



Emerging themes for public libraries looking forward

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Meeting:

91. Public Libraries and Metropolitan Libraries

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 75TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY
23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy
<http://www.ifla.org/annual-conference/ifla75/index.htm>

Abstract & Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to draw out the themes, discussions and learnings from the Metlib mid term meeting in Brisbane that was held in May. Conference delegates, as we always do at our mid term meetings, found the program and the conversations stimulating, interesting and thought provoking. We are a small section, but we are special – we have among our members library directors from the major public libraries of the world, and the opportunities to network and socialise and talk in a relaxed and informal way to our colleagues is a very special experience.

The four themes of the Brisbane conference were

Community,

Collections,

Creativity and

Capability; the same as the session here this morning. We heard stories from Oslo,

Stockholm, Halifax, Timor Leste, Singapore, Shanghai, Zagreb, Ottawa and Australia that drew out these themes and described exciting, innovative and practical ideas and practices.

The program was enhanced by visits to some of the most stunning public libraries in Australia, particularly the State Library of Queensland and the Brisbane Square Library and the big, bold Gold Coast libraries.

What emerged from the papers at the conference was an emphasis on three areas, and these were:

- the use of buildings;
- staff development and workforce planning; and
- the increasing use of research to inform decision making and implement evidence based practice.

In this paper I will talk about these areas and also add more information to the evidence based practice section with a description of a project Yarra Plenty Regional Library has been involved in recently that I think you will find interesting.

Use of buildings

The first speaker at our conference provided fascinating insights into how technology, most particularly wifi, is changing the use of library buildings. Dan Hill from Arup was the first keynote speaker. Arup is an independent firm of designers, planners, engineers, consultants and technical specialists offering a broad range of professional services. Dan has been working with the State Library of Queensland on their exciting new facility that will provide space and resources to create digital content.

In order to understand how people are using the library he analysed the use of wireless internet provision and how it has activated spaces that would otherwise be empty. He found that it was being used almost 24/7 – and it was only between 3 & 4 am that there was no use. He described how people will seek out nooks and crannies, seats, floors, tables, any furniture, to create small spaces for themselves and their laptops. They work singly and in groups. Because the technology is pervasive he cautions against over programming spaces; the Internet just leaks through. Dan's observations showed that people were using the library space and wifi for business, study and social networking. 94% of people surveyed told him that the provision of free wifi encouraged them to use the library. And when we were there for the conference we saw them - along the knowledge walk of the library, in groups and singly when the library was opened and closed. The knowledge walk is accessible 24 hours; it is a covered walkway that leads through the library with the added attraction of power points.

Dan described some of the creative concepts that are being explored for the State Library of Queensland. He talked about the possibilities of making the invisible visible; exposing in an anonymous but collective way what people are accessing on the web. This could be done in different ways using data collected by the wifi.

Some of the ideas they are looking at are:

Inside the building, describing in cloud tags what people are accessing and displaying these on a physical space such as a wall;

Externally, to indicate to the outside world what is happening inside the building, having light globes that look like poppies installed on the river in front of the building that glow red according to the amount of bandwidth being used. This will show the activity inside and broadcasts it across the river; as well as providing an artistic statement.

Dan's central tenet was that ICT is now a strategic driver; it is no longer in the background but it is changing culture and services. He says we need to move the virtual and the physical together and align them. He gave the interesting example of how things are moving off the internet onto paper, *Things my friends have written on the internet* is a print publication that publishes blogs as a news magazine.

The project that Dan has been working on for the State Library is The Edge which is due to open early next year. The Edge will focus on digital productions and interactive installations such as the poppies mentioned before. It will offer space for collaborative learning, experimentation and exploration of craft, technique and technology connecting informal learning with formal education, creative, cultural and business networks. It is based on the

same principles as the Eyebeam Art and Technology Centre in New York City, which we heard about from another keynote speaker Liz Slagus. There is more information about The Edge on the State Library of Queensland's website, and I see they are currently hiring staff to run it!

In our general discussions on the use of buildings and library layouts there were two strong themes that emerged:

Firstly there is a definite trend for new libraries to work on a ratio of 1/3 space for collections and 2/3 space for people. Last year I led a group of Australian librarians on the Viclink Great Library Tour and we visited some of the most innovative and exciting libraries in the world. My favourites were the Dutch libraries - OBA in Amsterdam and DOK in Delft. The spaces in these libraries are dynamic and fluid, and create a sense of being learning places that are responding to contemporary needs and are flexible to become what people want them to be. Another good example is Library 10 in Helsinki, where furniture is multifunctional and can be moved easily to create individual workspaces that suit the user and tools for learning can also be easily accessed and assembled.

