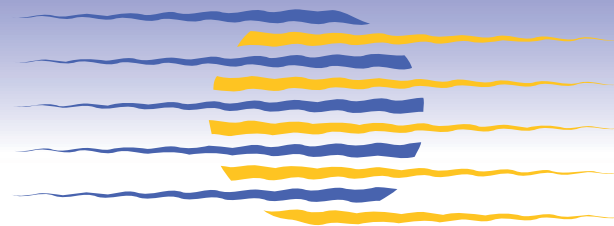


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challenging ideas

**Looking West to Learn What Works:
How 500+ U.S. Libraries Challenge Tradition to Win Back a Key Demographic**

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Abstract

This paper will look at a trend at U.S. public libraries toward delivering innovative services and amenities that attract and retain young adult patrons and what lessons may be applicable to Australia's public libraries.

The young adult demographic is, according to many public libraries' circulation statistics, the least served group in the local community. Yet hundreds of public libraries across America, plus a handful in Australia, have begun reversing this trend with innovative services that go beyond the traditional library vision. What's their secret?

First, they have identified what young adults want from the library. Research has shown that the primary reason young adults patronise libraries is to pursue education-related activities – homework assignments, research projects, and exam preparation. Yet many libraries continue to take a narrow view of their role in supporting this core educational activity. The traditional view is that the nuts and bolts of education should be left to the schools while the library supplies a study centre with access to reference material.

But students demand – and deserve -- more. Some innovative libraries have taken the next step, offering the educational equivalent of reference experts -- teachers staffing homework centres. Some at the technology vanguard are offering live, one-to-one homework assistance via the Internet. In the U.S., thousands of students use such services nightly. Others have built study lounges to encourage learning in more comfortable environments. This paper will evaluate these and other strategies in terms of their applicability and appropriateness to Australian libraries.

Introduction

What do children and young adults want from their public libraries? And are they finding their needs met with any consistency by Australia's public libraries? The 10-20 year old demographic – young adults, teenagers, high school and university and TAFE students – is one of the least served when we compare them to young children, early readers and their parents, retirees and other, older members of the community. No one would argue with the importance of encouraging reading at an early age, but what happens once our young readers hit the later primary school years and high school? Libraries have tried to address some of the needs of youth through websites targeting research needs and through rostering youth staff at peak homework times.

But is this enough? Could libraries be doing more?

Of course they can and should, particularly when we consider what these patrons want most when they come to public libraries. Research conducted in the United States and corroborated anecdotally in Australia tells us that students in public libraries are there primarily to work on homework, exam preparation, research projects and, of course, to socialise. Moreover, other research tells us that students like to use technology to learn, particularly the Internet, and that one of their preferred forms of communication is "chat" or online, instant messaging. Given these facts, are libraries doing as much as they can to support the needs of young adults?

Homework, by definition, takes place outside the bounds of the school day. Schools assign homework, and students complete it during hours when schools are closed. Libraries are in a unique position to support homework, to expand and solidify their role in the community by providing this essential learning support and, ultimately, to make a difference in young people's lives.

This paper will focus primarily on a solution to the "homework challenge" that is available and affordable to all libraries, not just those in major urban centres or with large and flexible budgets. With the right approach, even small, regional and rural libraries can offer homework services to their communities that will build deeper and more meaningful relationships with patrons, not to mention better educational outcomes for participating students.

