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Empowering communities through memories: the role of public libraries

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Abstract

Drawing on the findings of recent research into public libraries in Victoria, Australia, this paper will explore the role of public libraries in creating, sustaining, and preserving community memory, and how such activities contribute to the empowerment of communities. In this context, the concept of empowerment will be explored at a number of levels including the individual and institutional levels for participative action and institutional partnerships. The paper concludes that if public libraries can reposition themselves as brokers or central nodes in a stronger community network, then they will be in a stronger position to facilitate the construction and preservation of community memory which, in turn, will act to empower their communities.

Introduction

The definitions of ‘community’ are numerous (Johanson et al 2002). Community is not limited by practice, interest, or the like, but should be regarded in the widest sense. Multiple communities make up society. Anyone can belong to one or more communities, depending on their perceptions and participation. Yet as vague as it is in terms of definition, communities are ubiquitous, and cultural institutions such as public libraries must address the dynamic needs that arise out of communities.

This paper reports a study of public libraries in Victoria, which began as a study of performance indicators and community services, but which quickly evolved into an investigation of the ‘knowledge commons’ in public libraries – a concept that brings together immediate relationships with individuals in communities and broader forces at organisational and societal levels. The concept stems from the historical notion of the commons, reaching back to humans’ earliest efforts at co-operation and collaboration for the common good, for example developing conventions for shared use of grazing lands. In fact, some modern commentaries refer to the public library as ‘a place for people to meet that has been likened to the village green’ (State Library of Victoria 2005). In modern times the commons has come to mean resources that are made freely available for all in the community to build relationships and cultural democracy (Schauder et al 2006).
The focus of the study changed because libraries are changing, through the infusion of technology, and the development of new partnerships with communities. They are also taking on additional responsibilities and functions, reflected, for example, in new or redesigned buildings, and outreach services. Because of these changes, it was no longer feasible to create an accurate picture of public libraries without a thorough inquiry into their community networks.

Over the past decade, public libraries in Victoria have significantly increased their engagement with the broader community to further a number of interests, for example, in relation to issues such as information poverty (Williamson et al., 2000), lifelong learning (Bundy, 2001), and bridging children and adult literacy (Gibbs, 1990). At the same time, there have been structural changes in the sector. The restructuring of the state’s local governmental sector in 1993-1995 (Dudley, 1998) introduced competitive tendering to libraries, and since then public libraries in Victoria have operated under new service agreements, negotiated with their governing councils. Even more significant has been the surge of co-operation found amongst public libraries (Dudley, 1998). Such engagement with their own community has brought public libraries to a higher level of involvement in constructing memories and making meaning: an inevitable process of forming communities. Sometimes this has been the result of direct action, such as collecting and publishing local history of key figures in the community, but in any case it is apparent that public libraries are forging new partnerships and service delivery policies to aggregate and better serve their communities.

The many examples of changes in libraries reflect a larger movement of cultural institutions away from traditional methods of service. Libraries are transforming their spaces and outreach services to communities (Axtman, 2005; Elsevier, 2005), and in the recent years, have been moving towards the idea of the ‘learning commons’, where support services, resources, spaces, and technologies are brought together in comfortable workspaces to facilitate learning. As a result of these changes, a hybrid space, involving both physical and digital dimensions, has been created. The communities functioning within hybrid spaces are also changing at a rapid pace, as they adapt to new ways of communicating and constructing knowledge while still cognisant of what used to work for them.

Public knowledge, or the public resource, is critical for the sustainability and growth of communities. Public knowledge in this discussion refers to knowledge that exists commonly in the public domain,
equally accessible by communities, without prejudice or restrictions (Johanson 1997). It used to be simple: what is housed in a public library was accessible to members of the public – the communities they serve. But the presence of new technologies is now mediating levels of access to, as well as acquisition and accumulation of, public knowledge. This has brought change to the nature of interaction between the public library and communities. Public libraries have to, and continually do, reassess themselves in all their roles; especially with regard to accumulating and representing public knowledge to communities.

The presence of new public knowledge is something that cannot be established overnight. Meanings in communities have to be constructed, and re-constructed both by individuals on their own and individuals together as a community, if they are to become shared understandings. Such shared memories lead to public knowledge - shared by the community that defines it. Behind this definition, there are significations of resources, structures and agencies, instilled for the operation of the community, and communicative facilities are established (Giddens, 1986).

Yet this concept of public knowledge is constantly challenged today with privatisation and market forces seeking to dominate even the information and resources in public libraries. One example is licenses that limit access to electronic periodicals and journals. So, despite the fact that there is an abundance of information that has become easier and cheaper to access, it should be recognized that market forces shape the way communities create, exchange, and share information and technologies, potentially resulting in fragmented access and inequality in terms of literacy, democracy, and power (Hardy & Johanson 2003). It is altogether a challenge as it is an opportunity: the potential of an expanded generation of public knowledge through new community relationships fostered by public libraries.

The focus of the research reported in this paper is to examine the efforts of public libraries to connect their communities in recent times. The construct used in the study is the knowledge commons, envisioned to include not only information resources, but also indigenous knowledge and processes. This vision of the knowledge commons sees communities that purpose themselves for the production of knowledge. Such a purpose implies that they come together not only for the creation and sharing of information resources, but that they possess processes to facilitate the production of knowledge – whether open or enclosed. This concept of the knowledge commons is key: with the emphasis on the
use and production of knowledge as a resource that inspires, supports and sustains communities. Knowledge as a resource ‘has the characteristic of not being degraded when used, but rather to increase in value’ (Drucker, c.f. Hellstrom, 2003). It also recognizes that communities in the knowledge commons are dynamic –their creation and sharing of knowledge can be influenced by their very dynamism.

**Research Philosophy and Method**

The pilot research was undertaken using a case study approach, underpinned by interpretivist research philosophy, the key focus of which is ‘meaning’ or ‘interpretation’. ‘Interpretivism’ is an umbrella term for a number of different paradigms one of which is ‘constructivism’. Constructivist research is based upon the idea that ‘there is no unique “real world” that pre-exists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language’ (Bruner 1986: 95). Knowledge and truth are therefore created by people, and there are often multiple, conflicting constructions of reality. Supporters of interpretivist/constructivist qualitative research argue that it allows greater flexibility and therefore results in the discovery of new insights (Sutton 1997) and that ‘it can produce new and unexpected data, evidence we did not know was there’ (Madjar & Walton 2001:41). In other words it is the serendipity encouraged by this approach to research which is a major strength.

