Coteaching and the Learning Commons.

Authors: **LOERTSCHER**, DAVID V.
KOECHLIN, CAROL

Source: Teacher Librarian; Dec2015, Vol. 43 Issue 2, p12-16, 5p

Document Type: Article

Subjects: Schools
Library media specialists
School improvement programs
Teaching
Teachers

Abstract: The article discusses an alternative approach to school improvement practices through collaboration and co-teaching by the specialist staff of the school. Topics mentioned include definition of co-teaching, a study led by David V. **Loertscher** that compared isolated teaching with co-teaching, and a diagram that shows the dynamic partnership of a teacher librarian and a classroom teacher.

Full Text Word Count: 3289

ISSN: 14811782

Accession Number: 111875237

Coteaching and the Learning Commons

FEATURE ARTICLE

Building a Participatory School Culture

For a decade or more, school improvement seems to have centered on the single teacher in a single

classroom.

Finding better and better ways for each teacher to push student achievement in their classroom as scores measured on standardized tests has been a key reason. Accountability systems, supervision, and professional development have all combined to focus on strengthening the individual teacher's techniques. The message was strong: "If my students don't score high, it's my fault."

Without totally rejecting these ideas, we would like to put forward an alternative approach to add to the mix of school improvement practices. Collaboration and coteaching by the specialist staff of the school with the classroom teacher just might push not only the practices of adults in the school, but unleash a participatory culture among students as well.

We propose two main strategies that will not only advance school wide improvement but also foster a participatory school culture that aims for excellence: the first is the transformation of the school library into a learning commons, and the second is the strategy of coteaching between school specialists and classroom teachers. Our proposal hinges on the belief that teaching and learning are social processes where everyone participates as a teacher and as a learner. While our focus will be upon the benefits of classroom teachers coteaching with teacher librarians, it stands to reason that coteaching between other specialists and teachers would produce similar results.

First, let's define what we mean by "coteaching." Coteaching is the art of two or more mentor adults who plan, teach, and assess a learning experience together. Using this definition, Loertscher2 conducted and recently published a study comparing isolated teaching with coteaching. Briefly, here is what the study concluded.

Teacher librarians in sixteen schools--grades K-12--who cotaught regularly with classroom teachers were asked to participate. In these schools, teachers who did not collaborate with teacher librarians were asked a few short questions: Thinking of a recent unit of instruction you taught alone in the classroom, how many students participated and how many of those students met or exceeded your highest expectations? The answers hovered around 50% with secondary teachers averaging a bit higher and elementary teachers being the most critical of their success.

In these same schools, we asked the same questions of classroom teachers who cotaught a recent unit alongside the teacher librarian. Flow many students met or exceeded the expectations of both adults? The answers ranged from 70-100%! Participants were asked to make their judgments based on normal assessment practices they already used rather than upon some standardized test imposed by the researcher. The underlying purpose was to suggest that such a strategy and result could be tested in any school using normal assessments. The concluding question was: "Why can two adults working in tandem from the beginning of the learning experience to the end produce such spectacular results?"

The following diagram illustrates the dynamic partnership of a teacher librarian and a classroom teacher as gleaned from the comments section of the research study. Both partners indicated that they share strengths in

teaching and learning pedagogy, and each bring specific value and expertise to the coteaching experience.

Most schools have specialists on their staff who have, as their mission, the job of teaching their specialty to the entire school. Teacher librarians, technology integration specialists, art and music teachers, counselors, reading specialists, and instructional coaches--to name a few--also might be on staff. What might the results be if these specialists spent at least half their time each day coteaching rather than in isolated practice? Could they create a greater impact on teaching and learning in the school as a group, rather than going it alone? We cannot definitively answer these broad questions, but suspect that what we found with teacher librarians acting as coteachers would not be that different than with any other specialist in the school.3 Thus the Baber survey and our coteaching suggestions are recommended to the reader as one more arrow in a quiver of best practices.