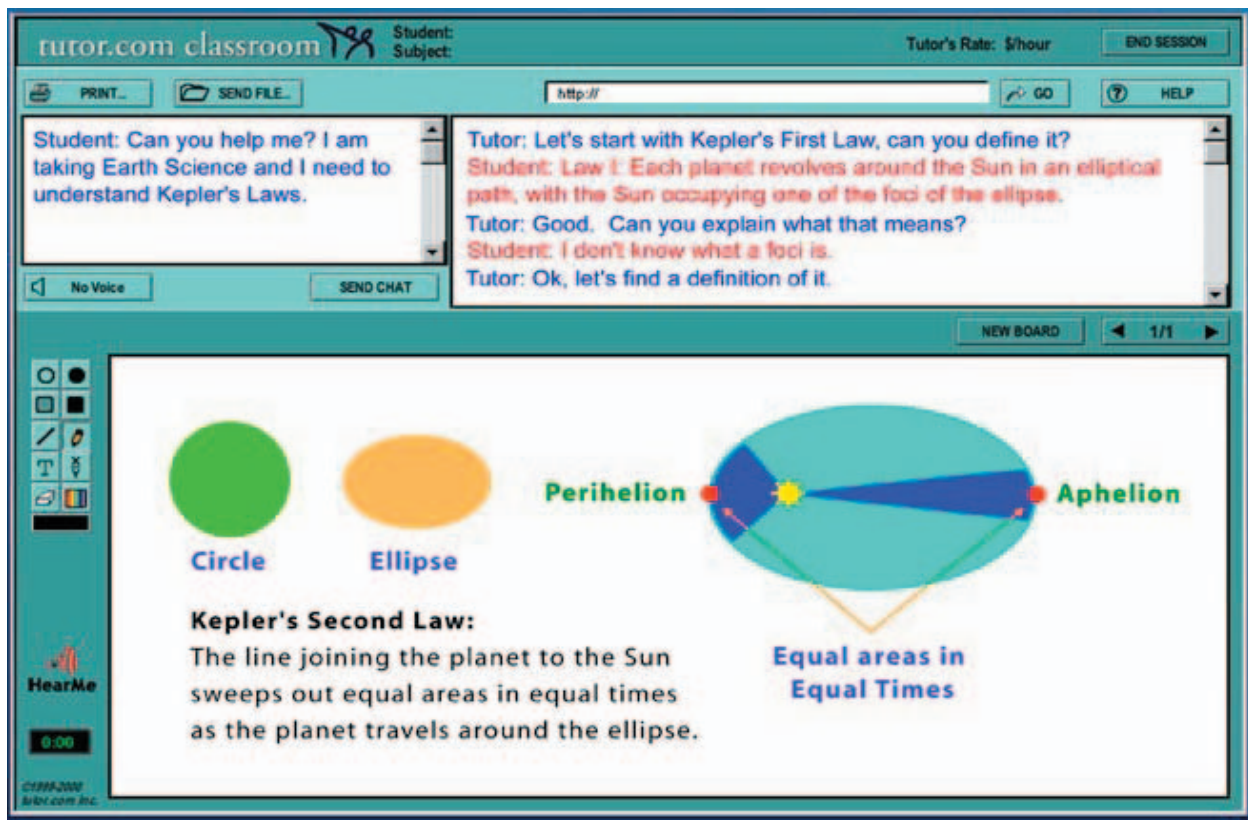
Background Research

During the past half decade, a substantial amount of research has been conducted in the United States by and on behalf of public libraries to identify young adult patron needs and how libraries can best go about serving them. Amongst the most important studies conducted was by the California State Library in 2001, which concluded that the primary reason teenagers (13-18 year olds) visit the local public library is to conduct research for school projects and to complete homework assignments.¹ At the same time researchers like Cindy Mediavilla of UCLA were starting to study homework centres at libraries, analysing what makes for a successful centre,

and how libraries should go about developing plans to assist student patrons with this critical activity. By the early part of this decade, a substantial part of the public library community in the United States had come to the conclusion that homework assistance fits with the library's mission to provide equal access to information and support for the educational pursuits of all members of the community.

As a result of this study The California State Library took action. Specifically, it found a solution that could bring homework assistance to libraries across the state as well as measurable outputs, including analysis of outcomes from the service. Their solution was a pilot program with an online tutoring company, Tutor.com, that delivered live, one-to-one tutoring in mathematics, science, English and social studies via the Internet. (Full disclosure: An author of this paper served at the time on the senior management committee of Tutor.com and is now the founder and chief executive officer of Tutoring Australasia, an Australian company that delivers a comparable service to Australian and New Zealand libraries.) The service was initially made available at 46 libraries and was funded through a federal grants program.

Why did the California State Library focus on an online solution to its homework need? A deeper understanding of the way online tutoring works will answer the question. Live Homework Help, as the service is known, delivers access to curriculum experts during weekday afternoons and evenings via a simple Web-based interface. Students simply indicate their year level and the subject they need help with and are immediately connected to an expert tutor for up to an average of 20 minutes of live, one-to-one assistance in an Online Classroom. In the classroom student and tutor communicate in a range of ways. They can type (chat) to each other, much as they would with friends using software such as MSN Messenger or ICQ. They can also use a shared whiteboard space to draw graphs, type equations, and solve problems together. Voice over IP enables student and tutor to speak to each other over both standard, dial-up and faster Internet connections. The classroom also allows both student and tutor to share Web pages, other electronic files and to print their entire session.



