

## **An Example of Community Engagement: Libraries ACT and the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities**

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In 2010, Libraries ACT created a number of community engagement specialisations to be implemented at the Librarian or Professional Officer Class 1 level. The specialisations spanned existing core library activities, target groups already the focus of library programming, lifelong learning, and specific groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This paper describes the specialisations initiative from first implementation through a review to implementation of a modified approach. It focuses primarily on engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities resulting from both implementations. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for library archives and information services ('the ATSILIRN Protocols' or 'the Protocols') have become a key tool to planning that engagement, although ideas for engagement and participation are increasingly being generated by community members themselves. The use of the Protocols is discussed and the relevance of cultural competence in libraries is introduced. The specialisation initiative, and related engagement activities, may provide the basis of formal study, which could address the transferability of the tentative findings of this overview or explore the development of cultural competence through engagement activities.

**Keywords:** public libraries; community engagement; cultural competence; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; library services

### **Background**

Libraries ACT delivers public and heritage library services to the Canberra community. It has a vision to promote literacy, learning and the pleasure of reading; and to inspire and connect people, engaging them with their community and the world (Libraries ACT 2013). The service comprises nine public library branches, the mobile library and the ACT Heritage Library, for approximately 383,400 people (ABS 2013a). The ACT Heritage Library is a specialist unit and is the repository for the stories of people living and working in the ACT.

The ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population numbered 5185 people in the 2011 census (ABS 2011), calculated at 1.5% of the Estimated Resident Population at 30 June 2013 (ABS 2013b). This is a smaller proportion than in the national population, which was 2.5% in the 2011 census.

The ATSILIRN Protocols (ATSILIRN 2012) and the National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections (the National Policy Framework) (NSLA 2007) are two key policy documents produced by the Australian library and information sector to address appropriate provision for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) also produced a policy statement, *Libraries and Information Services and Indigenous Peoples*, in 1995 (ALIA 1995).

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The ATSLIRN Protocols were developed by Byrne, Barnes, Garwood-Houng and Moorcroft over a two year period of consultation, drafting and refining, and were launched and published by ALIA in 1995 (Blackburn and Garwood-Houng 2014). They are intended to be of use to any information professional or organisation in any information sector. The Protocols' authors received positive feedback about the need for such a set of guidelines (Garwood-Houng 2008) but a mapping project a decade later found that their use depended on the commitment of individuals and that awareness and implementation was incomplete and inconsistent across the sector (Nakata et al. 2005).

The National Policy Framework was developed by the National State and Territory Libraries of Australasia (NSLA) in 2007. The Protocols and the Framework cover the same principles, differing in the organisation of concepts and degree of detail. The then-ACT Library and Information Service endorsed the National Policy Framework in 2007; the decision to implement the Protocols was made in 2012.

There is little scholarly literature about initiatives in public library provision for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However these initiatives exist; individual municipal public library services have developed or supported local programmes or initiatives to facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's access to information. For example, Alice Springs Public Library maintains two Indigenous Knowledge collections: the Akaltje Antheme Collection, established in 2002, and the Local Language Collection, established in 2008 ([www.alicesprings.nt.gov.au/alice-springs-public-library/special-collections](http://www.alicesprings.nt.gov.au/alice-springs-public-library/special-collections)). In 1995, the Northern Regional Library and Information Services established the Dhiiyaan Indigenous Unit in Moree, New South Wales. This unit became an independent entity in 2012. The Cooloola Shire Library, now part of Gympie Shire, Queensland, instituted the Indigenous Library Service in 2001; the City of Sydney Library maintains a Koori Collection; and the Koori Resource and Information Centre and the Goulburn Regional Library Corporation established the Koori Library Pathways Project in Shepparton, Victoria (Woodhouse 2008). Examples of projects can be found in conference papers (Blackburn and Neale 2008; Senior 2006; Shepherd 2010), the ATSLIRN Newsletter, and industry publications such as *Incite* (e.g. Shepherd 2009).

United States practitioners have discussed the importance of cultural competence in library and information science practice and education extensively (Allard, Mehra, and Qayyum 2007; Gomez 2000; Jaeger and Franklin 2007; Jaeger et al. 2011; Kumasi and Hill 2011; Mestre 2010; Mi 2005; Montiel-Overall 2010; Overall 2009; Montiel-Overall and Littletree 2010). This debate began in 1964 (Josey and Abdullahi 2002), addressing appropriate service provision for ethnically and culturally diverse communities.

