

# FEATURE





# iCOMMONS

A FUTURE-FOCUSED INTERNATIONAL  
SCHOOL IN MUMBAI, INDIA

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The volume of information we have available at our fingertips has grown exponentially in the last several decades. Social, professional, and learning networks have altered the way humans deal with the volume of information that bombards them daily. Traditionally, the library has served as a center of information in our schools. Because the availability and access to information has changed, many institutions, in both business and education, have chosen to rethink the role of the library and its place in our schools, our communities, and in our world.

### Meeting the Challenge

At the American School of Bombay (ASB), we understand that libraries are essential to student learning. Our school library's mission is to inspire and support our users towards creative and intellectual achievement while responsibly and ethically learning the value of information, its acquisition, and its use. Committed to student learning, we chose to reinvent our library to best reflect the spirit and the mission of our school. In the process, we discovered a way to both make school libraries relevant in today's technology-driven world and deliver the highest level of teaching and support the highest level of learning for our students.

The iCommons (Information Commons) at ASB was created to replace the traditional concept of a school library. Our existing traditional library was transformed by being decentralized and divided into many interactive learning spaces. The iCommons model follows the elements of the International Literacy Association's Standard 5, which recommends developing a suitable milieu to enhance student reading and writing (2010). Meeting this standard requires a respectful attitude and designing a physical space that would optimize students'

learning. To do that teachers must teach reading and writing using traditional print, digital, and online resources in their reading and writing instruction. Students must, therefore, have easy access to books, online resources, and instructional materials for both small-group and whole-class engagements (ILA 2010). Knowing the importance of this easy access, we decided to take the courageous step of decentralizing our entire library collection.

### Elementary School Grade-Level iCommons Spaces

Now, instead of a centralized library space, each elementary school grade has its own unique iCommons housing a variety of resources: e-books, audiobooks, printed books, and resources supporting opportunities to create digital products. This collaborative space is right outside the grade's classrooms and engages students in their learning journey (see figure 1).

In the past, checking out books was the responsibility of a librarian. Now, in establishing an environment of

trust and independence, this responsibility was given to the students. Self-checkout stations throughout the schools help the children quickly and easily check out the books on their own. In addition to demonstrating trust, this approach to check out also frees up the school librarians to play the bigger role of information curator and coach. The 100 percent self-checkout policy happens from grade 1 through 12; only the kindergarten students need some adult support to do the checkouts. A huge variety of books across genres and reading levels are now being used much more in the decentralized iCommons than were ever used in the centralized library. As Heeru Bhojwani, the information curator and coach at the American School of Bombay put it, "After we decentralized the libraries into iCommons, we found that the number of book checkouts shot straight up! Today, the students in our school are checking out books almost four to five times more than what they used to do earlier under the centralized library system."



Figure 1. An iCommons area near elementary school classrooms.

## Secondary School iCommons

In the secondary school, the ASB iCommons is an educational sharing space for collaboration, content creation, readings, and study. It replaces the concept of a traditional library by expanding its uses in form and function. The physical space is flexible and is blended with the virtual world, adapting to meet the needs of individuals and group study (see figure 2). Books students could read digitally were removed from the iCommons collection and redistributed into the spaces within the school in a way that would enhance student learning. Therefore, books on different languages were moved to the Modern Languages space; young adult fiction was placed in the Language Arts classrooms; science and social studies books were also shifted to their respective areas (see figure 2).

The original name of the iCommons in the secondary school was the Da Vinci Studio. It was a place to come, think, share ideas, and create. Initially, it was envisioned as a space for a “renaissance” within the school. Our iCommons emerged from this renaissance. It houses the makerspace, an idea that came out of school libraries in the U.S. and best highlights the evolving nature of libraries. The makerspace is equipped with materials that provide an opportunity for students, faculty, and other members of the school community to explore and tinker (see figure 3). Making and tinkering matters because this hands-on learning is a proven approach that equips minds with the tools to create something new. It also helps students make decisions in open and connected learning environments. Making and tinkering are being driven by the quest for authenticity as well as global social and economic trends. The iCommons is now a place for our community



Figure 2. Flexible space serving multiple purposes.

to gather; it also provides creative and informative resources that would not be accessible elsewhere. Fiona Reynolds, the deputy head of school at the American School of Bombay, explained, “Thanks to the iCommons, the responsibility of checking in and checking out the books is no more the responsibility for the librarian; it is now the responsibility of the children. This, in turn, creates a new sense of trust and independence for the children; it also empowers the librarian to evolve into an information coach and curator. We will be focusing on continuing and expanding upon such enhancement for the future.”

Linton Weeks, a national correspondent for NPR Digital News said, “In the nonstop tsunami of global information, librarians provide us with floaties and teach us to swim” (2001). With the transformation of the physical space, the role of the school librarian has evolved from being a media specialist to an information curator and coach who focuses on coaching the community of learners. School librarians are available to personalize teaching and learning

and to support users in understanding the importance of *evaluating* all kinds of media for communication and education. They are experts in assessing and curating credible and reliable resources—both print and electronic media—for teachers and learners. They are collaborators and classroom teachers’ partners in teaching. Handling all these responsibilities, along with meeting the need to analyze, collate, and deliver information in a variety of formats, is the role of our librarians.

### Writers Club

The transformation of the school library also pushed the library staff to think about what more we in the school community could be doing, such as creating our own pieces of writing and publishing them into books that we could have in our new iCommons space.