The Online Classroom

From the library's perspective, there are a number of advantages to a system of online tutoring. First, the service requires minimal support by and training of librarians. Library staff need to know how the service works, when it is available, and be able to direct students to use it. But they don't need to identify and train tutors to provide the service or worry about a drain on valuable technology resources. For libraries that already have experience running face-to-face homework centres, the cost involved in staffing such services is well known. Many libraries struggle to find qualified tutors as well as physical space and funding for such services. Online tutoring also offers a service to a wider range of students (Yr 4 to Yr12) as well as a depth of subject specialisation which face-to-face tutoring cannot match. Online tutoring can easily

supplement and extend face-to-face homework centres and, at the same time, provide a "virtual" homework centre experience at venues with no existing curriculum support for young adults.

The benefits to libraries of online tutoring services go even deeper. The service helps libraries build important links with area schools – both public and private – and encourages students to think about the library as a safe and helpful environment for after-school activities. Additional partnering with area community centres and other after school venues serves to establish the library as the focal point for after school educational and learning services. In an age when so much of education is being privatised, from pre-schools for toddlers to coaching colleges for senior high school students, libraries are uniquely positioned to ensure that high

quality educational and technology services are available to all students, regardless of their economic circumstances.

There is another piece to this puzzle that has proved extremely rewarding for the North American libraries that are offering online tutoring to their patrons. Much like the databases with which libraries have become exceedingly familiar over the past three decades, the Live Homework Help service delivers hard data to librarians about usage. Unlike databases, online tutoring data comes in the form of customized, monthly reports that tell librarians how the service is being used, what subjects are popular, the ages of students logging in, satisfaction ratings and even any comments students may have about the service. These reports give librarians a clear picture of the benefits being delivered to students and help them see correlations between their marketing and awareness efforts and student usage and satisfaction.

The series of benefits described above help explain why online, one-to-one tutoring has proved to be such a popular new service amongst North American libraries. In less than half a decade more than 500 libraries have rolled out the service and hundreds of thousands of students are benefiting from Live Homework Help. Typical sessions are rated “very good” to “excellent” by students and more than 95% say the service is making them more confident with their school work and helping to improve their marks. But a critical question remains: How applicable is the situation in the U.S.A. to public libraries in Australia?

It may be easy at this point to highlight the differences between public libraries here and the U.S.A. and conclude that not all lessons learned there are applicable here. Libraries over there, for example, tend to be aggregated into larger “systems,” either city-wide networks or regional consortia which allow them to offer services of a type and scale that is often not replicable in Australia. Moreover, the sheer scale of the population of the United States means libraries that are funded on a per-capita basis are much larger economic entities than their counterparts in Australia.

But the similarities run much deeper than the differences. Every public library in Australia has, in the past decade, accepted its role offering its community free or extremely low cost access to the Internet and the World Wide Web. To their credit, statewide initiatives like NSW.net in New South Wales have assisted libraries with connection and hardware costs, thus bringing access to the ever-growing resources of the Internet to the most remote corners of the country.

Australian public libraries are going well beyond Internet access. In Brisbane, the City Library has established “learning lounges” at two branches that are designed to be comfortable and relaxing venues for technology-based activities. The venues can be reserved by local community groups, businesses and individuals and offer excellent computing facilities. Across New South Wales many libraries offer HSC seminars focused on key subjects senior high school students are revising. These seminars represent an opportunity for local libraries to build links to area schools, recruiting teachers to give the seminars and visiting schools to encourage attendance. Most libraries will tell you these events are extremely well attended, and they normally charge a small attendance fee to defray costs.

Why are events like HSC seminars so popular? The answer is simple. Australian school leaving exams are extremely “high stakes” exams. In fact, there is far greater pressure on Australian students to achieve on such exams than on their American counterparts, where student achievement is measured only partly by exam marks. As a result, homework and exam-focused

services, in general, prove extremely popular at Australian public libraries. The question all of this raises is: Can and should Australia's public libraries do more? We believe the answer is a resounding “yes.” The rest of this paper will deal with the real world experience of Fairfield City Library Service and its implementation of an online tutoring program over the past year-and-a-half. We will share a range of lessons that, on the whole, demonstrate the value of such a service to the community and the “social capital” homework assistance is capable of building.

