Designing school library spaces

By Miriam Tuohy

Snapshot

Miriam Tuohy explores New Zealand school library space design, outlining a range of very useful tools and processes used by the National Library of New Zealand's team of facilitators to ably support school library staff to bring their vision for their library to reality.

School library design requires us to consider many different disciplines: architecture and design, library service development and delivery, teaching and learning, resource management, and psychology. In this article I will provide some context about school libraries and innovative learning environments in Aotearoa New Zealand, and highlight some of the approaches, tools and resources we use in our work with schools.

National Library of New Zealand (NLNZ) has a team of facilitators around Aotearoa who support schools with library design, building and/or remodelling projects. Our facilitators can help schools develop a vision for their library, provide input to the library design, layout and fittings, and offer guidance about ensuring a smooth transition to a new library environment that supports current and planned library services. We try to ensure that everyone involved has the information and support they need, keeping in mind that designing library services and library spaces could be completely new for some involved in the process!

In our work with schools, we incorporate evidence-based practice — drawing on local and international research, and examples of innovative learning and library spaces. We also encourage schools to use an inquiry approach such as the Spiral of Inquiry (C21 Canada, 2016) for their school library development.

In recent years, and in particular since the rebuild of Christchurch schools following the 2011 earthquake, New Zealand schools are engaging more with mana whenua (local Māori tribes with authority over the land) to develop a cultural narrative for their school (Ministry of Education, 2021a). This describes what is special about the place the school stands, including its history and customs. A cultural narrative may be applied to many aspects of the school, from setting aspirations for learners, guiding local curriculum development, to the design of school buildings and settings including the library.

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The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2016) report Māui whakakau, kura whakakau has information for schools about the impact of physical design on Māori and Pasifika student outcomes.

Innovative learning environments

In New Zealand, a shift towards 'innovative learning environments' is supported by research, some funded in part by the Ministry of Education (Mahat et al., 2018), showing the impact that physical spaces have on learning.

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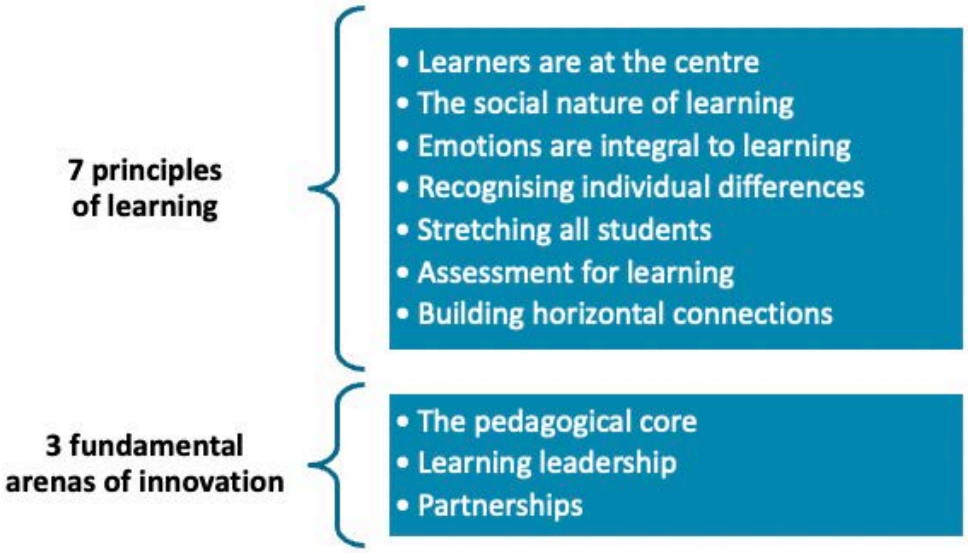
It's important to remember that what makes an 'innovative learning environment' is about more than just the physical space, or flexible seating. It is about enabling innovative teaching and learning and being innovative in the design of the spaces where that happens.

For school libraries, there is another layer on top of this: innovating library services and the spaces where they are delivered.

What does it mean to innovate learning?

The OECD Handbook for Innovative Learning (2017) describes 7 principles of learning across 3 'fundamental arenas of innovation'.

Figure 1: Adapted from OECD's Handbook for Innovative Learning "7+3" framework (2017)



They ask educators to innovate 4 elements at the pedagogical core:

- ***learners*** — who is learning
- ***educators*** — who they are learning with
- ***content*** — what they are learning
- ***resources*** — what they are learning with.