We now turn to a number of perspectives that encourage coteaching to become a natural part of the repertoire of classroom teachers everywhere. These approaches have evolved in U.S. and Canadian schools since the publication of our first work in 2008.4

REINVENTION OF LIBRARY SPACE TO A PARTICIPATORY LEARNING COMMONS CULTURE

This responsive learning environment becomes a third coteacher in a super learning experience.5 The idea of "library" is transformed from a physical space of storage and retrieval functions to a flexible learning space for individuals, small groups, and large groups working to not only consume knowledge but to create knowledge. Books and computers are still there, but they don't get in the way. The space is governed not by an imposed layout but by the immediate needs of students and teachers

It soon becomes the "go to" place for participatory learning. Teachers and teacher librarians collaborate to design both curriculum-based units and projects as well as discovery learning experiences for students who are pursuing their own interests. A group of students entering the learning commons might scatter to do individual work or conference in small groups; others gather to create various multimedia products, and still others are using the makerspace to work on something they are building or inventing. Yes, there is still the individual who reads or does homework in an environment where both quiet and purposeful noise is being accommodated.6

Up on top of this busy and flexible space sits a virtual learning commons that has replaced the traditional one-way information library website. In the cloud, students are participating, building contributing, showcasing, and collaborating alongside their teachers and fellow students.7 This virtual environment is available to everyone 24/7--on any device and from any location. Virtual "rooms" include literacy activities, knowledge building centers, discovery learning rooms, information centers, school culture, and experiential professional development areas.8

Thus, multiple environments of the learning commons beg for collaborative learning-both face to face and virtually-not just in a single school but combining students in various classes, across schools and around the

world. Best of all, such transformations can evolve with minimal to moderate investments that might lead to substantial architectural redesign or new construction.

BUILDING A RESPONSIVE AND ROBUST TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

When the learning commons is equipped with robust wireless, excellent software and tools such as Google Apps for Education, and facilities for multimedia production and a makerspace, the possibilities for exciting learning experiences grow exponentially. As an extension of the classroom, teachers bring their students not only to use the technologies here but to gain the expertise of other specialists who are officed there. Students immediately adopt the space as their own, recognizing the potential available to them. Teachers interested in project based learning seize the opportunities to unleash their students in real world creative experiences and soon discover the benefits of taking on a mentoring role. With fewer worries about technology failing here in the learning commons, more experimentation can take place at the top of the SAMR model, as presented by Reuben Puentadora, where learning is stimulated by technology in ways not possible without it.9

ADOPTION OF HIGHER LEVEL INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNS THAT MAKE COTEACHING "A NATURAL"

At the heart of the coteaching experience are learning units designed to drive participatory learning. For many years, the authors have worked to eliminate what we called "bird units." These are library assignments in which students select or are given a topic or issue, go the library and complete worksheets or other required assignments, develop some kind of product, and do a class presentation, which then receives a grade.

In a cotaught learning experience, much more sophisticated learning designs, plus available technologies, can integrate both how-to-learn skills with deep understanding of topical knowledge, which results in a superb learning experience. In such units, an essential broad umbrella question is developed by the adult mentors followed by the students developing their own subtopic questions as either individuals or in groups. Then, using inquiry skills and collaborative technologies, the students pursue their own questions and build understanding of their "piece of the pie." Instead of ending such a unit with presentations, the adult mentors develop an activity that asks students to combine the knowledge gained in their puzzle piece with others to develop a deeper understanding of the original umbrella question. The object is to develop collaborative intelligence of the whole rather than just an understanding of one part of the original question. This process is often boosted by a powerful collaborative technology. Finally, a metacognitive Big Think activity looks back at what individuals and groups learned, how they learned it, and how they can become better at the next learning experience.

To facilitate these more sophisticated designs, the authors built 18 Think Models10 and the metacognitive Big Think strategies to mark progress in cotaught units. Many experts such as Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe,11 provide enduring models for higher level teaching and learning. More instructional designs that can be used collaboratively are collected in this posting: "TeachThought Library: 10 Learning Models 8t Frameworks" at http://tinyurl.com/qhglcv6

Traditional assessments usually concentrate on what individuals know and can do. We recommend three aspects of learning be assessed, as illustrated in the following poster:

As pictured, assessments will range from individual work to cooperative success by groups, and finally the deep collaborative intelligence that has developed. Whatever assessments are given, all the adult partners should help design what will be measured.

Example 12 Beginning with an umbrella question--"What's happening in the world of endangered species?"--students examine case studies such as interventions to save bald eagles, explore ongoing efforts to protect pandas, and uncover problems like the impact of climate change on monarch butterflies. They follow this by developing their own inquiry questions that they want to pursue. After initial investigations, the students work cooperatively in groups to organize their findings. Now groups are jigsawed with a higher level task to examine the hows and whys of successes and failures and predict what they think is next or take some action. Along the way, the students have received mentoring from teacher librarians interested in wide reading and inquiry skills, counselors interested in STEM careers, reading teachers helping with complex texts, science experts contacted through various technologies, and instructional coaches who have rolled up their sleeves to coteach rather than just observe and give advice.

