

Creating our future – Libraries creating connections: an Australian perspective

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

Peter Drucker

Rather than sit back and wait for the future to happen, it is much more interesting to create it. This paper describes how some libraries in Australia and overseas are recognising and responding to the needs of their communities, creating connections, now and into the future.

What sort of connections might public libraries create in their communities? The different connections that libraries are making will be discussed under the headings:

- Cultural
- Learning
- Reading
- Informational
- Social
- Professional

Cultural Connections

Because libraries are such neutral and trusted places, cultural connections through libraries can start to build inclusive and tolerant communities. The Fabric of Holland Park is a story from my previous library service, Brisbane. One of the branches had particular problems with two groups of newly arrived immigrants, Somalis and Sudanese. I can't remember which way around it was, but one group was causing grief to the other, and there were occasions of physical violence in the library. Working with the Community Development Branch, the idea of a celebration of Holland Park was devised. It was based on fabric, and the library being seen as the fabric of the community. All the major ethnic groups in the community were invited to display fabrics from their culture in the library, and to set up food stalls in the park outside serving food and drink. The local school organized performances of songs and dances and one hot Brisbane Saturday it all came together. The change in attitude was remarkable, and as a result of this one single event, a definite change was noted by library staff in the tolerance levels and in an enhanced sense of community harmony.

Another example of cultural connections is Music Sundays @ Narre Warren Library. Narre Warren in outer Melbourne is in the centre of a corridor experiencing rapid growth – 10 – 12,000 new residents settle in housing estates in the area every year. It is difficult for many of these people to get to cultural events, and so the Casey Cardina library corporation initiated Music Sundays afternoons to provide quality live music. The program is held once a month, and

the library books the performers, local musicians if possible, and organizes the publicity. The performers are paid at a professional rate and the concerts are free.

The success of the event is measured in terms of audience figures, increased visits to the library and audience reaction and feedback. Last year 320 people attended the concerts, as well as the many who listened and enjoyed as they selected their library materials.

Learning connections

The new Hume Global Learning Centre is just down the road from me, in a neighbouring municipality. Hume City Council comprises some of the lowest socio economic areas in Victoria, with some of the most socially disadvantaged people. However the Council is a dynamic and visionary organisation and it believes that learning is the key to personal, economic and community growth.

In 2003, Council began one of its greatest initiatives - the creation of the Hume Global Learning Village. This is an innovative partnership that links learning providers from across Hume City. The Council has taken a leading role in learning and education and is bringing together in a network, the 200 plus organisations that have a role in learning and education. The participants are formal and informal learning providers in the area including schools, neighbourhood houses, the local TAFE, universities, community groups such as the historical society as well as 5 branch libraries. Access is also provided to social support and local training and employment programs. While the new library is a very attractive and eye catching building, and the physical face of the Village, it is the human network of education and learning providers that is the real point of difference here. Some of you may know Vanessa Little, who was previously with the State library of South Australia. She is the Director of the Hume Global Learning Village, and it is very inspiring to listen to her describing what they are achieving through their initiatives.

Another example of learning connections is the Teacher Release into Industry Project (TRIP) which my library Yarra Plenty has been involved in for the past 2 years. A teacher worked with the library service as a School Liaison Officer (SLO) from February to November 2003. This role was designed primarily to promote and raise awareness of the library's services, including its web site and many online resources, to schools in the area. The SLO also provided professional development sessions for both teachers and Yarra Plenty Children's and Youth Services staff about schools and students needs. The result of these programs was a considerable increase in remote uses of the library's many databases. School staff now have a much higher recognition of the role and resources the local public library can offer and they contact the library service more frequently than prior to the program. It is a measure of success that Yarra Plenty Regional has the highest usage of the Gulliver database material in the State.

Reading connections

I don't know about over here on the west coast, but certainly on the eastern seaboard, for a few years reading wasn't so hot in libraries. We got seduced by the technology especially public access to the internet, and the encouragement and love of reading took a back seat. But all that is changing and now libraries offer many and varied reading programs to connect with the community.

