

## **ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER... New connections in public library service delivery**

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Public libraries have always sought to provide the best collections and services for their community. This has been done within a series of processes in what is the common structure for a library – select and acquire the item, process it, circulate it, assist the customer to find it, promote it. So we have the traditional areas of library practice: acquisitions, cataloguing, circulation, reference and increasingly, marketing done primarily through events and programs.

But what if we brought these interconnected parts together in a different paradigm for library service delivery?

What if the development of the collection was driven more by the events and workshops held across the various demographics of the community than by the traditional selection processes? And through this, the library's role focused on facilitating social capital in its community, in its role as community hub, to the same degree as providing and promoting its information and recreational services?

This paper explores the potential of this as a model of library service provision, examining its implications and benefits. The changes that this approach would bring to library structure and practice, in particular the collection development process and event and program planning processes are discussed.

### *Making a paradigm shift*

A program centred model places the library's services and collections more firmly in the mindset of its community and gives the library and its collections a more direct connection and relevance to the community's needs and aspirations.

This perspective was alluded to in *The Bookends Scenarios*, a project exploring the possible futures for NSW public libraries in the year 2030. Personalisation was seen as an important influence and could include 'active participation in design and provision where users of public services become co-designers and co-producers' (*Bookends Scenarios: 2009, p15*)

Looking towards new possibilities for libraries has long been a part of library practice. The experimentation with other names for libraries in past decades could be seen as a pointer towards this type of thinking. The aim was to present the library in a new light and names such as Information Resource Centre and Learning Centre sought to express the idea that the library is new and different, but when the delivery of the service did not significantly change from the traditional form, it became more of a passing trend than a new approach to library services.

More is required than changing the name. Shifting the focus of our library practices to a model that starts rather than finishes with connection to the community has the potential to place the library in a stronger place to discuss its future.

### *Foregoing our 'Field of Dreams' mentality*

As with any proposal for strategic change, there is a need to examine some longstanding practices in library service delivery.

In the film *Field of Dreams* Ray Kinsella was told by a ghostly voice that if he built a baseball pitch in the middle of his cornfield, then the ghost of a famous baseball player would come and play. "If you build it, he will come", the voice said.

If you build it, if you provide it, if you have a quality collection, invite interesting speakers, run competitions with great prizes – they, the public, will come. Just open the doors, organize and promote the event, and they will come. And when they come - they'll borrow lots of books. Send the stats up. And in that one epiphanous moment they will just know that the library is a good place to be. (Heald, 2008)

But this has not been the case, and questions as to the future of libraries are necessitating further thinking.

*Certainly, the literature of the 1990s is replete with lamentations about the 'death of the library', and the fear that the technology of the Internet would not only replace the book but render the librarian increasingly redundant in an information environment where the user is now able to meet her/his own information needs without the assistance of an 'expert' intermediary.*

*Hillenbrand, 2005.*

### The Library as a community hub

The role of the library as a community hub has been a starting point for a number of models for libraries moving into the twenty first century. There is widespread recognition that a library that is not recognized and supported by its community will not survive under current financial constraints. The library needs to maintain its connection to the community.

It is therefore in our best interests to continue to connect with our communities in new and dynamic ways. At the very heart we need to question the traditional notion that we alone, as library professionals, know what is best for our community's education and recreation. We can stay as we are and bemoan the fact that *Pride and Prejudice* is not being borrowed as frequently as we'd like, or we can read the signs of the times and subscribe to *Women's Weekly*.

*Circulation statistics for the Women's Weekly from one Sydney public library come out to an average of 17.8 loans per (monthly) issue.*

*Source: independent research on SIRSI Dynix system, Kogarah Library*

At the very least, we need to find new ways to listen to our community.

### Listening to the community: moving to a program centred model of library service delivery

Historically, the circulation desk has been the focus of the activity in the Library. Here is where the main interaction has occurred with customers. Borrowing, returns, registrations and the range of associated services have been the central focus of this area.

So ingrained is the centrality of this area of library operations that popular perception of the role of the librarian is most often linked to it. How many of us, on being introduced as a librarian, have received the response "I must return my overdue books". Rarely has there been a comment on the computer or creative writing class opportunities in the library.

At a time when librarians have sought to emerge as information specialists in an information soaked world, library practice has, albeit inadvertently, led to us being perceived as keepers of the books.

