

INFORMATION LITERACY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A COVERT OPERATION

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ABSTRACT

The participative and collaborative technologies of Web 2.0 are being utilised by libraries in their information literacy programs. Supporting independent learning and literacy are core public library roles, along with providing physical and virtual places for social and community interaction. This paper considers the application of Web 2.0 tools to public library's information literacy programs, under the aegis of reader development. Web 2.0 tools can be used to support reader development, including by the provision of information and advice; by encouraging reading with recommendations and reviews; and by facilitating access to library and information resources. The relevance of reader development to information literacy, through the Web 2.0 environment, is enunciated with discussion of fostering lifelong learning, writing and digital citizenship skills; encouraging reflection as part of community; and assisting deep learning, despite the often casual and relaxed environment of social networking technologies. Public libraries aim to form connections with the local community, while facilitating broad access to library services. A blog as a virtual community place can have meaning for a geographically local community, as well as for the wider online community. Information literacy is commonly seen, within the library and information profession, as the concern of academic libraries. However, lifelong learning is both an integral element of information literacy, and a core concern of public libraries. Professional staff in the public library sphere are well placed to recognise and use reader development opportunities, especially those utilising Web 2.0 tools, to support the building of their customers' information literacy skills.

1. DOES INFORMATION LITERACY MATTER IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

1.1. What is the big deal with information literacy?

To be information literate you must know "when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner." [1]. Information literacy is one of the literacies critical to enabling a participative citizenship that is adaptive to rapid social change and engaged in lifelong learning [2]. Because of the benefits of information literacy, socially and

economically, ALIA issued the *Statement of Information Literacy for all Australians* in 2006, which urges that “as a matter of priority, and at all levels, library and information services professionals embrace a responsibility to promote and facilitate the development of the information literacy of their clients” [3]. With the importance of the knowledge economy driving pressure from within governments and professional bodies for libraries to facilitate the acquisition of effective information practices [4] the question is, what should public libraries be doing?

1.2. What is the role of public libraries?

ALIA’s *Statement on Information Literacy for all Australians* makes it clear that *all* library and information professionals are responsible, including public library staff. And as Jack Goodman, the CEO of Tutoring Australasia wrote in 2009, public libraries have moved on from being seen only as repositories of information, to also being “about sharing information and opening opportunities for learning, community engagement and social capital building” [5]. “Libraries are lifelong learning centres” and identified in ALIA’s *Statement on libraries and literacies* as “part of the solution” for improving national literacies. Supporting independent, lifelong learning and literacy are core public library roles, along with providing physical and virtual places for social and community interaction. But information literacy is commonly seen, within the library and information profession, as the concern of academic libraries. In 2008 Jane Harding noted that there is little mention of the role of public libraries in the literature on information literacy [6].

1.3. What is holding us back?

This is not to say that public libraries are not facilitating information literacy at all, but there are issues with the perception of what a public library’s role is and should be, both from the community and from within the profession. One challenge is that public libraries are not a formal part of the education system, especially relevant because people learn best when they are engaged in meaningful learning tasks. Harding recorded that the approach by public libraries to information literacy has tended to be *ad hoc*, often with a focus on skills training, not evaluation and critical thinking. There is no denying that information retrieval and digital access skills are important and that they underpin information literacy, but information literacy is more than the sum of its necessary skills [7]. Jennifer Sharkey described information literacy as “a process and a change in thinking, rather than a set of skills” [8]. Harding, Chan and Dudley [9] and others have called for a national framework to enable a more strategic and successful approach for public libraries to information literacy.

Even if they are able to apply digital skills and confidently navigate the online information environment, public library customers operating in this environment are likely to demonstrate the “postmodern condition” identified among students by Harley, Dreger & Knobloch, and “characterised by consumerism, superficiality and knowledge fragmentation” [10]. In effect they may not know what they *need*, but they *want* their information provided quickly and easily and they don’t care to know where it comes from, or how it gets there. It is partly this desire for speed and simplicity that renders public library customers resistant to more formal channels of information literacy instruction. From a community perspective, customers use public libraries mostly for their recreational reading and their social and recreational information needs, and they may be resistant to the idea of being *taught* information literacy.

