

A PARTNERSHIP FOR ACCESS: THE KOORI LIBRARY PATHWAYS PROJECT - A REFLECTIVE REVIEW FROM SHEPPARTON VICTORIA

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ABSTRACT

The Koori Library Pathways Project received funding from the Library Board of Victoria through the Libraries Building Communities Demonstration Project grants program in 2005/06. Launched in November 2006, the pilot project was completed at the end of September 2007. It was a joint initiative between the Shepparton based Indigenous organisation, the Koori Resource & Information Centre (KRIC), and the Goulburn Valley Regional Library Corporation (GVRLC) whose regional headquarters and main branch library are based in Shepparton. Shepparton has the largest population of Aboriginal people in Victoria outside of metropolitan Melbourne. The impetus for this project came from the local Aboriginal community when KRIC approached the GVRLC to discuss ways of developing a sustainable partnership between the two organisations. The Project was undertaken with two key objectives: to better connect the community to local Indigenous information and knowledge and to develop and deliver more accessible and responsive library services to the local Indigenous community. These two broad objectives were to be met by completing a list of project goals that included investigating the information needs of the local Indigenous communities, developing a resource of Indigenous information and knowledge, establishing protocols, strengthening the capacity of the local Indigenous community to manage information services, cultural awareness training for staff and exploring potential resources for sustainability. The project was managed and co-ordinated by KRIC with the support of a project team that included members from both organisations.

This paper will critically review the project as a model for a partnership for access.

BODY OF PAPER**Acknowledgments**

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On behalf of the Project, we would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this country, the Arrente people, their ancestors and Elders.

On behalf of the Project Team, we would like to thank you for this opportunity to reflect on the Koori Library Pathways Project. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have been part of this project.

We wish especially to pay respect to the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal community for the leadership and the vision which brought about the partnership; to give thanks to community members for their support and assistance.

We are also glad to be able to express appreciation and gratitude in this forum for the support this project has received: to acknowledge the work of the State Library of Victoria's Libraries Building Communities Research Reports which provided the springboard for this demonstration project; to thank those who supported the grant application, namely the Greater Shepparton City Council, the Shepparton Family History Group, the Shepparton Reconciliation Group, the MurrayLink Libraries; to thank the Library Board of Victoria for having faith in the grant application and providing the vital wherewithal and to thank the State Library of Victoria staff for encouragement and assistance.

If this project, and the partnership which it has helped facilitate, have been successful and if this partnership is to be enduring, much is owed to these supporting relationships.

A grateful tribute is paid to fellow team members: to Sharon Atkinson Firebrace and Tui Crumpen from the Koori Resource & Information Centre who inspiringly and skilfully managed and coordinated the project; to project officer Raquel Davis from the Koori Resource & Information Centre, team artist and designer of the library bags who became the ambassador for the public library in the community, and to Sheila Atley, Goulburn Valley Regional Library Adult Services and Deputy Librarian for her pivotal role.

A special acknowledgement is due to Derryn Schoenborn who, on behalf of the Aboriginal Community Strategic Planning & Policy Unit, critically and sensitively evaluated the Koori Library Pathways Project in October 2007 and whose words are echoed in the following reflections.

Background

The Koori Library Pathways Project was a joint initiative to develop a sustainable partnership between the Koori Resource & Information Centre and the Goulburn Valley Regional Library Corporation. Both these organisations are based in Shepparton, a regional centre of approximately 29,000 people, situated in north central Victoria, 180 kilometres from Melbourne.

The Koori Resource & Information Centre is an Indigenous organisation which operates from a house in Corio Street Shepparton. KRIC, as it is called, has been supporting and nurturing Indigenous services in the area for around twenty years; it has an established and strong networking role and is well practised in forging partnerships. KRIC has been increasingly concerned about knowledge retention and knowledge transfer in the Aboriginal community and the need to explore ways in which its historical knowledge could be shared with the wider community whilst respecting sensitivities and protecting this knowledge.