*"But why do you need a degree just to stamp/wand books?"*

Hillenbrand, 2005 p16

Moving to a program centred model will diversify the image of the library and the librarian, however in order for this to become more than a passing trend, some structural changes will need to take place.

### *Restructuring to facilitate change*

If the events and programs of the library are to be the leading force in collection development and increase the library's connectedness to its community, then structural changes are required. Kogarah Library is an example of one library's move in this direction with its recent restructuring.

The Library has moved from three to two teams, broadly dividing the tasks in the library between circulation, information and branch services on the one hand and community connection and collection on the other.

The Information and Customer Services (I & CS) Team is responsible for the provision of circulation services, reference services, inter library loans, CALD services and Branch services. The Collection and Cultural (C & CS) Team is responsible for connecting the library to the community and culture of the Kogarah LGA and for the development of the collection and library management system. Within this team are Children's Services, Youth Services, Home Library Services, Local Studies, Readers Advisory Services, Events and Programs and oversight of the library's exhibition space.

The I & CS team staffs the circulation and reference desks and the Homework Zone Help desk and the Local Studies information desk are staffed by the C & CS team.

The structure, in releasing some staff from circulation duties and facilitating the development of community connection across the various ages and groupings in the community, has allowed the development of a wide range of events and programs. Kogarah libraries have over 600 events and programs each year.

These connections take the form of regular community interest groups such as knitting, book groups, computer classes and conversational

English groups, storytimes in English, Mandarin and for intellectually disabled young adults. Programs have been developed for all age groups, developing out of community partnerships or from the various children's, youth, local studies, home library service or general events staff. Connections with local preschools, primary and high schools, cultural groups, historical societies and community groups have been developed. The program and events bring over 17,000 people into the library each year, allowing staff to network across a wide range of the community. With a population of 58,000 in the Kogarah local government area, this represents a significant base for collection consultation.

### *Community connections and the collection development process*

Increased community connection means that there are increased opportunities for the library to listen to the community, building on connections made at the circulation and reference desks.

It is this diversification of connections with the community that informs the collection development process. Well-attended programs, partnerships with community groups, consultation on specialised collections may all be used to assist in the selection process. As the network of community contacts grows so do the possibilities to utilise their expertise and understand the needs of a wide range of community members.

Kogarah Library has moved to the outsourcing of selection processes and this allows the library to maintain its broad collection areas but give weight to the areas in which the library connects with its community. Community members can also become involved in the annual review of the selection profiles for their interest area.

Focus is on the library's ability to develop networks and partnerships with its community to further extend its programs and develop its collection. Outreach becomes the starting position. It can happen across all areas of the library, including the circulation desk.

### *The changing role of the circulation desk*

The circulation desk in this model must be more than the loans/returns area. By its location, it is generally the first point of contact with the customer, and so becomes the face of the library's interaction with its community. This makes it a critical communication point, and the shopfront for all the library services.

Promotion of events and programs becomes vitally important, networking with customers who may have suggestions or skills for information sessions, reference staff may be an integral part of this area, on hand for information and collection requests and enquiries.

Future library planning may well locate loans and returns to another area of the library and have the circulation/information desk as the first point of contact.

There is a significant divergence here from the current thinking of de-staffing the circulation desk through the use of RFID technology. A program centred approach would need the desk to be staffed by qualified staff who could field enquiries about the library's activities and services and extend its networks.

Placing our connections with the community as a central focus of our library practice and policy, rather than an add-on area, will change the way the library and librarians are seen in its community. It also brings the possibility of the development of social capital into the equation.

### *The role of program centred library services in facilitating social capital*

Social capital is created from the myriad of everyday interactions between people. It's not located within the individual or within the social structure, but in the space between people. It's not the property of the organization, the market or the state, though all of these can engage in its production.

Social capital is a 'bottom-up' phenomenon. It originates with people forming social connections and networks based on principles of trust, mutual reciprocity and norms of action. (Bullen & Oxyen, 2005 quoted in Heald 2008 p6)

Programs and events bring opportunities for interaction with and in the community. Connections occur. The library has a unique opportunity here because it is still seen as neutral ground. There are no agendas beyond linking people to the information or resources they want. No joining fees, no oath of allegiance, and no response required. In this environment free access to information for all people is a foundational principle.

