



maintaining and improving literacy levels. Furthermore, holding the FMP sessions at the library encourages young people to become library members and to use the facilities regularly. The overarching outcomes of the program are long term social capital gains, targeting 'at risk' youth to minimise social problems and developing an informed, involved community which has an excellent quality of life.

As a direct result of FMP, public perception of the library's role in the community has changed – people now understand that we don't just stamp books! Press coverage has been good

and the program has helped to consolidate strong relationships with local schools and service organisations. FMP has been a successful part of our campaign to increase the library's budget so that we can offer more youth development programs. It has also helped highlight our focus on enriching the lives of **all** members of the community and making the library a warm, inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone. Most importantly, we have had very positive feedback about the changes in students who attended. Their relationship with other students and school staff who also attended has been enhanced and their attitude and motivation at school has improved.

Changes have also been commented on in terms of the library environment itself; students (and often their families) feel welcome and visit regularly. Quiet is a thing of the past although respect for oneself, others, and property is stressed. Students and library staff share a very positive relationship – all are on first name basis and a mutual respect is apparent.

Involvement by library staff in a town Youth Services Providers Reference Group has grown out of the FMP program, offering excellent opportunities for cross-agency support. A Community Literacy and Numeracy Group which meets at the library has also recently been formed as a result of improved community perception of the library's role in literacy development. Whole community engagement will ensure that outcomes of the program are supported and that complementary programs are implemented. A regular Youth Drumming group has been established at the library based on the success of the Drumbeat sessions within FMP. Finally, representatives from The Pacific Institute visited Narrogin to speak with key stakeholders in youth services across the town about future possibilities for targeting problems in the Town. FMP has been the instigating factor in each of these initiatives.

Essentially, FMP is about building connections and forging positive relationships. The saying is that people will always ask someone they know when they have a question – we have to make sure that person is a librarian, trained and ready to help. FMP is providing a platform for staff to get to know students in the town, and allowing students to develop a feeling of connection and respect towards their library. Country libraries across WA are using the program to help build community capacity and to engage young people with their services. And it is working!

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## Are we just lazy? Why aren't libraries fully using online technologies?

Rural libraries are faced with some unique problems. Laziness is typically not one of them. We are motivated community members who go the extra mile to support and facilitate projects that we believe in and programs that will benefit our communities. Typically funds are tight, but energy is high. In our small, isolated communities everyone has their ideals and passions and we work to inspire our communities to contribute to our favourite causes. This is the beauty of our rural communities – unfortunately there are also downfalls: infrastructure is often limited, services are scarce, and telecommunications channels outside of the major rural townships are sometimes simply non-existent. Remote communities that could benefit most from online banking, remote shopping, and forming online networks to exchange ideas through blogs, wikis, and other social networking sites are denied these urban essentials because of poor infrastructure, because our rural librarians have trouble accessing comprehensive training, and because of our slow, cumbersome public PCs.

### Geographic remoteness

Remoteness is the question and the answer to the problem of why the Tableland Regional Libraries are moving cautiously in our uptake of virtual services. Would not the remoteness and isolation of many of the Tablelands areas ensure and maximise the take up and delivery of advanced online services?

Theoretically – yes!



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# REGIONAL AND RURAL LIBRARIES

However remoteness, while making virtual connectivity a very attractive ideal also comes with the reality of telecommunications disconnectivity. Many regional areas in the Tablelands still have no mobile telephone coverage, the internet service offered to remote cattle stations or even medium sized townships such as Dimbulah is typically only dial up, and it is slow, cumbersome, and expensive to operate a home PC.

Out in the bush virtuality (and the home PC) doesn't work quite like it should. Staying connected is not a life style choice so much as a constant battle.

## Scarcity of resources

Tablelands Regional Council (TRC) Libraries have just begun to engage actively with online technologies. In the past this has been hampered because of:

- Training – the remoteness of library locations makes it difficult for all staff to attend localised training.
- Set up costs – upgrading our library operating system from entry level to the more advanced platforms which enable interactive virtual spaces to be easily constructed.
- Availability of staff to implement and maintain virtual networks.
- Availability of infrastructure – we are reluctant to heavily promote online resources when there is only limited customer access to public PC's.
- The fears of staff of having to maintain virtual as well as a physical workplaces when amalgamation has meant that many staff are already undertaking the duties of multiple positions.