**Interpretivist Case Studies**

Interpretivist case studies were carried out in three public libraries services, with the selection of services based on the profiles of the communities in which they were located. They included a regional public library serving connected shires and towns on both sides of the border between Victoria and New South Wales; a public library service which is part of a learning centre in a relatively newly established community; and another service located in a suburban region of Melbourne serving multi-ethnic communities that differ in terms of ages and economic parities.

**Data collection**

Interviews of one to 1.5 hours were carried out with the library managers from each library service. In the case of the Hume Global Learning Village into which the library service is integrated, the General
Manager of the Learning Community Department, Hume City Council, was interviewed with the Library Manager. These interviews took place at venues within each library service, giving the project team members an opportunity to observe the location and at least some of the physical spaces. Written documents for each of the services provided additional information.

In order to cast further light on the key issues of the research, interviews were also carried out with seven individuals identified as ‘gatekeepers’, who were defined as visionary leaders likely to have a deep understanding of the community-building role of the public library. These gatekeepers included two university librarians, one employee of Moreland City Council, one employee of Wodonga Learning Centre and three representatives of community organisations who are very active in their communities. Interviews focused on a wide range of questions related to the role of public libraries in community building and in providing a community memory (collective memories of communities that are shared and understood both implicitly and explicitly). Table 1 provides examples (only) of interview questions asked of representatives of library services.

Table 1
Examples of Interview Questions Asked

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What kinds of activities are being undertaken by your public library service in order to encourage community involvement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Can you please talk about the partnerships with community organisations that are important with regard to community building?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How are public open spaces in your buildings changing, especially to accommodate new technology?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do you think that new library spaces and resources have helped to empower the community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Has the skills base of the staff had to change dramatically in the last few years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Are there professional roles that are particularly focused on community building?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Do you think the library has a role in providing a community memory?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fieldwork, which was carried out in compliance with the requirements of the Monash University Ethics Committee, took approximately six months to complete, between November 2005 and April
2006. Where it was not possible to conduct an interview face-to-face, telephone interviews were undertaken (with three interviewees). With the permission of the interviewees, all interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

**Data analysis**

Analysis of data by identifying broader themes and specific categories is a typical method of analysing qualitative data (see, e.g., Huberman & Miles 2002). It is the approach used by grounded theorists (see, e.g., Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2003). There were five steps to the data analysis: (1) The transcribed data were produced in printed form. (2) Two researchers read through the data, making notes about the tentative themes (with definitions) which appeared to be emerging. (3) Passages of data were labeled with categories and linked to one of the themes so that identically labeled or categorised data could be retrieved as needed. Further themes (broader than categories) were identified and defined as necessary. As with themes, categories were given a short title and a definition if needed. Categories that were initially broad were sometimes sub-divided to be more precise as the analysis progressed. (4) Categories were conceptually organised, meaning that thought was given to the similarities, differences and relationships among the categories. (5) Final themes were developed in preparation for documenting the research findings. Examples of themes and categories are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

**Examples of Themes, Categories and Quotations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community building by public libraries</td>
<td>(1) Forging community relationships</td>
<td>(1) <em>I have a team here and I encourage them to be involved in a range of external committees and organisations.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Community facilitation role</td>
<td>(2) <em>We need to keep refining it a bit more I think on what the role of the learning advocate or the learning facilitator will mean for a library staff member and we’re actually using a library staff member to do that, to develop that.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Library staff training for community building</td>
<td>(3) <em>So we’ve done a sort of action learning program with them … and it’s really been a skill exchange for them, on how do we do this staff.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of public libraries in community memory</td>
<td>(1) Direct contribution</td>
<td>(1) <em>I think the library is one of the memories, apart from helping preserve the memories, because you’ll find generations of the community have used their libraries.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2) Through partnerships I also think we do have a responsibility to assist in preserving the memory of the local community but I see it more as in partnership with other stakeholders.

Case Study Results

While the interviews conducted with the managers of the relevant services were quite wide-ranging, the following case study summaries emphasize the aspects of community building and the preservation of community memory.

Hume Global Learning Village (HGLV)

As mentioned above, for our project the library manager (referred to as LM) was interviewed together with the General Manager of the Learning Community Department, Hume City Council (referred to as GM).

HGLV, which incorporates the six Hume public libraries, caters for a large city north of Melbourne, about 20 kilometres from the centre of Melbourne. Its official web site (Learning Communities Catalyst 2005), talks of the diversity of cultural, ethnic and social experiences of the Hume population where around 40 different languages are spoken. The city has strong industrial, commercial and business bases. The web site describes the HGLV, which has about 300 members as ‘an innovative project facilitated and supported by Hume City Council that links learning and education providers across Hume City’. Apart from the libraries, members include educational institutions, neighbourhood houses, local businesses and community organisations. The headquarters of HGLV is the Hume Global Learning Centre, housed in a Hume City Council facility that also includes a new library in a part of the city that previously was without one.

From the interviews, we learnt that, although not all parts of the city are economically and socially disadvantaged (e.g., people in the Sunbury area), about one-third of the population of the city earns under $200 a week, that there is a low level of tertiary education and high levels of unemployment. The concept of ‘the learning community’ arose as a response to the social and economic problems faced by the city. As the interviewees said:
‘So by developing a learning culture in Hume, that was seen as the best way to change the social and economic outcomes, and through that grew (LM)… that sort of concept of the Global Learning Village’. (GM)

Connected with the kind of socio-economic area with which they are working, the developers of HGLV have a strong focus on social justice. As the GM said:

‘But we’re (I think) we’re the only council to deal with a social justice charter and a citizens’ bill of rights, and that sort of is the overarching philosophical kind of document for us, and then sitting underneath that is this desire to create this learning community as the vehicle through which social justice will be achieved.’

Implementation of the concept of the learning community has involved bringing together everybody in Hume with an interest or role in community learning. The library has key involvement in this, including providing the learning advocate or facilitator role, as articulated by the GM:

‘The council sees the role of the library as being a fundamental plank and driving a lot of this collaboration out in the community. … We need to keep refining it a bit more I think on what the role of the learning advocate or the learning facilitator will mean for a library staff member and we’re actually using a library staff member to do that, to develop that. And then we’re going to take that beyond the library staff into some of our other professionals across the council.’