Secondly there is the desire by users for a sanctuary within the library. Whereas once libraries were quiet places devoted to individual pursuits, with small areas available for more noisy activities, now it is the opposite. One of the most common complaints we get now is that our libraries are too noisy and loud. Creating quiet places, even places with no technology, seems to be the next big thing. A number of libraries have achieved this through good design; for example in the OBA there are quiet reading places that are not signed as such, but are respected by the users who intuitively understand that this is their role. The State Library of Queensland and Brisbane Square both have similar spaces that indicate to the user through the furnishings and layouts that silence is encouraged.

Liv Saeteren told us about the concept plans for the new Oslo library, which will be based on the Agora, or meeting place of minds. The architectural competition was about the concept of the building not the design of the interior. The current building was the most modern and progressive in Europe in 1933, but Liv told us it "froze to death." The library will integrate the physical and the virtual. While borrowing books will continue to be one of the core offerings, less and less people who visit the library borrow physical items, and last year only 50% of people who came into the library borrowed. "Libraries have become a place where people can be, and there are many ways that they can sit together" said Liv.

In stark contrast to these wonderful stories of new and beautiful buildings, we heard from Patti Manolis from Geelong Regional Library in Victoria, who gave an inspiring talk about library services in Timor L'Este. Patti undertook a study tour there in 2004 and visited 30 libraries across the country including public, school, university, special and community centre libraries. Timor L'Este is a small young country to the north of Australia, colonised by the Portuguese for 400 years and occupied by Japan during the 2nd World War. The population is 1 million and the average age is 20. There are 15 indigenous languages, and Portuguese is one of the official languages. It is a very poor country with 50% of the population living in poverty on less than 50 cents a day. The unemployment rate is 80% and the life expectancy is 57 years. Patti spoke movingly about her experiences there and the people she met. She found that

“there is a great hunger for knowledge and desire for education but that the human, financial and physical resources required for the establishment and operation of public libraries are few and far between.”

Despite this, libraries are springing up everywhere, with staff creating their own literacy materials and even delivering library services by horse. It was an inspiring story and highlighted the enormous good that public libraries can bring to people.

As I said in the introduction, the papers were complemented by visits to some wonderful libraries in and around Brisbane that demonstrated how co location with Council services can work; how subtropical buildings can be designed to make the most of the climate and natural setting; and how a university has really funkyed up its library with a multimedia annexe that looks more like a bar than a library.

The next strong theme of the conference was staff development and workforce planning

As seems to be the case when library directors gather together, the conversations focus a lot around staff development and equipping staff with the skills and competencies they will need; as libraries change from being predominantly transactional places, to becoming creative community hubs and places of participation and creation and learning. Johanna Hansson from Stockholm Public Library gave a great presentation on how they are bridging the gap between vision and reality. Library directors have visions of the future and dream of different roles for libraries; staff have their everyday activities, and work with a lack of resources and their realities of providing services. Stockholm has introduced a new structure that aligns all staff with one of the following outcomes: Learning; Reading; Lending. Johanna said that we need to recognise that there must be a gap between the vision and the day to day operations; but the gap should not be too great. At Stockholm they believe the value of the library is not in the vision, but in every encounter between staff and user; user and user; and user and media.

Johanna said that to create change, all changes have to relate both to the vision and to the day to day. The activity that bridges this gap is process mapping. This involves knowing what, why and how you are doing things, and having as the focus the approach and attitude to the library user, not the organisation of the library. The library needs to be values based; values are the words that describe our vision and ideas and are guidelines for words we share. In Stockholm they make it possible for staff to make their own decisions, and they keep giving permission for staff to try things. A very simple example Johanna gave and which was much commented on was that for one week all staff had to say hello to every user that came into the library. What a simple, radical idea! One of the big impacts they found was that people coming into the library started asking more questions.