Innovation might also result from rethinking the ***dynamics connecting these 4 elements*** above — simply put: how, when, and where learning happens.

Table 1 below is not a full list of possibilities, but rather some prompts for rethinking those 4 elements. Good library design would further consider each element – and the dynamics between them — in relation to library services and spaces specifically.

To illustrate: if we are thinking innovatively about learners and their needs, then rather than limiting access to areas of the library based on year level we might define spaces for a specific purpose or activity e.g. instead of 'Seniors-only' space, create a quiet study or reading space for all year levels.

Table 1: Innovating elements of the pedagogical core and the dynamics that connect them

Learners
Who are our learners? Re-think: • how we differentiate or group them • how they can make choices about their own learning.
Educators
Who are they learning with? Re-think who this might be: • it will include peers, and library staff • it will extend outside the school to include parents and whānau (families), community organisations, and more.
Content
What are they learning? Rethink knowledge, competence and values: • changes to local and national curriculum • finding out what matters to our school community • deciding together what we want our rangatahi (young people) to know or be able to do.
Resources
What are they learning with? Re-think: • what might be considered a 'learning resource' • how resources might be accessed using new technologies such as AR + VR.

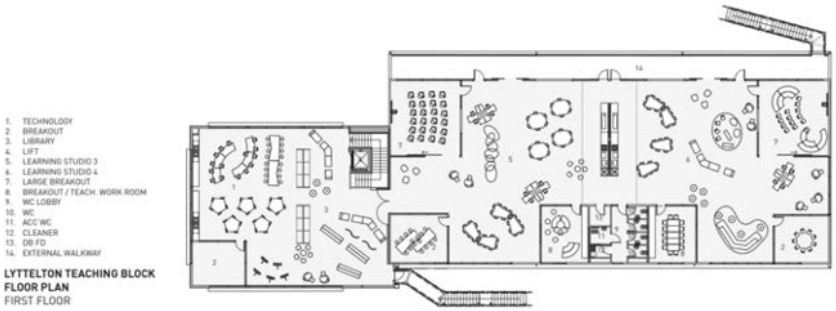
School library construction — building and remodelling

Schools in New Zealand are required to develop 10-year property plans that cover maintenance and development of the physical environments. Schools receive capital funding from the government to carry out this work under a 5-year agreement for upgrading, modernising, or replacing existing buildings.

Reference designs

New school buildings often begin with a ‘reference design’ – concept designs that schools can customise, and that help ensure consistent quality of the learning environment. Many of the current reference designs feature flexible spaces to accommodate larger groups of learners and a wider range of pedagogies and activities than before. We are increasingly seeing school libraries incorporated within or adjacent to these new flexible learning spaces.

Figure 2: Example of Lyttelton teaching block floor plan showing position of the library space



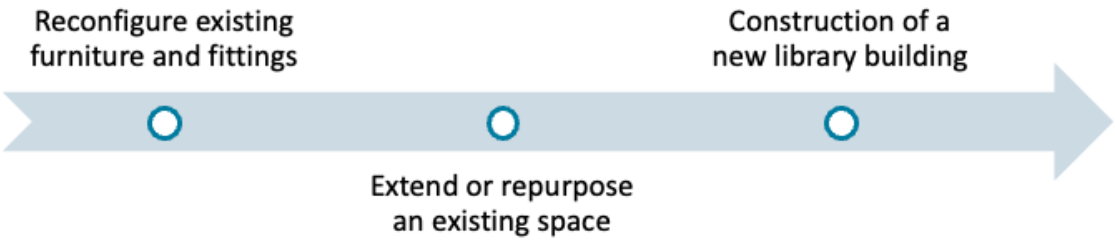
Older school libraries may be standalone buildings (especially in secondary schools dating back to the late 1950s, libraries built to the S68 and Nelson Block library reference designs are still common) or spaces within a classroom block (mainly primary schools). Remodelling of older standalone libraries might modernise the space and extend the library footprint. For libraries within an older teaching block, modifications may see classroom divisions removed to create large multi-use areas that encompass the library.

