

Building social capital through networking: how public libraries can be more than repositories of information

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The role of the public library is an evolving one. We have moved from the early colonial days of subscription libraries through the Schools of Art and Mechanics Institute libraries to the largely local government funded public libraries of today. These libraries range from 1950s buildings with parquet floors and timber shelving to modern buildings designed on retail technology principles and sited in shopping centres. Libraries no longer simply offer access to physical items located on shelving but give their clients access to information anywhere in the world, or even beyond, through the wonders of the internet. This process of change has enabled libraries to maintain some level of visibility in their communities. It is time, however, that librarians looked beyond simply keeping pace with technology and considered the broader picture of the public library's relevance to its community.

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue ⁽¹⁾ in the 1998 Australian Library Week Oration stated:

It is critically important that librarians - modern custodians of knowledge - take the time to think about issues of equity, access and representation, and who and what is represented in physical collections and online.

If we are to take the issues of equity, access and representation seriously we will need to rethink the way we operate our services. Not only do we need to make sure that what we purchase and subscribe to, whether in physical or cyber format, meets this criteria but we also need to ensure that our community is both aware of, and able to make use of, those resources. We also need to look beyond the concept of librarians as "custodians of knowledge" to librarians as facilitators in a knowledge society. In communities where access to the knowledge society is blocked by illiteracy, high rates of LOTE, exclusion and poverty, librarians need to be even more creative in their facilitator's role. No matter how well rounded, balanced, up to date and fair our collections may be, if large portions of our community can't access them we are not offering an equitable service.

Dr Robert S. Martin ⁽²⁾ in his speech at the UNESCO High Level Symposium in December 2003 made this comment:

Today, global prosperity and individual productivity depend upon the ability to learn constantly, adapt to change readily, and to evaluate information critically. In this information rich world, we must remain

committed to fair and equitable access, and we must create and facilitate ways to transform information into knowledge.

So, how can we ensure that our communities can access the resources and services that we have available? How can we ensure that we are responsive to, and representative of, our communities' actual, as opposed to perceived, needs? We will look at various ways that library services can partner with their communities to bring about better outcomes for all.

Meetings

The thought of attending extra meetings may well bring a sense of dread to the busy professional, but the judicious attendance of meetings is a critical factor in building worthwhile partnerships. Most government bodies, at local, state and federal level, belong to a wide range of networks and interagency meetings. It is worth looking at the range of networks available in the local area and choosing strategically to be involved in those that cover a wide range of overlapping interests. For example, the Community Drug Action team may not be most librarians' first choice but membership of that one group will give access to many non-government agencies, individual community members and a huge range of State agencies, including the Premiers Department, the Departments of Education, Health, Community Services and the Police, to name a few. The benefits for the library service are exposure to groups working in the community at all levels and a better understanding of where we fit in that community. There is also the opportunity to promote services we offer to agencies and individuals who may be totally unaware of what is available. In NSW [Di@yll](#) (Drug information @ your local library) is a key resource we want our communities to know about and access and the local CDAT is a perfect vehicle for promotion. The CDAT is also a great way to access reliable local resources to enrich our collections.

Other interagency meetings such as Youth Workers Networks, Multicultural groups, Children and family networks and many more offer almost unlimited opportunities to meet other people in your community with intersecting interests. In this area it is also important to consider networking opportunities with colleagues from other libraries and sectors. Membership of professional bodies such as the Australian Library and Information Association, Metropolitan and Country Public Library Associations, Reference, IT, Multicultural, Youth and Children's working groups give librarians the opportunity to "cross pollinate" ideas with others – who knows what wonderful new things will grow from such contact?

Programs

Eccles ⁽³⁾ discusses the importance of adult role models from outside the school and family context in the healthy development of young people and their need to see themselves as a part of the broader community. Activities and programs offered by public libraries can become crucial elements in this development. Often we run our programs looking for bottom line statistics to help justify our

funding and forget the value of the programs themselves. For example, we may run a *Homework Centre* or a *Family Literacy* program employing qualified teachers to work with our local young people. Our tendency is to count the students who attend and declare it successful (or otherwise) on that basis. The outcomes from an educational point of view may be measurable, but how do we measure the social capital aspect? In this example, we can survey parent and student perceptions of the program and talk to our partner schools about the results their students are achieving. However, at Fairfield one of the most significant illustrations of social capital growth we see through these programs are demonstrated in the end of year celebrations. Children who started the year self consciously aware that they were falling behind their cohort, happily stand in front of the assembled audience of parents, friends and library customers to talk about their experiences. It is exciting to see children achieve results that surpass their own expectations and to be willing to share those results in a public forum.

