

C³ (The Cube): Communication, Collaboration and Creativity in a Culturally Relevant Learning Commons

IMLS: Accelerating Promising Practices for Small Libraries

Narrative

Project Justification

What need, problem, challenge, or opportunity will your project address, and how was it identified?

The Wahluke High School library was designed to be in the center of the school. Only 15 years old, the front doors face the entrance to the school, and the north wall looks onto an enclosed outdoor courtyard that floods the room with natural light. However, for the past several years the doors to the library have remained locked, the lights off and the room used only for meetings, lunchtime detention or testing. Over time, the library has slowly become irrelevant. It is neither a modern information space nor a modern learning space. There are several sets of desktop computers and rows of desks and chairs but few books, no conversational seating or collaborative areas. The tragedy of the unused school library is not only the wasted space and resources, but the fact that students in this rural, low income area do not have regular access to a public library either.

The agricultural town of Mattawa is situated sixty miles in any direction from the nearest large town, bookstore, college or fully operational public library. The regional branch library is only open during weekdays, with only two nights past 4 o'clock. Besides the local sandwich shop, it is the only place in the town with free wifi after the school closes at 3:30. About 50% of the 2000 students live in the tiny town of Mattawa, which is the third most densely populated town in the state of Washington with nearly 6000 people living in one square mile. Wahluke High School serves about 600 students; 95% are Hispanic with 33% English Language Learners and 88% Low Income. Students struggle academically with only 17% meeting math and 38% meeting reading standards. Only 50% of 9th graders are on track to graduation. Of the 37 teachers 78% are white and the average years teaching experience is only 8.

This year, the new high school administration, along with a new district teacher librarian began investigating ways to reinvent the high school library space to energize instructional practices and mitigate some of the challenges of the learning environment. Opportunities for change were identified first through results of a third party survey that is conducted annually. Results found pronounced needs at the high school level that would be addressed by initiating culturally responsive teaching practices in a district that is 95% Hispanic. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) not only heightens cultural awareness, but is based on the idea that culturally and linguistically diverse students are often denied learning opportunities that use their assets and challenge them to become independent learners. On the annual survey, 50% of high school students reported a significant lack of student engagement in the classroom indicating that most teachers lecture only and there is little group work. On three separate questions almost 70% of teachers at the high school showed marked concern that they need more instructional support to meet the needs of a diverse student community. Regarding curriculum,

72% of students and 74% of teachers at the high school acknowledged a lack of diversity or cultural connections to the local community in instructional content.

A follow up survey and interviews were conducted with teachers and students. Responses reflect a limited view of the library space as teachers want students to check out books, get remedial tutoring or one on one help with assignments. Students think of the library only as a place to study in quiet, print homework assignments, “hang out” and charge their phones. Particularly for the culturally and linguistically diverse students at Wahluke High School, a move towards culturally responsive teaching that incorporates interactive student led inquiry, technology and communications resources, and collaborative practices using the library as a “learning commons”, could be pivotal to improving the learning culture in this district.

What best practice will inform your approach?

Our approach for reimagining the Wahluke High School library space is built upon research articulated in Zaretta Hammond’s book Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain.

In a culturally responsive environment, students of color can overcome educational inequities when they are challenged to use their innate abilities and activate brain functions that actually grow their capacity to think critically and creatively rather than relying on constant support. Often the learning strengths of these students are highlighted by oral traditions, building classroom structures around communal talk and tasks, attending to student voice, giving them more autonomy, and connecting content to their own community and culture. A strong emphasis on inquiry-based learning will provide an instructional framework for integrating these processes into learning across content areas.

The “Cube” library learning commons can support teachers in providing culturally responsive instruction by extending their classroom environment through additional instructional support, provision of a collaborative physical environment and a variety of resources for student led learning projects. Students will have a 21st century literacy space reframed to highlight their culture, communication skills, collaborative abilities and creative interests.

Our budget conscious design expectations are founded on guiding principles of library design in educational contexts. As stated in Nair’s Blueprint for Tomorrow: Redesigning Schools for Student-centered Learning, “...learning is a reciprocal process between the learner, the facilitator, the pedagogical practices, the social climate, and the physical environment” (Nair 2019). We recognize that learning spaces must facilitate pedagogical practices that are important to instructional design. The learning commons will extend classroom spaces, serve as a model classroom, invite student led projects and act as a visual reminder of important pedagogical shifts in the building. Inspired by the theory behind the Library initiative by the Robin Hood Foundation that placed library redesign at the center of school strategic plans in New York City, we believe offering the “Cube” learning commons as a resource for teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching practices will support this focus.

How would you qualify your library as small and/or rural?

There are no current staffing, services or usage statistics for the library. There are approximately 3000 books or about 5 books per student; 1200 fiction, 1300 non-fiction and 500 reference books dating as far back as the 1960's. Over 60% of the collection should be weeded. Wahluke High School has about 600 students, a criteria for eligibility for the Small, Rural School Achievement federal funding program. It is listed on the Fiscal Year 2019 Rural Educational Achievement Program spreadsheet as both Rural and Low Income (U.S. Dept of Ed 2019).