The Goulburn Valley Regional Library in Marungi Street is in walking distance of the Koori Resource & Information Centre. The Library had been concerned about the accessibility of its services to the local Indigenous community and had come to the view that a first step would be to work with this community to develop a model that would best meet the library service needs of the local Indigenous people. While there had been informal chats with members of the local community over time, how this might be done was still unclear.

In December 2005, the Koori Resource & Information Centre approached the Library with a proposal for a partnership, when, fortuitously, the Library Board of Victoria called for applications for funding of Libraries Building Communities Demonstration Projects. Here was an opportunity to facilitate a partnership to improve access and to establish in the library a sense of belonging and connectedness for Indigenous people.

The background to this project is important. The Goulburn Statistical Division with 11% of Victoria's Indigenous population has the largest number of Indigenous residents outside Melbourne, with 59% of these people living within the City of Greater Shepparton. (State Library of Victoria 2008, p.12). The Indigenous community in Shepparton is youthful and growing. This local community has many challenges to contend with, including high rates of unemployment and low school retention rates. (State Library of Victoria 2008, p.13). However, the Koori Resource & Information Centre's vision for community strengthening and empowerment lies in turning the focus to the information needs of the local Indigenous community to encourage literacy growth and knowledge of local culture and history. The Library had a role here in developing positive pathways to facilitate the use and management of information for the community.

In mid 2006 the Goulburn Valley Regional Library received \$60,000 in funding to facilitate the partnership and to implement the Koori Library Pathways Project over a twelve month period that began in October 2006.

Establishment of the Koori Library Pathways Project

The following month, in November 2006, the partnership was publicly acknowledged with a formal Memorandum of Understanding. The signing of which was witnessed by a large representative audience at the Shepparton Library.

Holding a public launch, at this time, was important to ensure wide community awareness and engagement early on in the life of the project.

This was the first major event organised by the project coordinators and the project team. In the original submission for funding, it was proposed that an Indigenous project officer be recruited to manage the project. This goal to find a person with the requisite skill who was from the local Indigenous community and was willing to take on a part-time short-term position in the specific timeframe, was, as the evaluator later commented, highly ambitious. (Aboriginal Community Strategic Planning & Policy Unit 2007, p.15).

Fortunately it was quickly realised that it was an unrealistic expectation to find one person to manage the project. Instead, in trying to find a suitable candidate, a more effective and workable arrangement evolved, which was to employ the Koori Resource & Information Centre to manage and coordinate the project.

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This proved to be efficient, flexible and best utilised the skills and time constraints of each member of the team. It also drew on a broader range of expertise and engaged more Indigenous people into the project. The day-to-day operation of the project and the partnership was carried out by the project work team which consisted of two representatives from the Koori Resource & Information Centre and two from the Goulburn Valley Regional Library and supplemented by a young Indigenous person employed by KRIC to work on the project one day a week.

The benefits of the partnership, and the style of joint action that was adopted, were immediately evident in the staging of the launch. Tui Crumpen and Sharon Firebrace, as managers of the project, prepared the Memorandum of Understanding and guided the format of the afternoon.

They arranged for the visit of Gowrie Street Primary School children to showcase the work of the Yachad Accelerated Learning Project (YALP) and to read their stories that celebrated the lives of Indigenous people to guests. (The Library was then able to arrange for these electronic readers to be copied and processed for the collection and made available for loan. They have been well used.)

The project coordinators also ensured that representatives from a wide range of Indigenous organisations were present at the launch so that the event brought together a large number of Indigenous and non Indigenous people. The date chosen coincided with a regional staff meeting in the morning so all library staff had the opportunity to attend the afternoon proceedings together with invited State Library staff, Council and community supporters.

Project coordinator Sharon Atkinson Firebrace and the Chief Executive Officer of the Koori Resource & Information Centre, Paul Briggs, both addressed the audience.