Project management

The Ministry of Education (2021b) has property processes and requirements that schools must follow. For construction projects this includes establishing a project team which will bring together a range of expertise, including building project management, architecture, and design. Decisions made by the project team need to include input from people who understand library management, library services, library design, and teaching and learning.

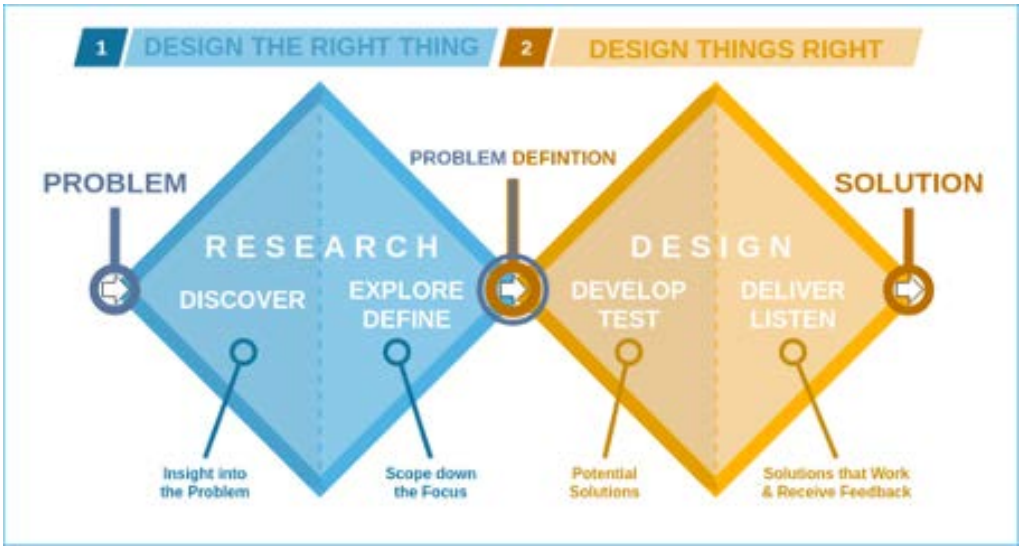
Choose and use a design process or framework

Library design projects and budgets can vary enormously. You might simply rearrange existing furniture, shelving and other fittings where no budget is required, or embark on a construction project with a budget of millions.



Following a design process will help keep your project on track. There are many different processes you might choose from. For example, the UK Design Council's Double Diamond framework for innovation describes four stages: Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver.

Figure 3: Illustration of the double diamond diagram (CC0)



Design the right thing

Having a clear vision of what you want to achieve and making sure everyone is on the same page, is vital! No matter the size of your library design project, it is worth putting a team together who will clarify the vision you have for the library, and guide design decisions. Using the Double Diamond approach, the team might first clarify the problems or challenges you face and explore what solutions might be possible.

Supporting resources and tool

NLNZ facilitator support might include:

- sharing research and readings about current and future trends in school libraries, and school library design

- arranging visits to other libraries for inspiration
- facilitating workshops to help school communities reach an understanding about the purpose of the library, and the vision they have for how it will support reading, learning and achievement across the curriculum, and student well-being
- tools and resources such as
    - our **School Library Development Framework** – especially **place** as an element of library service
    - our **school library guiding documents** information and downloadable template
    - **The Harwood Institute – Turn Outward** DIY resources
    - **Techniques for idea generation and innovation** (SessionLab, 2021).

Design things right

In an effective school library, student learning and well-being is supported by library services that combine elements of place, collections, connections, and access. These elements interact with each other; there is a synergy between them. (National Library of New Zealand Aotearoa, 2018).)

Making changes to your library space can be a catalyst for innovation in the services your library provides, and vice versa. Educator and designer David Jakes (2017) writes 'Redesigning your library means rethinking the invitation and the experience that the space offers.' Below are some of the questions we might ask about the ***invitation*** and the ***experience***.

