

CREATING A LEARNING SOCIETY

Libraries across Australia are taking up the idea of their institution being at the heart of a thriving learning community. It's a different way of looking at how the library interacts with users

and it encourages collaboration with other organisations with similar goals, on the basis that, together, these bodies can make a bigger difference than each operating completely independently.

The Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN) is run by volunteers and is part of a global movement to establish learning towns, learning communities, learning regions. University, TAFE, and public libraries are often involved with ALCN projects and this is one example.

Mt Evelyn is located in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne. It is the fourth largest town in Yarra Ranges and has population of 10 000. Mt Evelyn became a Learning Town 13 years ago.

A Learning Community is a town, city, region, or any geographical entity with a strategy for lifelong learning among its citizens. In essence, the thinking moves beyond education and training within self-contained compartments to the creation of lifelong learning which is fundamentally inclusive and could be named lifelong learning for all. This moves us to a lifelong learning society which takes a holistic view of learning while maintaining a sphere of action in the community. A Learning Community focuses on the development of all its citizens by, for example, celebrating learning in innovative ways as a creative, rewarding, and fun activity, and encouraging active involvement by whole families.

Mt Evelyn is a young community with 40% of its population under 25. There are four primary schools, one secondary school, three kindergartens, and three childcare centres.

Therefore it is no surprise that much of the Learning Town action is focused on this young cohort. Four years ago, key stakeholders came together to form the Early Years Literacy Group, with a focus on engaging the early years and their parents in activities associated with literacy skills development.

A number of activities have been undertaken that have enhanced the engagement of young people and their families. We will look at one: The puppet festival *Sox and Stories*.

Sox and Stories was designed to engage the family/ early years cohort,

as puppets are a non-threatening, all-age tool. Research has shown that puppets successfully engage learners with communication, literacy, mental and physical limitations, or who may

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have experienced trauma. It also provided an opportunity to create a creative, rewarding, and fun activity that encouraged active involvement from whole families.

This project connected with work being undertaken between the Shire and the local community house, Morrisons. The working group was exploring ways to engage the community in supporting literacy development, especially in the early years.

A fantastic, two-day event was designed. The project was introduced at an evening launch, held in the library/ community room facility, with a carnival atmosphere. There were craft tables, storytellers, roving puppeteers, and a visit from Bookaburra, the storytelling icon. The centrepiece for the night was the performance piece, *The Sand Dragon's Tale*, which is a multi-cultural piece using a fusion of art forms including performance, music, puppetry, and dance. The audience was riveted, including a large group of footy club dads.

One parent said, "It was simply excellent. The performance though was truly sensational and was far more sophisticated storytelling than the puppets."

The following day provided a range of workshops for a range of ages from pre-school through primary school and teens to adults, all making puppets and props and creating stories.

A local Primary School Principal was asked, "Do you think this project

would provide literacy development?"

The response? "Very definitely yes. The bringing to life of picture books is priceless and will motivate both reading and performance. Great opportunities for taking this into things like procedural writing."

The community responded very positively as well:

"I thought the roving puppeteers did a particularly good job of engaging the groups. The session I attended with my grand-daughter aimed to encourage children to look at how we make puppets from anything and then to create a story".

This event has created a huge interest from all areas of the community so that there has been a move to develop a story-telling team – from one magic moment to a bigger learning opportunity.

If you would like to know more about Australian Learning Communities, please contact Jan, jsimmons@morrisons.org.au.

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