**LIBRARY, COMMUNITY CAMPUS, LEARNING HUB:**

**THE COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE**

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*Technology, new demands from consumers, changing social needs - all the uncontrollable, incredibly fast forces of modern Australia - mean that public libraries need to keep up to avoid going the way of the movie rental store, travel agents, catalogues, or even "the Computer". So has "The Library" become obsolete? Can "The Library" be saved, or do we need a re-invention that truly reflects their full value in 2015? Jack Goodman - CEO and Founder of the most popular online library service this century yourtutor.com.au, and President of Friends of Libraries Australia - talks about how Australia's public libraries can continue their tradition of education and community development, retaining their relevance by embracing change.*

I

’m going to start this discussion about Australia’s public libraries by talking about our nation’s universities. This may seem counterintuitive, even off point. Or, as my kids might tell me if they were reading this, “Dad, you’re not answering the question. You’re going to lose marks!” Nevertheless, bear with me.

**Libraries and universities, shared transformation**

A few days ago I attended the national convention of Universities Australia. This is an annual event, held in Canberra, at which upwards of 600 senior university academics gather – Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors, etc. – to share their thoughts on the future of the sector. What is normally a relatively genteel event, featuring fancy food and drink and relatively little “conferencing” in relation to networking and “catching up” time, was different this year. Why? Our universities are undergoing what may be their most radical period of transformation since they assumed their modern forms over the last several centuries.

In Australia, this process is being accelerated –at least potentially – by the current Government, which is hoping to begin privatising our 39 public institutions. At the conference the Prime Minister sent his views in the form of a 2-minute video to the conferees, while the Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, floridly presented his views to the delegates in an after-dinner speech at Parliament House. And finally, the next morning, shadow minister Kim Carr provided an alternative view – again in powerfully strident tones – of what the future of our university sector should look like.

Regardless of your view of the current debate – and it’s been going on for so long now that it’s likely most of us have lost track of what the Government’s current position is – there’s something far bigger and more important that’s happening to our unis than whether their funding model changes. It’s the digitisation of education.

**Keeping up with social expectations**

What does this mean? By now we’re all well and truly tired, I am sure, of hearing about the impact the Internet, the World Wide Web, computers, smart phones, tablets, and now wearable tracking devices are having on our daily lives. We’ve all heard the stories about how technology has overwhelmed long-lived parts of our economy – including books, music, movies, newspapers, magazines, databases, and more. What’s happening now is that technology’s impact is accelerating across a wider range of more complex, higher-level human endeavours, including health care and education.

**Students aren’t on campus anymore**

For our universities, this means that while enrolments are at their highest levels ever, the fastest growing campuses in our nation are invisible. That is, online enrolments in “cloud campuses” (as many unis are calling their digital offerings) are rapidly becoming the most popular way to study. The reasons for this are obvious. The consequences are not so clear, and they’re quite concerning if you’re an Australian uni. One thing anyone who’s been on a uni campus recently will know is this: student attendance at the traditional uni lecture is down. Way down. It’s not uncommon for academics to report that, by week 3 or 4 of a semester, fewer than 20 per cent of enrolled students are attending weekly lectures. The nation’s lecture theatres are not so much venues for information transmission but glorified echo chambers.

And once a student begins to study in the cloud, what becomes of them? This is where the world as we have known it turns upside down. Because whether a student in Adelaide, or Alice Springs, or Atherton happens to be studying at their local uni or another cloud campus across the country, or even across the ocean, is entirely impossible to predict. Just in our own backyard, Flinders, UniSA and Adelaide are now competing directly with 36 other Australian universities, as well as hundreds of private providers in Australia and overseas – let’s say at least 500 English language public and private institutions in the US, UK, Canada, and elsewhere.

What does all this have to do with public libraries? A lot. In fact, it should be telling us two things: First, public libraries are, without a doubt, in the midst of a challenge similar to that of universities. Second, transformative crises such as what I have described above also represent great opportunities for those of us who are willing to embrace change. How so? Read on.

**Transformative crises as opportunities**

Let’s pause for a moment and consider how libraries have changed in the last 20+ years? Let’s cast our memories back to 1995, when Paul Keating was prime minister of Australia, our population was less than 18-million, and the Internet was, effectively, a novelty. Personal computers were large, white boxes, sometimes with CD-ROM drives (DVDs didn’t hit the market for another year) that cost about $3,000. If you wanted to get an Internet connection, you needed to have some technical know-how, a modem, a spare phone-line, and a copy of Netscape Navigator or Mosaic. You almost certainly didn’t go to a library to get online, since few public libraries had Internet connections, and there wouldn’t have been much to do online anyway as there were very few websites. And needless to say, there was no Google, no smartphones, no Facebook, no broadband, no iPads. The world was, indeed a very different place.

**What is the real mission?**

What does the landscape look like for public libraries in 2015? Much like universities, libraries are experiencing a persistent and growing threat to what has historically been their core mission: providing communities with access to reading material and reader development. We report the statistics to our managers on a monthly basis and the numbers speak for themselves. Loans are, almost across the board, down from their peaks 3 or 4 years ago, and the trend line shows no sign of change. Patrons who have been libraries’ best customers for years now have access to near limitless reading and listening material on their smartphones and reading tablets, whether they’re borrowing that material from their library or downloading it for no or nominal cost. Traditional databases – with a couple of unique exceptions – are under similar pressures. This should come as no surprise when the vast majority of queries from our community are quite easily resolved via Google, Wikipedia, and the increasingly impressive network of well-edited and sourced free online content.

