

Engagement with the Community: Northern Territory Library's Libraries and Knowledge Centres¹

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Abstract In 2004, Northern Territory Library (NTL) implemented a new Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) Program for library services in remote communities. The program was developed in response to requests from Indigenous communities, who wanted assistance to preserve their cultural heritage and provide appropriate access to it. The program is built on the services that NTL already provides through community libraries. A key component of the program is the *Our Story* database, which enables communities, through their local library, to organise, store and make accessible, digitised material related to their cultural heritage. This paper presents an overview of the LKC Program, which was recently recognised with two awards under the NTG Chief Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management. An external evaluation of the program will be discussed, including benefits gained. The paper will conclude with some stories illustrating how content from the *Our Story* database is being used as part of 'family practice' in different communities.

Introduction

In 2004 Northern Territory Library (NTL) implemented a new Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) Program for library services in remote communities. The program was developed in response to requests from Indigenous communities, who wanted assistance to preserve their cultural heritage and provide appropriate access to it.

This paper presents an overview of the LKC Program and the *Our Story* database, which is a key component of the program. It includes a brief discussion of the external evaluation of the program, which was published earlier this year, and concludes with some stories illustrating how content from the *Our Story* database is being used as part of cultural practice in various communities.

I have chosen *Engaging with the Community* as the title for this talk because last month the LKC Program won the inaugural Chief Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Sector Management in the category of *Engagement with the Community* and won a highly commended in the category of *Indigenous Community Development*. We were able to celebrate this success with both NTL staff and our Community Library Officers (CLOs) at the annual CLO training forum. We would not have won these awards without the ongoing commitment of CLOs to their libraries and their communities.

Background: Northern Territory Library

NTL is the Territory's equivalent of a State Library and is administered by the NT Department of Local Government, Housing and Sport. NTL's key objectives are to:

- Develop communities through libraries;
- Connect people to information;
- Preserve NT documentary and cultural heritage; and
- Help people learn.

NTL is responsible for a centralised public library model for all public libraries across the Territory. As well as providing a range of library services directly to Territorians,

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NTL facilitates the provision of annual operational funding by the NT Government to Municipal and Community Government Councils for the provision of public library services. NTL provides advice, support and training to public library staff in the 6 municipal and 22 community government jurisdictions where there is a public library service. Community libraries are predominantly located in Indigenous communities across the Top End, with two in the Southern Region.

The 22 remote community libraries come in all shapes and sizes. Many are located in Council-owned premises and some are "joint-use" libraries located in the local school, where they serve both school and community library members.

Community libraries contain a range of resources including books, magazines, videos and DVDs. All have at least one computer available for public use and most have Internet access. 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* and e-books such as *TumbleBooks*.

NTL recently introduced the *YourTutor* service to remote community libraries. *YourTutor* is a free Internet service that provides students with one-to-one real-time tutoring in English, Maths, Science and research based subjects. Students aged 9 years to adults can talk to a live tutor online Monday to Friday 3pm – 8pm NT time.

Each Community Library is staffed by a Community Library Officer (CLO) and is usually open from between 10-30 hours per week. CLOs are employed by local Councils to operate the library and to provide library programs for community members. With ongoing support from NTL, they provide a regular and sustainable service. In all cases, CLOs are local (and usually long-time) residents of their communities and have demonstrated great commitment to the communities they serve.

A small team of NTL staff provide ongoing training and support to CLOs. This involves site visits, and regular telephone and email contact, often on a weekly basis. The team consists of four full-time staff members, a part-time IT officer and an administrative support person. A dedicated website is provided for CLOs to provide easy access to a range of resources and procedures to help them with the day-to-day running of their libraries.

The LKC Program

In recent years Indigenous communities have been exploring ways to preserve their cultural heritage and provide appropriate access to it. Many Indigenous communities are now focussing on the repatriation of local material and grappling with ways to preserve old photographs, tape and video recordings and documents. There is recognition that these items need to be preserved in a digital format. In communities where digitisation is well advanced, there is further recognition of the need to structure and organise digital material so that it can be easily retrieved. There is high demand for access to local material and for personal copies of family photographs and recordings of songs and stories.

In June 2004, NTL implemented a new Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) model for libraries in remote Indigenous communities. The LKC model is built on the services that NTL already provides through community 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, local infrastructure and community knowledge.

A key component of the program is the *Our Story* database, which enables communities, through their local library, to organise, store and make accessible, digitised material related to their cultural heritage.

NTL evaluated several products before selecting the *Ara Irititja* software that was developed specifically for Pitjantjatjara communities in Central Australia. The database has a simple, user-friendly interface and a proven record of successful implementation and use by Indigenous people. An important feature of the database is the ability to restrict access to individual items to cater for cultural sensitivities.

The database can be used to store and display any digitised media, so that photographs, sound recordings, videos etc, can all be viewed through the one interface. It was designed as a local stand-alone program and is not an internet-enabled product. Storage capacity and response time are therefore not dependent on Internet access and capacity. Additional storage capacity is provided through portable, external hard-drives.

NTL has negotiated a Territory-wide licence for *Ara Irititja*, which allows it to be installed in all NT public libraries at no cost to local communities. Ongoing licence fees are met by NTL. *Ara Irititja* has been re-branded for NT library use as *Our Story*. In all cases, the community owns the content in the database and data is stored according to rules set by community leaders.

NTL's technical support and library management expertise ensure that content in the databases is appropriately structured and stored, and is appropriately archived, according to local requirements, as well as made accessible to the community.

In summary, Libraries and Knowledge Centres:

- Provide access to knowledge and information through core library services including English literacy and information literacy programs
- Enable the acquisition and preservation of local knowledge
- Provide training and support to community members engaged in acquiring and preserving knowledge
- Provide access to recreational activities for all groups within the community.