We recommend that project units such as this example are developed in a virtual collaborative space we call a KBC (Knowledge Building Center)13. Here teachers can coplan, teach, and assess anywhere anytime, thus eliminating the number one inhibitor of coteaching success. No longer is 'time' a problem. The same benefits apply to students who only need good internet access to connect to their project work. The KBC inspires a giant conversation about learning for students and teachers who participate in the journey as a true community of learners.

INFUSION OF DISCOVERY, CREATIVITY, MAKING QUESTIONING AND OTHER LEARNING STRATEGIES THAT ENGAGE LEARNERS

Another central focus is to respond to the growing chorus of creativity, invention and making14 by transforming coteachers into commenters. Using the Google 80/20 rule as a guide, students encounter the concepts of creation illustrated in the uTEC Maker Model illustrated in this poster.15

The learning commons becomes the center of the genius hour, self-directed learning projects, and inventions in the makerspace leading to entrepreneurship. Investigation, tinkering, building, experimenting, and performance counter the heavy weight of boredom experienced by many children and teens.

ADDRESSING ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES THAT ENCOURAGE A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE ACROSS THE SCHOOL AND ACROSS SCHOOLS

The question for administrators often is a choice between strategies. Is there room for experimentation and creativity? Two TED talks that discuss organizational approaches are well worth the time:

Linda Hill looks at structures across many organizations at: http://tinyurl.com/ne2e2jn

Margaret Heffernan, management consultant, shares ways collaboration can work well in various organizations at: http://tinyurl.com/p999er4

Participatory perpetual beta approach to school improvement. Without disturbing what structures are already in place in a school, the learning commons can provide a place where experimentation happens, successes and failures noted, and judgments are made about strategies, technology, software, and a host of other "good ideas." Here is where coteaching could be tried on an experimental basis, results noted, and decisions made about whether the approach could go viral across the school. If administrators participate in the Big Think activities of cotaught units-with the adult mentors and the students together in a metacognitive analysis of what went right and what went wrong and how to improve the next time-valuable information could be gleaned and analyzed, and plans for the future could be made. It would seem that a perpetual beta approach to school improvement might succeed in a rapidly changing world of technology, learner characteristics, and school demographics.

Admittedly, the skills of the teacher librarian need to change in order to facilitate the transformation to a learning commons. No matter the credentials in the state or province, astute teacher librarians will need expertise in curriculum and technology alongside library and information science. Administrators are urged to find such professionals and assist with the professional development needs of those who want to embrace a changing role.

Leadership for coteaching and learning commons. Transformation to a learning commons with coteaching as a driver of school improvement requires the leadership and expertise of a qualified teacher librarian trained in curriculum and technology for learning, alongside library and information science, to be most successful. Administrators are urged to assist with the professional development needs of teacher librarians who want to embrace this challenging role.

Inclusion of a variety of specialists on the learning commons staff. To reiterate, any specialist with a whole-school responsibility becomes a part of the cadre alongside the teacher librarian and offices either physically or virtually in the learning commons. They form a team eager, willing, and able to coteach with classroom teachers and they learn how to coteach effectively by tracking their work individually and as a group--and demonstrating their impact on teaching and learning across the school. If each specialist's goal is to spend half of his or her time coteaching, the impact can be substantial, as a healthy mix of collaboration and mentoring emerge. Their contribution to R&D experimentation can change school culture from a tight sense of delivery and performance to a focus on student choice, creativity, and excellence in a healthy effort to reach every learner.

Adjust schedules to support coteaching. In elementary schools, students are often scheduled through the various specialists. Take a look at this free participatory webinar for ideas not only for the teacher librarian but adapted for other specialists as well: https://www.youtube.com

CONCLUSION

The learning commons serves a unique purpose in the school as a bridge between educational philosophy and practice, curriculum goals and demands, and the real world. As such, it is a natural environment to incubate and nurture coteaching. The mantra of the learning commons is to drive excellence in teaching and learning through high level instructional design, as well as sparking experimentation, innovation, creativity, discovery, and play. The physical and virtual learning commons spaces are deliberately designed for flexibility,

always responsive to the needs of users. Here rich digital and print resources and technologies support all learners and all curriculum needs. No other space in the school can provide the same wealth of opportunities for differentiation. The teacher librarian has expertise in processes and skills needed for students to navigate successfully in our networked world and to become active participants in their learning communities. In combination, the ingredients and collaborative chemistry of the learning commons fuel successful coteaching experiences for both adults and students.