There is not yet a similar debate in Australian scholarly literature. Australian contributions at the 2013 International Federation of Library Associations conference drew on international experience (Garrison 2013) or the Australian archive sector (Thorpe 2013). Discussion elsewhere often has a different focus and is not particularly current: cross-cultural provision for Aboriginal people in Canada (Hills 1997; Kosta 2010; Sinclair-Sparvier 2002); multicultural and immigrant communities in Europe (Audunson 2005, Berger 2002); and the elimination of racism within the library workforce in the UK (Pateman 2002).

## **Key concepts: community engagement and cultural competence**

### ***Community engagement***

There is no agreed definition of community engagement (Goulding 2009; Sung and Hepworth 2013). Approaches encompass increasing public participation to improve public

services (CSV Consulting 2006; Goulding 2009) and building the public library's social role (Hillenbrand 2005; Johnson 2010; Muddiman et al. 2000; Pateman and Williment 2013; Schull 2004).

Sung and Hepworth (2013) suggest that the origin of the community engagement activity “from above or below” (2) will result in different strategies and methods. Rogers and Robinson (2004, cited in Goulding 2009 and Sung and Hepworth) offer a definition which is an example of an approach “from above”:

Community engagement encompasses a variety of approaches whereby public service bodies empower citizens to consider and express their views on how their particular needs are best met.

Goulding, and Sung and Hepworth then diverge in their discussion. Goulding outlines a spectrum along which community engagement might be located: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower. She suggests these activities to library community engagement: spaces for community activity; partnerships with the community sector and other public entities; volunteers; and community involvement in one off decision-making, projects and/or strategic decision-making. Sung and Hepworth (2013) offer a model of eight essential elements of community engagement – accountability, belonging, commitment, communication, flexibility, genuineness, relevance and sustainability – which are affected by two underlying variables: influence of authority; and the organisation's ability to learn. They suggest that the more the initiative comes ‘from below’ the more genuine the engagement.

The social role public libraries might fulfil through community engagement is conceived as either facilitating the creation of social capital (CSV Consulting 2006; Hillenbrand 2005; Johnson 2010; Schull 2004) or actively working for social change (Muddiman et al. 2000; Pateman and Williment 2013). The creation of social capital results in increased public participation and influence in existing services and structures. Actively working for social change creates locally defined institutions, such as needs-based community-led libraries and requires ways of working which depart significantly from current methods, and range from internal decision-making and outreach to partnership.

These three strands – improving services, creating social capital, achieving social change – are interwoven in implementation and outcome. For example, studies of projects implemented ‘from above’ demonstrate that “different branch libraries within the same library service will often develop in distinctive ways ... One size does not fit all” (CSV Consulting 2006, 8). This outcome is consistent with community-led libraries, which are a deliberate ‘co-production’ by partnership between a specific library and its community (Pateman and Williment 2013). Among the elements of a library's social capital are “... community empowerment and self-determination; local image and identity ...” (Hillenbrand 2005), which also might be expected in a community-led library. Perhaps this sharing of characteristics is to be expected when a number of approaches fit under what is effectively an umbrella term.

### *Cultural competence*

Terms used in the debate about appropriate provision for diverse communities include cross-cultural communication and provision, multiculturalism, affirmative action, education, leadership, cultural awareness, intercultural leadership, race, cultural competence and diversity. Honma (2005); Winston (2005); and Pawley (2006) discuss

the role of race in discrimination and its unacknowledged presence in terms like multiculturalism, arguing that engagement with groups defined by their ethnicity requires awareness of the effects of racism. ‘Cultural competence’ emerged in the 1990s (Mestre 2010).

Overall (2009, 176) defines cultural competence as:

... the ability to recognise the significance of culture in one’s own life and in the lives of others; to come to know and respect diverse cultural backgrounds and characteristics through interaction with individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic groups; and to fully integrate the culture of diverse groups into service work and institutions, in order to enhance the lives of both those being serviced by the library profession and those engaged in service.

The complexity of the definition and the accompanying framework for development are both challenging and useful.

There are simpler definitions, which focus primarily either on the individual (Mestre 2010) or on the organisation (Ramsey 2013). All the definitions viewed describe cultural competence as transformational and locate that transformation in the professional and the organisation, in response to community characteristics. Service industries like education, health and justice consider cultural competence essential to effective provision (Abrums and Leppa 2001; Ambtman et al. 2010; Clark et al. 2011; Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria Inc 2006; Kersey-Matusiak 2012; Kumas-Tan et al. 2007; National Health and Medical Research Council 2005; Perso 2012; National Centre for Cultural Competence n.d.; Universities Australia 2011). Librarians working in these fields overseas have responded to developments in training and practice (Alpi 2001; Mestre 2009; Mi 2005; Press and Diggs-Hobson 2005). Culturally competent practice confers a reciprocal benefit, shared between the professional, the organisation and the community (Mestre 2010; Montiel-Overall 2010).