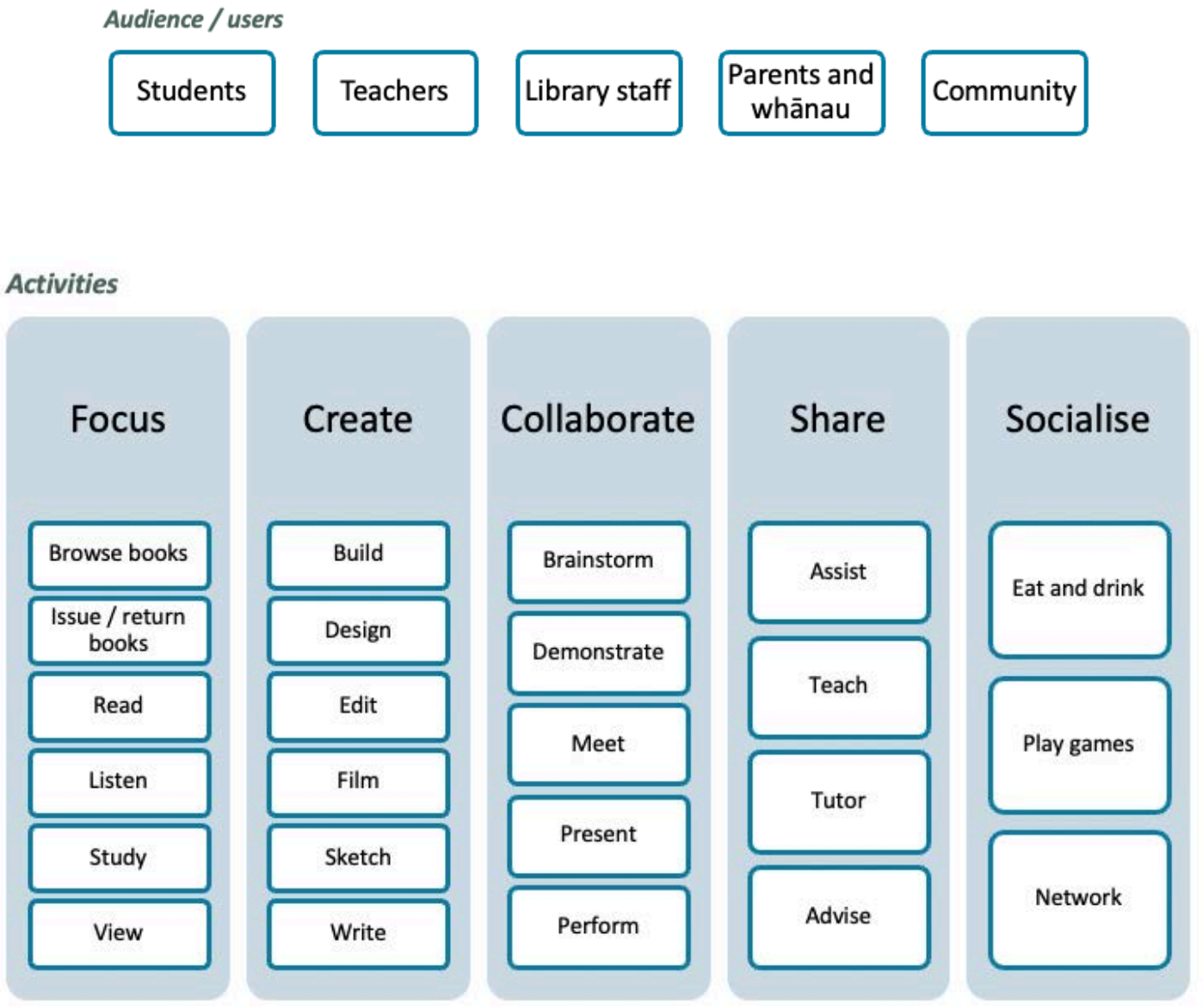
Making changes to your library space can be a catalyst for innovation in the services your library provides...

- What makes people want to come in and explore the library, or stay for a while:
    - does it look welcoming and inviting?
    - is it a comfortable place to be?
- How does the library space enable people to accomplish what they came to do (or perhaps do something they didn't realise was possible!)
    - can everyone use the library? is the space accessible for all learners?
    - can people do and find what they need in the library?
    - does the space help them see how things work, and what's possible here?
    - what support can they access here?
- What keeps people coming back again and again:
    - how does the library space make them feel?
    - are there new things to see and do, to read, and to learn?