1.4. Why it needs to be covert

Judith Peacock, writing about QUT's integrated information literacy practices, described the need for a "robust 'viral' model of information literacy" [11]. This is a very useful piece of imagery for those looking to further information literacy in public libraries – if customers are resistant to formalised learning then librarians need to adopt a covert approach using a viral model. Professional staff in the public library sphere are well placed to recognise and use reference and reader development opportunities to support the building of their customers' information literacy skills, if they are open to the idea that every reference query or reader advisory conversation presents a learning opportunity.

Even more exciting are the opportunities created by the utilisation of Web 2.0 tools. The social media technologies of Web 2.0 can help public libraries inform, without being didactic, because the very nature of these web-based technologies is casual and interactive. So, as long as public libraries are alert to the possibilities of using Web 2.0 tools to support reader development, facilitate informed access, and encourage digital citizenship skills, we can also support information literacy.

2. WEB 2.0 TOOLS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

2.1 What's gone before?

Some great things have been happening with the participative and collaborative technologies of Web 2.0 in public libraries over the last six years. Experimentation with the application of the technologies, and learning from colleagues who have taken the lead, has seen libraries "enhancing access to collections and services through collaboration and participation with clients" [12]. Identified benefits include increasing clients' interaction with the library and improving client centred services [13].

Lynette Lewis from Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service has written about their very effective Learning 2.0 program which has been delivered to librarians across Victoria and, in collaboration with the State Library of Victoria and the School Library Association has been rolled out to schoolchildren and teachers there as well [14]. Learning 2.0's influence was discussed at the last ALIA conference where librarians from Victorian public libraries spoke about their creative implementation of a number of Web 2.0 tools including Flickr and Google Maps mash ups, blogging, using online polls for feedback, using del.icio.us and RSS feeds, screencasts and podcasts [15]. The application of Web 2.0 to rural public libraries in overcoming distance accessibility issues and encouraging community involvement and collaboration has also been explored [16].

2.2 Where it can lead

At the Gold Coast City Council library service, we have an enthusiastic Online Futures Librarian, following on and extending the work done by the previous librarian, in applying Web 2.0 tools for customer engagement and professional development. But I would like to focus on our online book club blog, *book coasters*, and the potential that it has, along with other library blogs, to foster information literacy through reader development. Blogs are about two things - conversation and knowledge sharing [17]. A book club blog presents the opportunity to converse with customers about

books in a way that is supportive of reader development. Knowledge sharing, through the blog, is then the nexus for reader development and information literacy opportunities.

3. MORE THAN YOUR NEXT GREAT BOOK

3.1. What is the big deal with reader development?

The 2008 report by Friends of Library Australia (FOLA), *A nation reading for life: the challenge for Australia's public libraries*, explained that reader development is not just about "providing encouragement, information and advice to readers but ... also includes a range of physical, marketing and promotion, and other mechanisms to encourage reading and facilitate access to reading resources" [18]. Reader development supports and encourages readers to think critically about what they are reading and to be able to discuss their reading, articulating the appeal characteristics of what they have read and explaining why they did or did not enjoy it. Library facilitated reading groups or book clubs are one of the forums for readers to learn and apply these skills [19].

3.2. How reader development supports information literacy

It is easy to see the links between reference enquiries in a public library and the opportunity for information professionals to facilitate information literacy, after all reference is about bringing "people and ideas and knowledge together to meet an individual's information needs and desires" [20]. Forging this connection, between the content and the client, is central to the role of library and information professionals operating in an online environment [21]. It is what we do. But to many librarians, readers' advisory or reader development is just about helping the public library customer find the next novel to enjoy. It is certainly about that, but there is much more to it.

