

ONCE UPON A TIME IN KOGARAH...OR THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN THE COMMUNITY NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling in its various forms has been a part of the human journey since the beginning of time. It is through stories that societies have perpetuated their histories and given social meanings and boundaries. The community's narrative is the synergy of all its stories.

Storytelling, most often for children, has long been a part of the programs offered in public libraries. This paper looks more closely at the power of storytelling, storycatching and story creating in our libraries, and asks whether we are accessing the full potential of stories. In offering the explorative work being done at Kogarah Libraries in storytelling across all age groups, the author seeks to address the questions: Are we accessing the full potential of stories? What are some of the possibilities that we could explore within our services and resources for developing story? And what implications would moving further into stories in the library's programs bring for the library's ongoing role in our various communities?

BODY OF PAPER

Introduction

Once upon a time in Kogarah....

Kogarah is in the southern suburbs of Sydney. The local government area is largely residential, with a mixture of long term residents and around 37% recent immigrants. My role at the Kogarah Library and Cultural Centre is to connect the library's collections and services with the community and culture of the Kogarah local government area. Consequently I am responsible for arranging and managing an average of 36 events and programs per month across the main library and two branches, together with exhibitions in our exhibition space.

As a librarian coming into events planning, as opposed to an events planner working in a library, I have explored the ways in which the events that we run connect with our community in line with our core businesses – information, education, recreation and the growing number of other literacy areas.

It seemed to me that whenever an event was held that involved a story – whether it was a travel talk, a history talk, an author talk, or even traditional storytelling itself – that the audience became more involved. It seemed to be about the stories - and this started me wondering.

Since time began story has been the means by which a community has maintained cohesion and taught its beliefs and acceptable behaviours to its members. Through the lives of princesses and heroes, creator beings and evil spirits, in sacred, creation and moral tales, we see stories present across all cultures and times. Something at the heart of humankind needs to hear and be involved in stories.

Stories are the fabric of societies and the way that people are empowered to see beyond themselves. Story is imagination in action.

In the complex web of histories and relationships in any community, stories are the way we make connections with each other and these connection points form the community narratives. There is a multitude of community narratives happening at any given moment, it's not one story, but a synergy of the stories that are in the community, expressed in thousands of ways and given voices at any opportunity.

The community's narratives can be dominated by single issues or manipulated for certain agendas. But at their best, these narratives can affirm and empower the community. Such is the power of stories.

And in libraries we know this power.

On any day across the entire country stories are being told in libraries. Stories for children, stories at gatherings of adults in book clubs, told by speakers, shared at workshops and in any number of other events. We collect and organise the stories, we promote them - we are, as Bill Nagelkerke has said, "centres of story" (Nagelkerke, 2007).

Whilst I acknowledge that public libraries have significant roles in providing access to information, technology and educational resources, I would like to suggest that it is stories that are our unique domain. Where else are stories of all types available in a wide

variety of formats? Stories from across time, from as close as our own community or from far flung places across the globe.

Freely available. No means test, no ticket required. Free to anyone.

In this area I believe that public libraries are unique.

So the questions I want to raise with you are these – are we realising the full potential of story in our public library services? What are some of the possibilities that we could explore within our services and resources for developing story – and what implications would this bring for the library's ongoing role in our various communities?

To look at developing the full potential of story we need to briefly look at the power of story.

The Power of Story

In the tens of thousands of years before writing, before popular literacy, before we recorded what we know in books and on computers, story was the way we transmitted everything. Story was the carrier, the link, the way we taught each other how to be human and to see each other's humanity as we journeyed across the planet (Baldwin, 2005).

Story was then, and remains now, the narrative thread of our existence – our lives are woven around this narrative - what we make of things that happen, what we tell others, what we remember. History is what scholars and conquerors say happened; story is what it was like to live on the ground (Baldwin, 2005).