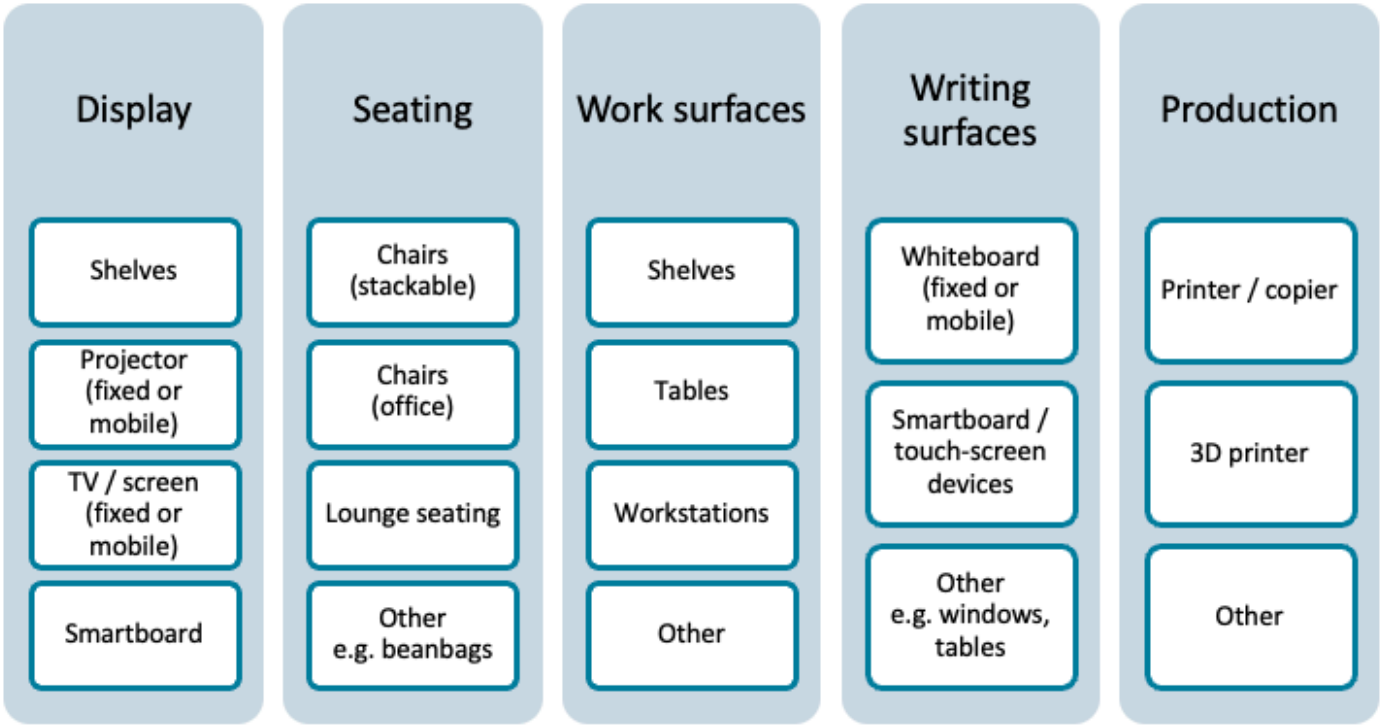
- How might the library space respond and adapt to changes, which could be:
    - in the way teaching and learning happens e.g. through collaborative student projects or shared teaching, increased use of technology
    - in the way information is accessed e.g. digital resources, AR and VR
    - resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic e.g. self-issuing and returning books, social distancing requirements.

