

Community Connection: developing a public library's collection and services from the outside in.

The following paper looks at the development of Kogarah Library service in Sydney, Australia since 2005 from the perspectives of Linda Heald, the Coordinator of Collection and Cultural Services and Mark Norman, Library and Cultural Services Manager. It reflects five years of dramatic change to the structure and ethos of the library service which has brought about a library that is focussed on its connection to its community in the first instance, and is then developing the areas of traditional library service from this as a starting place. It is, in effect, developing services from the outside in (allowing its more traditional services to reflect the needs and diversity of the population of the Kogarah local government area in Sydney, Australia.)

Linda

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 more recently, marketing, done primarily through posters, flyers, bookmarks, newsletters and web pages. Up to five years ago, this was also how it was done at Kogarah Library - traditional library services, with some specialist staff providing a few regular programs and events that were in addition to their primary library role, and 'marketing' library services through clip art flyers and posters.

Mark

Opportunities arose in 2005 when Council endorsed three new directions for the library: 1) library services were brought together with other Community Services under one manager 2) building of a new library as part of the Kogarah Town Square redevelopment; and 3) the inclusion of a large multi-purpose community/exhibition space within the new library. These three directions were the impetus for reviewing the structure and ethos of Kogarah Library Services. Council's direction, community feedback, and the new building, forged the establishing of the Library and Cultural Services unit.

The library structure shifted from having all senior staff reporting to the manager to three teams with clear areas of responsibility – two of the teams, Collection Management and IT, covering acquisitions and collection maintenance and Central and Branch Services, covering circulation and reference, were formed from existing staff; and a new team, Community and Cultural Services, was formed to develop links between the library and the community.

In order for the library to remain relevant, our thinking, planning and focus had to shift from books, loans, reference enquiries and controlling noise, to intentionally making connections into the community - to work from the outside in, with all the diverse cultural, socio-economic and educational facets of the community.

Boaden and Clement¹ note that a "seamless and flexible integration of cultural spaces ...and programs ... increase community access and participation to foster education and lifelong learning as well as a sense of identity and community cohesion." Recognising that Council had invested heavily in the Kogarah Library and Cultural Centre, and that we had an opportunity here to change the dynamic of traditional library services, we began exploring how we might best deliver on the opportunities that a new building and the new team structure had created for us.

Linda

The brief I was given when I started as Team Leader, Community and Cultural Services at Kogarah Library in 2007 was to 'connect the library with the community'. It took 12 months of experimenting and listening to the community to get the idea that connecting the library to the community was more about focusing on their interests and information requirements in an ongoing way, than providing a lot of one-off interesting events. It took another year to consolidate the processes.

And now, after two years of developing this area, we have added the idea that the development of the collection could also be more intentionally driven by community connection and less by the traditional selection processes.

Significant changes have had to be made to the library's structure and practice in order to achieve this. In this paper we would like to show you how we have turned some traditional approaches around and are working from the outside in, developing a dynamic library service, built around connecting with the community we serve as a starting point.

If we are looking from the outside in, what does the 'outside' look like in the Kogarah LGA²?

Mark

The City of Kogarah is located 15kms south of the Sydney CBD and forms the heart of the St George Region, bounded by the City of Rockdale, the City of Hurstville and the Georges River to the south. The City comprises 17 suburbs. The name "Kogarah" is Aboriginal, meaning "Place of Reeds" and takes its name from the reeds that grew in the inlets along Georges River. The original Aboriginal inhabitants, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation were part of the Dharuk language group and lived in the area around Botany Bay.

The first recorded European visitors to the area were on Cook's voyage in 1770. The first grants of land in the area were taken up in 1808 and throughout the 19th century settlement in the Kogarah area increased slowly with the area remaining primarily agricultural. With the construction in 1884 of the railway line, and the introduction of the steam trams in 1887, the population increased dramatically as the area was opened up to residential development. Kogarah

¹ Boaden, Sue, and Clement, Carina, 2009, *Beyond co-location to convergence - Designing and managing new public library spaces and services*, IFLA Conference, Turin, Italy

² LGA = Local Government Area

was developing into a unique community. On 22 December 1885, Kogarah was proclaimed a Municipality.

