

HELPING TO KEEP CULTURE STRONG: NORTHERN TERRITORY LIBRARY'S AWARD WINNING INDIGENOUS LIBRARY PROGRAM

Jo McGill

Director

Northern Territory Library
Parliament House, State Square, Darwin
jo.mcgill@nt.gov.au

ABSTRACT

In August 2007 Northern Territory Library (NTL) was named the first Australian recipient of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Access to Learning Award. The award honours NTL's innovative approach to bringing computer and Internet technology to remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

The Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) Program helps Indigenous communities increase their technology and literacy skills and assists local people to preserve and share their cultural heritage. A key component of the program is the *Our Story* database, which enables communities to archive digital recordings, photographs, film, stories and songs in local languages, using library computers. NTL supports the locally employed Community Library Officers, who operate the Libraries and Knowledge Centres.

This paper describes NTL's LKC Program, how they are being implemented and the evaluation processes used to measure the impact on the communities. It tells the story, not only of the success of the program from a library perspective, but of the many ways in which the program is helping to keep local culture strong, by supporting communities to collect, preserve and share their cultural heritage.

The funds received through the Access to Learning Award will enable NTL to extend the LKC Program and to develop and deliver complementary services, such as an early years literacy program tailored specifically to meet the needs of Indigenous children and their parents. The paper will conclude with a brief description of the three key strategies which will drive further development of the program.

SOME BACKGROUND

It is now over 12 months since the Northern Territory Library received the Access to Learning Award from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. As most of you would be aware the Award is in recognition of the work we are doing in some of the remote areas of the Territory with local Indigenous councils to ensure the public has access to information that will improve their

quality of life. I will commence with a short presentation produced for us by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As recipient of the 2007 the Access to Learning Award we received \$1.2m.

The Northern Territory is a unique environment, with 1% of the Australian population¹ in one-sixth of the total land area². Issues of distance, isolation, and cultural and linguistic diversity play a role like nowhere else in Australia. The Northern Territory's population differs greatly from that of other Australian jurisdictions, as nearly 30% of Territorians are Indigenous. Over two thirds of Indigenous Territorians live in remote communities, some many hours drive away from the major centres, often only accessible by 4 wheel drive or alternatively light aircraft. Many of the communities are poorly serviced. In most cases all material goods (clothing, food, building supplies etc) must be brought in by barge or air.

The culture of the Territory, with its long, rich heritage of Indigenous tradition and its fresh, pioneering European history, is truly one-of-a-kind. Let me remind you that Indigenous culture is 60 000 years old – the oldest surviving culture on the planet. By comparison, European settlement of Australia is only a little over two hundred years old and the Northern Territory has self-governed for less than thirty years. Many of the Indigenous Communities run by community councils are still in their infancy in terms of infrastructure and governance. So, some of our clients are from recently established communities where their own traditions are being overshadowed by western civilisation. Access to knowledge resources, places of learning, entertainment and information technology may be limited in many areas. Differences in literacy and numeracy skills between remote and urban areas are acute as has been well reported.

These factors all present challenges and opportunities for library services in the Northern Territory, and gives libraries an especially significant place in the communities they serve. The role of collecting and preserving cultural heritage takes on additional importance. In some areas of the Territory, libraries may serve as a key meeting place providing a unique learning environment that is not available elsewhere in the community. In areas of low literacy and employment, the crucial role libraries can play in education and self-development becomes more pronounced.

Within this context then, the Northern Territory Library (NTL) aims to work in partnership and cooperation with Australian, Territory and local governments, national and local education institutions, private industry and other community

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, National Regional Profile : Northern Territory, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/7Population/People12000-2004?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=7&issue=2000-2004&num=&view=>

² Australian Government, Geoscience Australia, 2005. Area of Australia, States, and Territories <http://www.ga.gov.au/education/facts/dimensions/areadime.htm>

stakeholders to facilitate the delivery of appropriate library services to Territorians.

In addition to our role as a “state’ Library, NTL services all public libraries across the Territory through a centralised delivery model. Coupled with providing a range of library services directly to Territorians, NTL manages the Northern Territory Government annual grant funding to the Municipal and Shire Councils for the delivery of public library services. The model works well in the Territory with NTL providing advice, support and training to public library staff in the 6 municipal and 8 Shire council where we have a network of 30 public library sites.

As the Territory’s major library service provider manages the purchase of library materials to the network including online resources. NTL also takes a leadership role in fostering professional development for staff in the network. This includes facilitating education and training for the librarians across all sectors.

WHY LIBRARIES & KNOWLEDGE CENTRES?

Two primary drivers for the model can be identified:

Firstly Indigenous people have an oral tradition of sharing knowledge and culture; however very little of this knowledge is captured in books or the published material usually associated with public libraries. Northern Territory Library recognized the need to capture this local content and make it accessible to the Indigenous communities.