As a result, recently Heeru Bhojwani, ASB’s information curator and coach, collaborated with a parent to create the Writers Club at ASB, giving all the members of our community—parents, students, and staff



Figure 3. Secondary school makerspace.

the authors' joys, sorrows, questions, and epiphanies through poetry, memoirs, essays, and more.

*Letters from the Road* brings together stories of journeys, memories, and reflections that people carry as they transit to different places throughout the world. Language frames one's experiences; therefore, all the writers had an opportunity to express themselves in the language in which each was most comfortable. This unique book contains eighty-five articles in seven different languages: Dutch, Korean, Japanese, Hebrew, Hindi, Bahasa, and English. Members of the ASB community believe this book will resonate, not only with expatriates and third culture families, but also with all global citizens.

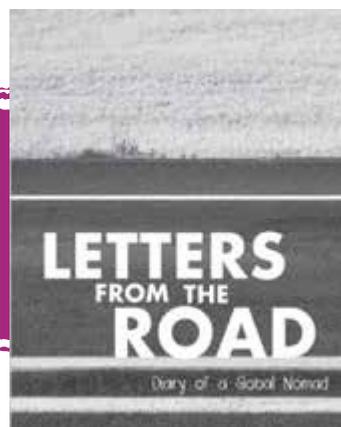
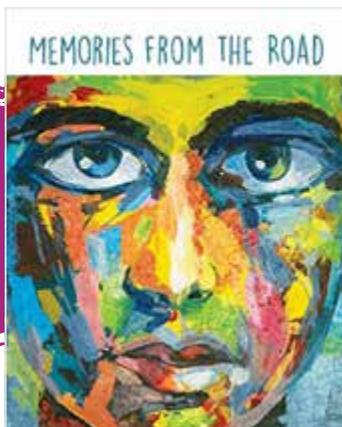
After receiving an overwhelming response, the Writers Club wishes to take their publications a step forward to include not only the school community but also the greater Mumbai community. R. David Lankes, a passionate advocate for libraries, says, "Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities" (2012). This is exactly what we strive to accomplish with our publications.

### Jarul Book Award

Creation of the Jarul Book Award was the result of another collaborative effort, this one involving our information curator and coach, and staff members from two other international schools in Mumbai. The goal: to celebrate and honor Indian

members—the opportunity to express themselves through a creative process. Through writing and imagery, members of the ASB community explored the idea of what it means to be international. This exploration culminated in a series of writing workshops for parents and students, resulting in two printed anthologies: *Memories from the Road* (available in Kindle format from Amazon) and *Letters from the Road*. *Memories from the Road* was born out of two ideas. The first was that writers need an authentic audience. If we wanted our students to care about punctuation

and grammar, we had to give them a public space to share their hearts and souls. The second idea was to uncover the world of "third culture kids," particularly at ASB. (Third culture kids are those who do much of their growing up while living in a country other than the one that issued them a passport.) Once we chose the theme of sharing our experiences as global nomads, the writing community quickly grew to include parents and teachers who also wanted to share their memories and learnings from their lives "on the road." *Memories from the Road* became a canvas to share



picture books for children. This student-centered project enables students to select, read, nominate, and vote for their favorite book. In addition, the seal for the award was designed by a student. This award empowers young learners by allowing them to develop their democratic voice. Overall, this project is an example of the learning that can occur when libraries are reimagined and creativity flows. To learn more about the award process, go to <<https://jarulbookaward.wixsite.com/jarulbookaward>>.

### Looking Ahead

At the American School of Bombay our libraries have long since evolved from the traditional “books for lending” model into idea incubators and learning hubs. Our libraries have transformed from being places for research to spaces for inquiry, from places for books to spaces for ideas, from places for isolation to spaces for collaboration, and from places for information to spaces for innovation. We are now fully prepared to embrace the future of school libraries. We are actively working towards becoming early adopters of futuristic library technologies like augmented reality, print books with digital interface, RFID application concepts, real-to-digital highlighters, and more.

Matthew Ruffle, the director of institutional advancement at ASB, perfectly summed it up when he said, “With its bold new vision, our school intends to play the role of a major contributor in shaping the libraries of the future. Building upon the successful iCommons model, we are constantly innovating—transforming libraries into collaborative, open, and productive spaces—to equip students and our community in effective sourcing, selection, and utilization of relevant information.”



**Craig Johnson** is currently serving as the Head of School at the American School of Bombay (ASB) in

Mumbai, India. Prior to assuming this role in 2010, Craig, his wife, and his three sons were in Brazil where Craig served as the principal and then the headmaster of two different international schools. In his capacity as the Head of the School at ASB, Craig endeavors to stay engaged with his students and faculty by teaching classes, coaching sports’ teams, and leading professional learning communities. A regular presenter and workshop facilitator around the world on a variety of leadership and educational topics, Craig is a passionate advocate for innovation and relevancy in education as well as the author of numerous articles on a variety of subjects, a screenplay set in Mumbai soon to be made into a movie, and has published a novel titled, Wave Watcher.



**Arun Subbian** has three decades of experience across advertising, journalism, and corporate relations. He interacts with

national and international media across print, television, radio, and digital platforms and also directs the creation of audiovisual content.



**Heeru Bhojwani**, information curator and coach (K–12 librarian), serves the ASB community

as a collaborator and a co-learner to manage, curate, organize, share, and create information and media while supporting a maker mindset.



**Rachel Bishop**, head of communications and marketing, has spent the last five years of her professional career telling

the story of ASB and its students. She uses words, images, and social media to further the stories of achievement and success that occur at ASB daily.

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