Another example of a partnership program that aimed to develop social capital was "*Helping your child (0-5) to learn*". This program involved a range of agencies including Schools as Community Centres, Anglicare, UnitingCare Burnside, Families Together and Fairfield City Library Service and book supplier Global Books. The agencies produced two workshops for parents and children in each of three community languages – Vietnamese, Chinese and Khmer. The workshops covered areas such as the importance of play as well as language and literacy development. Parents spent the first part of the session learning the theory of the subject in their community language while their children were involved in supervised play. The second part was a practical session where parents put into practice what they had learned with their children. The library provided a storytime session as a model for parents and then supplied a range of picture books in the appropriate language for parents to read to their children. Parents were surveyed at the end of the sessions and were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits they had received. We were interested to note that some of the fathers had taken time off work to attend the sessions and were very willing to spend time learning about play and language development and then putting it into practice with their children. The icing on the cake was that families received a picture book in their family language, donated by Global Books, to take home and read with their children.

Venues

Another way we can help build social capital is to provide safe space for people to meet, socialise and relax. In our increasingly fragmented society a space where people can interact with others is becoming invaluable. Our library buildings often have under utilised spaces. Many have meeting rooms, technology rooms, children's areas, reference areas etc, which are heavily used at certain times of the day, or week, but remain virtually empty at other times. Fairfield Library Service has partnered with our local Community College to allow them regular use of meeting room spaces to run courses. The benefits to the

library are obvious – a rental income stream (albeit small), better use of available space, course participants using the library who may never previously darkened our doors and the opportunity to give our community access to something that may not have been available otherwise. We have offered computer classes – the Community College provides their own PCs which are locked away at other times, as well as classes on reading to your baby. The latter classes are run by staff and are a great way to promote an understanding of the importance of reading in those early years as well as another way to promote the library service to potential users.

This ongoing partnership with the Community College has led to an exciting new service. The College received funding to run 6-week courses for pregnant teens on the importance of reading to their babies, language development and play, as well as build a support network for participants. The course, called *Cool Babies* will be run in the library and will involve the young women learning about language development as well as actually reading, making their own books to read to their babies and of course developing support networks. Local agencies were approached to promote the program but also wanted to be involved in sharing their resources with the students. At the end of the course a Community Expo will be held showcasing the services of these local agencies. At the Expo the students will be presented with their certificates as well as have the opportunity to access services working in their interest areas in a non-threatening way. The library service sees this group as a pathway to library membership, *Babytime* (lapsit) and storytime attendance as well as helping to develop life long learners.

Another use of space for community benefit is supporting local schools and students by offering HSC lectures in the library building after normal business hours. Each year we hold a series of HSC lectures that are promoted by personal visits to our local high schools. The sessions are held on Saturday afternoons at one of our branch libraries that close at midday. High school students tend to be awake and functioning at that time of day and because the library is closed, the lectures don't interfere with other customers' needs. The reference area is cleared of tables and approximately 100 students can be accommodated in the reclaimed space. The library service has the opportunity to showcase all the resources and services we offer to senior high school students, while high quality lectures are provided on a cost recovery basis. Each year, feedback from students shows how much they value the support that the library provides during this very stressful period of their lives.

Even libraries that have no spare rooms or spaces have walls, foyers, hallways and other often under utilised areas. These spaces are ideal for exhibiting displays from community organisations, artwork from local schools, draft plans from Council and a myriad of other things. Libraries need to make sure that these displays look professional and are in keeping with your building and community, but they provide an excellent way to showcase local talent and interests.

Partnerships

Over a period of time networks can be developed into partnerships. For partnerships to be truly successful there needs to be a strong element of trust between the parties. This is usually only built up over time and with a few successful programs behind you. An example of a partnership, which has blossomed into a program building social capital, is the *Live Homework Help for Refuges* program. This partnership involves the company Tutoring Australasia, St Johns Park Bowling Club, four youth refuges and Fairfield City Library Service. Together, this partnership provides online tutoring in Maths, Science and English, every school day for young people living in these local refuges. These young people are among some of the most at-risk in our community and a program like this, which helps keep them in school, is invaluable. Some of these young people are in Year 11 and Year 12 and the extra study support that is offered is helping them to keep up with their schoolwork despite the many other pressures they face in their lives. St Johns Park Bowling Club provides the funds to pay for the subscriptions while Tutoring Australasia provides extra services such as one-to-one training with the students and after hours trouble-shooting gratis. The Library Service administers the funding and has arranged information sessions for the refuge staff and clients as well as Club executives. All of the partners, with the exception of the refuges, have worked together over the past few years to the point where each knows that the other will deliver on what is promised. The Library Service has done the main liaison with the refuges but trust had already been built as the Library has had a representative attend the Youth Workers' Network over a period of some years.