The interviewees consider that partnerships are their major achievement, with the LM mentioning that they had just won the local government National Award for Excellence. The library staff members have been trained to enable them to broaden their role in the community:

‘So we’ve done a sort of action learning program with them … and it’s really been a skill exchange for them, on how do we do this stuff’. (GM)
A database, with connections to learning providers and opportunities in the area, is being set up. Clearly the GM appreciates the availability of information specialists to build this database which she described as a

‘hybrid of a community information database in the traditional sense of a community information system, with a learning system overlaid, because there’s a lot of crossover.’

Community information, as understood in this case, refers to information that is about the local community, such as details of local organisations and their activities. Regardless of its medium, community information is articulated to specific local communities and is unique to them. A significant issue for the research was space and its use, and how this might empower the community. The LM spoke enthusiastically about the space in the new library and how it is being used, e.g., by young people without suitable study space at home. On the other hand, the library takes programs out into the community, e.g., the story time program is taken out to play groups, kindergartens and neighbourhood houses. With this program library staff have gone out and found people in the community with two languages, English and their own, and have paid for their help, which makes them feel valued. A volunteers program is also seen ‘as one of 56 strategies for creating a learning community’ (GM).

One way in which community memory is being generated is through the ‘inspiring stories’ program. These are being collected in a database, and used in displays. The LM described the concept thus:

‘The idea of it is that these people are able to go out and be advocates to say, “You can achieve anything,” and living in Hume, we have people who have gone out and achieved things in their working lives and their sporting careers’.

Whitehorse Manningham Library (WML)

The second case study was of the Whitehorse Manningham Library which, through its eight service points, serves a population of some 250,000 in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The area served is predominantly residential and, while the population is relatively homogenous, significant numbers of
residents were born outside Australia, notably in Southern Europe and Asia. Household incomes are higher than average (Local Government Victoria 2006).

The WML CEO, believes that public libraries should be seen as centres of community activity. Specifically he sees WML as a local community service that, with a limited pool of resources, operates in three basic areas: a traditional library service (the major part of what they do); a virtual service providing external access to information and resources; and a mechanism for community building and social engagement. He considers that the last area has always been a function of public libraries, but has taken on a new importance because of new challenges in the community, often brought on because the

‘Government is pushing down the resourcing support of disadvantaged members of the community to the local level.’

And indeed, the level of engagement with the community is significant, including activities from the provision of display space, to outreach services, to resources supporting life-long learning. Yet other programs promote: computer literacy; community language activities (Chinese lantern making, Chinese calligraphy, health for women, Greek poetry); and youth activities that emphasise the enhancement of the personal and life skills, such as workshops on buying cars, getting a driver’s licence, managing part-time work and study, and getting music published.

But there are challenges within this new environment, particularly in relation to the need for continuing professional development. The CEO recognizes that the personal involvement of staff is a critical success factor in that regard, and to that end, ensures that staff members receive training in relevant areas, such as how to work with people with disabilities or with different cultural backgrounds.

‘I think in the end that’s what a lot of this is about, in terms of strengthening communities, bringing communities together, interacting with people, talking, being face-to-face. I think that not only helps to initiate projects but also to drive them to completion. Technology may well have a role in the outcome, but in terms of making it work, the personal touch is more important. That’s one of the strengths of libraries, because in the end most people work in public libraries because they want to work with people, they are face-to-face services.’
At the same time, he recognizes the need to avoid replicating what other agencies are doing, or running programs that really they are not trained to. WML also undertakes a number of activities in partnership with other institutions and broker yet others, for example, a homework club for migrant and refugee youth, run in conjunction with local schools. These types of activities involve opening up spaces within the library, such as the training area and meeting rooms, in a way that both takes advantage of the significant numbers of people who actually visit libraries, and creates a heightened awareness of just what the library can achieve. WML also brokers outreach services in conjunction with other institutions, for example, by running Internet training programs at local family daycare centres, council nursing homes and aged care facilities, catering for older residents who may have an element of social isolation, or supporting people with intellectual or physical disabilities.

‘I think also the concept of having libraries just being a stand-alone building has changed. I think there’s much more acceptance and I think it’s crucial now that libraries are part of an integrated facility that works with other agencies. The trick is to have the right other agencies or groups within the library building. And I always think, often they think, oh yes, the library and the gallery should go together, or the library and the arts centre should go together, or the library and the art and craft, because somehow that seems to go together. Whereas I tend to think more of the library and the human service area, so I’d rather be next to a maternal and child health centre.’

With regard to community memory, the CEO commented that:

‘Libraries have a responsibility to assist in preserving the memory of the local community but I see it more as in partnership with other stakeholders.’

This is perhaps best exemplified by the Whitehorse Manningham Heritage Network, comprising the library service and four local history societies. Established to develop co-operation between the local historical societies and the library, its primary aim is to create a local history database for the region in order to satisfy the community's heritage needs by improving accessibility to local heritage collections.
But he adds that there is also a short-term aspect to community memory, facilitated by a tight integration within the community that relates more to earlier service along the lines of the community information concept, which is as strong as ever.

‘We have vast amounts of council and local information at all our branches, as well as community notice boards and a lot of local knowledge in terms of our staff who, whilst they may not live in the area, work in it, and know the environment well.’

**Upper Murray Regional Library Service (UMRLS)**

The Upper Murray Regional Library Service (Albury Wodonga) straddles two states – Victoria and New South Wales (NSW). Serving three Victorian local government areas and five in NSW, it caters to a population of 130,000 over an area of 28,211 sq km. It includes a number of regional centres, such as Wodonga and Albury, as well as a number of smaller towns and rural areas. In addition to its twelve branch libraries, it has two mobile vehicles that provide a full range of materials and Internet access, at some 72 sites (Local Government Victoria 2006).

According to the Chief Librarian (CL), the communities served are changing rapidly in terms of needs and expectations. Wodonga itself is growing rapidly, particularly in the business area and is attracting a lot of families with younger children. These changes are also reflected in rural areas, and the services expected at mobile libraries:

‘Previously people just wanted to borrow books, now they need to rearrange the mobile service…mobile libraries are also very much a community gathering point if you like, and a social interaction point...’