A UTS Research project report put it this way:

As we listen to a story, a statistic becomes a person, another culture becomes more tangible. At the same time, stories provide an escape from our immediate experience. They set our imaginations free, allowing us to explore alternatives that we may never have considered. This very exploration and distancing allows us to return to a deeper understanding of everyday life (Postern-Anderson & Redfern, 1996).

Stories are used across many disciplines to bring people together, as healing tools, as empowering tools, as teaching tools.

Narrative therapy has been developed as a healing tool in counseling as a means of allowing a client to rewrite their story (Morgan, 2000).

In business, stories are told to refocus an organisation toward its founding principles and develop its vision for the future. Storytelling is advocated by Stephen Denning as a means of enabling individuals in an organisation to see themselves and the organisation in a different light, and accordingly take decisions and change their behaviour in accordance with these new perceptions, insights and identities. (Denning, 2001).

Social Stories are a tool for teaching social skills to children with autism and related disabilities.

In science, stories are being used to address the idea that science is (or is at least pretty close to) a body of facts about the way the world works that scientists discover and students memorise. So, in teaching methods, science is presented as a literary form, a story that provides useful explanations of the natural world. These explanations must be solidly based in observation, but they always involve considerable creativity (Bickmore & Grandy, 2007)

In libraries we know and promote the value of telling stories to children to broaden their world and excite their imaginations. We invite people to share their stories at events, to speak about their lives, their crafts, their specific experiences. We ask people to share stories, sometimes recording it as oral histories for our collection. We also invite authors to talk about how they write their stories.

We connect our community to each other and to the wider world of stories through our collections in a variety of formats, and through other means such as ‘living books’, where people are ‘lent out’ to share their story.

But against the background of the power of story, are we realising its full potential in public libraries?

Going further

Christinia Baldwin in her book *Storycatcher* outlines the task and the rise of the storycatcher – one who can help us shift into narrative: to make people conscious of the story just beneath the surface of our talk, and invite us to speak it. Anyone can be a storycatcher (Baldwin, 2006). Everyone can be a storyteller. We all have stories.

There is a much bigger picture here.

In looking at library events and programs I began to wonder if we might be operating with a sort of 'field of dreams' mentality. The film *Field of Dreams* was premised around the instruction to Ray Kinsella that if you build a baseball pitch in the middle of your corn field, then he – the ghost of a famous baseball player, will come and play. "If you build it, he will come." Have we taken this on as well? If you build it, if you provide it, if you invite interesting speakers, run competitions with great prizes – they, the public, will come. Just organise and promote the event, and they will come. And when they come - they'll borrow lots of books. Send the stats up. And in that one epiphanous moment they will just know that the library is a good place to be.

We then pack up the chairs, do the evaluation and finish with that event, moving on to the next thing. We've got the reports, the stats, the kudos.

But what if we could do more? What if we looked at using stories in our events and programs as points of connection and as vehicles for community development?

Let me expand.

I'd like to present you with some explorations that we are doing at Kogarah Library in developing the potential of story in the events and programs of the Library.

We are in the early stages, but in sharing this, I hope that I can encourage you to look at the events and programs that you are offering, whether they be traditional storytelling, a speaker for ANZAC day, a school holiday activity or a cooking demonstration.

In the events and programs that we run at Kogarah I see people who find connection into a bigger picture of their community as they meet and encounter others. Stories really do turn the statistic into a person and cause other cultures to become less mysterious.

I see people who find themselves connected into new possibilities as they hear stories and learn new skills. This is story working as imagination in action.

And I see people who find a connection, as far as they care to think about it, to another part of themselves – the 'lights go on' the body language relaxes in response to the hospitality of ideas. Joseph Campbell saw storytelling as a way of getting people's minds in touch with the experience of being alive. (Campbell, 1993).

In this process of connecting, even temporarily, they find *communitas*.