As part of our Living Libraries program we celebrated Achievers Day with Cabramatta High School. Alumni from Cabramatta High spoke at the library to an audience of about 100 Yr 11 and 12 students about what they were currently doing. This partnership with a local school not only helped to showcase some of the successful young people from that school, it also served as an encouragement to the younger students about what they could do and was a reminder of the library's role in that development. Achievers Day was so successful it will run again this year in partnership with another local school.

Time to dream

The premise of serendipity – good things coming by chance – can be assisted by being in the right place at the right time. It takes an ongoing build up of knowledge to realise where the right place is and when you need to be there. Tapping into local networks and building partnerships is a great way to increase serendipity. We want people in our Council, State Government Departments, local organizations, the business community and the general community to think of the Library when they have a great idea to build social capital. We want to be one of the obvious places people think to come not just for resources but also for the broader community issues. If we are truly to be facilitators in a knowledge society we have to be visible and active in our communities, constantly looking

for new ways to build bridges to the excluded and marginalised. This may mean a change in the way things have always been done in our library services. We may have to look at the way we manage our resources, in particular our most valuable resource – our staff - to give people room and time to dream. Each community is different and there is, unfortunately, no formula which will work in all situations. This is why it is critical that we take to time to really look at our own communities and discover the needs, but also the hopes and dreams and start to see where we can be involved. In our community, some of the biggest issues we face are literacy, high levels of LOTE and a staggering youth unemployment rate. When we look at the dreams and hopes of our community we see people with amazing aspirations to build better lives for themselves and their children. We see children and young people with untapped potential for greatness. We have built many of our programs around these specific areas – the *Homework Centre*, *Online Tutoring*, *Family Literacy*, *HSC lectures*, *Cool Babies*, *English the Movie* (literacy for senior high school students), *Achievers Day*, *English Conversation* classes etc in order to support the schools and help young people reach their potential.

It might be argued that many of the issues discussed here fall outside traditional "core values" of a library service.

In his UNESCO speech Dr Robert S. Martin ⁽²⁾ says:

In a world where the public demands accountability, where no institution is guaranteed unquestioned support, where there is increased competition from across the public, private, government, and commercial realms, no museum or library can simply assume continued public support. Our institutions therefore face increasing pressures to be entrepreneurial, innovative, strategic, and customer-focused.

It seems that if we are to retain not only credibility in our community, but also ongoing funding, we need to expand our concept of what core service entails. We need to provide opportunities for people in our local environment to equip themselves to become life long learners. We need to extend the traditional boundaries of our institutions to embrace the disadvantaged, the excluded and the oblivious. Getting to know the other groups who are working with our target groups is a logical way to extend those boundaries. When we build networks we will also discover that lots of other people in our community have dreams about how social capital can be increased. Ideas like the *Cool Babies* program came from one of our community partners and we picked up their vision and ran with them. We need to be open to community ideas and flexible enough to rearrange our own schedules to accommodate great ideas.

To be relevant and necessary in our communities Public Libraries need to do more than keep up with the latest technology and provide a wide range of materials and resources. Libraries need to be credible members of their community, who offer opportunities to build the social capital framework and

allow all people equal access to those opportunities. We need to build networks and partnerships with the business community, other government agencies, our schools, and community agencies and of course with the population we serve. Only then will we be enough a part of our community to ensure that we are offering an equitable service, with access for all. We will also be able to represent the needs and dreams of our community to funding bodies and decision makers in government and beyond. While this process may sound daunting it can be started simply. Library staff needs to look out for local opportunities to get involved in networks, which then, over time, can build up into partnerships. Don't be afraid to dream and also to listen to the dreams of others in your community. Dreams are the beginning point for new ventures that can bring about amazing change.

(1) Australian Government: Culture and Recreation Portal. *Libraries in Australia* in <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/libraries/>

(2) Martin, R. S. (2003) *Building knowledge societies* In <http://www.ims.gov/scripts/text.cgi?whatsnew/current/sp120903-1.htm>

(3) Eccles, J. S. (1999). The Development of Children Ages 6 to 14. *The Future of Children*, 9(2), 30-44.