Other than the mobile libraries, there exists a number of other ways through which the library initiates and maintains close involvement with the community; through working relationships with groups such as the local Chamber of Commerce, arts community and schools. One specific focus of this interaction is the ability of the library service to contribute to lifelong learning, a role reinforced by its membership of
the ‘Learning Cities’ program, which recognizes that there are multiple strategies that people adopt to facilitate learning and which seeks to assist those strategies.

‘They’re going to want to know how to update their hardware, how to update their software, but they’re not going to go and ask somebody who wants to sell them that. They just want to know how to do it. And some of the feedback, the initial feedback, was that they thought libraries would be a good place to come and sit and have that demonstrated, so that they’re in a non-threatening place, which is probably a learning space but it hasn’t got any expectations.’

This idea of the library as a non-threatening space has been particularly important at UMRLS, where it has been incorporated into the thinking around the redesign of services and spaces, and which is being extended with regard to other local cultural institutions. So, for example, the Wodonga Library was redesigned, and an ‘art space’ or gallery with a separate entrance added, resulting in users of the previously distinct services being exposed to both. This model has proved successful and is to be extended to other branches:

‘And now there are plans in Albury to have the library and the museum share a building… they’re complementary but they’re very different services because you’ve got a museum with artifacts…a library with books…you come into what’s called an infozone, [which] will lead you into both areas. So but the concept itself is really fantastic, you would be able to go in…find all that’s written…in the books, and [also] see a collection [of] artifacts…and get a whole picture.’

Quite explicitly, it is recognized that these new spaces provide an opportunity for the maintenance and presentation of community memory and UMRLS has appointed a community collections officer to work on these projects. They are finding mixed definitions as to just what constitutes the community:

‘There are some small communities that have things that they feel are very much for their community, that they do have significance and they want to hang onto them…[which will] restrict access. [But] if they were in, say, a museum or in a bigger collection somewhere, more people would have access to them - particularly an issue in regional and small communities, because they want to hang onto things that make their community, or their town, unique.’
On the other hand, public libraries offer the chance to protect contributions to community memory. This forms the very basis and purpose of public libraries, as they interact and engage communities towards making resources significant, establishing communicative facilities, using structures and agencies to purpose communities towards making meaning and representing public knowledge within the community. But to resolve such issues will require time and negotiation, which serves to reinforce one of the final points made by the CL:

‘In some ways it’s not the building or the space, it’ll be the staffing as to whether it works or doesn’t work…’

**General themes and issues**

As can be seen, the above case studies brought out several common themes, reflecting an increased level of community engagement at all levels, which is both an end in itself and a stimulus for further change, and which reflects renewed interest in areas such as lifelong learning and the creation and preservation of community memory, built around the creative use of spaces and technology.

Without question, there is a new emphasis on engaging with communities. And, in some ways, libraries are coming to be seen as central players in the ability of local government (councils) to engage with their communities. The capacity for community building is derived from the provision of both in-house and outreach services, and its potential is immediate. As people commit towards this cause, there is a greater sense of belonging and pride to being part of the community they live in – and the public library acts as a ‘broker’ in allowing this commitment and enthusiasm to be channeled in a positive and purposeful manner. This is often reflected in extensive volunteers’ programs.

A significant finding of the study is the emergence and the extent of partnerships pursued by public libraries but, while it is apparent that there is consensus amongst public libraries that they need be an integrated facility within the communities they serve, there is no consensus as to exactly what a ‘correct’ mix might be, and indeed the mix should match the needs of the specific community. For example, while each of the three libraries studied attempt to engage with educational institutions, community
organisations and local business (Burgess et al 2006), one sought active engagement with other cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries, while another expressed a stronger preference for co-location with social services organisations such as maternal and child health centers. Regardless of the choice, however, creative partnerships with other organisations not only allow all to work together in a complementary way so as to improve services, but also to enhance the profile and level of engagement of the public library within the community. As one participant lamented: ‘Isolation is deadly’.

Public libraries have been one of the custodians of community memory, important for sustainable communities, with information resources that have been selected to represent the identities and information needs of communities. This task has gradually become a conscious purpose for public libraries. Of the libraries studied there is a ubiquitous presence of distinctive resources providing information relevant to the specific community involved. There is also constant dialogue between the community and public libraries. Occurring at almost every level of the library’s operations and decision-making this holds many implications, especially for the work of library staff. Ultimately this approach to designing the library’s services and staff training programs creates a vital mechanism to support the preservation and sustainability of resources (memories) belonging to the community.

In this context, it is crucial to highlight that the use and production of knowledge in the public library is a continuum – from the self to the community. The construction of self-knowledge has never been a separable construction – and according to Castells (2004) communities come together to share and collaborate through this construction of self-knowledge. While libraries have been viewed traditionally as very effective institutions in supporting people in their self-pursuits of knowledge (Bundy, 2001), through new community ties they are both facilitating and inspiring people in communities in such construction of knowledge. Some examples have been explored in the discussion: mobile libraries becoming social interaction points (UMRLS), community language activities (WML), and the inspiring stories program (HGLV) helping people in the community strengthen their identities both as individuals and as a collective. This brings us back to the notion of the knowledge commons, where people come together as a community for the exchange and production of knowledge. This is a zone of fair and equal use and, for public libraries, it is about the creation and transmission of public knowledge within the community – which they facilitate through information resources and services.
Conclusion

The study contains many rich findings, and only a selection of these findings has been discussed. A recurrent theme has been that the library is changing its role, and that all librarians need to change the way they think and work. Change is inevitable, and for public libraries in Victoria much of this change has a lot to do with the way dialogue is generated, and the way services are delivered with communities. The use of resources, spaces and information technology is critical to facilitating dialogue with communities and empowering them in the process, as are the issues surrounding changes to traditional roles and attitudes that form a precondition to enhanced community engagement.

The positioning and repositioning of public libraries vis-à-vis their communities is crucial. It has gone on for many decades (Barker & Johanson 2004) but has gathered momentum recently. As central agencies and integrated facilities in the community, public libraries have the first-hand ability to engage communities actively. The creation, sustainability and preservation of community memories act to empower communities. At the institutional level, the paper has recognized the potential of libraries to engage institutional partners and to harness them for the betterment and empowerment of the broader community. A preoccupation has been how libraries can provide opportunities for participative action within the community, contributing to a greater sense of belonging and recognition for individual members of the community. The findings have helped to better understand the interplay of the knowledge commons and design principles in guiding the transformations of a range of cultural institutions.