One Book One Brisbane is a reading campaign that has as its aim building a strong reading culture in the city and promoting 'street culture' through citywide participation in book reading and subsequent discussion. Every resident in Brisbane is invited to read and discuss the same book at the same time. Brisbane City Council has supported the project generously, both politically and with funding and has now been operating the program for 3 years. Based on the Chicago model, and the original Seattle program, it has been designed to support and endorse the importance and joy of reading while encouraging debate and discussion about social issues and about the value of writing in the community. For 5 weeks each year, a giant Brisbane book club is created, where readers are engaged in a range of reading activities. It is an intense and focused program, with a lot of energy spent on marketing, promotion and events. There is a concentrated marketing campaign through e-mail, ezines, a strong online presence and an extensive program of media exposure that includes bus and bus shelters advertising. The marketing department also provides collateral that is designed to capture the imagination and get people talking. This is placed all over the city – in libraries, cafes, bookstores, shopping centres, at railway stations – anywhere, where people stop and meet. There is a creative and varied program of events– the idea is to have something for as many people as possible – readers and non-readers, young and all, male and female. The activities and resources include a comprehensive online presence, story time sessions, authors by discussing creative writing and publishing and their own writing styles and successes.

The measures of success are in the participation rates, in 2004 the program achieved:

- 8000 borrowings of the winning books through libraries
- 4500 entries in the competition
- 4500 attendances at events in libraries

However, the program is not just about numbers. It is about encouraging a love of reading and about building communities through reading.

Babies and books – everyone suddenly wants some of [this](#) action! Dr Alan Bundy has written a thoughtful and practical paper on A 'Bookstart' program for Australia. While a number of libraries around Australia including a number from Western Australia are involved in programs to encourage and support reading to babies, there is no systematic national program as exists in the UK and other countries. Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) has released a report of a 2004 survey of

the forms of 'bookstart' programs operating in Australian public libraries. The report advocates a national literacy development program modelled on the UK's highly successful Bookstart program. Under the program all babies, through their parents or caregivers, would receive a free kit from their local library containing at least one quality board book, information on the critical importance of developing literacy in children by reading to them as babies and information on library membership and story times. Such a program requires leadership from the federal government and co-operation between all levels of government. It is being mooted as a good project for Public Libraries Australia and ALIA to cooperate on. The report, 'Australian Bookstart: a national issues, a compelling case' by Alan Bundy is available at <http://www.fola.org.au/pdfs/bookstart.pdf>

Another example of connections and reading is YACCIN – the Youth and Inner Northern Network Summer reading club – the original Reading Rulz. This group was established in 1999 to help children's librarians in the inner city and outer northern region of Melbourne re establish networks with neighbouring library services. It consists of representative from six library services, and an important objective of the group is to identify projects that neighbouring libraries could collaborate on. The demise if the state-wide summer reading program provided the group with a perfect opportunity and five programs have now been run. By 2003, 80% of Victorian libraries were participating and it is now a national program with partners from the State library of Queensland and ALIA. The program operates by distributing packs to participating library services. These packs contain large full colour posters, stickers and book marks for participants and a basic handbook for library staff, including book lists and activities related to the theme. Factors for success in the program have been the high level of demand from libraries, use of professionally produced materials and the participation of authors.

Flip de Beer is a special story not from Australia, but from Utrecht in the Netherlands. One morning when the Grade 2's of 98 primary schools across the city arrived at school, there was Flip the bear on their doorstep. Each bear had a backpack; in it was a letter from his mother, asking the class to look after him, as she had to go off with the circus for a month. The backpack also contained Flip's toothbrush and a disposable camera. The children were asked to each take him home for a night, and to write about their experiences with him with their parent's help, to feed and clothe him, and to take him on outings and generally look after him. Soon bears were seen all over at shopping centres, at picture theatre and other places in the city. Flip went on holidays as far as Cologne, Paris and even Montreal. He went with kids to judo lessons, violin lessons, horse riding, swimming lessons and the like. He also went to the dentist, orthodontist and a dermatologist. By the end of the program, Flip had acquired large wardrobes of outfits, including 46 jackets, 21 knitted sweaters and 19 pairs of pyjamas. Some lucky mothers even got laundry duty! In his backpack, kilos of play mobile, liquorice, transformers and other toys were found.

At the end of the month, all the stories were gathered and a children's author wrote a consolidated book of the bear's adventures invented by the kids. Flip stayed with at least 2,400 families for one or more nights and for each of these visits there were reports made in his diary. There were 1,920 pictures of Flip counted and the total of the diary ended up being more than 1 metre thick.

It was a very popular and engaging program and I hear that even now the odd bear is seen in public, though most of them had to be thrown away as they had been cuddled to death. And he even got his own TV show!

Informational connections

Connections around the provision of information have encouraged innovation in service delivery.