Secondly, the preservation of language and the promotion of oral language skills are regarded as the foundation for building literacy and reading skills. To achieve success as a literacy learner, oral language skills are considered essential.

Mary Elizabeth Moreen, from the Mungatopi clan and traditional land owner from the Tiwi Islands, expressed the urgency of this work to our staff: “You must do this for us. All our old people are dying and then their knowledge is lost forever.” This plea for assistance is repeated across the Territory as elders struggle to retain meaningful connections with the younger generations.

THE APPROACH

In 2004 the Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) Program was developed to provide access to local content and to respond to the immediate need to preserve Indigenous cultural heritage. The model incorporated the lessons learned from the Indigenous Knowledge Centres previously implemented in 3 communities resulting in three quite different approaches. An internal review of the previous program clearly stated that NTL was not in a position to support the multiple models, and capacity within communities was at best, questionable. The review determined that such an approach would be unsustainable and recommended that a standardised but adaptable model be implemented.

The current LKC model is built on the services that NTL already provides through remote libraries. It is presented as a series of building blocks comprised of traditional library concepts plus Indigenous knowledge concepts. The model outlines the essential components and who is responsible for providing each of these. Components include the library system, community knowledge, a knowledge database and the facility to link local communities through a regional knowledge network. Given that each community has differing needs, flexibility in how the program is delivered is important. This is achieved by the community deciding which components suit their needs. Sustainability is achieved through NTL support in the areas of library resources, provision of operational grants, a collections database including maintenance of the software and ongoing training and mentoring for staff.

The key focus for libraries is on learning for life, literacy, access to information, recreation and preservation of culture. The model has the potential to facilitate “joining up” of other government and non-government services such as Indigenous literacy and language centres, schools, arts and culture centres, and community archiving facilities. Training in all aspects of managing the library and knowledge centre enables community members to develop or increase their skills.

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

Each library is staffed by one or two Community Library Officers (CLO) and is open from between 10-30 hours per week, Monday through Saturday. Community Library Officers are employed by local Councils to operate the library. They provide a regular and sustainable service with the ongoing financial assistance and professional support from NTL. In all cases, CLOs are local residents of their communities. The program has created meaningful jobs for some community members, who are motivated to increase their own skills through employment at the library and involvement in important cultural work. Jacqueline Bourke has worked in the Pirlangimpi Library for 6 years. She has developed expertise in using various computer programs, seeking information on the internet, use of office equipment and technology including digital cameras and scanners, along with general administrative skills etc., and now she is passing on these skills to others in the community through her work at the library.

In Indigenous communities, the library is often the only public space where people can come to read, find information, access computers or use the Internet. It is a place where community members interact, and it provides assistance to those who have had little or no contact with information and communications technology. Technology is a key component of the LKC model. Each LKC has free public access computers which are connected to the Internet. Many libraries have sign-up sheets and time limits such as the demand for the service. Through the Internet community members have access to the combined online catalogue of NT libraries and to a range of online resources including the *Health and Wellness Resource Centre*, the *YourTutor* homework help service and e-books such as *TumbleBooks* which is an online collection of animated talking picture books, quizzes and games for children. Other uses of Internet include emailing family members residing elsewhere, online banking, reading of news, and checking football scores

A small team of NTL staff provide regular training, mentoring and support to CLOs and their Councils. Support involves onsite visits, regular, often weekly contact by telephone and email and an annual CLO forum held in Darwin where the CLO's undertake a range of workshops and training to assist them in their library work. The community library, supported by NTL, provides a solid foundation for sustainable library services, and a permanent presence in the community. This is critical, as many services and programs in remote regions can often be unreliable and short-term. The relationship is mutually beneficial with NTL staff gaining invaluable insight into Indigenous Knowledge systems and culture.

In addition to the public access computers, the highlight of each LKC is its own *Our Story* database, which enables the community to establish a unique digital collection of local knowledge by creating, adding and repatriating content related to their regional indigenous history. *Our Story* uses the *Ara Irititja* software, developed specifically for the Pitjantjatjara communities in Central

Australia. The database has a user-friendly interface and a proven record of use by Indigenous people. An important feature of the database is the ability to restrict access to individual items to cater for cultural sensitivities. It can be customised to reflect local names and language.

The database stores and displays any digitised media, so that photographs, sound recordings, videos etc, can all be viewed through the one interface. It was designed as a stand-alone database and is not Internet-enabled. Storage capacity and response time are therefore not dependent on Internet access and speed, which can be problematic in remote communities. The program is unique in that it encourages the development of literacy and IT skills through interaction with local content and technology.

The *Our Story* databases are used for recording cultural traditions and preserving ancient knowledge systems by the **owners** of those cultures. In all cases, the community owns the content in the database and data is stored according to rules set by community leaders.