Acknowledgements

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References


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Abstract

Drawing on the findings of recent research into public libraries in Victoria, Australia, this paper will explore the role of public libraries in creating, sustaining, and preserving community memory, and how such activities contribute to the empowerment of communities. In this context, the concept of empowerment will be explored at a number of levels including the individual and institutional levels for participative action and institutional partnerships. The paper concludes that if public libraries can reposition themselves as brokers or central nodes in a stronger community network, then they will be in a stronger position to facilitate the construction and preservation of community memory which, in turn, will act to empower their communities.

Introduction

The definitions of ‘community’ are numerous (Johanson et al 2002). Community is not limited by practice, interest, or the like, but should be regarded in the widest sense. Multiple communities make up society. Anyone can belong to one or more communities, depending on their perceptions and participation. Yet as vague as it is in terms of definition, communities are ubiquitous, and cultural institutions such as public libraries must address the dynamic needs that arise out of communities.

This paper reports a study of public libraries in Victoria, which began as a study of performance indicators and community services, but which quickly evolved into an investigation of the ‘knowledge commons’ in public libraries – a concept that brings together immediate relationships with individuals in communities and broader forces at organisational and societal levels. The concept stems from the historical notion of the commons, reaching back to humans’ earliest efforts at co-operation and collaboration for the common good, for example developing conventions for shared use of grazing lands. In fact, some modern commentaries refer to the public library as ‘a place for people to meet that has been likened to the village green’ (State Library of Victoria 2005). In modern times the commons has come to mean resources that are made freely available for all in the community to build relationships and cultural democracy (Schauder et al 2006).
The focus of the study changed because libraries are changing, through the infusion of technology, and the development of new partnerships with communities. They are also taking on additional responsibilities and functions, reflected, for example, in new or redesigned buildings, and outreach services. Because of these changes, it was no longer feasible to create an accurate picture of public libraries without a thorough inquiry into their community networks.

Over the past decade, public libraries in Victoria have significantly increased their engagement with the broader community to further a number of interests, for example, in relation to issues such as information poverty (Williamson et al, 2000), lifelong learning (Bundy, 2001), and bridging children and adult literacy (Gibbs, 1990). At the same time, there have been structural changes in the sector. The restructuring of the state’s local governmental sector in 1993-1995 (Dudley, 1998) introduced competitive tendering to libraries, and since then public libraries in Victoria have operated under new service agreements, negotiated with their governing councils. Even more significant has been the surge of co-operation found amongst public libraries (Dudley, 1998). Such engagement with their own community has brought public libraries to a higher level of involvement in constructing memories and making meaning: an inevitable process of forming communities. Sometimes this has been the result of direct action, such as collecting and publishing local history of key figures in the community, but in any case it is apparent that public libraries are forging new partnerships and service delivery policies to aggregate and better serve their communities.

The many examples of changes in libraries reflect a larger movement of cultural institutions away from traditional methods of service. Libraries are transforming their spaces and outreach services to communities (Axtman, 2005; Elsevier, 2005), and in the recent years, have been moving towards the idea of the ‘learning commons’, where support services, resources, spaces, and technologies are brought together in comfortable workspaces to facilitate learning. As a result of these changes, a hybrid space, involving both physical and digital dimensions, has been created. The communities functioning within hybrid spaces are also changing at a rapid pace, as they adapt to new ways of communicating and constructing knowledge while still cognisant of what used to work for them.

Public knowledge, or the public resource, is critical for the sustainability and growth of communities. Public knowledge in this discussion refers to knowledge that exists commonly in the public domain.
equally accessible by communities, without prejudice or restrictions (Johanson 1997). It used to be simple: what is housed in a public library was accessible to members of the public – the communities they serve. But the presence of new technologies is now mediating levels of access to, as well as acquisition and accumulation of, public knowledge. This has brought change to the nature of interaction between the public library and communities. Public libraries have to, and continually do, reassess themselves in all their roles; especially with regard to accumulating and representing public knowledge to communities.

The presence of new public knowledge is something that cannot be established overnight. Meanings in communities have to be constructed, and re-constructed both by individuals on their own and individuals together as a community, if they are to become shared understandings. Such shared memories lead to public knowledge - shared by the community that defines it. Behind this definition, there are significations of resources, structures and agencies, instilled for the operation of the community, and communicative facilities are established (Giddens, 1986).

Yet this concept of public knowledge is constantly challenged today with privatisation and market forces seeking to dominate even the information and resources in public libraries. One example is licenses that limit access to electronic periodicals and journals. So, despite the fact that there is an abundance of information that has become easier and cheaper to access, it should be recognized that market forces shape the way communities create, exchange, and share information and technologies, potentially resulting in fragmented access and inequality in terms of literacy, democracy, and power (Hardy & Johanson 2003). It is altogether a challenge as it is an opportunity: the potential of an expanded generation of public knowledge through new community relationships fostered by public libraries.

The focus of the research reported in this paper is to examine the efforts of public libraries to connect their communities in recent times. The construct used in the study is the knowledge commons, envisioned to include not only information resources, but also indigenous knowledge and processes. This vision of the knowledge commons sees communities that purpose themselves for the production of knowledge. Such a purpose implies that they come together not only for the creation and sharing of information resources, but that they possess processes to facilitate the production of knowledge – whether open or enclosed. This concept of the knowledge commons is key: with the emphasis on the
use and production of knowledge as a resource that inspires, supports and sustains communities. Knowledge as a resource ‘has the characteristic of not being degraded when used, but rather to increase in value’ (Drucker, c.f. Hellstrom, 2003). It also recognizes that communities in the knowledge commons are dynamic –their creation and sharing of knowledge can be influenced by their very dynamism.

**Research Philosophy and Method**

The pilot research was undertaken using a case study approach, underpinned by interpretivist research philosophy, the key focus of which is ‘meaning’ or ‘interpretation’. ‘Interpretivism’ is an umbrella term for a number of different paradigms one of which is ‘constructivism’. Constructivist research is based upon the idea that ‘there is no unique “real world” that pre-exists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language’ (Bruner 1986: 95). Knowledge and truth are therefore created by people, and there are often multiple, conflicting constructions of reality. Supporters of interpretivist/constructivist qualitative research argue that it allows greater flexibility and therefore results in the discovery of new insights (Sutton 1997) and that ‘it can produce new and unexpected data, evidence we did not know was there’ (Madjar & Walton 2001:41). In other words it is the serendipity encouraged by this approach to research which is a major strength.

