out with their laptops or portable devices to peruse the book stacks or visit the library's special collections.

This space is *comfortable*. It is designed for many types of learners and learning styles, not just one. The tables and chairs facilitate collaboration, but there are different types of seating spaces as well. Sofas, large upholstered chairs, three-position chairs, task chairs, and other furnishings are found throughout the space. No one size fits all in the Commons 2.0. There is still a place for traditional library furniture—wooden tables and chairs, and table lamps—as long as the tables are retrofitted or designed with a power supply in the center. The goal is to make users comfortable. Holding focus groups or simply asking users can help determine the appropriate features.

In addition to being comfortable, the space should be *inspiring*. The furnishings, layout, and design should present a uniform and consistent vision of functionality, sophistication, and creativity. This space should feel dynamic, with artwork that inspires users to tap into their own creative impulses. High-definition widescreen monitors throughout the space can feature rotating displays of student art and projects, for example. Paintings, kinetic sculptures, ceramics, and other art can be displayed in and around the commons to inspire users.

The Commons 2.0 is *practical*. It provides a place where real work can be done and real learning can take place. Its layout and design rely on sound pedagogical principals such as constructivist learning theory, as well as an understanding of the value systems and abilities of today's college students. It offers practical services and features such as laptop docking stations, self-help graphics, and color imaging, and it facilitates human-human interaction—student peers, student mentors, librarians, and faculty can collaborate here in real time.

Skeptics assert that this new academic interest in social software and collaborative learning is just a passing phase and that redesigning our libraries to cater to such ephemera is not the best use of scarce funding, staffing, and square footage. Technologies, media formats, and gadgets will certainly come and go, but our continued investment in computer-enhanced pedagogy is critical. We have only just begun to understand the impact that the Internet and interactive technologies will have on education and learning. In this global community, where information can be shared instantaneously and the ability to work together and understand each other is critical to our collective future, the trend toward collaboration and group learning may be one of the most important issues facing universities today. We must be willing to understand and be responsive to the needs of our community of learners. Our library spaces must continue to evolve if we want to have a place in tomorrow's university and world.

Learning Commons Weaknesses :

The Digital Divide is a very real problem in academic libraries currently and will remain so for the foreseeable future. This can be a problem in a highly technological library model but when the learning commons work efficiently, the needs of these students are provided for through library orientations, research/reference classes, technology courses, one-on-one assistance, effective and in-library peer assistance. These services should be developed online as well as in person for the maximum benefit of the student user and the school.

Conclusion :

A Learning Commons takes academic libraries into the 21st century. There is a hum of activity with students talking, learning, searching for information on a variety of devices, focusing on content creation and synthesizing of information. The Learning Commons becomes the hub and the heart of the educational institution; a place for teachers and teacher-librarians to collaborate to build inquiry learning and critical thinking skills in students; a place for technology integration and experimentation; a place that is 'owned' by students and staff alike.

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