

Innovation – it's easier than you think



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The exhortations to be nimble and agile are coming at library staff so frequently that you could be forgiven for thinking that we're supposed to be circus performers rather than librarians. But innovating, as EDWARD KOSTRABY outlines, often involves very simple changes that don't necessarily require a great deal of extra effort or expense.

The push to be innovative, creative and adapt to all kinds of expectations is relentless. The digital revolution is no longer a revolution, but a continuous disrupting element transforming all before it, from individual knowledge to organisational inputs. Can the digital divide ever be bridged? Or is it any longer relevant, as libraries introduce MOOCs, avatars, game-based learning, cloud-based library systems, learning commons, 3D printing, makerspaces, robotics, refurbis, new builds, technology-rich environments, touchscreens, mobile shelving and alternative work spaces? Then there is the question of how they integrate with the school curriculum. Examples of such innovation in libraries abound and practical examples from 2016 include these projects that gained the VALA Award:

1. National Library of Australia – edeposit service:
This service is the public interface of an end-to-end digital collection management system, fully integrated with other NLA systems, enabling Australian publishers to deposit Australian digital publications in accordance with the new legal deposit provisions of the Copyright Act.
2. University of Melbourne – Data Forensics Lab:
This is a response to a growing demand to access and extract valuable research data and files from now-obsolete systems and media. The lab offers a range of services for examining, analysing, recovering, reusing and preserving data stored in digital media


in a forensically sound manner. The lab can process a variety of legacy computer storage media using state-of-the-art, purpose-built hardware and software. Innovation such as this, and the thought behind it, takes time to come to fruition. The institutional environments in which the innovators are located play a key role in nurturing innovation. Tim Kastle at University of Queensland (timkastle.org) provides extensive resources, including blog posts on thinking about innovation and putting it into practice. 'I have seen innovation in the way staff tackle issues which at some point they believed were beyond them or not possible,' Tim said. 'Just a shift in work practices to something different can lead to and open up the daily workload within a library.'

A project I previously worked on at a secondary school involved the 'genreification' of the non-fiction collection into categories that a school might use – for example, the Industrial Revolution. Anything relating to this topic was placed in a zone, still using Dewey, but zoned with appropriate reference directions in the catalogue to specify where it was in the collection. The task involved a lot of discussion to determine what it would look like so that all staff felt comfortable in breaking away from the standard Dewey sequence. Once this was achieved, it became a little easier to start introducing other changes to improve the connection between the library and user needs and access.

In the field of education, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership has published a paper on the importance of innovation and a learning culture, which cites 50 innovative examples (bit.ly/2eA7euF), and a paper titled 'Global Trends in Professional Learning and Performance and Development' (bit.ly/1sYx9rg) provides an overview of innovative practices – which are so important in teaching – throughout the world. The School Library Association of Victoria has also been promoting and running workshops and PD sessions on innovative practices in libraries for well over a decade.

Academics Karen MacDonald and Wyoma vanDuinkerken, although writing about an American context, tackle the topic of innovation in a very readable way¹. They explore its components – such as creativity and entrepreneurship – and equate it to a business model of operation in which the concept of creative destruction keeps developing. The article provides an eight-step process to achieve this process. Each of these steps can stand alone and get results. This type of systems approach has resonated with many of our Australian tertiary and public libraries and is also influencing the school library

sector. People have been pressing this point for over a century and it has been reinterpreted and reworked to this day. The culture of the working environment and its structures, however, are perhaps the biggest impediments to innovation.

Winston Churchill once said that the empires of the future are the empires of the mind. Whether that prediction will be borne out is unclear. But one thing, as MacDonald and vanDuinkerken point out, is certain, and that is that 'the library is a growing organism', constantly evolving and mindful of its connection to its many stakeholders. The Prime Minister's call to be an innovative and creative nation only supports what seems to be the norm in Australian libraries. 


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¹Libraries surviving as entrepreneurial organizations: a creative destruction perspective
MacDonald, Karen I and vanDuinkerken, Wyoma.
New Library World vol. 116 No. 7/8 (2015): 406–419.

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