**Interpretivist Case Studies**

Interpretivist case studies were carried out in three public libraries services, with the selection of services based on the profiles of the communities in which they were located. They included a regional public library serving connected shires and towns on both sides of the border between Victoria and New South Wales; a public library service which is part of a learning centre in a relatively newly established community; and another service located in a suburban region of Melbourne serving multi-ethnic communities that differ in terms of ages and economic parities.

**Data collection**

Interviews of one to 1.5 hours were carried out with the library managers from each library service. In the case of the Hume Global Learning Village into which the library service is integrated, the General
Manager of the Learning Community Department, Hume City Council, was interviewed with the Library Manager. These interviews took place at venues within each library service, giving the project team members an opportunity to observe the location and at least some of the physical spaces. Written documents for each of the services provided additional information.

In order to cast further light on the key issues of the research, interviews were also carried out with seven individuals identified as ‘gatekeepers’, who were defined as visionary leaders likely to have a deep understanding of the community-building role of the public library. These gatekeepers included two university librarians, one employee of Moreland City Council, one employee of Wodonga Learning Centre and three representatives of community organisations who are very active in their communities. Interviews focused on a wide range of questions related to the role of public libraries in community building and in providing a community memory (collective memories of communities that are shared and understood both implicitly and explicitly). Table 1 provides examples (only) of interview questions asked of representatives of library services.

### Table 1
**Examples of Interview Questions Asked**

| 1. | What kinds of activities are being undertaken by your public library service in order to encourage community involvement? |
| 2. | Can you please talk about the partnerships with community organisations that are important with regard to community building? |
| 3. | How are public open spaces in your buildings changing, especially to accommodate new technology? |
| 4. | Do you think that new library spaces and resources have helped to empower the community? |
| 5. | Has the skills base of the staff had to change dramatically in the last few years? |
| 6. | Are there professional roles that are particularly focused on community building? |
| 7. | Do you think the library has a role in providing a community memory? |

The fieldwork, which was carried out in compliance with the requirements of the Monash University Ethics Committee, took approximately six months to complete, between November 2005 and April
Where it was not possible to conduct an interview face-to-face, telephone interviews were undertaken (with three interviewees). With the permission of the interviewees, all interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

**Data analysis**

Analysis of data by identifying broader themes and specific categories is a typical method of analysing qualitative data (see, e.g., Huberman & Miles 2002). It is the approach used by grounded theorists (see, e.g., Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2003). There were five steps to the data analysis: (1) The transcribed data were produced in printed form. (2) Two researchers read through the data, making notes about the tentative themes (with definitions) which appeared to be emerging. (3) Passages of data were labeled with categories and linked to one of the themes so that identically labeled or categorised data could be retrieved as needed. Further themes (broader than categories) were identified and defined as necessary. As with themes, categories were given a short title and a definition if needed. Categories that were initially broad were sometimes sub-divided to be more precise as the analysis progressed. (4) Categories were conceptually organised, meaning that thought was given to the similarities, differences and relationships among the categories. (5) Final themes were developed in preparation for documenting the research findings. Examples of themes and categories are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

**Examples of Themes, Categories and Quotations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community building by public libraries</td>
<td>(1) Forging community relationships</td>
<td>(1) I have a team here and I encourage them to be involved in a range of external committees and organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Community facilitation role</td>
<td>(2) We need to keep refining it a bit more I think on what the role of the learning advocate or the learning facilitator will mean for a library staff member and we’re actually using a library staff member to do that, to develop that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Library staff training for community building</td>
<td>(3) So we’ve done a sort of action learning program with them … and it’s really been a skill exchange for them, on how do we do this stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of public libraries in community memory</td>
<td>(1) Direct contribution</td>
<td>(1) I think the library is one of the memories, apart from helping preserve the memories, because you’ll find generations of the community have used their libraries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2) Through partnerships, I also think we do have a responsibility to assist in preserving the memory of the local community but I see it more as in partnership with other stakeholders.

**Case Study Results**

While the interviews conducted with the managers of the relevant services were quite wide-ranging, the following case study summaries emphasize the aspects of community building and the preservation of community memory.

**Hume Global Learning Village (HGLV)**

As mentioned above, for our project the library manager (referred to as LM) was interviewed together with the General Manager of the Learning Community Department, Hume City Council (referred to as GM).

HGLV, which incorporates the six Hume public libraries, caters for a large city north of Melbourne, about 20 kilometres from the centre of Melbourne. Its official web site (Learning Communities Catalyst 2005), talks of the diversity of cultural, ethnic and social experiences of the Hume population where around 40 different languages are spoken. The city has strong industrial, commercial and business bases. The web site describes the HGLV, which has about 300 members as ‘an innovative project facilitated and supported by Hume City Council that links learning and education providers across Hume City’. Apart from the libraries, members include educational institutions, neighbourhood houses, local businesses and community organisations. The headquarters of HGLV is the Hume Global Learning Centre, housed in a Hume City Council facility that also includes a new library in a part of the city that previously was without one.

From the interviews, we learnt that, although not all parts of the city are economically and socially disadvantaged (e.g., people in the Sunbury area), about one-third of the population of the city earns under $200 a week, that there is a low level of tertiary education and high levels of unemployment. The concept of ‘the learning community’ arose as a response to the social and economic problems faced by the city. As the interviewees said:
‘So by developing a learning culture in Hume, that was seen as the best way to change the social and economic outcomes, and through that grew (LM)… that sort of concept of the Global Learning Village’. (GM)

Connected with the kind of socio-economic area with which they are working, the developers of HGLV have a strong focus on social justice. As the GM said:

‘But we’re (I think) we’re the only council to deal with a social justice charter and a citizens’ bill of rights, and that sort of is the overarching philosophical kind of document for us, and then sitting underneath that is this desire to create this learning community as the vehicle through which social justice will be achieved.’

Implementation of the concept of the learning community has involved bringing together everybody in Hume with an interest or role in community learning. The library has key involvement in this, including providing the learning advocate or facilitator role, as articulated by the GM:

‘The council sees the role of the library as being a fundamental plank and driving a lot of this collaboration out in the community. … We need to keep refining it a bit more I think on what the role of the learning advocate or the learning facilitator will mean for a library staff member and we’re actually using a library staff member to do that, to develop that. And then we’re going to take that beyond the library staff into some of our other professionals across the council.’