Library space taxonomy

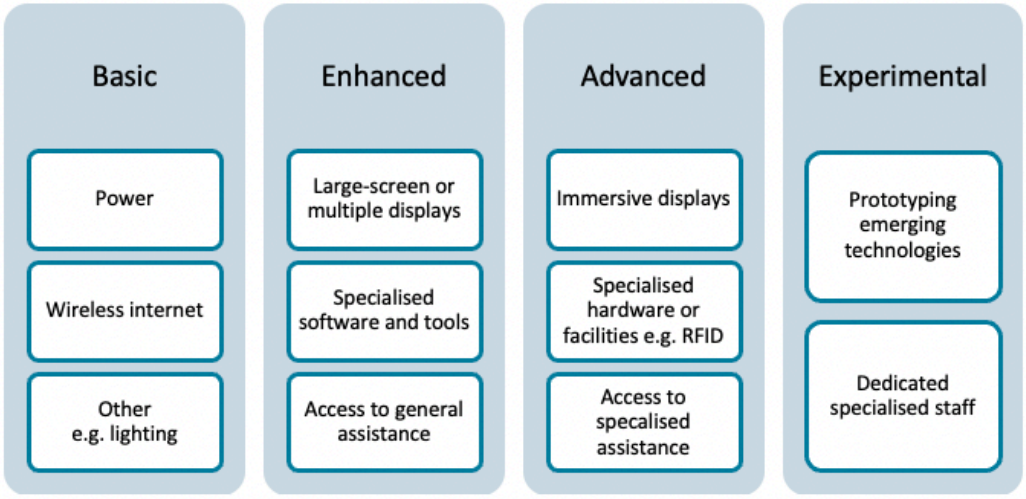
At NLNZ Services to Schools, we have developed a library space taxonomy, based on an original 'learning space mind-map' produced and shared (CC BY 2.0) as part of the Learning Space Toolkit (n.d.). The taxonomy helps to build a detailed picture for your library of current and future audiences (users), activities, components, technology, and attributes of the space. Schools who have been early users of our taxonomy have found it useful, and we will continue to develop it using feedback from schools.



