Elementary school libraries are not often thought of as suitable spaces for learning commons because most elementary school libraries operate on a fixed schedule, allowing only one class at a time to use the space. Elementary school libraries are too often the drop-off location for a specific class during the classroom teacher’s planning period. For as long as I have been an elementary school librarian, I’ve been bound and determined to change that paradigm. It never felt right. It never felt dynamic.

I spent my first years trying to convince my administration to adopt a flexible schedule. I thought I could get decision makers to bite if we started small. I advocated for a pilot program in which only one grade level out of six (in a K–5 building) would operate on a flex schedule. In the end, the administration would not budge. I knew then that I had to take a different approach—something I could control myself.

I thought that if I could transform the look and feel of the library, the changes would encourage teachers and students to start thinking of the library differently—and using it differently.
Transforming the Physical Space

I made an all-out effort to transform the library into a learning commons, starting with the physical space. I thought that if I could transform the look and feel of the library, the changes would encourage teachers and students to start thinking of the library differently—and using it differently. Step one was to alter the physical space to accommodate multiple uses. The original library had a quasi-classroom area containing six round tables (that could comfortably seat only four young students), a screen, and one computer that connected to a ceiling-mounted projector. Windows separated that area from an adjoining computer lab. The school library had no wireless access and was completely void of comfortable seating for leisure reading.

The small circular tables in the classroom area were not conducive to learning with mobile devices. Four average-sized fifth-graders could barely fit around the tables, and the addition of laptops or iPads made the area feel even more cramped. The shape of the tables prevented them from being pushed together to create a greater workspace.

At the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year, my school district provided each of its libraries with an iPad cart, stocked with thirty iPads. (In the previous school year, the cart contained only twenty iPads.) The addition of ten more iPads meant that I now had access to a full class set. More good news: That autumn the district’s director of technology notified me that the budget contained a line item for technology furniture and said I could use some of the funds for our library. Having done research on library design during my post-graduate program, I immediately began looking for mobile furniture to replace the antiquated circular tables. I wanted to create a space where the primary function could be changed at a moment’s notice, a space that could accommodate many needs and purposes.

To this end, I found innovative tables in hourglass and reverse hourglass shapes. Not only are the tables much larger than their predecessors, they also can be wheeled together to create seating for large-group sessions or workshops or be pulled apart to allow for collaboration among small groups of students.

The hourglass and reverse hourglass shapes immediately appealed to my students. The tables resemble giant puzzle pieces that can be configured in myriad ways. They also look slick and modern, design elements that elementary students are not usually afforded.

At roughly the same time, through a district-wide grant, I received a SMART Board for the library. The addition of the interactive whiteboard in the library classroom made the space instantly more desirable to teachers because all classrooms had already been equipped with SMART Boards, and lessons could be developed using SMART Notebook software. The addition of the new equipment meant that teachers could hold their classes in the library classroom, using existing lesson plans, while I taught my classes in the adjoining computer lab (also equipped with an interactive whiteboard) or vice versa.

Transforming Learning

With all three elements in place—the full iPad cart, the innovative movable tables, and the SMART Board—the library classroom had now become a flexible workspace. Students could use iPads 1:1 or 1:4 or spread throughout the library when producing individualized content, such as voice recordings. As a result, learners have more options for research and presenting their findings and more control over their own learning process.
Here is one instance of how this process works in practice: I had third-grade students conduct a soup-to-nuts iPad project incorporating Common Core State Standards benchmarks. Their task was to select an endangered animal from the deplorably long and growing list of such species, perform research about that animal, and create a multimedia presentation to educate the public about ways to protect that animal.

Changing the physical space has, in fact, altered student and staff perceptions of the school library.
While the school library program still does not operate on a flexible schedule (yet), use of mobile furniture and technology in the library has approximated a flexible environment, despite the fixed schedule.

To select and find information about their animals, students used Endangered Animals, an iPad app. Some students also used an app called WWF Together to gather information (though not all endangered animals are featured on WWF Together). Next, using a Google image search, students began to collect illustrations of all aspects they had researched about the animal. Students saved images to the camera roll on their iPads and noted on their graphic organizers where they found the images. Finally, to share their findings, learners used Tapiqueo to create a multimedia presentation. This app presents students’ learning in a grid format. Students are able to add images, text, and narration to each cell they create. The finished product is an HTML file. Edmodo hosted the HTML files, and I provided parents with a public link so they could access and download their children’s work. The project was so successful that many parents downloaded the Tapiqueo app for their children to use at home.

These third-graders were the youngest students in the district to perform such a feat, and the newly acquired library furniture and technology made it possible. During the research phase, students had plenty of space on the new tabletops to use the iPads 1:1 and to take notes on a graphic organizer. At times we combined an hourglass and reverse hourglass table to increase the workspace, allowing struggling students to be closer to those who
Copyright of Knowledge Quest is the property of American Library Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.