Who will benefit from your project? How have you engaged them in your planning?

Students, teachers, and community liaisons will benefit from the “Cube” Culturally Responsive Library Learning Commons at Wahluke High School. Six separate meetings with district administration and the Librarian TOSA (teacher on special assignment) were made to plan the scope of the project and the inclusion of stakeholders. A teacher committee within the high school, as well as focus groups and individual interviews with teachers, students and organization specialists helped formulate the plan. We believe in the importance of authentic voices in the implementation of the project, so all stakeholders will be regularly invited to give feedback that will be considered in each step of the project.

The C³ “Cube” project will address the agency goal of Promoting Lifelong Learning by highlighting 21st century skills and focusing on inquiry-based learning to support culturally responsive teaching practices in a diverse community of learners.

Project Work Plan

What specific activities will you carry out?

There are four integrated concepts from that will carry this project forward: **1) Participatory Assessment:** Three times a year during the two year grant, interviews will be conducted with teachers and students to collect their input on how resources in the “Cube” can support learning. While not research, this information will be coded and aggregated to guide development of the space and instructional design work during the subsequent months. **2) Physical Space:** A diverse group of students will work with the district’s in-house graphic designer and art teacher to choose colors, and produce artwork for the space. Purchase of new furnishings will facilitate different types of learning groups – collaborative desks with shared monitor, green screen video production, standing mobile laptop desks, conversation seating with charging stations, flexible seating desk pods, makerspace table, Skype/virtual reality/presentation and screen space, and an individual study “bar”. Learning resources housed in the “Cube” will be contributed by existing funding streams and will be reassessed annually for additional purchases at the beginning and end of fiscal cycles. These currently include white boards and tables, cameras, sound equipment, lighting, microphones, monitors, laptops, web cams, individual and group virtual reality resources, tablets and low tech makerspace items. **3) Instructional Support:** Although the project is aware of initiative fatigue among staff members, individual instructional support by librarians will be planned as an integral part of school and district culturally responsive professional development in all content areas. Teachers will be expected to integrate at least 2 lessons a year using the “Cube”. **4) Cultural Connections:** To elevate student voice and accountability, and to raise awareness of cultural connections outside the learning ecosystem, there will be on-going communication through a Learning Commons social media presence and district web page in English and

Spanish, sharing of student artifacts beyond the classroom, collaboration with community groups and inclusion of family and community in “Cube” outcomes. These will include a Family Fun collaboration event, StoryCorps collection and a Noche de Cuentos scheduled in the space and adjoining outdoor courtyard. The project will encourage additional events of this type in year two (although they are unscheduled).

Who will plan, implement and manage our project? Will partners be engaged and, if so, for what purpose?

Management of the project will be under the direction of the district’s Teacher Librarian. Professional development on inquiry-based learning and technology training will be facilitated by the District Teacher Librarian. Day to day operation of the learning commons, instructional design support, scheduling, co-planning, and participatory assessment will be under the direction of a hired Librarian who will have her office in the “Cube”. Partners will support the space with staffing, and technology resources. They will help extend school day access to the learning commons. The plan is to extend supervised use of the space before school, during lunch and after school sometimes until 8pm. Partners already on campus include University of Washington GEAR UP, Freshman Success, Wahluke Community Coalition, State Migrant Office.

What time, financial, personnel and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?

Essential to the project is regular professional development in culturally responsive teaching practices. This task is already being undertaken at the district administrative level. Many of the needed resources for this project are already in place. Almost all activities will be part of full time duties by employees which include District Librarian, Graphic Design/Social Media person, Technology Specialist, Bilingual Director, Facilities Maintenance, Positive Behavioral Support Specialist, Building Principal, Career and Technical Education Director, Teachers, Counselors, Graduation Specialist, and to be hired, an additional Librarian/Instructional Designer. Only furniture will be purchased. All other technology and consumables will come from the school and organization specialists who have already purchased equipment (see below). Time for training and professional development is built into the school’s regular schedules on monthly ½ days, once a week late starts, and summer staff days. The project has budgeted for some staff salaries for extra time after school, interviews during teacher prep hours and evening events.

“Beyond simply looking at technology as a tool to do traditional education better, you need to see technology ... as a key change agent to transform education from a teacher centered model to a student centered model” (Nair 2019).

Technology is already in use in pockets of instructional practice throughout the high school. However, much of this technology use is attached to specific funding streams and is not available to everyone. Nevertheless, it is not being used as widely as it could be, and our project will invite programs hosting this technology to the learning commons space where a librarian instructional specialist will support its use. Bilingual Services, Career and Technical Education and GEAR UP College Preparation leaders have already agreed to support the learning commons by bringing their resources together to be used by all students.

What are risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?

"Overt support for the library activities by the school administration has been isolated as a critical element in the success of the resource. Principals must be willing to incorporate the library into a strategic plan to strengthen the school's instructional approach, committing funding and staff time to develop the library as a framework for impacting student performance. Teachers within the school must be willing to partner with each other to make full use of the resource. This is a radical top down approach, but effects the greatest leverage of the initial investment" (Siddiqi 2010).