I have already touched briefly on the relevance of thinking critically about books and articulating these thoughts in relation to a book club. Communication is vital for information literacy. Work being done on applying "a possible information literacy framework for public libraries" [22] using Prague's Frame, identifies communication skills, and the ability to communicate or guide others on the same question, as components in community information literacy. "Reading is more than just literacy" Fran Inkster noted [23], expanding on the recreational, informative, social and emotional needs that reading can address and outlining the positive influence it can have on building social capital and community. Reader development supports information literacy in these ways, fostering an appreciation for reading that underpins lifelong learning and encouraging reflection and critical thinking. When reader development is progressed through a social environment, such as a book club, it further builds a sense of community. When this is undertaken online in, for example, a book club blog, writing and digital citizenship skills are also built.

3.3. Using Web 2.0 for reader development

The FOLA report encourages public libraries to "reassert books and reading as their core business and brand" but I do not believe that this can only be done at the expense of engagement with Web 2.0 technologies. Many librarians have recognised the benefits to themselves, for professional

development [24], and to their customers of using blogs, wikis and RSS feeds to enhance reader development [25]. In short, “using Web 2.0 tools to reach, engage and inform their users”[26]. The UK government’s 2003 strategy for libraries, *Framework for the Future* (F4F), listed the three key activities for public libraries as the promotion of reading and informal learning, providing access to digital skills and services and undertaking measures to tackle social inclusion, build community identity and develop citizenship [27]. Discussing the practical application of F4F, Penny Garrod pointed out that these three activities are, necessarily, inter-dependent, and emphasised the need to link reader development to the library’s online services [28].

An online book club, like the Gold Coast library service’s *book coasters*, ticks all three of the F4F key activity boxes in a way that demonstrates the usefulness of Web 2.0 technologies for supporting public library information literacy programs. It promotes reading and informal learning in a way that is deliberately casual, with a light, conversational tone, whether encouraging reading with book recommendations and reviews or discussing genres and themes. This helps the organisation of the library “sound human” [29] and steers the blog away from formalised, didactic instruction. It provides access to digital skills and services, though the interconnectedness of the online environment and encouraging the exploration of information resources through links. And it helps build community identity.

4. FORMING COMMUNITIES

4.1. Communities online and out there

Like a lot of the Web 2.0 library developments, an online book club blog is a natural extension of what public libraries are already doing, a technological facet added to our core business of customer-centred service provision in the context of our communities. A blog such as *book coasters* is just another way to encourage reading and to encourage critical discussion of what has been read. The library blog is a means of facilitating discussion which engenders a sense of belonging to a community of people with the same interest in reading. This clear link between book groups and reader development and libraries contributing to social inclusion has been discussed by Fran Inkster [30].

A blog, as a virtual community place, can have meaning for a geographically local community, as well as for the wider online community. The benefit of a blog based reading group is that it extends beyond the limitation of the client base made up only of those community members who use the physical library, as mentioned by Harding [31]. On the Gold Coast we have used local, library based advertising to promote *book coasters* and enhance community identification with the service, but its presence online means that we have had discussions about books with people geographically scattered across the world. Feeding this back into the local community helps build a commonality of interest and inclusion.

4.2. Supporting information literate communities

The FOLA report is not alone in recognising the unique role that public libraries hold in their communities. Recognition that information literacy is “a culturally situated phenomenon based in

the way communities construct meaning and belonging” [32] and that public libraries, as part of their communities, also have an important role to play in supporting and developing information literacy is less widespread. The designation of 2012 as the National Year of Reading gives public libraries an ideal opportunity to consciously work towards linking reader development and information literacy and to overtly skill their staff in using reader development to support information literacy, even if they are doing so covertly to ensure improved community engagement. The easy availability and applicability of Web 2.0 technologies to support that work should not be ignored.

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