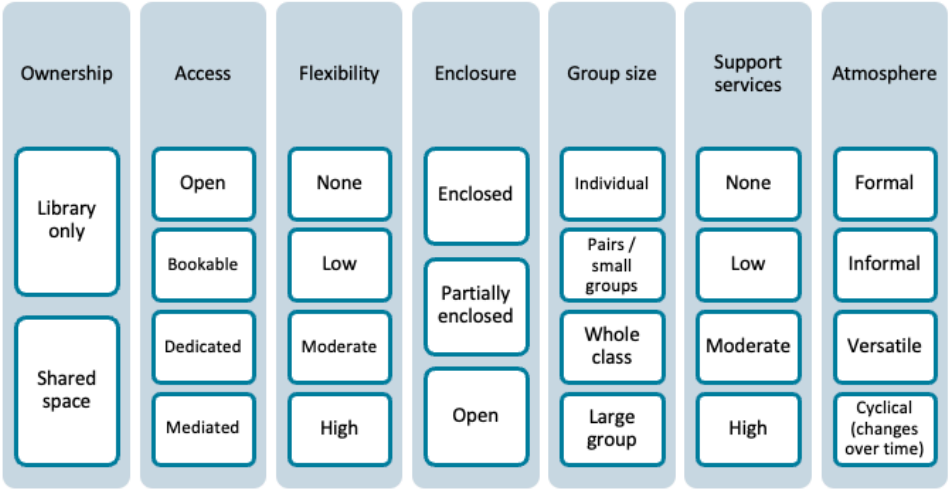
Components



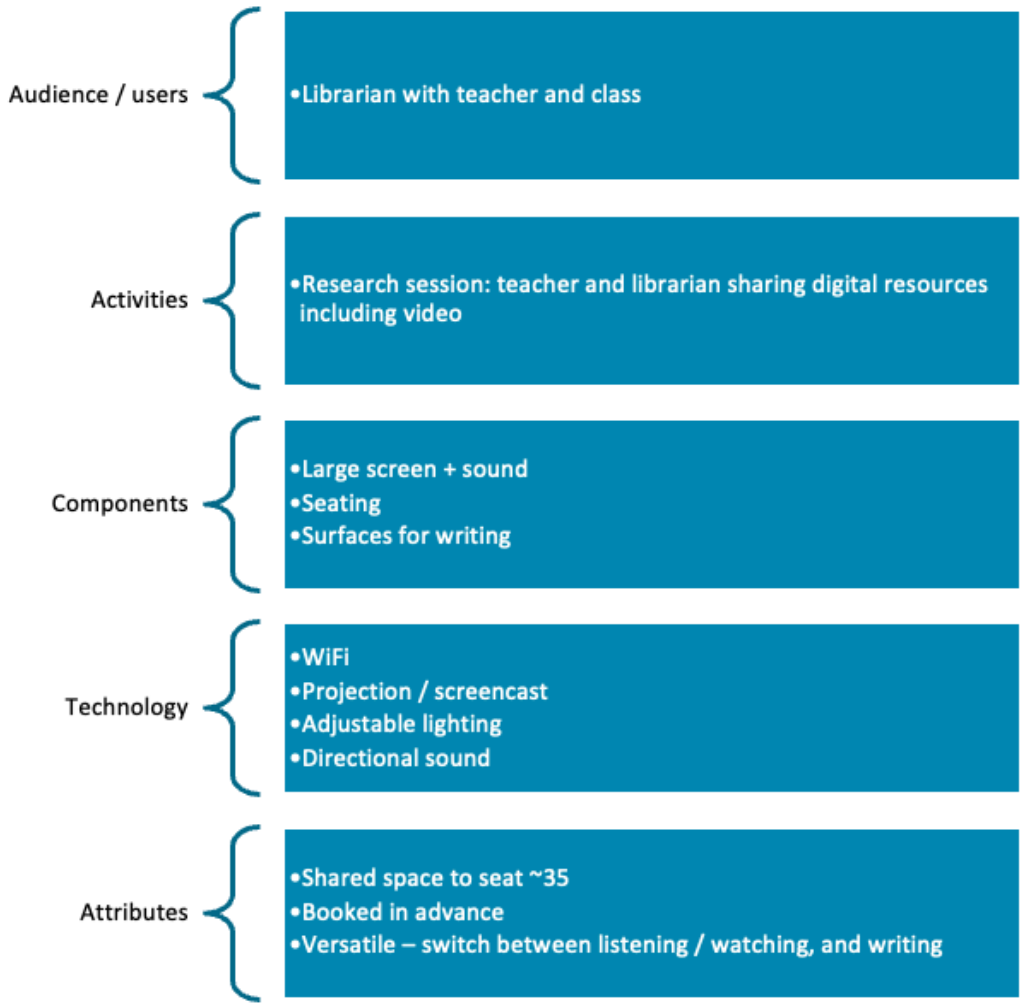
Technology



Attributes



An example of the taxonomy



Supporting resources and tools

NLNZ facilitator support might include:

- Helping schools undertake an audit of their library services – looking at what is offered, then exploring the services in more detail i.e. if this is the service the library will provide, what will the space need to support that?
- Encouraging schools to do their own user experience research such as journey mapping and touchstone tours — finding out from library users how they would move around the library space to accomplish a task or fulfil a need.
    - Advice about furniture and fittings — What will you need, and where will everything go?
    - Suppliers – we provide a list for NZ schools, you might contact your state's school library association for advice.
    - Layout/floor-planning – experimenting with different configurations for your space
    - Signage/way-finding
        - Good signage can make it easy for people to find what they need and know what's expected — and what's possible! — in different spaces.
        -

- Bilingual signage – in NZ, Te Rōpū Whakahau provides a list of bilingual signs for libraries to use (Te Rōpū Whakahau, n.d.).

Start where you are, and build from there

For most school library staff in New Zealand, being involved in a library building project may happen once in their career, or not at all. In our experience school library staff sometimes have little opportunity to contribute their ideas or feedback from the start of a library construction project. Sometimes they are given a final design and just have to pick it up and run with it! If you find yourself in that situation, don't despair — you can still work with your school community to make the most of what you have.

Within a school, the library staff will generally know the library very well — they are immersed in it after all! But don't be tempted to go it alone. The aim of great design is to create great solutions for the problems and needs that people have, and to do this you must listen to them, and really understand those needs. This holds true for every library design project, whether big or small.

...keep asking and listening to your school community about their problems, their goals and aspirations, so that you can continue to design – and redesign!

Finally, remember that at the end of a library build, or when you're done rearranging your library space, your design work is not finished. Keep learning – there is an ever-growing body of research and knowledge about school library design you can draw on and contribute to by sharing your experience with others. And above all, keep asking and listening to your school community about their problems, their goals and aspirations, so that you can continue to design – and redesign! – the library spaces they need.

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Miriam Tuohy *joined the National Library of New Zealand's Services to Schools as School Library Development Senior Specialist in 2016. Her involvement in the New Zealand education system spans early childhood education, primary and secondary school and tertiary libraries. Miriam was a member of the School Library Association of New Zealand Aotearoa(SLANZA) National Executive from 2010-2016 including a year as President in 2015-16. As part of her current role, Miriam has contributed to the publication of Services to Schools framework for school library development, the 2018 and 2019 reports of the nationwide surveys of New Zealand school libraries. She is also involved in developing and delivering professional development for school library staff and teachers, and is a regular contributor to the National Library of New Zealand's Libraries & Learning blog.*