Paul Briggs set out the vision of the partnership. He offered a rare insight into the issues facing Aboriginal people in accessing and retaining their knowledge, culture and history and stressed the importance of working in partnership to safeguard the future of this knowledge. The wider public, as readers of the *Shepparton News*, were also offered access to this insight as reporter John Lewis sensitively captured Paul Briggs' memorable words of the need to find a vehicle to integrate Aboriginal culture into the mainstream of knowledge for the safeguarding of this knowledge for and by Aboriginal people.

What steps did the project take to achieve this goal and how well did it succeed?

Initiatives to preserve and make more accessible Indigenous knowledge, culture and history

The first steps had, in fact, begun in October, at the very beginning of the Koori Library Pathways Project, when two archiving working bees were organised at the Koori Resource & Information Centre with the sorting of materials by volunteers from both organisations and other supporting groups. This group activity not only galvanised the partnership but provided assistance and support for the Koori Resource & Information Centre to initiate and develop its own separate and ongoing archiving program. This was an important stepping stone for the Koori Resource & Information Centre to start recording its history.

The project team also organised for the Public Records Office of Victoria to visit the Koori Resource & Information Centre to discuss possible links and networks, policies and the conservation of archives. The Shepparton Family History Group gave KRIC staff an insight into the resources held in its library and how their resources are organised and indexed.

Meanwhile steps were being taken at the Shepparton Library to establish a visible Indigenous section in the library and to create a collection of Aboriginal picture books. Project team member, Raquel Davis, spent time in the library bringing these collections together. While there was immediate positive feedback from patrons, there were some issues to consider.

At the completion of the project the evaluator recommended that the Goulburn Valley Regional Library should review its Indigenous collection from the point of view of getting an idea of how much it possesses which is *for* Kooris as opposed to being *about* Kooris and take steps to increase the amount of material that is *for* Kooris and advertise it to the Indigenous community. (Aboriginal Community Strategic Planning & Policy Unit 2007, p.16)

Findings from Focus groups, which were held in the last months of the project, revealed considerable concern for how Indigenous culture and history was presented in library books. As one participant put it, "A lot of the time I find it is just a white man's perception of our nation".

Furthermore, the initial intention to establish local protocols with the Indigenous community for the collection and handling of Indigenous material was not followed through during the lifetime of the project.

At the end of the twelve months, late 2007, the Koori Library Pathways Project had not secured any further funding. However the partnership was firmly established. The two organisations agreed in April 2008 to sign a new Memorandum of Understanding to maintain their partnership to continue to work co-operatively to build a resource of Indigenous information and knowledge that is accessible and responsive to the needs of the local community.

Fortunately the Koori Resource & Information Centre was able to obtain funding through the Department of Sustainability and Environment for a Traditional Owner Repository Project. The Goulburn Valley Regional Library was able to lend support in the implementation of this project and by so doing, address unresolved issues and build on the work of the project.

A team of local Indigenous people were employed to work on the archiving project at the Koori Resource & Information Centre and to complement this work, they spent time at the Shepparton Library developing a Koori Resources Assessment Program. This gave them the opportunity to read books held by the Library, to evaluate them and comment on each item for its local relevance. In reviewing the material they also had the option of recommending it not for public display.

This program gave the participants insight into the general nature of a public library collection and heightened their awareness of the significance of the 'living history' contained in the files held by the Koori Resource & Information Centre. There, at KRIC, the participants were designing an archiving system for and by Indigenous people that would provide access for future generations to these resources and the knowledge and history contained in them.

Initiatives to make public library services more responsive and accessible to the local Indigenous community

The second broad objective of the Koori Library Pathways Project was for the partnership to help develop and deliver more accessible and responsive library services to the local Indigenous community.

It had been originally proposed to organise focus groups at the beginning of the project and to identify local needs and respond, where possible, to these needs. Again this was overly ambitious as these take time both to organise and to analyse. The Koori Resource & Information Centre, as managers of the project, monitored the time-line carefully, reshaping it for optimum results in the short time-frame allowed. As such the focus groups were scheduled for later and KRIC instigated a variety of activities, turning the focus of the project toward trialling programs for their workability for the future.

