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Watkins, Jerry and Russo, Angelina (2005) Developing communities and collections with new media and information literacy . In Fox, Edward A and Neuhold, Erich J and Premssmit, Pimrumpai and Wuwongse, Vilas, Eds. *Proceedings 8th International Conference on Asian Digital Libraries*, pages pp. 390-394, Bangkok.

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Developing Communities and Collections with New Media and Information Literacy

Mr Jerry Watkins, Dr Angelina Russo

Senior Research Associates, Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for
Creative Industries and Innovation at Queensland University of Technology
Tel/fax +61 7 3105 7353, email jj.watkins@qut.edu.au

Abstract / Introduction

As part of its many functions, the reference library is charged with developing both its collection and its user community. These two functions are sometimes pursued as separate initiatives (with separate funding) by library managers. In Australia, the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) is committed to an exciting policy of simultaneous collection development and community engagement by integrating new media technologies with public programs. SLQ's Mobile Multimedia Laboratory is a purpose-designed portable digital creativity workshop which is made available to communities as a powerful platform to capture and disseminate local digital culture, and also to promote and train community members in information literacy. The Mobile Multimedia Laboratory facility operates in conjunction with SLQ's Queensland Stories project, an innovative portal for the display and promotion of community co-created multimedia. Together, the Mobile Multimedia Laboratory and the Queensland Stories initiatives allow SLQ to directly engage with existing and new communities, and also to increase its digital collection with community created content. Not only are both initiatives relatively cost-effective, they have a positive impact upon information literacy within the state.

Information Literacy and the Role of the Library

The skills required to engage in digital consumption have been termed the information literacies. Literacy has historically been a field of study most notably discussed in education, but media and cultural studies have recently focused on the information - or "new" - literacies and what skills are demanded of audiences as they negotiate the potential of expanding digital services. For example, Nixon proposes that forces such as the global cultural economy and public policies regarding information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now so deeply embedded in daily life - at home, work and school - that in many places they are shaping a 'new

landscape of communication' and 'new learning environments' [1]. Leu *et al* suggest that "The new literacies of the Internet and other ICTs include the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives" [2].

Through ICT the types and quantities of information in which an individual requires literacy are changing. No longer is it adequate to think of textual and visual modes of literacy separately, nor envision the internet as only a vast catalogue and receptacle of information. Through their pervasiveness and global nature the internet and ICT challenge traditional roles of producers and consumers in culture, narrowing the distance between them. Shedroff suggests that "the most important skills for almost everyone to have in the next decade and beyond will be those that allow us to create valuable, compelling, and empowering information and experiences for others. To do this, we must learn existing ways of organizing and presenting data and information and develop new ones" [3].

The information literacies are a readily recognizable phenomenon: the impact of technology on cultural communication should be well-known to anyone familiar with the history of the printing press, radio, telephone and television. Indeed, interaction design research and practice have dealt quite successfully with some of the usability design issues raised by the information literacies. Furthermore, ICTs offer an opportunity for regional and remote communities to partner with cultural institutions in the representation of cultural identity. This research is formed around interaction design principles which foreground 'human' rather than 'technical' determinants of ICT usage. While this is not a new approach, the focus is on audience-centered outcomes which are facilitated by design and curation: audience experience drives technology and not vice versa.

The historic position of the library as a repository of community knowledge positions it well as a candidate for the focus of information literacy within the community. Indeed, the role of new media provider may provide an answer to Darke's plea for a more user-focused library: "We must find ways of bringing the public back to the library. Tomorrow's libraries must become the movie-theatres of today. What does the public want? How can we help them? Do we know? If not, we had better get out there and find out. We have to make libraries fun places to visit, an entertainment experience where people can get answers for their questions, and have a good time while they are doing it" [4].

As ICTs become further embedded in our daily lives, they have the potential to create new platforms for community engagement. This paper argues that the discussions ranging around literacy can be considered integral to the further development of meaningful services for communities. As theories and practices in media/ cultural studies, education and Information Technology converge to contend with institutional access and community participation in production, all find themselves in relatively new territory. What seems to be consistent in each of these arguments is that literacy will be the key to the making of meaning. Literacy which enables cultural production can be developed by drawing together the discrete practices of a number of fields towards the empowerment of audiences and the development of the cultural consumer/ producer. In doing so, not only are the

processes of cultural production demystified, but the audience's ability to effectively engage in the civic opportunities afforded by new media can also be realized.

Developing User Communities via Co-creation

Community content creation is not a new field of study. Since the 1960s, cultural institutions in the USA and UK have broadened their public programs to include audience interaction with content through education [5]. However, whilst audiences have come to interact with the institution, the artefacts they create are not usually collected, registered and archived within an institution's collection. Therefore audience interaction has been restricted to entertaining ways of "making meaning" from existing content without providing an avenue for the collection and distribution of artefacts created through this interaction - thus limiting the long-term value of community interaction with content. Only recently have the ICTs familiar to higher-end metropolitan users started to become available to regional communities. When such technologies are married to traditional forms such as community narratives, they present an opportunity for individuals and communities to preserve their stories and distribute this knowledge to a wider audience.