## **Context**

### ***The ACT government***

The ACT government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the Traditional Owners of the Canberra region, indicating this on its website and on roadside signage. It provides secretariat support to the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB or the Elected Body) and the United Ngunnawal Elders Council (UNEC), through the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Key government directorates – education, health, justice, territory and municipal services – have dedicated programmes addressing issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and provide relevant information for members of the public. The health, education and justice directorates have developed Reconciliation Action Plans. Many units across all directorates have dedicated positions for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff.

The ACT government is committed to Close the Gap by addressing disadvantage in the areas of health, schooling, safe communities, governance and leadership, economic participation, healthy homes and early childhood. The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has noted the importance of culturally competent mainstream services in achieving Close the Gap targets (ACT Government n.d.).

### ***ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community***

The Ngunnawal people are the Traditional Owners of the ACT region. Their country shares boundaries with the lands of the Wiradjuri, Ngarigu, Yuin, and Gundungurra

peoples. The ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities also include people from all over Australia, who, like many non-indigenous Australians, have come to work, study or consolidate relationships in Canberra.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled organisations provide advocacy and service functions. For example, the Elected Body is a representative body established to give the community a strong democratically elected voice. Its role is to provide direct advice to the ACT government on matters of relevance to the community (ATSIEB n.d.). UNEC participates in ATSIEB, and also provides advice to the ACT government, addressing issues for the Ngunnawal people relating to heritage and land. UNEC members give Welcomes to Country and have developed a charter for welcome and healing (UNEC n.d.). Other community organisations include Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation, the Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Corporation, the Aboriginal Justice Centre and the Aboriginal Corporation for Sporting and Recreational Activities. There are many more, all of which are potential points of engagement.

### **Community engagement at Libraries ACT**

In 2010, a number of community engagement specialisations were created in the Libraries ACT service, to be implemented at the librarian or professional officer class 1 level, supported by senior librarians or senior management staff, acting as leaders. Initially 13 specialisations were created, spanning existing core library activity; target groups already the focus of library programming; life learning; and minority groups. The specialisations were: adult literacy; arts and culture; health; seniors; early childhood literacy; schools; youth; Indigenous; multicultural; government and legal; volunteers; heritage; book groups and ICT. The intention was to build partnerships and connections with other ACT government directorates, organisations and groups within the community, to result in programmes and activities that would improve library services and boost community participation in and use of their libraries. Many of the specialisations had the potential to overlap, and collaboration was expected to occur over time.

Staff were recruited specifically as community liaison officers. Library qualifications were not essential, although candidates' knowledge of or experience in libraries was explored at interview. Librarians already employed by Libraries ACT, newly recruited community liaison officers and senior librarians were asked to nominate three specialisations, in order of preference, and specialisations were allocated accordingly. The number of staff in each specialisation varied greatly: the Indigenous team was the smallest, comprising the author and her manager.

It was envisaged that librarians and community liaison officers would spend significant time on engagement work beyond the library. Operational 'front-of-house' work would be performed primarily by administrative officer level staff, in a concierge-style workflow. The first task for each specialisation was to devise a 12-month plan, a key element of which was mapping the target community's requirements. Normal operational demand, which varied across branches, however, meant that the time devoted to community engagement differed across specialisations. Other factors affecting the time and nature of the activity undertaken included: staff confidence, experience in community engagement, experience in librarianship, and compatibility between specialisation and existing library activity, e.g., early childhood with storytime programming. Consequently the kind of work undertaken in each specialisation varied. Experienced librarians already working with Libraries ACT were inclined to work on developing collections, or to review and develop existing services in the area of their specialisation. Experienced community development

workers tended to undertake a mapping of their target community's requirements. Officers or librarians whose specialisation reflected a personal passion tended to have existing links with relevant groups in the community and built on those. Engagement officers with other professional qualifications tended to develop programmes and activities reflective of that expertise, e.g., an engagement officer with teaching qualifications devised a service-wide 'Canberra Kids Love to Read' programme, building links with teachers, pupils and local libraries. Some specialisations didn't lend themselves easily to community engagement, such as ICT, or were already well established in library operations, such as volunteers and book groups.