These programs will be familiar to library services, such as storytellings, displays, group visits, library bags, talks, cross cultural awareness workshops and the *Living Library*. Each stage in the project aimed, in various ways, to reach out to different groups in both the Indigenous and non Indigenous community, to further access and to share knowledge and skills.

For example, visits people from Cummeragunja Village and Badtja Kindergarten to the Shepparton Library and by Ardmona School to Mooroopna Library took place to give young Indigenous people an experience of the library and its resources and to hear storytellings by Elders. The *NAIDOC Living Library* involved secondary school students. A group of Elders went down to Melbourne for a guided tour of the State Library of Victoria. PowerPoint presentations of the project were given at a number of gatherings, to the Department of Sustainability and Environment, to Library Boards at both state and regional level, to the Fifth International Conference of Indigenous Librarians, to the Shepparton Home Library Service, and to Greater Shepparton City Council.

Library bags, designed by the Koori Resource & Information Centre project officer, were handed out on such occasions, promoting not only the library but providing information on local Indigenous services and projects.

There was also considerable mainstream media exposure and project activities were well reported in Indigenous outlets, such as the Rumbalara Football Netball Club newsletter.

The cultural awareness program organised by the Koori Resource & Information Centre was a major milestone in promoting access by breaking down barriers, both cultural and personal and also importantly by forging new pathways.

Three workshops were offered to enable all members of the library's staff, both permanent and casual, and other groups who had supported the project to take part and also included staff and students from the Academy of Sports Health & Education, and Elders. The program took the form of a journey by bus to Barmah and the Yorta Yorta Training Centre, then over the Murray River to the Cummeragunja Village and then back to Mooroopna on the Goulburn River. In 1939 when the historic *Walk-off* from the Cummeragunja Reserve took place, two hundred people had walked off the Mission, in what is regarded as the first mass strike by Aboriginal people in Australia. Many crossed the Murray and moved down to Shepparton and Mooroopna where they lived for some years on the river flats before settling permanently in the area. The trip, planned by the Koori Resource & Information Centre, followed this history. In the feedback from the workshops, as the evaluator remarked, there is a sense that a number of the participants were amazed that there was a major facet of local history (and present day life) that was almost wholly unknown to them before the tour. To quote from one library staff member 'I was made more aware of Koori culture in this area and the conditions that the local Kooris live or lived in. It would be good if this project was offered to more people in the area. I have lived in Shepparton for 26 years and never knew of Cummeragunja etc.' (Aboriginal Community Strategic Planning & Policy Unit, p.13)

The cultural awareness trip to Cummeragunja created the opportunity for the library to make links with the Village. A school holiday program visit to the Shepparton Library followed and the project concluded with the Mobile Library visiting the Village with the aim of scheduling school holiday visits to Cummeragunja into its regular timetable. Whilst the outreach to the Village was regarded as one of the best outcomes of the project, considerable work and commitment by the library is needed to meet the needs of this relatively isolated community.

Another quite different program instigated by the project coordinators was the *NAIDOC Living Library*. This was inspired by the Danish *Living Library* concept and drew on information provided by Shaun McIntyre on the *Lismore Living Library*. The Koori Library Pathways Project's model was a morning event at the Shepparton Library where secondary school students were given the opportunity to learn directly about the lives and perspectives of five local Indigenous people within a library setting. There was some apprehension on the part of both *the books* and *the readers* but all survived and were very positive on reflection about the experience. This program was regarded as one of the most successful by the project managers for its impact on a cross section of the community and its community involvement at different levels.

While the Koori Library Pathways Project drew a greater number of Indigenous people into the library setting through its various activities, perception of increased Indigenous use on a regular basis of the library can only be anecdotal. The weekly presence of a KRIC staff member in the Shepparton Library was certainly very important. This was perhaps most obvious when she was absent for the set day and people arrived hoping for her assistance.