Our support ensures that content in the databases is appropriately structured, stored and archived according to local requirements and industry standards. Such management of the content is necessary for access in by future generations.

The aim of community ownership is to restore pride and understanding of traditional culture. The work that happens around the database is helping to engage young people in cultural work. Elders recognise that young people are interested in working with computers and multimedia, so this is an effective way of undertaking important inter-generational work to keep culture strong.

For example at Wadeye a language project is documenting four of the region's endangered languages. Linguists work with elders, who may be the last living speakers of their languages. Using photographs from the *Our Story* database, elders provide language names for the plants and animals found on their traditional lands.

Through free access to IT, the program helps community members in their learning and skill development, offering very tangible ways to improve quality of life. *Our Story* is a tool not only for preserving culture, but also for enriching local material through the recording of stories and information associated with each digital item. This is a powerful example of user-generated content at the local level.

The LKC Program is leading the way in Australia in the provision of library services to remote Indigenous communities. It is the first library program to provide, free of charge, an appropriate database specifically for local resources, together with ongoing training and support to ensure sustainability.

EVALUATION, REVIEW AND CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS/MEASURING SUCCESS

In implementing any new program it is important to use impact assessment and evaluation tools to stay focused on the objectives and goals. In 2003 the then Minister for Local Government, John Ah Kit, proposed a “regional” approach to the development of the model, however we have subsequently learnt that, in community development terms, this is possibly a little further down the track. A critical factor of community development is addressing needs at the individual and family level before embarking on group needs. Working together to build community connectedness at the local level before embarking on building the community at the regional level is a vital step in the process of community development. By undertaking a regional approach initial community building steps would be ignored, limiting the success of community development.

In considering a community’s capacity to provide a library service NTL engaged Jay Gibson to conduct a review of community ‘readiness’ in Central Australia in June 2004. Communities had experienced a range of programs, many short-term in nature, some of which raised awareness, stimulated demand for improved services and/or assisted in developing skills and knowledge. Our aim was to provide an ongoing, regular and reliable service to build capacity in communities. Communities struggling with basic needs are unlikely to engage at the level required for such a service. The review also established overall that there was both a lack of locally produced material and a safe keeping place for cultural/historical documents.

After the first LKCs were operating for 12 months, Professor Martin Nakata, Director of Indigenous studies, University of Technology Sydney supervised an evaluation of the model³ with the assistance of a team of academics with expertise in particular areas including; intellectual property and Indigenous knowledge, information and communication technology, literacy, education and community development. The team was requested to evaluate the model specifically from these particular fields, which also aligned with Northern Territory government objectives.

The value of the LKC program was confirmed by the evaluation, which stated that it could be a key infrastructure element for building capacity in Indigenous communities, and that it provided an innovative approach to engaging with changing community needs for knowledge and information. The LKC program was described as “60,000 years of oral tradition meets technology”. Without this valuable tool, we run the risk of losing an important part of Australia’s history. The significant recommendations of the report were prioritized into an action plan by NTL and have served as the core activities for the PLKC program over the last 3 years. As identified in the report, there is great potential

³ Evaluation of the Northern Territory Library’s Libraries and Knowledge Centres Model. Darwin: Northern Territory Library, 2006.

to join up other services delivered by any number of organisations non government and government. This is an important point when positioning the program in whole of government policy initiatives.

I cannot emphasis enough the value of such an evaluation process. Undertaking working through this process has resulted in the validation of our work externally, consolidation of our thinking, provided us with some influential partners, and greater partnership opportunities. Importantly for NTL staff it has provided us with a roadmap for the future.

Increasingly the benefits of demonstrating the outcomes of a program to the community rather than the measuring only inputs and outputs are being recognised. It is argued that assessing impact is important and libraries are turning to measurement instruments and methods use in the non-profit sector. Such tools assist “to prove that library services can positively influence various skills and competencies, attitudes and behaviour of users” (Poll and Payne, 2006)⁴. Conversely such assessment identifies areas of weakness or services that are not valued by the community which in turn provides information for future decision making.

We think the value of the program speaks for itself when we see the members of the communities who are actively creating and using the content of the database. We have seen people who, for the first time, are able to find photographs of family members and other information related to their family histories. This is extremely important, particularly for those who were forcibly removed from their families and communities, and suffered a loss of cultural connection⁵. Our previous Northern Territory Government Minister, Mr Elliot McAdam, MLA, was very moved to find photos of his mother on one of the local *Our Story* databases; photos that he did not know existed.

The value of the program was recognised locally in 2006 when NTL was awarded the Chief Minister’s award for Engagement with the Community and then, on a global scale in 2007 when NTL was awarded the Gates Foundation Global Libraries Access to Learning award. The award was not only fantastic recognition of the work we are doing, and a valuable injection of funds to the program, it has also provided the Library with access to some remarkable leaders in the field of public library service delivery. The challenge for us as a small organisation is to ensure continued professional leadership to the network and cost effective and sustainable information technology solutions to meet the needs of library users.