After June 2012, the specialisation structure was reviewed to clarify activities and expectations. The number of specialisations was reduced to seven and the term 'specialisation' was replaced with 'portfolio', reflecting the range of activities that could be undertaken – and which are expected to be undertaken over time. Specialisations considered core business, such as volunteers and book groups, or core business *and* specialist in their own right, such as heritage, were removed. The removal of core work from the initiative meant that portfolio activity would be focused on generating new contacts and new activities, with the potential to introduce new ways of working. The inherent question of sustainability and the effect on existing work were factors in the decision to review the structure and enhance clarity and consistency in implementation. A consistent planning and reporting cycle was designed, with reference to the Australian Business Excellence Framework (SAI Global *n.d.*), and templates for planning and reporting developed. The new portfolios comprised: early childhood; schools; adults; seniors; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement; multicultural; and people with disabilities and special needs. The new 'portfolio' planning process was implemented from January 2013, for implementation from July 2013.

The scope of portfolio activity is ambitious. It now encompasses collections, programmes and events, buildings, information and communication technology, policies, procedures and customer service delivery, staff development and training, roles/jobs for temporary staff, and volunteer opportunities. While community engagement is fundamental, the potential for organisational development is clearer. Portfolios were reallocated, again according to expressions of interest. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement team grew by one, remaining the smallest.

Senior librarians and some librarians undertook community engagement training. The model, taught by the International Association for Public Participation, was based on the spectrum of participation cited by Goulding (2009) – inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower.

## **Implementation**

This initiative, in both its iterations, was not framed as formal research activity. The process of undertaking community engagement with ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been and continues to be an organic one, shaped initially by contacts made and an initial large project and driven increasingly by community input. This resembles the cycle in action research. The intrinsic involvement of the portfolio team as 'insiders', strongly suggests ethnography. Alternatively, the length of time being reported – two and a half years – may suggest a case study. The increasing contribution made by members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community resembles community-led libraries. However these similarities are incidental as no specific methodology is applied in planning or practice.

***Specialisation: March 2011 – June 2012***

The first phase of the Indigenous specialisation was undertaken by the author, a qualified librarian who applied for a community liaison position, drawing on her experience in community development and in providing services and collections for and about Aboriginal people in Alice Springs, and her manager. The term 'Indigenous' and the acronym 'ATSI' were discarded, as the communities prefer the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in full.

The first specialisation plan aligned with the Libraries ACT draft strategic plan and drew on other organisational documents: the draft framework discussion paper for the *Canberra Social Plan 2011* (ACT Government 2011) and the *Second Report to the ACT Government 2011; Towards True Reconciliation* (ATSIEB 2011). The aim of this first plan was "to begin enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in Libraries ACT, as consumers of the service and participants in programs."

The outcomes were expected to benefit both Libraries ACT and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Libraries ACT would gain a clear indication of the requirements Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had of the service, including: programming that addressed their needs and interests; increased use of the service by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and the opportunity to develop its collections to be of greater interest to this community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would gain enhanced knowledge of the services Libraries ACT had to offer, opportunities to participate in the development of Libraries ACT collections, and opportunities to participate in the provision of relevant programmes. The success measures of this plan were broad and included: the capacity to more effectively plan further engagement activities based on consultation with the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having received information about Libraries ACT and participated in public library events and activities of interest to them.

Initial consultations included ATSIEB, UNEC, key staff in other directorates such as education and justice and a small number of community organisations. Suggestions for engagement activities coalesced around promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. The Elected Body nominated the provision of cultural experiences for children, an Elder-in-Residence programme to improve cross-cultural understanding in the community, and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of the youth detention centre. The chair of UNEC emphasised the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as a normal part of the visual environment and suggested the acquisition of artwork to hang permanently in the branches.

One activity swiftly became the primary focus for the first specialisation: organisation of the *In Living Memory* exhibition. The decision to undertake this project was an internal one, echoing the 'library-led' component of the model defined by Sung and Hepworth (2013). It nevertheless met the first plan's aims: to raise Libraries ACT's profile in the community through an activity of direct relevance. It also offered the whole ACT community the opportunity to learn about and reflect on important history that still resonates in the lives of some ACT residents. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement expanded on suggestions and was beyond expectation. This ownership of initiatives is a continued characteristic of these communities' participation.