Our Story has now been installed in eight communities:

- Wadeye
- Peppimenarti
- Umbakumba
- Angurugu
- Milingimbi
- Barunga
- Anmatjere
- Ltyentye Apurte

It will be installed in the Tiwi Islands this month and both Ramingining and Galiwin'ku are in the planning stage.

Many of the local databases already contain a significant amount of local cultural material. The Wadeye *Our Story* contains approximately 20,000 items and includes photographs from every clan group. Local elders and community members continue to provide content to enrich items in the database by adding local stories and

information. Material identified as “public” is accessible to the entire community through a computer located in the Wadeye LKC (situated in the Transaction Centre). Back-up processes are now in place to ensure data is not lost due to hardware or power failure. A “read-only” copy of the database is available at Wadeye OLSH School.

The flexibility of the LKC program means that library services do not always have to be delivered within a designated library space. Library programs may better meet local needs if they are delivered elsewhere in the community (e.g. childcare centres, women’s centres, museums, art centres). Portable computer equipment enables database access wherever people need it: under a shady tree, or on a bush trip. All of this can be achieved without compromising the key components of the model.

The key focus for libraries is on literacy, access to information and preservation of culture. Literacy programs and the promotion of reading can occur anywhere, any time. The LKC model has the potential to facilitate “joining up” of other government and non-government services.

Training in all aspects of managing the LKC enables community members to develop or increase their skills. Ongoing IT support and training ensures that local services are relevant and sustainable.

With the introduction of *Our Story*, many CLOs have taken on the additional role of database facilitators: identifying and gathering local content, training community members to use the database and facilitating the ongoing development of the content by working with community members to provide additional information and stories.

The program has been very successful and in all cases, the number of visitors to remote libraries has increased significantly.

Evaluation of the LKC Model

In June 2005, NTL commissioned an evaluation of the LKC model. The evaluation was undertaken by a group of academics, headed by Professor Martin Nakata, University of Technology Sydney. The evaluation produced very positive results, with the evaluation team reporting that the LKC Program 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 Evaluation Report contains a number of recommendations for further development of the program and NTL is now developing strategies to address three key areas:

- Literacy and especially early years literacy;
- Intellectual property and copyright issues; and
- Training of CLOs

The Evaluation Report has delivered many benefits to NTL. A paper on the benefits gained will be published shortly.

The Evaluation report and NTL’s response to it are available on the LKC page of NTL’s website.

Cultural Practice

To conclude, here are a few brief stories about how the content in *Our Story* is being used, as a way of illustrating the significance of this program to local communities.

The LKC program extends the boundaries of what might be considered library work and often requires broader skills. Cindy, former CLO from Anmatjere, films Hazel collecting bush food. As well as learning how to manage content on the database, Cindy learnt to use a video camera and set out to record and document local practices which could be stored in *Our Story* and accessed both now and in future.

In Milingimbi, Oscar came in to the library immediately after a family funeral to “turn off” photos of the deceased person. The database has been designed to allow individual items to be hidden from view without being removed entirely from the database.

In Angurugu, Elizabeth Caldwell, who provides support to the CLOS, has noted that when people first encounter the database, they use it quite passively, that is they sit and watch while it is explained and demonstrated. Following this, they may view the entire photo collection at their own pace, using the mouse to move from the beginning to the end of the collection.

Later, once they become familiar with *Our Story* and its content, their interaction involves much more targeted use. For example, they may want images for a family function, such as a birthday. The image may be printed, and displayed as part of the birthday celebration.

When non-ceremonial people (that is, people who are not deeply into ceremony) in the community pass away, it is common for community members to locate an image in *Our Story* and run off multiple prints of that person even in the week following the death. Recently a man passed away who might be regarded as linked to ceremony. Some close relatives came to view some photos of him the day after he died, and said they would come back soon for printouts.

One of the outcomes of the Wadey database has been community access to resources which were previously unavailable. Gemma was able to find a photo of her family totem on the database. The family had never before had access to a digital image of their totem. The image was printed off and then screen-printed on to T-shirts, which were worn at a family funeral.

Bernice Cavanagh is CLO at Ltyentye Apurte near Alice Springs. When the library received a newly published book written by Roy McFadyen, Bernice realised that the author may have known some of her family. Mr McFadyen lived and worked at Loves Creek Station east of Alice Springs from 1937-1942. Bernice wrote to him to ask for more information and whether he had photographs of her family. Mr McFadyen, who is now in his 80's, invited her to visit him in Queensland, so Bernice and another young woman, Veronica, decided to travel to Queensland to record an oral history of Mr McFadyen's time in Central Australia.

Jay, our staff member based in Alice Springs, travelled with Bernice and Veronica and provided technical support for the recording. Mr McFadyen presented Bernice with a copy of his photographic collection and he donated a second set to the Ltyentye Apurte *Our Story* database. This wonderful material would have been lost to the community, but for Bernice taking the initiative to contact Mr McFadyen. Her role

as CLO gave her the opportunity and the confidence to contact Mr McFadyen and to undertake the journey to Queensland.

A recent report on the LKC Program can be downloaded from the LKC webpage.

Thank you.

Cate Richmond is Assistant Director, Libraries and Knowledge Centres, Northern Territory Library (NTL). Cate has held this position since March 2004 and has overseen the implementation of the Libraries and Knowledge Centres Program: a new model for library services to remote Indigenous communities. Prior to joining the NT Government, Cate worked for 16 years in the Library and Learning Services Division at Deakin University in Geelong. Cate has more than 26 years of library experience and has worked in the academic, government and public libraries sectors. Since joining NTL, Cate has published several papers on Indigenous library services and is the NT representative on the National and State Libraries of Australasia (NSLA) Indigenous Library Services and Collections Working Group.