In the events and programs that are run at Kogarah Library, I see people who find connection into the bigger picture of their community as they meet and encounter others. Stories turn the statistic into a person and other cultures become less mysterious. People are

connected into new possibilities as they hear stories and learn new skills.

It is critical that in developing new models for library service delivery that we ensure that our services are also delivering social capital. This brings the library to the attention of its community as a valuable resource, a perception that we can no longer take for granted.

Maximising opportunities for creating social capital brings us to consider changes that may need to be made to the planning process used for the events and programs.

### *Changing the starting point for programs and events*

Driving the collection development process through events and programs and striving for social capital gains necessitates a change in how we plan events, programs and services. It is essential that libraries move from the 'one-off' event to a targeted series of events or programs that are directed to a specific demographic, or subject area.

The idea that we can develop numerous points of connection in the community through a series of events and programs is not new. Children's and Youth services have been doing this for some time. Adult services have generally not followed this lead and have often been more reactive in their programming, focusing on a particular demographic which is often a response to an outside trigger such as Seniors Week, Youth Week, etc. The event is 'one-off' and having been done, chairs are packed up, stats done and planning begins for the next event, usually with a different focus or target audience.

We need to see the events as ongoing opportunities of connection to our community. The kudos built by one event is added to by the second and so on. One thing very intentionally leads to another. At Kogarah Library we began this building process with opportunities that we found in our community:

- From discussions with some of the people who attended our satellite event of the ABC's Knit In, two Knitting groups were formed. These groups have been going for three years now and in addition to the work done for the local hospital and other charities, are a significant source of social networking and therefore social capital, for the participants.
- Based on contact with the local students through library events and at their schools, the library's Youth Officer has developed a

- yearlong program of HSC related events. Various workshops and a Library 'Lock-In' are timetabled at strategic points of the HSC year. These focus on stress release for students and parents as well as subject relevant events. The aim is to create a total yearlong package that establishes the library as a part of the HSC preparation and assistance framework in our local area.
- Creative writing and art workshops have led to what is now a series of annual creative writing and art competitions. These have then led to exhibitions of the young people's art works and stories in the library's exhibition space. The entries in these programs are then added as social history to Kogarah's Local Studies collection.

*Living Learning Libraries* sets down standards and guidelines for programs. A program is defined as:

An ongoing series or sequence of activities provided by library staff in partnership with other community or business organisations and usually relating to a particular library service, library collection or population demographic (*Living Learning Libraries, 2009 p 20*)

A library event is defined as: a 'one off' activity or performance or occasion that is usually held in the library and usually related to a library program (*Living Learning Libraries, 2009 p 20*)

Under these definitions, the program centred model is more concerned with programs than one-off events. This necessitates a more streamlined and intentional approach to the areas that the events and programs will cover to enable the library to best use limited resources. Focussing on doing a selected number of areas consistently and well will achieve more than numerous unrelated one-off events.

#### *Developing a 'streamed' approach*

Events cease being one-off and become part of a carefully planned 'streamed' approach.

At Kogarah Library the event planning is placed in the context of twelve streams, these use four core areas defined in our event and program strategy:

- Literacy & information
- Storytelling
- Life long learning
- Community and cultural connection

The areas covered by the streams will vary slightly from year to year, but these are seen as the framework for most of the 600 events and programs run by Kogarah Library each year.

The streams for 2010 are:

- Children
- Cultural development
- Eco literacy
- History
- Information literacy
- Intercultural events
- Library collection promotions
- Life skills literacies
- National and international days/weeks
- Seniors
- Techno literacy
- Youth

### Conclusion

The opportunities of moving further into the community's informational and recreational needs are opened up by an approach to library practice that begins with connection with the community.

In developing this connection, libraries need to carefully review their structures and processes to enable contact and ongoing dialogue with the myriad of groups in the community to be a central part of the library's practice.

Collections that reflect the community's interests and information needs can be best developed in consultation with the community and as a response to encounters with individuals and groups through streamed events and programs. While the library strives to maintain a broad and balanced collection, it is a collection that supports the activities and known interests of its community that will best place the library as a community hub.

The library is in some way future proofed by broadening its standing as a place of dynamic community connection, both in its collection and programs, available to all members of the community, making information accessible in the most appropriate format for the customer, developing literacy skills and providing community space for the development of social capital. Circulating

books may not be our strongest claim for existence in the coming years.

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