The idea of establishing a global online reference desk was first mooted during a visit I made to Carroll County Library Service in Maryland in 2000. Back in Brisbane we pursued the Maryland connection for some time but when we had not received any commitment from them, started looking for other partners. In 2002, BCC formed a sister library relationship with Richland County Public Library, South Carolina and later that year, another partnership was formed with Somerset County Council, United Kingdom. The partnership with two countries in complementary time zones matched the projected service and made it possible to provide a 24/7 live reference service.

Answers now Global Reference Service enables Brisbane residents and Brisbane City Council library members to ask librarians questions online, in real time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It complements reference and information services already established - in addition to existing on-site face-to-face, email and telephone reference services.

The service started in November 2002 and is a global partnership between the three libraries mentioned, and now also includes Christchurch City Library Service in New Zealand. It provides 24/7 reference service on a time-share basis. The service is using LSSI (Library System and Services Incorporated) software, Virtual Reference Toolkit that has capabilities for one-on-one virtual reference sessions and access to related electronic content (shared browser, push pages, e-mail and transcripts). It has proven to be a successful and sustainable model, and as far as we know the first international partnership of this kind in the world.

The Information Australia Portal was a pilot of what is now known as Libraries Australia that connects library borrowers with wider information resources. Yarra Plenty was one of the library services taking part in the trial with the National Library of Australia and other libraries around Australia. It allows individual library members to request items listed on the Kinetica database through a special electronic gateway, for supply on interlibrary loan. Available online are more than

43,000 journal articles, 760,000 images such as paintings, prints and drawings and bibliographic details of more than 36 million print and electronic articles in libraries across Australia. Yarra Plenty went live with the trial in November 2003 and library users have enthusiastically taken up the opportunity to gain access to books held in the National Library and other participating libraries. The pilot was successful and the NLA has now made the service available through its website and renamed it ***Libraries Australia***.

Gulliver is the big success story in Victorian public libraries, soon to go national from what we hear. The Gulliver consortium, which manages the selection and cooperative purchasing of online databases for Victorian public libraries comprises 46 public libraries. By working together public libraries are able to offer users access to a collection of databases that have over 21,000 resources including full-text journals, books, newspapers and pictures. These databases can be accessed at nearly every public library in Victoria or by library users at home using their library membership number to log on.

“An important outcome of this initiative is that it ensures statewide access to a core level of materials and information services for users regardless of geographic location, the size of library services or mode of library delivery.”

The Gulliver Group was formed in 1998 by Viclink which is the peak public library body in Victoria, with State wide funding through the State Library. The major reason that it was founded was to provide affordable access to online databases, as for most individual libraries, it was not possible to fund individual subscriptions. When the statewide funding ceased in 2001, libraries felt that it was so important to continue offering this service to the Victorian community that they formed a consortium and the subscriptions have been funded by the member libraries since then, with no additional funding from the State Library. The group has been careful to select electronic databases that will meet library and users needs - applying evaluation criteria in each of the areas of content, statistical and technical features and vendor viability. Gulliver has shown what can be achieved when public libraries work together and it is a model that is scaleable to other states.

Social connections

The physical library provides opportunities for many social connections by individuals. Libraries can be iconic buildings in their communities. Consider the new Seattle Public library, recently awarded Time Magazines top award for architecture for 2004. Or Cerritos Library in California, the happiest library of them all.

Waynn Pearson, the City Librarian explains, “The City of Cerritos has built a “Library of the future” that will be legitimate and relevant well into the 21st Century. We believe this to be true because at the Cerritos Library, we started with an

idea that service would be experienced by the user. The Cerritos Library is the first “Experience Library” and is a significant departure from traditional library thinking. On the other hand it preserves the tradition of the library as a community centre and gathering place.”

In Australia, Yarra Plenty’s Mill Park Library, which opened in June 2002, is one of Victoria’s largest public libraries and the first to be built on the concept of a hybrid digital/print library. Visually stunning, the buildings tinted glass, curved roof, columns and shape compels people to look closer. Its cement clad iron pillars angle towards the sky and support an overhang at the western entrance to shade the building from the afternoon sun. Inside, ducts are concealed in internal columns, which bounce light off the ceiling onto the open expanses below. Panes of tinted glass filter sunlight into a golden hue. This library is a landmark, and a civic statement by the City of Whittlesea.

The new Kerang Library in Victoria is located on the main road into the township and was designed as a landmark building around the historic water tower on the site. The water tower in itself is highly symbolic. It is the only tall structure in an otherwise flat landscape and therefore a point from which people can orient themselves. The association with water, literally the lifeblood of the community, also says something about how the community sees the library. It is a life force in Kerang.