*In Living Memory (ILM)* is a photographic exhibition created by the New South Wales State Records Authority (SRA) from the NSW Aboriginal Welfare Board Archive. The exhibition had been developed in collaboration with Aboriginal people across New South

Wales, whose families had been under the control of the board or who continue to live near or otherwise retain a strong connection with the missions and reserves administered by the board (SRA n.d.). Libraries ACT, Archives ACT and SRA collaborated to bring the exhibition to Canberra, where it hung in the Civic Public Library branch during July 2012. The project, of necessity, grew into a collaboration between government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and individuals. In addition to the information agencies, participants were the ACT Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, ATSIEB, the Yurauna Centre (Canberra Institute of Technology's (CIT) dedicated support unit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students), the Yurauna Centre Cultural Arts community, UsMobWriting (a local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers' group), and the Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service. A lecturer and students of the Yurauna Centre Cultural Arts Program hung and demounted the exhibition. The broader cultural arts community created an exhibition *Honouring Cultures, Living Traditions*, to accompany *ILM* and "connect memories of the past with fibres of the present, fastened to the future ... to warm on wintry days and ease the emotion of viewing" *ILM*. UsMobWriting wrote material specifically to address the theme 'In living memory'. They used this material to support the creation of *Honouring Cultures, Living Traditions* by reading to the artists while they worked and to give public readings at a number of branches during the exhibition. Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service was available to provide support, if required, for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander visitors who found the exhibition distressing. All participants promoted the exhibition formally or informally. The exhibition was opened during NAIDOC Week by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. A small crowd from the community attended the launch as did Indigenous and mainstream media.

Libraries ACT contributed the project management, marketing, and development of a programme of associated events. Other government agencies provided ministerial liaison, funding, promotion assistance and media liaison. SRA staff also conducted an information session for library staff to enable them to promote the exhibition effectively. Attendance at this session was voluntary and approximately 15% of the whole library staff attended. The effort involved in this project posed risks to normal service delivery and probably incurred opportunity costs by impeding the follow up of initial consultation contacts and suggestions. Holding the exhibition during NAIDOC Week had benefits and challenges. While NAIDOC was the obvious time to hang the exhibition, it is also the busiest time in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander calendar, so *ILM* had a lot of competition. The real success of the project has become clear as engagement activity continues. Its greatest and ongoing success stems from the relationships built with Yurauna Centre and UsMobWriting and the contribution these groups continue to make to the library service.

The other key activity of the plan was the implementation of the ATSILIRN Protocols. Although organisational development of the kind embodied in the protocols was not envisaged in the first iteration of Libraries ACT's community engagement initiative, the author's experience at Alice Springs demonstrated that an environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are comfortable underpins successful engagement activities. The senior librarians discussed the protocols and their implementation at two meetings, each attended by a guest speaker: Alana Garwood-Houng, a protocols author, attended one, and the director of the CIT Information Commons, which has implemented the protocols, attended the other. An implementation workshop was planned for all interested staff. The decision to implement was made in February 2012 but the workshop was deferred until after *ILM* and occurred seven months later.



Attendance at the workshop by staff from all levels demonstrated that there is a significant proportion of the library workforce who want to engage with these communities. The guest speaker, a literacy and numeracy field officer from the ACT Education Directorate, began by referring to how cultural competence informs her work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pupils and their families. The concept has since informed the portfolio's approach and the author's further study. The workshop discussed their understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures and ways of implementing the protocols.

Unfortunately, the workshop momentum was lost somewhat during the specialisation review during the latter half of 2012. However the workshop contributed to the impetus for the portfolio to focus specifically on the protocols when the new portfolio planning began in January 2013. Whole of staff support is still evident when opportunities arise for participation in some aspect of portfolio activity, such as information sessions about exhibitions, organising programmes and displays or attending Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) seminars.

Other specialisation activities included exhibitions installed by community members and the participation of community members in storytimes on National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day and Indigenous Literacy Day. These activities aligned with two suggestions made by ATSIIEB and UNEC during consultation – visual references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and cultural experiences for children.

#### ***Portfolio: 2013–2014***

Following the review of the specialisation structure in late 2012 and using the new planning process from January 2013, the objectives of the 2013–14 plan are more focused. The plan includes implementing the ATSIILIRN Protocols, building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' use of Libraries ACT collections and participation in programmes and services, organisational development through the implementation of the ATSIILIRN Protocols, and building awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the broader population. The protocols will impart a particular focus to these objectives' implementation.

The project areas in the new planning template – collections, programmes and events, ICT, buildings, policies and procedures, staff development – are addressed in the protocols. Accordingly, the portfolio team reorganised the template, substituting appropriate protocols for project areas. [Table 1](#) is an excerpt from the plan, with an additional column linking the Protocol implementation with project area.