The area has grown from a population of 3,892 in 1901, with 96% being either Australian born or born in the United Kingdom, to 53,000 in the 2006 Census, and is now an area of significant diversity in its language, culture and religion (over 37% of residents were born overseas). Approximately 21% of residents speak only English at home.

On 1 April 2009, the Kogarah Municipality was proclaimed a City and is now known as the City of Kogarah.³

Linda

Given the changes, we had to look at what sort of library service would connect with this community.

What did we have to work with?

Kogarah has two branch libraries as well as the main Library and Cultural Centre. It has 27.8 equivalent full time staff, a total collection of 110,918 items, and loans 411,277 items per year. The library has a membership of 32,923 and a budget of \$3,119,337. So, within the resources we had, we set about looking at new possibilities for the library service.

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 has been to present the library in a new light and names such as *Information Resources Centre*, *Cybrary*, *Ideas Store*, and let's not forget the *Interactive Learning Centre*⁴ have sought to express the idea that the library is new and different. But when the delivery of the service or the structure of the library did not significantly change from the traditional forms, it became more of a passing trend than a new approach to library services.

Mark

The word *library* has such a strong resonance with the vast majority of people, no matter what their background. But history is showing us that what happens within the library is more important than any rebranding of an edifice which still has its services locked in traditional modes of delivery and focus.

Public libraries are grappling with the need to change the way they see themselves within their community. The idea of the library as a community's "third place"⁵ has been embraced by many libraries. Community "places" are being designed and built and we are seeing libraries, museums and galleries morphing into converged spaces and services. Oldenburg's "third places" provide a neutral space where members of a community can gather, interact, or just 'be'. In contrast to a number of other third places, where there is

³ Kogarah City Council, 2010, *Kogarah 2020 Community Strategic Plan*, page 14

⁴ ABC TV, 2010, *The Librarians* television series

⁵ Ray Oldenburg, 1991, *The Great Good Place*, New York: Marlowe & Company

usually a prime focus for 'gathering' - sporting clubs, churches, gyms, pubs, theatres, cinemas or music events - libraries, museums and galleries are developing new roles and services in addition to their prime role of managing collections - be they library collections, or collections that have artistic, historical, or scientific importance. With our first place being home, and our second place being work, school or university, "third places" allow people to explore their interests or join with others with shared interests. Oldenburg sees third places as being at the heart of a community's social vibrancy.

The impact on Kogarah Council of the third place/community hub concept has been extensive. Since the completion of the new Library and Cultural Centre in 2005, nearly 1.5 million people have visited. The organisational restructure of the library service paved the way for a converged space containing traditional library services with cultural and community services.

There was significant growth in this period.

From 2004 to 2009, the annual operating budget doubled and the staffing establishment was increased by seven FTE⁶ staff. Over the same period of time, visits increased by 196%, attendance at programs increased by 389%, and loans increased by 137%.

While the new building and the new three team structure did deliver increases in membership, programs, attendance, and loans, the teams quietly became disparate silos. Some of the long-standing staff in the Collection Management and IT, and Central and Branch Services teams believed that the members of the 'new' Community and Cultural Services were removed from the 'real' work of the library because they were not regularly rostered onto the Loans or Information desks. At the same time, some staff from the Community and Cultural Services team thought they were not being supported by others from a more conservative, traditional library background.

It was not a settled time for the library - during a three year period, over 50% of staff resigned - some because they did not agree with the direction in which the restructured service was heading. However, each resignation gave us an opportunity to re-examine staff roles and responsibilities. When recruiting, we were open to selecting the best candidate for the position, rather than a candidate with library qualifications (first) and library experience (second). In some instances we selected new staff that had suitable experience from another field, and had just decided to undertake library studies. We were looking for 'best fit' for a new and developing culture, rather than years of 'library' experience.

Linda

Over the same period, this new team of 5.8 EFT staff delivered around 690 programs and events each year and brought over 17,000 people into the library. It was clearly a time of dramatic change. And a time when we were continually developing and imagining what the library service could look like.