Although a presentation by Judith Hare from Halifax on developing community led libraries was listed under the Community stream at the conference, it was really about staff development

Halifax includes urban, suburban and rural areas and serves a population of 390,000. The library service was concerned that the socially excluded weren't using libraries and so got involved in a pilot project on community led libraries. While the traditional library service model delivers programs and services designed by library staff, a community led library listens to what people want and tailors their service to those needs. Judith described the

program that was run out of Greyston Heights housing project, which is an entry point for many refugees from Somalia and the Middle East. This new way of developing programs and services has led to a paradigm shift for library staff and community development work is becoming the foundation of everything they are doing. It led to a new management position of Community Development Manager being created, as well as new positions dedicated to working with teens. The library hired local staff and then went door to door to find out what people wanted. The library service had to change job descriptions and competencies, because what the library now wants is staff that are skilled working with the community. A tool kit has been developed to assist other libraries who want to follow what has been done and this is available at www.librariesincommunities.ca.

The key learnings from the pilot were about how to anticipate and address the many barriers that the socially excluded face using libraries. At Halifax they found out that barriers included:

- library procedures that made it difficult to enrol children who live in foster homes;
- the fact that many had overdue charges because they did not understand the concept of a public library; and
- the need to gain community trust, which they achieved by getting to know people as individuals.

Another theme related to workforce planning was the ageing of the profession. Barbara Clubb told us that in Ottawa they have found that there will be significant organisational change over the next 10 years, as 48% of the staff expects to retire over the next 10 years, and 50% of librarians are over 50 years. One system has 71% of their managers over 50. Barbara told us about the Ottawa Talent Plan that is being put in place to address this - there is an emphasis on succession planning and mentoring. The impression that Barbara has is that young librarians are not interested in taking on management positions.

Our discussions led to ways of attracting staff; and that the skills that we need in libraries now and into the future aren't necessarily library skills, but expertise that other professionals can bring such as designers, storytellers and youth workers.

Although librarians have transferrable skills, many of them still see their role as transactional. Sharan Harvey made an interesting point about how the social bonds that staff form extend onto the floor of the library, and this creates a barrier to staff getting out from behind desks, as they would rather interact with each other than with library users.

The third main theme of the conference was evidence based practice.

Evidence based practice is an important development in the provision of public library service. Rather than relying on librarians' instincts, service delivery is increasingly being informed by community consultation and engagement and careful analysis and evaluation of services and programs.

Sharan Harvey from Brisbane City Council told us about the collections research they have done using focus groups to understand customer use of library collections and to evaluate new service concepts. They found out that people use the library for discovery, relaxation and escape. There is a preference for the library to have a wide range of materials rather than just popular material; and that there is a need to satisfy niche interests. Feedback they got included that libraries should have all the parts of a series; that people are afraid to borrow

damaged books in case they are blamed; and people want hard covered books that have a clean smell and white pages! Following this research Brisbane introduced a fast back collection – books that are available for a one week loan and can't be put on hold. Sharan also described some of the concepts for libraries that they floated with the focus groups, and one that grabbed our imagination was the pop up library – a library that appears for a short period of time and then disappears.

Sharon Thien from the National Library Board of Singapore described research that they had done to establish the usage of print reference collections in their public libraries. They found that there was very little research on the topic and through their work found that there is low usage of the reference collection – only 10% of items were used in a 2 week period. This has led them to the conclusion they should downsize the collection, relocate the reference desk and establish criteria for the retained collection. And coincidentally she told us about a pop up library that NLB assembled at a Bicycle Expo that featured materials relating to bikes and bicycling and that promoted the collections and services of NLB.

Although the next part of this presentation was not given at our conference, I thought I would take this chance to describe to you a project that Yarra Plenty Regional Library has recently undertaken which is also to do with evidence based practice.

Being the best we can is a state wide project of the State Library of Victoria and the Victorian Public Library Network.

The methodology is based on “Building on Success: a public library quality improvement matrix for Scotland” developed by the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC). We were very fortunate to have our Scottish colleagues, Elaine Fulton and Rhona Arthur work with us on developing the framework. They were in Melbourne in February this year (luckily for them it was after we had our 48 degree day); it was a great international partnership. The Public Libraries Quality Improvement Matrix was developed in 2004. It is incentivised by a 500,000 pound grant that only libraries who have done well in the process can apply to. They have 7 indicators, as well as a tool kit. All verification and the reports are written by SLIC.

