
Libraries in Indigenous Communities: Information Technology for Local Knowledge

By Cate Richmond.

LIBRARIES AND KNOWLEDGE CENTRES (LKC) PROGRAM, PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Northern Territory Library (NTL) is responsible for developing communities by providing access to appropriate library services for all Territorians. NTL has four main goals:

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

NTL provides a range of library services directly to Territorians, as well as providing specialist library services to NT libraries and their staff. Part of NTL's role is to provide annual funding to Municipal and Community Government Councils and ongoing advice, support and training to public library staff in the 6 municipal and 22 community government jurisdictions where there is a public library service.

In June 2004, NTL implemented a new Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) program in eight communities in the Top End. 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. More about Our Story in the next section, but first some background about community libraries and the development of the LKC Program.

Community libraries are predominantly located in Indigenous communities across the Top End, with several in the Southern Region. They are staffed by Community Library Officers (CLOs) and are usually open from between 10-30 hours per week. The libraries contain a range of resources including books, magazines, videos and DVDs. All libraries have at least one computer that is available for public use and most have Internet access. Through the Internet library clients 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 for children.

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 2003, NTL funded three pilot knowledge centre projects in Galiwin'ku, Wadeye and Anmatjere. The projects were driven by community members and in each case different software and management systems were used. The term "knowledge centre" has many different interpretations and the challenge for NTL was to develop a model that would be sustainable through the provision of ongoing funding, support and training.

The LKC model is built on the services that NTL already provides through community libraries. It is presented as a series of building blocks comprising 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. Flexibility is achieved through the community deciding which components suit their needs. Sustainability is achieved through NTL support in the areas of library resources, provision of a database and ongoing training and support including maintenance of the software.

The key focus for libraries is on literacy, access to information 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, community archiving facilities, and arts and culture centres. Training in all aspects of managing the library and

knowledge centre enables community members to develop or increase their skills. Ongoing IT support and training ensures that local services are relevant and sustainable.

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 SOFTWARE

A key component of the LKC Program is the database of digitised local material. NTL evaluated several products before selecting the Ara Irititja software that was developed specifically for Pitjantjatjara communities in Central Australia. This 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.

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. Each community is encouraged to choose a local name for their database, for example in Wadeye the database is Murrinh Nekinigme and in Anmatjere it is known as Anmatjere Angkety. In all cases, the community owns the content in the database and data is stored according to rules set by community leaders.

Communities and individuals have many different interpretations of both the concept of knowledge and the purpose of a knowledge database. Our role is to work with communities to ensure that their LKC meets local needs within the framework of their cultural, legal and social structures.

PROGRESS SO FAR

Implementation of the model began in June 2004. The first phase of the project focused on eight communities across three regions:

- * Galiwin'ku, Milingimbi and Ramingining (East Arnhem)
- * Wadeye and Peppimenarti (Port Keats/Daly River)
- * Umbakumba, Angurugu and Alyangula (Groote)

Phase Two extends the program to Anmatjere and Ltyentye Apurte in the Southern Region, and to the



Tiwi and Nyirranggulung Regions. Our Story has now been installed in six communities, with two more to be added in March.

Before gaining access to Our Story, local cultural officers at Wadeye had already digitised a significant amount of songs, videos and photographs. However, the sheer number of digitised files made it difficult to manage and it was not possible to easily retrieve specific images or recordings. Wadeye's Our Story database now contains more than 8,000 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 LKC team undertook a pilot training program in Wadeye aimed at engaging youth and other interested community members in a range of skills required for the successful administration and development of the database. A training model was developed, which is now being used to train people in other communities. NTL encourages and supports library staff to undertake formal qualifications in areas such as library service, administration and IT. Local people are now employed to work on aspects of the database in Wadeye, Peppimenarti, Angurugu, Milingimbi and Anmatjere.

In October 2005, the Minister for Local Government, Mr Elliot McAdam, presented a progress report on the LKC Program to Parliament. In his speech Minister McAdam explained that, "flexibility, appropriate infrastructure and a user-friendly knowledge database are the key elements in the delivery

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of library services to Indigenous communities in the Territory."

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). Literacy programs and the promotion of reading can occur anywhere, any time. 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 program.

EVALUATION REPORT

The first 18 months of implementation has shown that a consistent model supported by NTL and using appropriate software is beginning to meet community needs. In July 2005 NTL engaged a group of academics, headed by Professor Martin Nakata, University of Technology, Sydney, to evaluate the LKC Program. The evaluation produced very positive results, with the team reporting that the LKC Program provided an innovative approach to engaging with changing community needs for knowledge and information. The team commented that LKCs could become a leading example for the ways such services can be delivered to Indigenous Australians. The Evaluation Report contains a number of recommendations for further development of the program. NTL has prepared a response to the report and both the report and the response document will shortly be published.

COPYRIGHT/IP ISSUES

One of the most critical areas discussed in the Evaluation Report deals with issues around Intellectual Property Rights and Indigenous Knowledge. One of the aims of the LKC program is to make culturally significant material more accessible to Indigenous people, especially those in regional and remote communities. However this raises many challenges in managing the different kinds of rights that may vest with such material, and in particular there are a number of emergent issues for libraries specifically related to the management of material in the digital environment.

NTL has given a high priority to the recommendations in the report that focus on IP and copyright issues. Advice has been sought from a number of experts including Dr Jane Anderson, Visiting Research Fellow with The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Dr

Anderson is developing a framework and protocols for Indigenous intellectual property management, which will help govern decisions about accessing and reproducing copyright material. NTL will also develop a policy specifically directed at intellectual property issues within the context of LKCs.

FUTURE PLANS

In 2006 NTL will continue to implement the LKC program in communities with existing libraries. It will also continue to develop the program, based on the recommendations contained in the Evaluation Report. NTL is investigating external funding sources so that the program can be extended to NT communities who do not currently have access to a library.

The community library is a focal point for access to information, recreation, learning and literacy. At community libraries people have free access to local information and resources and, if required, to resources beyond their community via the library network. A local Our Story database enables community members to connect with their history in a simple and direct manner. It provides a measure of ownership over local historical and cultural records. It inspires a sense of pride and self worth in individuals. Young people particularly are learning how to use Our Story and are developing the skills needed to manage it. It is bringing more people into the local library, where they can access a range of library services, designed to promote literacy and lifelong learning.



Volunteer Lawyers

Volunteer lawyers are needed for the 2006 free Legal Advice Sessions run by Darwin Community Legal Service:

- * Monday in Palmerston 6.30-7.30pm
- * Thursday in Darwin 5.30-7pm
- * Saturday at Casuarina library 10-11.45am

Lawyers usually commit to monthly or bi-monthly sessions

Support the community that supports you. Please contact DCLS on 8982-1111.