Many schools are already reinventing their school library facilities and programs as a Learning Commons to provide a whole school approach to learning for the future. We invite our readers to consider the undeniable benefits and proven results' gained for student achievement and teacher efficacy when coteaching with teacher librarians. Add coteaching with other specialists and learning commons approaches to drive participatory teaching and learning cultures. The entire school becomes a learning force when everyone works, plays, and learns together. When a teacher adds a teacher librarian as a co-teacher to a learning experience, what is the likely added value with the desired results being:

1. = 3

As a classroom teacher, what would the added value be if I chose an instructional specialist? A tech integration specialist? A gifted and talented teacher? A reading specialist? Or, any other kind of specialist available to me?

Shared Teaching and Learning Pedagogy:

*Instructional design

*Assessment for, of, and, as learning

*Learning skills

Teacher Librarian Expertise:

*Information systems

*Inquiry processes

*Wide reading

*Transliteracy

*Technology boosts

*Collaborative leadership

Classroom Teacher Expertise:

*Content knowledge

*Literacy instruction

*Knowledge of student abilities

The Successful Learner

Maker Model

(ENDNOTES)

1 This paper was peer reviewed for inclusion in the Treasure Mt. Research Retreat papers for 2015.

- 2 **Loertscher**, David V. "Collaboration and Coteaching: A New Measure of Impact," Teacher Librarian, vol. 42, no. 2, December, 2014, p. 8-18.
- 3 Here is one example from special education: http://tinyurl.com/o496hw5
- 4 **Loertscher**, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. The New Learning Commons Where Learners Win! Hi Willow Research & publishing, 2008. The 2nd edition of this book was published in 2011. Two other manuals have been recently published by **Loertscher** and Koechlin: The Elementary School Learning Commons: A Manual: and, The Secondary School Learning Commons: A Manual. Learning Commons Press, 2015.
- 5 Consult several titles on this topic: Pigozzi, O'Donnell, et. al. The Third Teacher, Abrams, 2010; Doorley, Scott, and Scott Witthoft. Make Space: How to Set the Stage for Creative Collaboration. Wiley, 2012; Robinson, Sir Ken. Creative Schools. Viking, 2015; Zhao, Yong. World Class Learners. Corwin Press, 2012.
- 6 Those interested in learning more about the physical learning commons can take a free collaborative QuickMOOC at: http://quickmooc.com
- 7 For those interested in creating a virtual learning commons, free Google templates include a general VLC template at: http://tinyurl.com/pfwco6f; an elementary school VLC template at: http://tinyurl.com/ojpkhny; a middle school VLC template at: http://tinyurl.com/qc7zelv; and a high school template at: http://tinyurl.com/p64hg5o
- 8 **Loertscher**, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. The Virtual Learning Commons, Learning Commons Press, 2012.
- 9 Search Google Images for the SAMR model representations by the author himself and others who have been experimenting with it. You can also view an explanation of the model by its creator at: http://tinyurl.com/ollvd3g. Another useful resource is the annual Horizon Report for K-12. The 2015 report is at: http://tinyurl.com/neqzvxe
- 10 **Loertscher**, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. Beyond Bird Units. Hi Willow Research & Publishing, 2011. Also: **Loertscher**, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. The Big Think. Hi Willow

Research & Publishing, 2009.

- 11 Familiar titles by Wiggins and McTighe include Understanding by Design, Essential Questions, The Understanding by Design Guidebook, and Solving 25 Problems in Unit Design.
- 12 Many other examples of cotaught units are included in **Loertscher**, David V. and Kathryn Lewis: Implementing the Common Core State Standards: The Role of the School Librarian. Achieve and AASL, Nov., 2013. This white paper can be downloaded at: http://tinyurl.com/mp63aek The experiences of many teacher librarians with coteaching and published in the journal Teacher Librarian are available as follows: **Loertscher**, David V. and Carol Koechlin, eds. Coteaching and Collaboration: How and Why Two Heads Are Better Than One. Teacher Librarian Press, 2015.
- 13 http://tinyurl.com/qazy8gz
- 14 Robinson, Sir Ken. Creative Schools. Viking, 2015; and Martinez, Sylvia Libow. Invent to Learn: Making, Tinkering and Engineering in the Classroom. Constructing Modem Knowledge Press, 2013.
- 15 Readers interested in the posters included in this article can see and print them out free of charge at: http://tinyurl.com/q73cclg
- 16 http://tinyurl.com/on4e4k7

~~~~~~~~

By DAVID V. **LOERTSCHER** and CAROL KOECHLIN

Source: Teacher Librarian, Dec2015, Vol. 43 Issue 2, p12, 5p

Item: 111875237
~~~~~~~~