⁴ Poll, R., & Payne, P. (2006). Impact measures for libraries and information services. Presentation at 8ty International Biellefeld Conference, Bielefeld, Germany. Retrieved July 13, 2006 from <http://33eprints.rclis.org/archive/00005749>.

⁵ *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), April 1997. <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/>

Fourteen out of twenty two remote communities now have the LKC program, with another two to be added by the end of 2008. Overall there are more than 40,000 items in the *Our Story* databases. The significant and continued increase in visitors to the Libraries and Knowledge Centres is testament to the program's success.

The Program provides information and opportunities through free access to computers and the Internet. Training is provided so people can learn to use technology in an informal environment for purposes that meet their individual needs. The intention is to provide the infrastructure, training and support to increase information technology skills so that pursuing education and employment opportunities is possible.

The Libraries and Knowledge Centres are helping to address the social and economic inequities faced by Indigenous communities. By connecting people to a range of information including health, education and recreational topics we are providing an opportunity to improve their lives and participate more fully in their own community and the world in new ways. Libraries are also recognised as trusted institutions where trained staff can play a critical role in helping individuals develop skills and confidence.

Northern Territory Library will use the ATLA funds to support and develop three key areas: community capacity building, preservation of culture and early year's literacy.

Firstly, the *Our Story* program will be the focus for the training of both staff and community members to increase IT skills, and will lead to real jobs for people in managing local digital collections.

Secondly, Northern Territory Library will focus on the maintenance and transmission of culture within the community, and the sharing of appropriate local material with a wider audience.

The Library will facilitate bringing selected local content into our web-based *Territory Stories* so the rest of Australia and beyond can access these resources and increase the understanding and appreciation of these unique cultures. Content may also be used by Educational institutions for Aboriginal history studies curriculum thereby building and supporting improved school/community relationships. Our Story database may facilitate the education of students about Aboriginal Australia and promote the reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people through the appreciation of culture.

Funds are being used to upgrade the technology so that we may increase the range of cultural material that is preserved.

Thirdly, Northern Territory Library plans to expand our early years' literacy program which is regarded as the critical years for development. Brain

research clearly indicates that it is from birth to age five that “children rapidly develop foundational capabilities on which subsequent development builds.”⁶

A 2005 report on early learning published by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation⁷ summarises recent research, which consistently shows that poor cognitive, social, and emotional development in early childhood has a long-term impact and is tied to problems later in life:

- Brain development is most intense from birth to 3 years of age. The number of synaptic connections in the brain peaks at age 3. Synapses that get used stay in the brain; if synapses are unused, they begin to be eliminated by late childhood.
- Poverty in early childhood is correlated with lower cognitive scores and lower school achievement.
- Children learn social and emotional skills early in life. These skills dramatically influence academic achievement later in life—more so than cognitive ability.⁸

Research into factors affecting the performance of students in literacy and numeracy also shows that 50 per cent of what a student achieves is determined by the student themselves. In other words students’ learning is substantially influenced by their personal experiences outside of school. “This highlights the significance of what parents can do in early childhood, as well as the quality of early childhood education and the care environment.”⁹

The ultimate goal is to assist Indigenous children to be better prepared to enter formal schooling. As part of this program the content from *Our Story* will be used to make e-books using local stories, images, people and themes. This will raise awareness of the importance of early literacy programs in later education and employment outcomes.

Closing the gap in educational outcomes for Aboriginal Territorians will be one of the ways to demonstrate our long term success. However in the short term an increase in the quality of the content held in the databases, overall usage of the libraries and the database by local people and our ability to roll out the

⁶ Zero to Three. BrainWonders: Helping Babies Grow and Develop. 14 April 2005. See <http://www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders>.

⁷ Investing in Children an Early Learning Strategy for Washington State. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005. p.8.

⁸ A New Framework for Assessing the Benefits of Early Education. September 2004. A Working paper by the Committee for Economic Development. See:http://www.ced.org/docs/report/report_preschool_2004_assessingbenefits.pdf

⁹ *Investing in children: an early learning strategy for Washington State*. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005. <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/pnwg/earlylearning/earlylearningstrategy.pdf> >

program to more communities will demonstrate our success. Attracting new partners and additional resources is another of our objectives thereby extending the reach of the program.

The Libraries and Knowledge Centre Program is contributing to improvements in the lives of Indigenous Territorians living in remote communities in meaningful ways. It assists people to retain 60,000 years of oral tradition, and plays an important part in helping our Indigenous communities to survive and prosper through improved literacy skills and access to information providing a gateway to better opportunities for all.