Being the Best we can was developed by a workgroup of Victorian public librarians, State Library staff, consultants from Australian Continuous Improvement Group and Rhona and Elaine, and focuses on planning and continuous improvement. It has been contextualised for Australia and has been mapped to the Australian Business Excellence Framework.

The Framework and Toolkit focus on planning, service delivery, and continuous improvement. The self-evaluation process demonstrates the continuing relevance, contribution and impact of library services, and provides source information for service improvement. The basic premise of the process is:

1. How are we doing
2. How do we know
3. What are we going to do now

The workgroup identified 5 Key Result Areas that we believe are our core library business:

1. Providing gateways to information
2. Building individuals capability and wellbeing
3. Developing social capital
4. Demonstrating leadership and values
5. Designing, managing and improving systems and processes

After much debate the workgroup agreed on a 5 star score

5 stars – excellent, international best practice

4 stars – major strengths

3 stars – important strengths, weaknesses being actioned

2 stars – satisfactory provision of core services

1 star – limited range of services or weaknesses in core services

The benefit of the methodology is that it allows libraries to measure services in terms of library specifics; identify and understand key strengths; identify areas for improvement; and prioritise areas for action. The Outputs from the process are an improvement plan; a report to stakeholders; benchmarks; training resources; case studies of good practice and a culture of quality.

Following a staff orientation, the first step in the process is to undertake the self evaluation process. We started ours with a general day long workshop involving over 20 staff who formed groups and described what we are doing now in the 5 key result areas, suggested evidence that would support these claims and identified strengths and weaknesses in each KRA. Each group was also asked to assign a Star score for each KRA.

Following this workshop a project group was formed who did further work on the report, gathered the evidence and worked up an improvement plan. This was quite time consuming but we found it well worth it. The next step was external verification of the self-evaluation process and outcomes, conducted by two peers to provide an impartial, independent and thorough review of the library's evidence. This was a very interesting process and both the reviewed and the reviewers found it an intense and rewarding experience. The final part of the process was to close the loop and a presentation was made to those who had participated in the workshop by the peer reviewers.

The Being the Best We Can self-evaluation process has three important features.

Firstly, management and staff conduct evidence gathering and data collection, ensuring stakeholders and staff are successfully engaged.

Secondly, external peer reviewers visit to review the self-evaluation information and discuss it with library management and staff. This review, coupled with the use of a common framework and guide, ensures consistency in the self-evaluations and provides an avenue for sharing best practices between libraries.

Finally, the process always results in a written report and service improvement action plan that can be used to demonstrate the library's performance and point the way to further improvement.

If you would like more information on this you can find it at <http://projects.libraries.vic.gov.au> -

Conclusion

Following the Aarhus unconference in June this year I was chatting on Facebook to one of the participants who said the discussions had been great and “Now it's time to become information warriors and figure that Phoenix to come up with a new business model for libraries.”

I think we are all grappling with this – as the economic downturn has reduced funding for public libraries, the demand for services has been growing. In a hard hitting editorial in the upcoming journal *Aplis* (September 2009) Alan Bundy argues strongly that the issue for public libraries “to paraphrase Bill Clinton, is ‘Their funding, stupid.’” He goes on to say that the return on investment is known – that public libraries have:

- An outstanding return on public investment of conservatively \$5 for every dollar spent – nothing else can demonstrate such a high return
- Very many more users and potential beneficiaries than any other educational, cultural or civic provision
- On a usage basis by far the lowest per capita funding of any educational, cultural or civic provision
- At only about 9c per Australian per day, one third of international best practice public library funding.

When librarians get together at international forums, it's a bit like the story of Goldilocks, some have large bowls of porridge, some have medium bowls and some have very small bowls. But we all have a shared understanding of the vital role we play in our communities.

Alan Bundy quotes British economist W S Jevons who argued:

The main raison d'être of free public libraries, as indeed of public museums, art galleries, parks, halls, public clocks and many other kinds of public works, is the enormous increase of utility which is thereby acquired for the community at a trifling cost.

Jevons wrote this in 1881.

Public librarians need to be information warriors, we need to figure out how we are going to create community led libraries, basing our decisions on evidence and bringing our stakeholders including our staff along with us. We have to fight for these new public institutions that we believe in and in that way we are creating our own future and our own agenda.

Thankyou for the opportunity to present this paper, I am very sorry that I can't be there with you all – I hope that you all have a wonderful IFLA and I look forward to seeing you again soon.