District and school administration have already committed to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) as part of their strategic plan. Our approach to the C³ "Cube" Culturally Relevant Learning Commons is less democratic and more guided by top down project management. This is largely because staff are unfamiliar with culturally responsive teaching methods, and because they may feel threatened by challenges to their personal biases and teaching practices. It will be important to mitigate adverse reactions to the project design by focusing on the assets teachers bring to the culturally responsive framework. An asset-based approach which elevates best practices already in use will guide study of CRT and make teachers the experts at mentoring their peers through use of the "Cube" for hosting regular professional learning communities.

Another risk is that the learning commons will deteriorate to a space to hang out or to send students who need supervision. It will be imperative that administration commits to keeping the space for learning activities, and does not open the space for other purposes that do not align with the goals of the grant. Being transparent about policies regarding the "Cube" will establish these standards from the very beginning of the grant.

Project Outcomes

What are the intended results an outputs of your project? How do they address the need articulated in your Project Justification?

Because 95% of high school students are considered culturally and linguistically diverse, we understand that research based instructional practices should be implemented by all teachers in order to reduce educational inequities and engage all students in rigorous learning. Outputs of the "Cube" project will address the four elements of Zaretta Hammond's "Ready for Rigor" Framework that support culturally responsive teaching practices. These outputs will support the transformation of learning cultures and will provide staff and students the opportunity to engage with their peers in using the learning commons. The following "Ready for Rigor" outputs are built into the project: **Awareness:** Transformation of the learning space that reflects students' cultural heritage. Attendance at events that invite families and communities to the learning commons. **Teacher Student Relationships:** Increased student "ownership" of learning, and sense of self efficacy as communicated in project interviews and student artifacts shared on the district's Learning Commons web page. **Information Processing:** Two lessons a year per class that utilize teacher training in Inquiry Based Learning supported by use of oral traditions, culturally relevant contexts and authentic engagement evidenced by "Cube"

scheduling journals. **Community of Learners:** Increased student voice in learning environment, as well as use of “communal” talk and tasks in class as reported on the annual assessment.

How do you define success for your project?

Successful implementation of this project will be reflected in greater use of culturally responsive teaching practices by all stakeholders. Administration will make this focus an integral part of the school’s strategic planning and will support the viability of the “Cube” as a learning commons; teachers will engage in regular professional learning communities that address these practices and will learn to utilize the resources in the “Cube” to support student learning; students will become more independent learners by using the “Cube” to develop communication, collaboration and creative 21st century skills.

What is your plan for collecting and reporting data on your performance goals and outcomes?

In order to meet performance goals and outcomes, both quantitative and qualitative methods will be collected and reported by the Librarian Coordinator. **Quantitative:** Analysis of annual educational effectiveness survey for both teacher and student responses. “Cube” scheduling logs to track use of the space by each class. Self-reported teacher implementation of 2 lessons per year using support from the “Cube”. **Qualitative:** Reports from quarterly interviews transcribed, coded and aggregated for feedback on implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices. Analysis of student artifacts posted to the Learning Commons web page.

How will you sustain the benefits of your project beyond the funding period?

In order for the project to be sustainable beyond the funding period, the fidelity of the learning commons space must be supported both in theory and in practice. Sustaining the use of the “Cube” as a learning commons will be ensured by including its use in the school’s strategic plan, by professional learning communities and in lesson planning. Making the “Cube” an integral part of the school’s learning culture will mean continuing peer professional development with new teachers and administrators. As teachers and students will come to depend upon the resources in the learning commons, it will be important that the resources there are not redirected for other uses. Equipment, furnishings and supplies should remain in this space and people will come to the “Cube” to use them. The funds from the grant will be used primarily for furnishings that will remain in the space, but funding partners in the building as well as the regular budget will support regular maintenance of the “Cube”. The most important asset of the “Cube” is the people who use it: administrators, teachers, students and commitment to continual supervision by a librarian and key staff under the direction of a full time teacher librarian will maintain the viability of the project beyond the funding period.

PROJECT WORK PLAN

KEY	
Participatory Assessment	
Physical Space	
Instructional Support	
Community Connections	

ACTIVITIES YEAR 1	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG
Interviews: Needs assessment												
Building resource consolidation												
Graphic design and install with students												
Order and install new furniture												
Class to commons pilots (in classrooms)												
Interviews: Class to commons connections												
Learning Commons open												
Librarian/Teacher instructional support												
Interviews: Class to commons reflections												
Learning Commons web page developed												
Learning Commons web page active												
Student artifacts posted												

ACTIVITIES YEAR 2	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG
Interviews: Collaboration possibilities												
Community connections: Collaboration Lab												
Resource assessment/Purchases												
Learning Commons open												
Librarian/Teacher instructional support												
Learning Commons web page active												
Student artifacts posted												
Community connections: StoryCorps												
Interviews: Class to commons connections												
Community connections: Noche de Cuentos												
Interviews: Class to commons reflections												