To avoid complacency, the portfolio team has been conscious of the community and associated issues when planning and a number of the activities linked to implementing a protocol have come from the community. The range of activities in the plan might appear ambitious; however, it is expected that some activities will take years to complete and the groundwork is the performance indicator for this cycle. The plan also has to be flexible to accommodate spontaneous developments and suggestions. The protocols are useful as an internally accepted framework for testing new opportunities, whether generated by library staff or the community. Using the protocols, written by information professionals for information professionals, as a guide means the portfolio is neither bound to planned activities only nor automatically agreeable to community suggestions.

The role of the community in generating ideas is increasing. The major activity in the first half of this plan has been the exhibition *I Do Have a Belief II; Kevin Gilbert 1933 –*

Table 1. Protocol implementation plan.

| Protocol   | Performance measure/s  | Portfolio project area/s                        |
|--|--|---|
| 1.1 Recognise Traditional Owners   | (a) Acknowledge Traditional Owners at key meetings and events<br>(b) Organise Welcomes to Country<br>(c) Provide advice regarding when to organise Welcome to Country, when to acknowledge Traditional Owners<br>(d) Develop signage for all branches acknowledging the Ngunnawal<br>Explore establishment of informal reference group with ATSIEB and UNEC members  | Programs and events<br>Buildings                |
| 1.2 Ensure appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander membership of governance and advisory boards  |  | Policies and procedures                         |
| 2.2 Seek to balance collections by acquiring material by and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples                                   | (a) Review the Collection Development Policy with regard to implementing the ATSILIRN Protocols<br>(b) Provide advice to public library staff about weeding and discard etc<br>(c) Acquisition per core business processes<br>(d) Inclusion of Reading for Reconciliation Booklists in Reading Group program<br>Assist in recruitment as appropriate, e.g. make suggestions about possible mentors; research options for advertising positions | Collections                                     |
| 4.2 Employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in as many roles as possible but especially visibly at library and archive service points |  | Staff development                               |
| 4.4 Ensure accessibility by encouraging and fostering positive relationships between staff members and clients                                     | (a) At least two 'interest group' meetings<br>(b) Other 'interest group' activities e.g. attendance at AIATSIS Seminars<br>(c) Other 'development' activities<br>(d) Reconciliation Discussion Group   | Staff development                               |
| 4.6 Encourage the use of organisation's facilities as meeting places and resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people                | (a) <i>Do Have A Belief II, Kevin Gilbert 1933 – 1993</i> exhibition<br>(b) Exhibitions and displays installed by the community<br>(c) Explore library branches as venues for community organisations' programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<br>Use of AIATSIS thesauri in original cataloguing   | Programs and events                             |
| 5.1 Use national Indigenous thesauri   |  | Collections                                     |
| 5.3 Improve access by ... describing items by their geographic, language and cultural identifiers  |  |   |
| 9.2 Provide cultural awareness training  |  |   |
| 10.4 Promote awareness and use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander related holdings   | Encourage cultural awareness training<br>(a) Maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pathfinder<br>(b) Promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and creators; information for display in branches, Library and Information Week 2014<br>(c) Use Libraries ACT Twitter and Facebook<br>(d) Development of an Indigenous Story-time kit<br>(e) Respond to community suggestions<br>(f) Digital story-telling            | Staff development<br>ICT<br>Programs and events |

1993. Mounting this exhibition was a challenge issued to Libraries ACT by Kevin Gilbert's daughter during NAIDOC 2012. The initial suggestion was that a selection of artworks from a gallery exhibition would be installed in Civic Library during September. However the curator, Kevin Gilbert's wife, decided to create another exhibition to reflect the library venue and focused on his written works and the technology used to produce those works. This resulted in a multi-media exhibition comprising drafts, galleys, paste-ups, lino-prints, silk screens, published books in English and other languages, a typewriter, a very early computer and iPads for viewing videos of Kevin Gilbert speaking. The launch of the exhibition, on International Day for the World's Indigenous Peoples, was crowded and, in a first for Libraries ACT, was live-streamed. Again, staff had the opportunity to learn about the exhibition and its significance through an information session, which was also recorded for staff who couldn't attend.

UsMobWriting launched their publication *By Close of Business* during this exhibition and read from it on Indigenous Literacy Day. Attendance at these events was nearly three times the numbers at *ILM* events. *I Do Have A Belief II* was included in Canberra Centenary promotional material, which is likely to have been a factor in the higher attendance. The effect of informal promotion through community involvement was probably also significant due to the cumulative effect of the previous 18 months' library-community engagement.