This is endorsed in a comment made by a focus group participant about barriers to library use. 'Shyness would come into it too. Just asking for information, having

someone to access, who you feel comfortable with would probably make a difference. Maybe another Koori person.’(State Library of Victoria 2008, p. 25)

That the library has many challenges in providing accessible, responsive and relevant services to the local Indigenous community was shown very clearly through the findings of the focus groups. It is most unlikely that without the partnership with the Koori Resource & Information Centre and the funding of the project this direct access to local Indigenous views and perspectives about library use could have been achieved.

The Koori Resource & Information Centre arranged for a local Indigenous consultant who was well known and respected in the community to facilitate four focus groups and two of these were specifically conducted for the State Library of Victoria's *Connecting with the Community* research.

The *Connecting with the Community* Report, to be presented at the 2008 ALIA conference, discusses in detail the factors that influence the accessing and using of library service by Indigenous people and draws in part on the views and perspectives of these focus groups. What was especially striking, as highlighted in this report, was the lack of awareness and experience of *public* libraries, which lead to Indigenous people having no compelling reason for using these services. And this, despite the fact they may have indicated a need to access literacy support services, education and employment support and community information. For all these reasons, a public library rather than an educational library may be the one place to go. (State Library of Victoria 2008, p. 23).

It is true that these findings were not specifically drawn upon during the life of the project and also it needs to be said that ultimately much is owed to the State Library of Victoria for its detailed analysis and reporting of these transcripts in the *Connecting with the Community* Report. Fortunately, in hindsight, and not surprisingly, as the Koori Library Pathways Project was very much guided by ideas coming from the Indigenous community, the programs implemented were attempts to reach out and engage the Indigenous community in the day-to-day life of the public library, thereby beginning to address the concerns and barriers revealed in the focus groups.

Funded projects that are community driven, such as the Koori Library Pathways Project, are important and crucial beginnings. Their structure and accountability promote experiment and innovation in the short term. They can be fun too. However, capacity building and change, both for the public library and the Indigenous community, take time and it will be, perhaps, a long time, before lasting outcomes are realised. It was a very sobering lesson to read the findings of the focus groups and learn of the myriad of difficulties and barriers that Indigenous people in the Goulburn Valley region can experience in accessing library and information services and their own history.

Preliminary work has been done to prepare a brief to seek further funding to develop and move this pilot project forward. But this will also take time to realise. The project has, however, identified factors that will contribute to its successful expansion. Especially vital is community ownership of the project through the inclusion of the Indigenous community in the planning and developmental stages. Flexibility, enthusiasm, trust and mutual respect all contribute to success too.

Finally, and importantly, the Koori Library Pathways Project has established a partnership of goodwill between the two organisations that goes beyond the project and which is not reliant on deadlines or specific limited funding but on an understanding and

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knowledge that these two bodies can work together with a shared commitment to Indigenous access.

REFERENCES

Aboriginal Community Strategic Planning & Policy Unit 2007, *Koori Library Pathways Project Evaluation October 2007*, Aboriginal Community Strategic Planning & Policy Unit, Shepparton

State Library of Victoria 2008, *Connecting with the Community*, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

BIOGRAPHIES OF PRESENTERS

Sharon Atkinson Firebrace has expertise in financial management of grants and operating a business as demonstrated by her position of manager of the Koori Resource & Information Centre for the past five years and her past employment as manager of First Nations Credit Union. She is actively involved in the Indigenous community, both professionally and personally. Sharon has been part of the Koori Library Pathways Project since the beginning and has given a positive commitment to raising awareness and promoting the project to the Goulburn Valley local Indigenous community.

Tui Crumpen is the Goulburn Valley Partnerships Manager for the Academy of Sports Health & Education and University of Melbourne. Her two year secondment to the Koori Resource & Information Centre (KRIC) was the result of a partnership agreement with the Department of Sustainability & Environment. In reflection she believes the Koori Library Pathways Project has been one of the most empowering and engaging projects she has had the pleasure to work on.

Libby Woodhouse has managed Shepparton Branch Library for the Goulburn Valley Regional Library for ten years and has been happily at the desk in public libraries for over a quarter of a century. She regards herself privileged that her pathway should have led to Shepparton to be a part of the Koori Library Pathways Project.