The interviewees consider that partnerships are their major achievement, with the LM mentioning that they had just won the local government National Award for Excellence. The library staff members have been trained to enable them to broaden their role in the community:

‘So we’ve done a sort of action learning program with them … and it’s really been a skill exchange for them, on how do we do this stuff’. (GM)
A database, with connections to learning providers and opportunities in the area, is being set up. Clearly the GM appreciates the availability of information specialists to build this database which she described as a

‘hybrid of a community information database in the traditional sense of a community information system, with a learning system overlaid, because there’s a lot of crossover.’

Community information, as understood in this case, refers to information that is about the local community, such as details of local organisations and their activities. Regardless of its medium, community information is articulated to specific local communities and is unique to them. A significant issue for the research was space and its use, and how this might empower the community. The LM spoke enthusiastically about the space in the new library and how it is being used, e.g., by young people without suitable study space at home. On the other hand, the library takes programs out into the community, e.g., the story time program is taken out to play groups, kindergartens and neighbourhood houses. With this program library staff have gone out and found people in the community with two languages, English and their own, and have paid for their help, which makes them feel valued. A volunteers program is also seen ‘as one of 56 strategies for creating a learning community’ (GM).

One way in which community memory is being generated is through the ‘inspiring stories’ program. These are being collected in a database, and used in displays. The LM described the concept thus:

‘The idea of it is that these people are able to go out and be advocates to say, “You can achieve anything,” and living in Hume, we have people who have gone out and achieved things in their working lives and their sporting careers’.

**Whitehorse Manningham Library (WML)**

The second case study was of the Whitehorse Manningham Library which, through its eight service points, serves a population of some 250,000 in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The area served is predominantly residential and, while the population is relatively homogenous, significant numbers of
residents were born outside Australia, notably in Southern Europe and Asia. Household incomes are higher than average (Local Government Victoria 2006).

The WML CEO, believes that public libraries should be seen as centres of community activity. Specifically he sees WML as a local community service that, with a limited pool of resources, operates in three basic areas: a traditional library service (the major part of what they do); a virtual service providing external access to information and resources; and a mechanism for community building and social engagement. He considers that the last area has always been a function of public libraries, but has taken on a new importance because of new challenges in the community, often brought on because the

‘Government is pushing down the resourcing support of disadvantaged members of the community to the local level.’

And indeed, the level of engagement with the community is significant, including activities from the provision of display space, to outreach services, to resources supporting life-long learning. Yet other programs promote: computer literacy; community language activities (Chinese lantern making, Chinese calligraphy, health for women, Greek poetry); and youth activities that emphasise the enhancement of the personal and life skills, such as workshops on buying cars, getting a driver's licence, managing part-time work and study, and getting music published.

But there are challenges within this new environment, particularly in relation to the need for continuing professional development. The CEO recognizes that the personal involvement of staff is a critical success factor in that regard, and to that end, ensures that staff members receive training in relevant areas, such as how to work with people with disabilities or with different cultural backgrounds.

‘I think in the end that’s what a lot of this is about, in terms of strengthening communities, bringing communities together, interacting with people, talking, being face-to-face. I think that not only helps to initiate projects but also to drive them to completion. Technology may well have a role in the outcome, but in terms of making it work, the personal touch is more important. That’s one of the strengths of libraries, because in the end most people work in public libraries because they want to work with people, they are face-to-face services.’
At the same time, he recognizes the need to avoid replicating what other agencies are doing, or running programs that really they are not trained to. WML also undertakes a number of activities in partnership with other institutions and broker yet others, for example, a homework club for migrant and refugee youth, run in conjunction with local schools. These types of activities involve opening up spaces within the library, such as the training area and meeting rooms, in a way that both takes advantage of the significant numbers of people who actually visit libraries, and creates a heightened awareness of just what the library can achieve. WML also brokers outreach services in conjunction with other institutions, for example, by running Internet training programs at local family daycare centres, council nursing homes and aged care facilities, catering for older residents who may have an element of social isolation, or supporting people with intellectual or physical disabilities.

‘I think also the concept of having libraries just being a stand-alone building has changed. I think there’s much more acceptance and I think it’s crucial now that libraries are part of an integrated facility that works with other agencies. The trick is to have the right other agencies or groups within the library building. And I always think, often they think, oh yes, the library and the gallery should go together, or the library and the arts centre should go together, or the library and the art and craft, because somehow that seems to go together. Whereas I tend to think more of the library and the human service area, so I’d rather be next to a maternal and child health centre.’

With regard to community memory, the CEO commented that:

‘Libraries have a responsibility to assist in preserving the memory of the local community but I see it more as in partnership with other stakeholders.’

This is perhaps best exemplified by the Whitehorse Manningham Heritage Network, comprising the library service and four local history societies. Established to develop co-operation between the local historical societies and the library, its primary aim is to create a local history database for the region in order to satisfy the community's heritage needs by improving accessibility to local heritage collections.
But he adds that there is also a short-term aspect to community memory, facilitated by a tight integration within the community that relates more to earlier service along the lines of the community information concept, which is as strong as ever.

‘We have vast amounts of council and local information at all our branches, as well as community notice boards and a lot of local knowledge in terms of our staff who, whilst they may not live in the area, work in it, and know the environment well.’

**Upper Murray Regional Library Service (UMRLS)**

The Upper Murray Regional Library Service (Albury Wodonga) straddles two states – Victoria and New South Wales (NSW). Serving three Victorian local government areas and five in NSW, it caters to a population of 130,000 over an area of 28,211 sq km. It includes a number of regional centres, such as Wodonga and Albury, as well as a number of smaller towns and rural areas. In addition to its twelve branch libraries, it has two mobile vehicles that provide a full range of materials and Internet access, at some 72 sites (Local Government Victoria 2006).

According to the Chief Librarian (CL), the communities served are changing rapidly in terms of needs and expectations. Wodonga itself is growing rapidly, particularly in the business area and is attracting a lot of families with younger children. These changes are also reflected in rural areas, and the services expected at mobile libraries:

‘Previously people just wanted to borrow books, now they need to rearrange the mobile service…mobile libraries are also very much a community gathering point if you like, and a social interaction point…’

Other than the mobile libraries, there exists a number of other ways through which the library initiates and maintains close involvement with the community; through working relationships with groups such as the local Chamber of Commerce, arts community and schools. One specific focus of this interaction is the ability of the library service to contribute to lifelong learning, a role reinforced by its membership of
the ‘Learning Cities’ program, which recognizes that there are multiple strategies that people adopt to facilitate learning and which seeks to assist those strategies.

