MODERN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND LIBRARIES

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Taking place across the country at the moment is a re-evaluation of which physical spaces best support good teaching and learning, and as part of that, a re-evaluation of the role libraries can play in supporting that learning.

This re-evaluation is taking place, in part because we have a crisis of design in our schools. At the heart of the crisis is the fact that 60% of the school buildings we use in this country are more than 40 years old, and while very few of them are still used exactly as they were originally intended, the fact remains that a lot of our school buildings were not designed with modern learning and learning pedagogy in mind. In fact, the dominant pedagogy in the 1950s and 1960s was direct instruction, and while the evidence suggests that this approach might work well for some students in certain situations, there is growing evidence that our learning environments could be better aligned with our current vision of what powerful learning is.

When exploring Modern Learning Environments (or MLEs), the starting point for schools is often a conversation about what is required to achieve their own school vision or the vision of the New Zealand curriculum: "young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong learners." Even just an exploration of how we might create 'connected' learners gives rise to a conversation about things like the design and layout of classroom furniture and the fact that the traditional way of arranging desks and chairs was to put them just far enough apart so students couldn't talk to each other. In fact much of New Zealand school architecture has the idea of separation woven through it, and is directly at odds with notions of connectedness and community. Even today we see evidence of this bias towards separation: groups of 25 or 30 students are routinely separated from each other, and each group (let's call them a 'class') is allocated an individual teacher who must teach that class on their own. Thankfully, we're seeing more and more schools around the country committing to provide physical spaces that align with, promote and encourage, a more modern vision for learning. For example if we believe that everyone brings different prior knowledge to a topic and no two people learn the same thing in the same way at the same speed, then it doesn't make sense to have a classroom set up with everyone facing the front doing the same thing at the same time. This vision for learning often centres around choice and variety: sometimes students will work closely with a teacher; sometimes quietly on their own; sometimes talking in groups; sometimes working outdoors learning from nature; sometimes using digital tools and sometimes using print resources; sometimes sitting at a

table, and sometimes 'learning by doing' by making models with whatever materials are around. Often these MLEs are larger, allowing more flexible grouping of students and team teaching, and they often provide a far more varied collection of resources than the traditional 65m2 classroom.

All of this provides a bit of a challenge for libraries, because learning environments (we can't really call them 'classrooms' any more) are now able to offer a greater variety of settings within the one space. Students can access, without leaving their classroom, many of the spaces that have traditionally been provided by libraries: quiet, reflective, 'sanctuary' spaces; collaborative, co-operative group spaces; or even group-learning 'seminar' spaces.

A second, perhaps more direct threat to libraries has been the arrival of relatively low-cost, wireless mobile devices in schools over the last five years. The increasing ubiquity of netbooks, tablet computers (like iPads and Androids) and low-cost laptops means that students and teachers are able to access more and more resources electronically. More and more students can now read e-book versions of novels or magazines, watch documentaries online, and read high-quality, up-to-date non-fiction without leaving their classrooms.

So here's the challenge: modern learning environments are encroaching on the two areas that have traditionally been core business for libraries: i) the provision of spaces (library as 'sanctuary', 'study' or 'seminar space'), and ii) the provision and allocation of resources (library as 'storehouse'). The dilemma is clear: if modern learning environments are becoming more and more like libraries, where does that leave libraries? What is the future of school libraries? Indeed some people are already suggesting there isn't one.

However, if we believe that rumours of the death of the school library have been greatly exaggerated, we might turn to an idea familiar to many librarians: that of the library as 'the third place'. Originally a 'third place' was somewhere that was not home and not work (a cafe, a barber's shop, a village green, a plaza etc.) and traditionally these have acted as 'anchors' of community life, facilitating and fostering broader, more creative interaction than that possible at home or work. If what's provided at home, work (or the learning environment) changes, then the third place needs to change as well. So let's consider: if school libraries act as a third

A modern learning environment at Hobsonville Point Primary School.

place (offering things not present at home and not present in the classroom) what could they offer?

Here are a few approaches some school libraries are taking:

• The service centre: in order to offer something different from what is available to students in their learning spaces or at home, some librarians are really exploring the different kinds of services they are able to offer: information literacy, digital citizenship, communication and research skills etc. These may be delivered in an embedded way in the actual learning environment, or they might be delivered within the library itself, or in a virtual space such as a learning management system or social network like Edmodo, Facebook or Google+.

• The gallery: the central position libraries often occupy in schools makes them ideal for use as galleries, not just as a place to showcase the wonderful artefacts that students produce as part of their learning, but also to promote the school's vision for learning, which would no doubt include seeking feedback, reflection, and constant improvement. What about setting aside gallery space within the library that acts as a dialogue between students and the wider school community? Set up a space that allows the community to provide feedback to students on their creative writing, or their 'trash to fashion' designs, or on their designs for the school gala posters.

• The community space: another idea linked to the third space is that libraries are often physically and metaphorically at the centre of a school, so an opportunity exists to make the most of this positioning by offering a space where people can come together. The library can host meetings and different groups inside the library space, and can also extend this invitation beyond the school in order to facilitate stronger connections between the school and the wider community. Indeed some schools actively encourage parents to come into the school library to use the facilities as patrons in order to strengthen partnerships and offer parents different ways to support their child's learning.

• The storehouse: and after all this, there may also be a role for school libraries to act as a storehouse for rare, or special resources that aren't able to be provided in every classroom. Precious artefacts like expensive books and resources, specialist

equipment like underwater cameras or even things like 3D printers or robotics' kits that might be too expensive to provide in every learning space, but are also too important to have locked up in cupboards. Imagine students booking time in the Design and Prototyping Lab in the library, working with a 3D printing expert from the community to bring the designs they've been working on with their teacher to life.

These are just some of the ways that school libraries are ensuring the value they offer is different from, and complementary to, the value offered by formal learning environments and homes. The challenge facing us is significant: if we don't provide something different from what people can access more conveniently elsewhere, we will struggle to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving, information-rich world.

I hope this article serves to further conversation about what school libraries can do to remain relevant, and to this end, I include some prompt questions for discussion:

• Which of the resources and services traditionally provided by libraries, are now available inside classrooms and learning environments?

• Which elements of our school's vision for learning are currently underserved? Perhaps how we celebrate learning? How we build community and connections? How we seek and provide feedback about what we're learning and the objects we're building?

• How might the library act as a 'third place' to provide unique, compelling and engaging experiences for staff, students and community that aren't offered elsewhere?

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Bio: Mark Osborne is a Senior Consultant for CORE Education in the areas of Modern Learning Environments, leadership and e-learning. He is a primary-trained, secondary school English and History teacher who was also Deputy Principal of Albany Senior High School. Mark is a passionate advocate for libraries and has worked in a range of libraries since the 1990s.