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Reader Development program

PUTTING READERS FIRST

Libraries across Victoria are buzzing with new energy and enthusiasm as more than 1000 staff have completed Opening the Book's online training course in a three-year program.

The rollout was a partnership between the State Library of Victoria and the Public Libraries Victoria Network. All of the 47 library services in the state participated and it has been the highest quality-sustained cascade Opening the Book has been involved in, surpassing previous programs in the UK and Ireland.

The contents of the course, especially the book examples, were adjusted to reflect the Australian context, with feedback from key early testers. However, the services that libraries aspire to offer – and the difficulties they face in doing so – are pretty universal in our experience. Reader-centred skills can be applied in most libraries to help solve some of the problems.

The advantages of online training for a large, distributed and often part-time workforce are very clear in terms of cost and convenience. The real measure of success, however, is the quality of the learning experience and its impact on day to day staff routines.

This is where Victoria struck gold – from the SLV Project Manager through the four Area Coordinators to more than 200 supervisors, the quality of mentoring was outstanding.

Opening the Book was asked to assess the quality of what has been achieved in Victoria. We sampled the work of 300 graduates spread right across the state, looking at their written work and the feedback and assessments from their supervisors across all seven modules. In addition we analysed the self-reported experience of 229 graduates giving feedback three months after finishing the course. The results of this analysis are truly impressive.

Of the sample of 300, 94% used all the opportunities the course offered to talk with patrons and they recorded quality feedback, while 91% of the self-reporting sample said that the course work they had done directly affected what their patrons chose to read. The results also showed that 76% felt more confident to talk positively about books they disliked or wouldn't choose to read themselves and 96% of the 229 reported that their library created more effective displays as a direct result of the course.

The two most difficult things for any course to deliver are motivation to learners and real impact in the workplace. On the first, there were only six non-completers across the full 1000 trainees. On the second, almost half of the 229 graduates sampled said that the course completely changed their view of their job and their library. These are statistics that elite universities would find it hard to match!

To give a flavour of our online training, INCITE asked us for our top tips for libraries embarking on setting up a reader development program. Here are three juicy ones to set you thinking.

CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Encourage staff to work away from the desk and actively engage with readers. Provide training to give staff the confidence to talk to readers about reading; this is a great way to show you value your readers and it gives opportunities to open up reading choices and widens staff knowledge of the collection. Make sustainable opportunities for readers to share their recommendations. Raise the status of your readers.

CHANGE THE SPACE

Take a clear look at the messages that your library layout is sending to visitors. What is the first impression? How could you manage it to surprise new visitors? In what ways are you tempting readers to engage with a range of books? What can you do to improve the customer journey around the space? Raise the status of your library.

CHANGE THE MESSAGE

Focus your marketing and promotional messages on the reading experience. Start with why people read, not what they read. Begin with the thrill and the buzz of reading, not the author or the title. Use direct quotes from readers about their reading and how they use the library. Raise the status of reading as a creative activity.

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