‘They’re going to want to know how to update their hardware, how to update their software, but they’re not going to go and ask somebody who wants to sell them that. They just want to know how to do it. And some of the feedback, the initial feedback, was that they thought libraries would be a good place to come and sit and have that demonstrated, so that they’re in a non-threatening place, which is probably a learning space but it hasn’t got any expectations.’

This idea of the library as a non-threatening space has been particularly important at UMRLS, where it has been incorporated into the thinking around the redesign of services and spaces, and which is being extended with regard to other local cultural institutions. So, for example, the Wodonga Library was redesigned, and an ‘art space’ or gallery with a separate entrance added, resulting in users of the previously distinct services being exposed to both. This model has proved successful and is to be extended to other branches:

‘And now there are plans in Albury to have the library and the museum share a building…they’re complementary but they’re very different services because you’ve got a museum with artifacts…a library with books…you come into what’s called an infozone, [which] will lead you into both areas. So but the concept itself is really fantastic, you would be able to go in…find all that’s written…in the books, and [also] see a collection of artifacts…and get a whole picture.’

Quite explicitly, it is recognized that these new spaces provide an opportunity for the maintenance and presentation of community memory and UMRLS has appointed a community collections officer to work on these projects. They are finding mixed definitions as to just what constitutes the community:

‘There are some small communities that have things that they feel are very much for their community, that they do have significance and they want to hang onto them…[which will] restrict access. [But] if they were in, say, a museum or in a bigger collection somewhere, more people would have access to them - particularly an issue in regional and small communities, because they want to hang onto things that make their community, or their town, unique.’
On the other hand, public libraries offer the chance to protect contributions to community memory. This forms the very basis and purpose of public libraries, as they interact and engage communities towards making resources significant, establishing communicative facilities, using structures and agencies to purpose communities towards making meaning and representing public knowledge within the community. But to resolve such issues will require time and negotiation, which serves to reinforce one of the final points made by the CL:

‘In some ways it’s not the building or the space, it’ll be the staffing as to whether it works or doesn’t work…’

**General themes and issues**

As can be seen, the above case studies brought out several common themes, reflecting an increased level of community engagement at all levels, which is both an end in itself and a stimulus for further change, and which reflects renewed interest in areas such as lifelong learning and the creation and preservation of community memory, built around the creative use of spaces and technology.

Without question, there is a new emphasis on engaging with communities. And, in some ways, libraries are coming to be seen as central players in the ability of local government (councils) to engage with their communities. The capacity for community building is derived from the provision of both in-house and outreach services, and its potential is immediate. As people commit towards this cause, there is a greater sense of belonging and pride to being part of the community they live in – and the public library acts as a ‘broker’ in allowing this commitment and enthusiasm to be channeled in a positive and purposeful manner. This is often reflected in extensive volunteers’ programs.

A significant finding of the study is the emergence and the extent of partnerships pursued by public libraries but, while it is apparent that there is consensus amongst public libraries that they need be an integrated facility within the communities they serve, there is no consensus as to exactly what a ‘correct’ mix might be, and indeed the mix should match the needs of the specific community. For example, while each of the three libraries studied attempt to engage with educational institutions, community
organisations and local business (Burgess et al 2006), one sought active engagement with other cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries, while another expressed a stronger preference for colocation with social services organisations such as maternal and child health centers. Regardless of the choice, however, creative partnerships with other organisations not only allow all to work together in a complementary way so as to improve services, but also to enhance the profile and level of engagement of the public library within the community. As one participant lamented: ‘Isolation is deadly’.

Public libraries have been one of the custodians of community memory, important for sustainable communities, with information resources that have been selected to represent the identities and information needs of communities. This task has gradually become a conscious purpose for public libraries. Of the libraries studied there is a ubiquitous presence of distinctive resources providing information relevant to the specific community involved. There is also constant dialogue between the community and public libraries. Occurring at almost every level of the library’s operations and decision-making this holds many implications, especially for the work of library staff. Ultimately this approach to designing the library’s services and staff training programs creates a vital mechanism to support the preservation and sustainability of resources (memories) belonging to the community.

In this context, it is crucial to highlight that the use and production of knowledge in the public library is a continuum – from the self to the community. The construction of self-knowledge has never been a separable construction – and according to Castells (2004) communities come together to share and collaborate through this construction of self-knowledge. While libraries have been viewed traditionally as very effective institutions in supporting people in their self-pursuits of knowledge (Bundy, 2001), through new community ties they are both facilitating and inspiring people in communities in such construction of knowledge. Some examples have been explored in the discussion: mobile libraries becoming social interaction points (UMRLS), community language activities (WML), and the inspiring stories program (HGLV) helping people in the community strengthen their identities both as individuals and as a collective. This brings us back to the notion of the knowledge commons, where people come together as a community for the exchange and production of knowledge. This is a zone of fair and equal use and, for public libraries, it is about the creation and transmission of public knowledge within the community – which they facilitate through information resources and services.
Conclusion

The study contains many rich findings, and only a selection of these findings has been discussed. A recurrent theme has been that the library is changing its role, and that all librarians need to change the way they think and work. Change is inevitable, and for public libraries in Victoria much of this change has a lot to do with the way dialogue is generated, and the way services are delivered with communities. The use of resources, spaces and information technology is critical to facilitating dialogue with communities and empowering them in the process, as are the issues surrounding changes to traditional roles and attitudes that form a precondition to enhanced community engagement.

The positioning and repositioning of public libraries vis-à-vis their communities is crucial. It has gone on for many decades (Barker & Johanson 2004) but has gathered momentum recently. As central agencies and integrated facilities in the community, public libraries have the first-hand ability to engage communities actively. The creation, sustainability and preservation of community memories act to empower communities. At the institutional level, the paper has recognized the potential of libraries to engage institutional partners and to harness them for the betterment and empowerment of the broader community. A preoccupation has been how libraries can provide opportunities for participative action within the community, contributing to a greater sense of belonging and recognition for individual members of the community. The findings have helped to better understand the interplay of the knowledge commons and design principles in guiding the transformations of a range of cultural institutions.

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