Schuler argued that communities were distinguished by lively interaction and engagement on issues of mutual concern and that their well-being contributes to the well-being of the state as a whole. He proposed that ICT could play a role in community life by improving communication, economic opportunity, civic participation and education. His position extended to community-oriented electronic communication where community networks have a local focus. Schuler fails to provide a credible economic blueprint of how to deliver universal online access for communities, although he does make a case for how institutions can provide greater community access to ICT by providing no-/low-cost public access points [6]. But the relationship between institution and community has a far greater potential than the one-way provision of access and facilities. The newly literate community not only has the tools to consume digital culture, it can also work with the institution to create its own digital cultural artefacts. This relationship underpins the process of community co-creation.

Community Co-creation and Collection Development

Livingstone suggests that information literacy has limited value to communities if they cannot access technologies, nor have reason to [7]. The State Library of Queensland's Mobile Multimedia Laboratory (MML) project is designed to widen and deepen the sharing of cultural knowledge by creating a channel for cultural knowledge distribution from community to audience via the State Library. The MML is a fully portable media workshop designed and specified by the authors which allows SLQ trainers to travel anywhere within the enormous state of Queensland in order to provide communities with the skills and equipment to create their own digital media. The MML will be used to continue the Library's existing program of information literacy workshops. These regional sessions include community training

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in use of internet, and skills upgrade workshops for regional library staff in scanning etc. Importantly, the MML also provides the creative technical platform for SLQ's flagship community co-creation and collection development project, Queensland Stories. This is an ambitious new program whereby the State Library empowers communities to tell their own stories about life in Queensland. These stories will become part of SLQ's collection, accessible by a wider online audience. SLQ provides the Mobile Multimedia Laboratory and its own trainers to communities who have particular events or histories to record. During a three- to four -day workshop, SLQ's trainers introduce community participants to the techniques required to prepare a short multimedia narrative, including scanning, digital imaging, storyboarding and scriptwriting. Participants are encouraged to follow a loose format established by The Center for Digital Storytelling [8], which consists of approximately 10 stills images accompanied by a 3 minute scripted voiceover of about 250 words, narrated by the creator. By using this consistent format, the State Library is able to use its growing digital story collection to build its own valuable community snapshot of people, places and attitudes in Queensland – a snapshot taken by the community itself, rather than interpreted by a curator. The finished stories are reviewed for inclusion on SLQ's Queensland Stories website [9].

Application and Lessons Learned

The first application of the Mobile Multimedia Laboratory in April 2005 was to facilitate training of the State Library of Queensland's core group of digital storytelling facilitators for the Queensland Stories project. This training program was designed and delivered by the authors to be compatible with the Australian National Training Authority's framework for nationally transferable vocational qualifications so that successful completion of the training program would lead to basic multimedia qualifications for the participant.

The eight participants were all SLQ staff members or associates, many of whom had been involved in the Library's ongoing regional information literacy outreach training program. Technical competence ranged from advanced through to basic PC familiarity. Each workshop was designed to be delivered over an intensive four-day period, but lack of participant availability meant that each workshop was delivered in three days. This unavoidable compression meant that the time available for participants to experiment with the first person narrative form that distinguishes digital storytelling was very restricted. Nonetheless, a good compilation of stories was produced by the group, and can be seen on the Queensland Stories website.

Perhaps the most interesting findings of the workshops were related to policy issues, rather than storytelling. For example, SLQ must observe all due copyright, privacy and intellectual property issues and has therefore decided not to allow the use of any commercial music as part of any digital stories hosted on its website. Another interesting issue to arise from the workshops was that of identity privacy. Due to the risk of web-based invasion of privacy or pedophilia, published stories are only labeled with the creator's first name or nick name so that they cannot be identified.

Conclusion

The State Library of Queensland's community-focused digital initiatives aim to give more Queenslanders the opportunity of further realizing their own creative potential, and the excitement of publishing this work on the Internet for a wider audience to enjoy. SLQ hopes to use the Mobile Multimedia Laboratory to reach regional, rural and remote communities with information literacy and community co-creation programs in order to include wider audiences in its public programs and collections. Unlike print-based literacy, information literacies draw together texts, contexts and social practices across a number of media and create artifacts which afford communities the ability to both create and to broadcast community narratives, histories and content within an online environment. This greater online presence of community knowledge can be ably supported and enabled by cultural institutions such as libraries, which can provide training and technologies for information literacy. In this way, the library can position itself at the centre of a cost-effective community co-creative hub.

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