⁶ FTE = full time equivalent, from 20.7 to 27.8 staff

Mark

The brief I was given when I started was to review the structure established in 2005 to coincide with the opening of the new Library and Cultural Centre; improve inter-team cooperation; and build on the events and programs calendar developed over the preceding 12 months. A representative team, the Review the Review team, was established, and over a period of ten months we explored all areas of the current organisational structure, our services, staffing levels, job descriptions, budgets and strategic planning. We also tried to shift our thinking from libraries as "transactional places, to becoming creative community hubs and places of participation and creation and learning."⁷

Concurrent with our internal review, the Southern Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (SSROC) called all 16 council library managers together and suggested a number of cooperative projects be investigated to determine if councils could save funding through consortia purchases, technologies and services; and improve cooperation between libraries. The suggested projects were - one library management system (LMS), one library card, one RFID system, a shared casual staffing pool, and outsourcing the selection, cataloguing and end processing of library collections. Amongst the 16 SSROC libraries, some managers focused on areas of interest to their libraries such as a shared LMS, one RFID supplier, and exploring outsourcing the selection, cataloguing and end processing of library collections; and some were not interested, for various reasons, in exploring any of the proposed projects.

In order to respond to the challenges SSROC had placed before us, Kogarah's Review team began exploring the possible benefits and risks of outsourcing both the LMS, and the selection, cataloguing and end processing of our library collections. It was eventually recommended, and endorsed, to outsource the LMS and the management of acquisition of library materials, if the SSROC tendering process delivered improved services to Kogarah for similar or less budget considerations.

What did these two projects provide to Kogarah's Library and Cultural Services? An opportunity to reflect - once again here was opportunity to look at how we could use our resources to extend our connections with our community. Through outsourcing services, came staff hours which could be redirected into other areas.

For some staff it seemed 'obvious' and 'logical' that responsibility for the outsourced collection management and IT/LMS services should move to the Central and Branch Services team as this team lends, shelves and directs customers to the collection, and assists customers with IT/LMS related services. My view, although possibly somewhat unorthodox, was if the answer seemed obvious and logical, that in itself was enough reason to explore other alternatives.

⁷ Mackenzie, C, 2009, *Emerging themes for public libraries looking forward*, IFLA Conference, Milan, Italy, page 4

By establishing representative teams from across the libraries and from all levels of staff, there was over time a shift from thinking operationally to thinking strategically. The majority of staff had never been encouraged in previous structures to think further than operating on a daily roster, trying to keep the customer satisfied. Working in these Review teams gave participants the opportunity to learn, question, act as conduits between the team and the rest of the staff, be questioned by their colleagues, raise issues, present arguments, and challenge the senior library staff. We also looked at the future of libraries. Could we accept that books and writing were technologies with limited lifespans? Would verbal recognition developments in PC technologies bring an end to literacy by 2050?⁸ How will a library serve a verbal society? It was an exciting time to explore our views on a future for Kogarah's Library and Cultural Services.

The outcome of the review in 2009 resulted in a second restructure which moved responsibility for the development and maintenance of the collection to the Community and Cultural Services Team, which was renamed the Collection and Cultural Services Team.

It became clearer that the 'obvious' and 'logical' would have kept Kogarah on a traditional path of providing library services, with cultural services 'on the side' - as in '*would you like fries with that?*' And more than likely encourage the continuation of silos, albeit now two instead of three silos. By integrating the cultural thrust of the overall Library and Cultural Services with programming and planning, cultural events, and collection development, we felt we could better build relationships with our community by inviting them to actively participate in all that we could and should do - which included building collections the community wanted, rather than us providing collections we instinctively (or professionally) felt they might, or should, enjoy. We needed to form a partnership with our community that would build on and respond to the cultural identity of the area, acknowledging that people "...seek engagement. They want enjoyment, but they also want stimulus and the challenge of new ideas and new ways of seeing and doing things."⁹

Cox¹⁰ talks about 'social capital' as being the process whereby people establish connections, or networks, trust, and cooperation. At Kogarah, we are aiming to connect communities with a diversity of cultures, stories, history, art, music, life experiences and thereby build social capital through the Library and Cultural Services.

Linda

Whilst this was developing, my team was still exploring what community connection looked like for us.