Communitas was the name that anthropologist Victor Turner gave to the experience of initiation candidates in African tribal groups. His studies showed that, once separated from the tribe for the initiation rite, each candidate would at first go in a separate direction, fending for themselves. However after a day they would come back together and out of the quest for survival the group would create a sense of community and egalitarianism so great, that upon re-entry it would have a re-energising effect for the whole tribe. He saw the ritual process as a transitional, or liminal, time for the group (Heimbrock & Boudewijnse, 1990.)

He coined the term *communitas* for this feeling of equality, of profound community shared by a group of people going through a liminal experience.

Communitas, according to Turner, is hard to pinpoint, and he goes on to talk about the structures that arise out of the anti-structure that is *communitas*. But for our purposes here, the spontaneity and connection that is *communitas* can be seen as the essence of community narrative. Having experienced the process of learning or listening or working together the group comes out to a known, but different, place.

And whilst in the library setting we don't take them to the edge of their comfort zones, being transported by someone's storytelling can be a liminal place. In creating spaces for *communitas*, we can begin to see the true impact of our event's contribution to the community's narrative.

But how do you show that on the report? It won't be evident in the numerical and financial columns, it may be linked to organisational goals, but because it is so sublimated, it may not be clear - unless we start to include in our reports that which we have actually achieved - social capital.

Social capital is the raw material of civil society. It is created from the myriad of everyday interactions between people. It is not located within the individual person or within the social structure, but in the space between people. It is not the property of the organisation, the market or the state, though all can engage in its production.

Social capital is a 'bottom-up' phenomenon. It originates with people forming social connections and networks based on principles of trust, mutual reciprocity and norms of action (Bullen & Onyx, 2005).

The term social capital was first used in the 1980s but in Australia it was the 1995 Boyer Lecture by Eva Cox that generated considerable discussion about the concept. She said:

There are four major capital measures, one of which takes up far too much policy time and space at present. This is financial capital. Physical capital makes it onto the agenda because of the environmental movement... We occasionally mention human capital - the total of our skills and knowledge but rarely count its loss in unemployment.

There has been too little attention paid to social capital... Social capital refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit. These processes are also known as social fabric or glue, but I am deliberately using the term 'capital' because it invests the concept with the reflected status from other forms of capital. Social capital is also appropriate because it can be measured and quantified so we can distribute its benefits and avoid its losses.

In libraries, we need to ask ourselves if our services are being delivered in such a way that they not only deliver the service but also increase the community's social capital. If we start to measure the social capital that we achieve we might find ourselves in a stronger position in the discussions about our futures.

Storytelling, in its broadest sense, I would suggest, is a significant tool for us in creating social capital.

Possibilities for developing story

Events and programs of stories can be more than one-off events. They can be potential connection points. So the question that follows is, how do we proactively facilitate these connections in our role as centres of story?

It's important to remember that stories will connect themselves, even if this is not articulated by the participants. To reiterate - something at the heart of humankind needs to hear and be involved in stories.

We can facilitate this by having stories for all age groups as often as possible in as many forms and media as possible.

As well as a variety of storytelling sessions, like many other libraries, Kogarah has regular programs of people telling true stories. People tell the stories of their journey along the Camino del Santiago in Spain, of their research into the prisoners of war in

Borneo during the Second World War, and of their memories of the local area 50 years ago.

However, story connections can also be crafted. We have done some experimentation with storytelling styles. Earlier this year the Library invited youth in the area to submit their stories about living in Kogarah. The *Unknown Stories* competition had categories for prose, manga drawings and hip hop rhyme. The winners were then exhibited in the Library so the stories were able to be read by the community.

In the school holidays the children were invited to make a book entitled *About Me*. The Library provided the covers and the blank pages and the children drew, painted and glued pictures about themselves in the book.

We are developing a *Stories Alive!* program in partnership with our childcare centres. Instead of being read to the children, the book will be acted out with costumes and props.

Workshops on creative writing and writing your family history are part of the program to develop writing of stories. A writer's group for the 9-12s is being developed.

In our overall programming, story connections have to be nurtured and there is an intentional continuum of storytelling, storycatching and story-creating activities through the programs offered for age groups from 0-100 yrs at Kogarah.