The remainder of the 2013–14 engagement cycle will be spent on operational and program ideas. Some of these have been planned for, while others are a response to ad hoc opportunities, such as a multi-lingual storytime for International Mother Language Day and preparatory work for the ATSIEB Chair's challenge for Indigenous Literacy Day in September 2014. This will see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presenters at storytimes in all public library branches, in language if possible, or librarians telling Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander stories.

A key activity of the remainder of the cycle will be establishment of an informal Reference Group; an initiative which has been approved by the ACT Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. This suggestion came from an ATSIEB member who attended one of UsMobWriting's *ILM* readings, remarking to the author: "Until I went to that, I had no idea what libraries could do. How about I ask three or four Aboriginal people and we form a reference group?" This demonstrates the value of UsMobWriting's contribution to Libraries ACT, as does the willingness of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community generally to grasp opportunities for engagement and cultural promotion.

## Discussion

Measures of success of the community engagement can be broadly organised into: activities or projects completed; willingness of the community to be involved; challenges issued to the library by the community; and staff interest and sustainability. Although "assessing community engagement doesn't have to be about counting the numbers" (CSV Consulting 2006), on reviewing achievements at the end of 2011–12, the team, having felt dominated by *ILM*, were surprised to realise that three quarters of the activities had either been implemented or commenced planning and could be carried forward. Unplanned activities such as storytimes by Aboriginal presenters were a significant part of the achievement. The same trend is evident in the second plan. At the halfway mark about half of the ideas have been implemented or commenced planning and spontaneous opportunities will be pursued as they arise.

The willingness of the community to be involved is evident in the ongoing participation of UsMobWriting, the enthusiasm of individuals for involvement in

storytimes, the exhibitions that community members now install themselves in selected branches, the increasing community response to events, and the contribution of ideas, like the Reference Group and Indigenous Literacy Day storytime challenge. The community consistently takes ideas beyond their original conception. Key to the effectiveness of UsMobWriting's relationship with Libraries ACT, is the alignment of its core activity – writing, creating culture – with library core business: literacy, learning and recreation. Further, involvement with the library is important to the group as it enables them to meet their own aims, such as being able to promote their work, demonstrate to their community the place of their culture in a mainstream institution, and to promote that culture to the broader community, thereby creating opportunities for cross cultural understanding.

In conversations with the author, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have viewed 'two-way' collaboration as revolving around the library facilitating the community achieving its aims, in return for which the community offers its culture as a learning opportunity. This is not a needs-based approach. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culture is an asset on which they build their aspirations and make connections with the wider community. Discussions about the Reference Group have included comments like, "If we can get our kids into libraries and reading and maybe end up working there, then it will be better for everybody – for us, the [broader] community". This kind of collaboration requires culturally competent librarians and organisations to work with communities "to ensure that library programs build on cultural values and norms of the community rather than replace them" (Overall 2009, 10).

This engagement can pose challenges to operational activity and to relationships. Libraries ACT has to offer genuine partnership with operational constraints *and* try to moderate those constraints. The community has accepted those limitations, after some initial difficulties. Organisational flexibility as described by Gomez (2000), a "willingness to learn" (Sung and Hepworth 2013) and education opportunities for staff, greatly assist the process of the community accepting limitations. Resolving difficulties and correcting mistakes takes time and it has taken two years to begin to embed the organisational flexibility that a damaged relationship revealed as necessary. The organisation's 'willingness to learn', the portfolio team's persistence and capacity for generating ideas, the grace of community members, and the community's desire to engage with the library, have meant continuing engagement.

For ACT Libraries staff, challenges lie in finding a balance between engagement work and operational requirements, leadership coming from the middle of the staffing structure, team members learning how best to leverage the value of ideas and support elsewhere in the organisation, and constraints to what can be undertaken. Expectations have to be modified frequently, although the portfolio team is unwilling to not test an idea or drop one altogether. Staff participation in the protocols implementation workshop led the portfolio team to moot the idea of a 'special interest group' for attendees. In response to informal development opportunities, it was expected that members would become advocates for cross-cultural understanding, models of growing cultural competence, and assist in implementing the protocols across the branches. Unfortunately this idea has had to be dropped. Operational requirements limit the amount of time non-portfolio staff can have away from their work and these staff have expressed unease about appearing to be favoured with development opportunities while their colleagues cover work that they normally do. The portfolio team are responding to this lost opportunity by contributing articles to the staff newsletter, promoting development opportunities to all staff, and assisting staff in implementing their own programme ideas. Optimally, this alternative

strategy will stimulate individual reflection and learning and foster the gradual development of cultural competence.