Case Study: Fairfield City Library Service

In February 2002, Fairfield City Library Service (FCLS) located in Fairfield City in western Sydney, New South Wales, launched a face-to-face homework centre at its Wetherill Park (branch) Library. The service was staffed by two high school teachers and was open two afternoons each week. The service was an immediate success, in no small part due to the extensive promotional efforts made by library staff to raise awareness. Fridge magnets were printed in mass, flyers were distributed to area public schools, and numerous visits were paid to schools by library staff.

At the time of the launch of the homework centre, FCLS also started to explore the possibility of extending the service with an online component. The library could see the demand for homework assistance was far greater than what two school teachers could handle two afternoons a week. Moreover, the service wasn't supporting the needs of older students or students at any of FCLS's four other libraries.

At this point funding was the main hurdle facing the library as senior management had all agreed in pursuing the service should the cost issue be overcome. Anne Hall, the manager of FCLS, gave approval for the library to apply for a Community Development and Support Expenditure Scheme (CDSE) grant. (The CDSE Scheme is a New South Wales initiative that requires local registered clubs to donate a portion of their profits from poker machines back to local community services, including education related services.) In June 2002, FCLS received word that a local club had funded its \$9,600 grant request, and, as a result, Australia's first Live Homework Help program was launched in February 2003.

The Live Homework Help service was used to extend homework assistance to two additional locations, initially the Whitlam (main) Library at Cabramatta and the Fairfield Library. After overcoming some initial technical set up issues the service was officially launched in April 2003 with a grand event featuring the former prime minister and namesake of the library, Gough Whitlam. Communications staff at Fairfield Council put in a substantial effort to ensure a well attended and professionally presented event that featured, in addition to Mr. Whitlam, the mayor of Fairfield Council and several additional councillors, as well as a buffet lunch featuring local cuisine. The results of this event were noteworthy. More than 80 area teachers, librarians, school administrators and journalists attended the event, which featured live demonstrations of the service by area students. In the coming days and weeks, coverage of the event exceeded the library's and council's expectations with articles appearing across local, regional and state-wide newspapers, on commercial and ABC radio.

Meanwhile, students at the libraries continued to use the service on a regular basis and monthly reports delivered statistics that showed the difference it was making in students' lives. These reports played a critical role in FCLS's decision to seek funding for

the service for a second year. (See screen shot below of a typical usage report.) The CDSE Scheme funded the program for the 2003 school year with a \$16,900 grant so that the service could be extended to three branch libraries. To launch the service at the

new libraries FCLS and Tutoring Australasia, the provider of the Live Homework Help service, hosted pizza parties at each branch, all of which were well attended and enthusiastically received.

Tutor.com Report - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by OptusNet

Australasia - FCLS - March, 2004

STUDENTS SERVED	AVERAGE SESSION LENGTH IN MINUTES
81	22.6

SUBJECT	CONNECTED SESSIONS
All Homework Help Mathematics - Algebra	5
All Homework Help Mathematics - Calculus	3
All Homework Help Mathematics - General Mathe	14
All Homework Help Mathematics - Geometry	3
All Homework Help Mathematics - Trigonometry	1
All Homework Help Science - Biology	21
All Homework Help Science - Chemistry	13
All Homework Help Science - Earth Science	4
All Homework Help Science - General Science	9
All Homework Help Science - Physics	2

GRADE LEVEL	CONNECTED SESSIONS
Year 4	5
Year 5	28
Year 6	5
Year 7	5
Year 8	2
Year 9	10
Year 10	4
Year 11	15
Year 12	2

QUESTION	RESPONSE	RESPONSE PERCENTAGE
Glad program is offered	Yes	94.12%
Helping to be more confident	Yes	92.84%
Helping to complete assignments	Yes	79.57%
Helping to improve grades	Yes	84.62%
Would recommend this service to a friend	Yes	86.67%

STUDENTS COMMENTS

what do you think?

it is fun to write to a tutor instead of spending more money to hire a tutor to teach you

its fun and exciting

it was fun

i like it because it wasnt fun and does not use any money and the tutor is very patient and nice

For the coming year, plans are even more ambitious. FCLS is eager to see its homework program expand further to include all five library locations, as well as additional access points throughout the community. These include shelters and refuges for young adults as well as other, technology-enabled venues frequented by students. Finally, the library would like to be able to offer remote access to the service as well, so that students may connect to tutors from home or anywhere they can browse the World Wide Web. Part of FCLS's plan is to move funding for its online tutoring program into the annual budget of the library.