Our Birth to 5 years old programs at Kogarah include the *1000 Books Before School* program which encourages parents and carers to read to their children. Three other programs that are offered are *Storytime*, *Rhymetime* and *Pop ups and Puzzles*.

From there they go on to *Crazy Pages Book Club* which caters for 6-9 years.

For the 9-12 years we are working on a *Writers Club*.

Between 12 – 15 years and 15-18 years, our programs become more focused on homework and HSC assistance, however we use school holiday programs to promote story whenever possible. The *Unknown Stories* competition previously referred to is to become an annual event.

18-30 years are not specifically targeted as yet, while the 30 years+ have *Bookchat*, a Book group, as well as literally hundreds of events each year which seek to reflect the diversity of the Kogarah community and give opportunity for story.

Storytelling, storycatching and story-creating give us great connection points with the community and to the community narratives.

One further possibility I would like to outline is the role of storytelling as vehicle for giving voice and vision to people in the community.

Telling stories to change the world is a powerful collection of essays about community based and interest based projects around the world where storytelling is used as a strategy for speaking out for justice and for building communities (Solinger, 2008).

Rachel Breunlin was a teacher in a high school in New Orleans just before Cyclone Katrina demolished the city. She and a fellow teacher had wanted more for the students in her care and they developed a writing project where the kids could express their own stories, instead of becoming part of the stories of the neighbourhood which were characterised by shootings, fights and an 80% failure rate in examinations.

In the program the students were given an advance of the royalties that would be paid to them when they were published. Rachel commented that it was the first time that the students had been required to write more than a couple of pages.

This began the Neighborhood Story Project in New Orleans and produced six new authors writing stories about their communities. In the aftermath of Cyclone Katrina the books that had been written were used to help the community move from the memories of the New Orleans they had known towards the one that was being rebuilt.

Storytelling became a vehicle for launching practical solutions, building and rebuilding the community.

The Memory Book project in Kampala, Uganda began as a way for HIV positive mothers to share their family stories with their children and give them a written account of their family and their history.

And in Darfur the trauma of the children is finding expression as they draw their stories. These visual stories have had international impact, showing the real situation in Darfur

through the eyes of innocent victims, detailing the violation of the people and of the laws of war by the Sudanese government.

That storytelling can be the vehicle for protest is also an expression of optimism and hope for the human condition. Ordinary people can be artists when they want to be and when they need to be. Shaping and making stories is art, and the art of storytelling can work.

Real stories from across the world affirms that storytelling can bring change – reclaiming history, fighting racism, giving hope. Ordinary people all over the world turn to artful storytelling, and make their most indelible mark on the cause as they contribute to their own community's narrative journey (Solinger *et al*, 2008).

Implications for the library's ongoing role in the community.

William Mitchell concludes his work on the future of public space in a virtual age by saying that we should not expect a wholesale replacement of our face-to-face interactions with electronic telecommunications, but that centres of cultures, such as libraries, will become more specialised, focusing on what they do uniquely well (Mitchell, 1999).

I believe that whilst we have significant roles in public libraries in making technology and resources available to everyone in our community and as professionals we are also very well placed to locate and distil information for our clients, it is as we create spaces for story and opportunities for story telling, storycatching and story-creating that we can play a unique role in our community's narrative development. And so be a community hub and a centre of story.

Once upon a time in Kogarah – Once upon a time in your library...let's see where the story goes...

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BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTER

Linda Heald is currently Team Leader, Community and Cultural Services at Kogarah Library and Cultural Centre in the southern suburbs of Sydney. Prior to this she has managed four College Libraries which included specialist music and theological collections and has worked in public and TAFE libraries. She is also currently teaching Diploma and Certificate Students in Library and Information Studies at Wollongong TAFE. Linda has an interest in the future directions of library services and has had published papers on Entrepreneurial Librarianship and Innovation in Libraries.