## Our virtual environment now

The TRC Library system does promote the take up of online services and our technical services division have made this a priority because of the large area covered by the Tablelands Regional Council and the remoteness of many of our library locations.

We are now, or will be in the immediate future, using online interactive services including:

- The online Booking module which enables customers to book a computer online at home or from a library OPAC
- Online Request module including online forms for Inter-Library Loans and information requests
- Customised saved list & email notification – receive a list of recently available items from a specific author or genre
- Emailed notices – overdues/reservations
- Online bookings – customers can book a meeting room online

- Incorporate online resources into our catalogue and provide links to author and genre lists as well as linking to lists of award winning literature

We are using the 2.0 technologies made easily accessible through our library operating system but not extending this to create our own library blogs or include RSS feeds as an integral element in our catalogues. So are we just lazy? Or are we simply disenchanted by the wonderful online possibilities we have been offered in training and the stark reality that our remote systems cannot support the technology?

## Conclusion

The problem, I believe, lies not in the creation of online sites or in librarians understanding of the value of social networking but with maintenance of virtual library spaces once they have been launched.

*Podnosh* (<http://podnosh.com/>), a pod casting consultancy which helps government groups and public organisations in the UK to use social media, acknowledges that the way we are using our online technologies is generally not maximising their potential. Podnosh claims that our hastily constructed virtual environments are failing and are in dire need of "social media surgeries".

In many rural libraries, where staff lack access to training and face the daily pressures of doing multiple tasks the major concern is that no one owns these online tasks and no one has the time to monitor and constantly update our virtual presence.

Maintaining an interesting *virtual* space takes *real* energy!

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## Supporting regional TAFEs

The Victorian Association of TAFE Libraries (VATL) is a network of TAFE Institute Libraries which provides expert advice, support, and services to its members and clients to contribute towards the continuous improvement of the overall quality of vocational education and training in Victoria.

The VATL Executive Group is an elected body charged with strategically developing best practice and collaborative partnerships for Victorian TAFE libraries. It includes three subsidiary groups:

- Management Interest Group (MIG) which shares information about management development,

collaborative projects, and new ideas relevant to the management of TAFE Libraries

- Cataloguing, Acquisitions, Serials and Systems Group (CASS) which is a forum for the sharing of information, skills, and best practice relevant to acquisitions, cataloguing, and collection development in TAFE Libraries.
- Liaison and Information Technology Group (LIT) which shares information and skills which will further the development and promotion of liaison, information and training services in TAFE libraries.

Part of the mandate for each group is the support of our regional, non-metropolitan TAFE Libraries through training, professional development opportunities, networking, and collaborative projects.

For MIG at least one of its three professional development activities is always held outside of Melbourne. In 2007, Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE hosted sessions on wikis and blogs. In 2008, the topic of 'knowledge management' was explored by three guest speakers at Gordon TAFE in Geelong.

In 2008, members of CASS ran a number of workshops and all were well attended by the regional TAFEs. The LIT group's 'Humanising the Web' program was held at South West Institute of TAFE, Warrnambool Campus in November 2008. This provided an enjoyable opportunity for more than 16 participants to listen and contribute to presentations from Michael Schack, Cameron Murrell, and Jane Wilson. LIT's most recent event was held at Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE's Yallourn Campus and its theme was 'Liaison and IL revisited'. 30 people attended.

This year, VATL & TAFE Development Centre (Vic) will be sponsoring a one-day professional development workshop to Canberra. Two nominated library staff members from every Victorian TAFE Institute will be heavily subsidised for the entire day trip. This is a tremendous initiative to combine professional development from the three groups into a major event which will cover workshops in the morning at Canberra Institute of Technology and visits to major libraries like ANU and the National Library.

VATL remains committed to its regional colleagues, both in terms of their active participation in metropolitan networking and training, and in reciprocating metropolitan engagement to rural and regional TAFE libraries.

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