The Mt Gravatt library in Brisbane is a modest suburban library, but it truly embodies the sort of everyday social connections that I am sure you have in each of your libraries. Every morning a group of gentlemen wait at the door for the library to open and then enter to read the papers. Following that there is a lively and sometimes heated discussion regarding the news of the day. It always was gentlemen, though they did finally admit a woman to their inner circle. Another story from the same library concerns a young woman newly arrived in Australia with a small child, who knew no one in the area. After attending a couple of story times she got to know some of the parents in the group and established friendships with them. You would all be able to add lots of stories in that vein I know.

Professional connections

Don’t let’s forget ourselves when we talk about public libraries and connections! Of course I will commend membership of our professional organization, ALIA as a very suitable and fitting way to grow your network and connect with your colleagues.

While I was at the Aurora Institute at Thredbo last year, I was challenged by participants as to why they should join ALIA rather than form another group that better represents their interests. So I thought about it and came up with the ***Top ten reasons to join ALIA*** which was one of my Frontline editorials.

1. Eleven editions of Incite, brimful of news, features, editorials and events
2. Discounts on courses and conferences – you could easily break even in one year if you went to a couple of ALIA conferences and events
3. Tradition - we've been going since 1937, and we are proud of that
4. Continuing professional development – new courses, new brokered deals with providers, and the chance to get another bit of the alphabet by your nominals – be an AFALIA – that **is** impressive
5. We need someone to keep the government honest on copyright and to fight for what we think is fair and reasonable for our communities
6. Networks and friendships – some of my best friends are AALIAs and I even know some FALIAs
7. Famous people belong – (like State Librarians and University Librarians and maybe your Boss)
8. There's a terrific website to visit to find all sorts of information, and all the best bits are for members only
9. You could win an award – for being really excellent or win a scholarship to travel the world
10. It lets you put AALIA or ALIATec after your name (looks great on your business card and your CV)

And there are so many reasons, I need to put in one last one – you can form a group of like minded souls and register with ALIA and you then have all the resources of the National Office staff, who are truly lovely people, at your disposal. Its just so easy to be a group now – the website will tell you that “ALIA Groups have a geographic, special interest, special purpose, issue or sectoral basis, have the support of (or serve) at least 25 members of the Association, and are endorsed by the Board of Directors.”

“A group may be established for a short period (for example for a specific purpose, issue or activity) or for up to two years to fulfil a longer-term purpose or need. A geographic location need not be limited to state borders.”

I'd also like to challenge the more mature members of our association to take a more active role in ALIA. When I was young, it was a real status thing to be on an ALIA committee, because there were a lot of library managers who held executive positions and it was a good place to meet the leaders of the profession. I think we are letting down the younger members by not participating more in local groups and providing a mentoring role for them. I know that a lot of people feel like they've done their bit, but as one of the people at the National Policy Congress said, she'd got her second wind and been revitalised – and some of that energy of the younger ones is bound to rub off onto you!

If you feel you would like to stretch your wings further there is the [International Federation of Library Associations and institutions \(IFLA\)](#), with lots of different sections, and conferences in far away places such as Oslo, Seoul, Durban and

Quebec. The American Library Association conferences are truly something else, as those of you who have been will know. 20,000 librarians in one city – they can't miss us! I was lucky enough to be part of the Bertelsmann Foundation's International Network of Public Libraries, which some of you may be aware of through Kay Poustie, who was also a member. Unfortunately the network is no more, but it was a very special opportunity to meet with colleagues from all over the world and to find out that issues and challenges faced by libraries are the same whether you are in Toronto, Somerset, Utrecht, Los Angeles or Perth.

And locally of course you have WALGLA and I know from my experience with Viclink how valuable this sort of networking is in day to day running of a library.

Before closing, I would just like to mention to the important research that has been undertaken in Victoria, [Libraries Building Communities](#). This is a comprehensive study which seeks to identify the contributions that public libraries in Victoria make to their communities through a process of research that informs, challenges and influences the popular perception of the public library. I recommend that you read the report, which involved all 44 public library services in Victoria. An independent research company was used to gather the data and produce the reports.

So I hope that in this talk I have given you some ideas of the ways that libraries are creating connections in their communities. I've talked about cultural, learning, reading, informational, social, and professional connections. And I encourage you to think and plan about how you would like to go about creating connections, because as that wise man Yogi Berra once said, "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."