The Bookends Scenarios was a project exploring the possible futures for NSW public libraries in the year 2030. Personalisation was seen as an important influence in libraries and could include "active participation in design

⁸ Frey, T, 2005, *The Future of Libraries – Beginning the Great Transformation*, Da Vinci Institute, page 3

⁹ Arts Council England, 2010, *Cultural Capital – A Manifesto for the Future*, page 15

¹⁰ Cox, E, 1995, *A Truly Civil Society*, ABC, Sydney, Australia

and provision where users of public services become co-designers and co-producers".¹¹ Co-designers and co-producers? How do we turn our community members into this? How do we make and maintain contact with the diverse groups in the community so this can happen?

It was not enough to run an event, pack up the chairs, enter the stats and move on to the planning of the next one. In my first year I followed this pattern, which was the one set by the person before me, and I found that at the end of the year all I could do was start all over again with lots of different one-off events and ideas which made the library a dynamic place, for those times, but seemed to have little ongoing impact.

It seemed to me that if the library could build a place for itself in the community's view as a place where they could consistently get certain services or participate in events that enriched life, then we would at least be 'riding the wave' as it were, as opposed to bobbing up and down on different waves. We needed continuity in our approach. Connection appeared to me to be based in establishing core principles that underpinned all our programs.

Let me tell you about Amanda. She's one of a group of intellectually disabled young adults who come to Kogarah Library for a Storytime and books session. In her first session with us she kept her eyes down, her body language was closed, and she wouldn't engage with anyone. Six weeks later she was smiling and reacting to the storyteller. The staff found out that she loved horses so they would show her the books about horses and her face would light up. We'd finally connected with this member of our community.

Sudha had recently come to Australia and had very little English. She joined in with the knitters at the Library's Annual Knit In event (a gathering of knitters who make squares which are sewn into blankets for charity) and then joined the monthly knitting group. The other members of the group were delighted to help her with her English and she still finds the group an important place of connection with her community.

Peter's mother brings him to the library to get some help with his reading. We've established a Homework Zone where Year 11 & 12 students from the local high school come and assist students with reading and other homework tasks. These are our very special homework helpers. These students are connecting with the children in their community in meaningful ways.

Hazel has grandchildren in South Australia. She wants to be a part of their lives and so came to the email classes at the library to learn about the internet and start emailing. Through the library's workshops, she is now connecting to her grandchildren across the country.

These people have in common, a connection to ongoing programs. In looking around at what our library could do in terms of resources, the interests of our community, staff skills and time available, I started with four core areas that I

¹¹ State Library of NSW, 2009, *Bookends Scenarios: alternative futures for the Public Library Network in NSW in 2030*, page 15

felt we could build our events and programs around, focusing our energies on these areas to start to get some momentum going. These could be a variety of things, but for our library they were:

1. storytelling
2. literacies
3. lifelong learning
4. cultural awareness

The essential element was to focus events in specific areas, rather than a scatter-gun approach in the hope that something would hit the target.

Let me show you how the process works for one of these areas - storytelling.

Like all libraries, we had children's storytelling programs. We know and promote the value of telling stories to children to broaden their world and excite their imaginations. But there had to be more. It is something that libraries do really well - we collect stories - made up stories, true stories, stories on film and audio. So I looked for other opportunities in story.

We invite people to share their stories at events, to speak about their crafts, their lives and experiences. Many events that we do are story-based - whether it's someone speaking from their travel experiences or talking about something from their own life experience. Sometimes we record it as oral history for our collection and we often invite authors to talk about how they write their stories.

And then there's telling the story in a different way - for example, workshops on comedy writing, manga and hip hop verse. There are groups around a common interest such as knitting and quilting where the group members come and share their stories.

There were local history possibilities - oral history, events where people tell their stories from the wars, from the depression. Our Local Studies Historian connected with local historical societies. So far they have been telling their stories to adults, but we are planning to arrange with local primary schools to have some sessions with the children. We can then build the local studies collection by adding these stories.