Funding of such programs is obviously a key hurdle that must be overcome, and FCLS is thinking creatively of ways to accomplish this task. In the United States, some libraries have explored an additional avenue; local benefactors, both individuals and corporations, are being identified to fund programs as well. U.S. public libraries are trying to replicate some of the success public and private museums across that nation have had melding taxpayer funding with additional support from private benefactors. As part of their effort, libraries are happy to share some of the awareness and excitement about the service with such financial backers. In New York State, for example, Verizon, the local telephone company, has supported an online tutoring program. This has made for a logical extension of its delivery of Internet access to the public library.

FCLS is just one example of a creative implementation of an online tutoring program. Other options exist and it is important for libraries to recognize that to realize visions of homework centres or other innovative services they may have to think and act in an entrepreneurial manner. For example, smaller public libraries and those in rural areas could consider collaborating to fund new services where the costs can be reduced when shared across budgets. Online tutoring is one example of such a service as access to the tutors can be shared across multiple locations. This is a particularly important benefit in the case of online tutoring because libraries in rural and remote areas are far more likely to have student patrons who, regardless of their personal financial circumstances, will be unable to access one-to-one academic support. This is an excellent example of the Internet overcoming the traditional "tyranny of distance" issue our rural and remote libraries face every day.

In this regard state libraries have the potential to play an important – in fact, critical – role. For services that are as central to public libraries as providing equal access to technology-based educational services, state libraries can provide the necessary boost to get programs up and running. State libraries can also play a leadership role in ensuring equity of service provision across the state that is not dependant on non-recurrent funding. .

Conclusion

In the past half-decade the better part of a thousand public libraries across the United States have begun to offer innovative homework related services for young adult patrons. Entire cities – Houston, San Francisco, Cleveland, and Brooklyn, among many others – are offering broad-based, unlimited access to their entire service areas. Some libraries with large budgets are building out customized spaces -- such as Teen Central at the Phoenix Public Library -- which are designed to engage young adults in academic and relaxed settings. And libraries of all sizes and budgets are beginning to leverage their technology infrastructure to deliver services like online tutoring to make one-to-one learning available to all their patrons. It isn't just new youth services that are changing thinking at public libraries in the United States. Funding of such initiatives is generating a lot of creative thinking, as well. State libraries are getting involved supporting pilot programs at libraries that might otherwise lack the resources to get started but that have needy populations. And in some cases local benefactors, both individuals and corporations, are getting involved, too.

Australian libraries serve similar populations to their American counterparts. Large numbers of primary and high school students flow into this nation's public libraries every school day afternoon. These students are, for the most part, looking for assistance with homework, exam preparation, and research projects. While librarians have great expertise in delivering research support, their skills are, more often than not, lacking when it comes to differential calculus, projectile motion, mitosis and meiosis, and sometimes even long division and multiplying fractions.

Online tutoring and face-to-face homework assistance centres serve this need effectively. The latter provide excellent support for young students for whom technology-based services may be cumbersome to manage. But for students in year 3 or 4 and above, online tutoring is an engaging, enjoyable and efficient way to gain help with essential learning challenges. And from libraries' perspectives, there is no more economical way to deliver homework assistance than through an online service. By outsourcing the entire service, from technology and staffing to reporting, most libraries find they can add a valuable service to their range of offerings without straining their staff.

Given the above, it's time Australia's public libraries took up the challenge of incorporating virtual homework help to the wide range of other services offered to an important demographic in their communities. If the nation's public libraries can capture the imagination of 10-20 year olds, they will build life-long library patrons, and that can only be in the long-term interests of all of us.

Bibliography

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Key Words

Homework, Internet, Youth, Teen, Online

(Footnotes)

¹ California State Library, 2001