The community has challenges of its own. Responses to outreach-type approaches, promoting existing library services and resources, have included, “Our kids [the service organisation’s cohort, not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children generally] don’t read” and “Our people [again, the service cohort] have such disorganised stressed-out lives that using the library would be one more suggestion that gets lost or contributes to feelings of failure.” Also, community organisations’ existing commitments can be such that they are unable to take on anything new, demonstrated in responses such as “Send us a proposal and we’ll see if we can consider it.” These comments suggest that engagement is possibly better based on aspirations rather than needs. The author expects there is potential in the complexities behind these responses to find something in common on which to work. Identifying and following up this potential is not planned, however, until implementing the protocols warrants it. By that stage portfolio achievements may make collaboration easier, the relevance of libraries may be more apparent, and organisations will be able to see how a partnership with Libraries ACT would achieve their aims.

Whole of staff interest in engaging with this group is genuine and widespread. This is evidenced by:

- attendance at the protocols implementation workshop, exhibition information sessions and AIATSIS tours and seminars (and by apologies received for inability to attend)
- interest in and desire to learn about community exhibitions
- participation in cultural awareness training
- willingness to devise programmes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presenters

Participation in all of the above is self-nominated. An organisation approach, mandating training and programmes for all staff about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would enhance uptake and progress organisational cultural competence.

Indications of success often come in unanticipated forms. During a staff discussion about the value of exhibitions in libraries, generally, one staff member remarked: “For people who don’t go and see art, to see it where they normally go, can break open their world and give them the chance to dream.” The portfolio team had been thinking in the engagement frame of reference – community participation, the community’s self-chosen form of cultural expression, cross-cultural understanding, the place of a particular culture in the broader context. They had not considered the broader possibility of “art for art’s sake” – they had their own perceptions broken open somewhat.

Working through the protocols as they apply to Libraries ACT should assist in achieving sustainability of the portfolio. Other strategies to achieving sustainability will include focusing on two-way collaborations that meet community aspirations and library aims, continuing established relationships, supporting or encouraging other library staff to undertake their own engagement, and planning for success. Implementing the protocols is progressing to the point where the team leader has commented that while failure was not anticipated, neither was this level of success.

## **Conclusion**

Two and a half years of engagement between Libraries ACT and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have demonstrated that:

- a small team can achieve a lot, particularly when there is support among colleagues and where the community wants to be proactively engaged
- a community group whose activity and objectives are in synergy with library business will enhance engagement outcomes
- the capacity of the library to support the community in achieving its aspirations will influence engagement outcomes
- “Protocols can assist in creating a space for change” (Thorpe 2013, 3): the ATSLIRN Protocols are useful as an internal planning tool, a framework against which external ideas can be tested or fitted, and a means for achieving sustainability
- community engagement offers opportunities for professional development
- successful engagement takes time, persistence, adaptability and good faith from all
- a willingness to learn, interaction with members of the community, and constant (two-way) accommodation and adjustment for community input and organisational requirements may, in the circumstances, be the building blocks for acquiring cultural competence
- the community will meet you more than half-way

Comparing this engagement with the features suggested by Goulding (2009) or the models proposed by Sung and Hepworth (2013) does not reveal a particular fit with either. However, aspects of the initiative align with elements of each. Following Goulding, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement portfolio team, and by extension Libraries ACT, moved swiftly from ‘consult’ and ‘involve’ to something approaching ‘collaboration’ with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Operational and accountability requirements will prevent fully community-led collaboration and involvement in strategic decision-making is not envisaged. With regard to Sung and Hepworth (2013), the organisation’s willingness to learn, the community’s willingness to participate, and the ‘influence of authority’ interact constantly so that whether engagement is ‘from above’ or ‘from below’ is fluid.

The portfolio team and the community have built on aspirations for cultural expression rather than needs to create what is possible. Engagement work can feel messy and daunting, and balancing operational and portfolio work can be difficult. However, the community’s drive to seize opportunities (and take ideas way out of the original ballpark) is an unfailing restorative. Support among colleagues and indications that they are engaging as they are able, is also encouraging.

Although it is critical to recognise the importance of library services enhancing the lives of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is equally important to recognise how libraries benefit from the communities they serve as well. (Overall 2009, 204)

### Notes on contributor

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