However, story connections can also be crafted. We have done some experimentation with storytelling styles. The library runs a series of youth competitions based around giving the young people of the Kogarah area an opportunity to express their stories in different ways. The program has the broad name of Audacious Imaginings and won an award in the NSW Public Libraries Marketing Awards in 2009. Through a number of competitions across the year young people are invited to tell their stories in prose, manga drawings, hip hop rhyme and art in various mediums. The winners are exhibited in the library's exhibition space so the stories can be read by the community. Through this ongoing program, way we are aiming to make our

service one that provides "a positive environment for learning and fun, making the most of young people's energy and enthusiasm."¹²

We are listening to the stories that we hear from our community and shaping events and programs to respond to those. In our overall programming, story connections also have to be nurtured and there is an intentional continuum of storytelling, story-catching and story-creating activities through the programs offered for age groups from 0-100 yrs at Kogarah.

Storytelling, story-catching and story-creating give us great connection points with the community and to the community narratives in these ways.

Once we see all these diverse areas come together into a storytelling stream, it makes planning easier and it also allows a momentum to build. Next year we will be bringing a Reader Development person into this. The role will be to assist people to read across other story areas, connecting people to areas of our collection that they have not experienced. It also means that we are working across the various age and ethnic groups in a unifying way, rather than work in demographic silos.

We have taken the same approach for the other three areas - literacies, lifelong learning, and cultural awareness.

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 are all used to assist in the selection process. As the network of community contacts grows, the possibilities to utilise their expertise and understand the needs of a wide range of community members increases. Increased community connection means that there are increased opportunities for the library to listen to its community.

Mark

We are constantly evaluating and where necessary, changing our programs and services - which runs a little contrary to traditional thinking where once you had a service or collection in place, it stayed there for a very long time. At present we are planning to do a major review our Reference services, of our Local Studies area, and of the layout of our entire collection. We continue to develop our approach because our relationship to our community has to remain dynamic. Implementing and expecting change is now a part of the culture at Kogarah.

How do we make sure we are responding to our community? We have traditionally used the library's website links to encourage customers to provide feedback to us, suggestions for purchase, compliments and criticisms. As an extension of this, Kogarah Library is taking a lead role with seven other libraries in developing a Customer Satisfaction Survey that will be distributed

¹² Arts Council England, 2010, *Cultural Capital – A Manifesto for the Future*, page 12

to all households in the seven Sydney LGAs, as well as to all library customers visiting any of the libraries. The survey will seek feedback from active customers and lapsed/non-users. The responses will then provide each library with location specific qualitative data, as well as benchmarked data from across all the libraries.

Within the libraries there are forms for suggestions for purchase, compliments and complaints, and requests for inter-library loans. At each event and program, staff informally talk with participants about the library's services and the customer's library experience.

We have started to use focus groups as a means of assessing and building our collections. The Chinese Friendship Group and the Chinese Focus Group assist staff in the review of Chinese language books, magazines, DVDs and CDs provided by outsourced suppliers. Their feedback is passed on to the suppliers in order to improve their understanding of our Chinese community's interests and literary preferences.

The three English language BookChat groups also work with library staff in the same way - reviewing the collection and providing suggestions for purchase.

The Library Youth Services Officer works closely with nine high schools in the LGA¹³ to both advise students and teachers of the services provided by the library and seek feedback on what they think we should be adding to our portfolio of services and to the collection. In working with the teacher-librarian network in the area, we are able to communicate our services to the schools. Forums with youth are held on a quarterly basis in each of the libraries in an event called The LINK. These are valuable opportunities for the Library Youth Services Officer to connect with our community's youth.

Evidence based practice shifts our thinking from what, as professionals, we think our community wants or needs, to "service delivery...increasingly being informed by community consultation and engagement and careful analysis and evaluation..."¹⁴ The customer's library 'experience' will become a key measurement of success, far outweighing standard questions such as 'did you find the book you wanted?'

Linda

We have a diverse and interesting community and most of our programs come from people coming into the library wanting to share their skill, or from local networks that we have tapped into. Our structure allows me to take up most of the offers because we are structured with a team whose primary responsibility is to connect the library with the community.

¹³ Local Government Area

¹⁴ Mackenzie, C, 2009, *Emerging themes for public libraries looking forward*, IFLA Conference, Milan, Italy, page 5

With the addition of collection development to our responsibilities I am confident that with the imagination and skills represented in the team, we can continue to find ways of connecting with our community, working from the outside in.

Linda Heald

Collection and Cultural Services Coordinator

Mark Norman

Manager Library and Cultural Services

Kogarah City Council, NSW, Australia

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