**What libraries do well; unique strengths**

One thing we can say, without exception, that libraries do well, have always done well, and will likely continue to do well far into the future is run early childhood reading programs. We don’t need more presentations, reports, studies, and analyses of story times for children and the benefits for both parents and babies. We know they work, they’re well attended, and they meet an important and irreplaceable community need. What works so well about these types of baby/toddler/children’s programs: First, libraries possess something increasingly rare in our heavily privatised world: public spaces that are comfortable, inviting, and designed for informal learning. Second, they’re delivering an experience that isn’t easily replaced by technology. Humans are social and as much as we seem to have an endless addiction to socialising online, we still crave face-to-face engagement, and we need spaces that are free and well-resourced, to deliver the quality of life experiences that help equalise access to societal goods that all members of our communities seek.

**Taking advantage of strengths: space, staff, social inclusion**

Can we extrapolate anything from these facts? As I’ve suggested many times in the past, if librarians and supporters of libraries were to think like entrepreneurs, we’d focus on the things libraries do best and try to find ways to build on those strengths, while mitigating any obvious and emerging weaknesses. In this case, libraries have a few key strengths we can identify as follows:

* They occupy valuable physical real estate that attracts substantial foot traffic on a daily basis
* They have educated, trained and experienced staff who are capable of delivering learning programs to diverse audiences
* They have a reputation for social inclusiveness

**The decline of the Maker Space**

These strengths speak to a bigger potential for public libraries, in my view, than many have been pondering. Much of the discussion around the future of public libraries has been within the context of what have come to be known as “maker spaces.” The concept here has been that libraries can provide physical space for people who want to tinker with “do-it-yourself” projects, often using equipment few people can afford at home. Much of the “maker space” movement has centred on 3-D printers and some of the remarkable things that can be made with them. Given the cost of 3-D printers, it makes sense that libraries are experimenting with offering the public access to such technology.

A good example of maker spaces in the narrative of the future of public libraries is an article from the new-tech website Timeline[[1]](#footnote-1), which describes such facilities as one of the important new services libraries can offer their communities. And while I won’t quibble with the idea that maker spaces are a reasonable example of something libraries can do to attract and keep more members, I would also point out something that you don’t need to be Alvin Toffler to realise. Maker spaces are likely to be a fad, and the cost of most of the things in them will, like all technological products, drop dramatically in coming years, so that anyone who wants one will likely own a 3-D printer. They certainly won’t have the novelty factor they have now. For proof, think back a few years to other fads, such as the library as a video-gaming lounge. I can think of more than a few presentations I have attended in the first decade of this century during which librarians excitedly presented their findings that teenagers (and adults!) like video games, and having access to gaming technology was a popular addition to a library. Given the ubiquity of cheap gaming platforms, plus the fact that gaming has become a highly compelling component of mobile device usage, it’s no wonder libraries aren’t investing in gaming lounges anymore.

**An entrepreneurial approach to the library space**

Let’s think more strategically, like a proper entrepreneur would, and consider a problem libraries are uniquely positioned to solve. In many ways, the problem – and solution – are so obvious that they’re easy to overlook. Libraries are about education, in the broadest sense of the term. They are about lifelong learning, again in the broadest sense of the term. And they exist, in our most expansive thinking, to help anyone travel their own, personal educational journey.

For an infant or a toddler, that journey is all about early literacy, and the library’s role is critical, particularly because we know that people’s life chances are profoundly impacted by the age at which they are exposed to books and story-telling. And because children in low-SES, immigrant and other disadvantaged communities are less likely to get sufficient exposure to pre- and early-literacy activities at home, the library plays a key role in providing this public good.

**The learning journey, past Baby Rhyme Time**

But it’s not just newborns, toddlers and pre-schoolers who have their own personal learning journeys. Primary school kids, high schoolers, school-leavers, 20-something adults in the workforce, parents, part-time workers, Gen-Xers considering a second career, and Baby Boomers are all on their own learning pathways, and there are myriad ways for libraries to play a valuable, supporting role in those journeys. This may sound so all encompassing as to be beyond our ability to imagine how it could apply to a new model for public libraries. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Let’s think back for a moment to the dilemma our university sector is now facing. The digitisation of the learning experience is pushing students into online learning settings, resulting in a growing proportion of students disappearing from campus and, in many instances, changing universities with little more than a click or two.

What role can libraries play in this scenario? To answer this question, we need look no further than Open Universities Australia, which over the course of the last few years has introduced its OUA Connect Library Program.[[2]](#footnote-2) This program is a partnership between OUA and a number of public libraries whereby libraries provide space for OUA enrolled students to study, run information sessions about the research and study-related services available, and generally provide something like a mini campus experience for learners. This is an interesting partnership that has been initiated by OUA because of their growing awareness that their lack of physical infrastructure was an obstacle for students seeking the benefits of a physical study space staffed with trained staff.

**Demand for local space increases, as the Uni campus disappears**

I won’t comment on the relative success of the OUA Connect Library Program, though there are a number of flaws in its implementation. What is noteworthy is the fact that it is one of the first instances of public libraries discovering – through a partnership with a large, private education provider (OUA is a highly profitable marketing business owned by several Australian universities) – the potential for reimaging their role as community campuses or learning hubs. The opportunity here goes well beyond the OUA partnership a handful of public libraries have struck. If we imagine the world five short years in the future, we can easily picture a scenario where university and TAFE campuses have been dramatically scaled back and simultaneously where millions of Australians are learning all ranges of things – both formally and informally – online. This includes studying for certificates, diplomas, bachelors and advanced degrees, as well as myriad skills that are essentially micro-courses in everything from DIY home repair to software design.

Will all these learners be able to access everything they need to succeed via the online learning environments their providers have populated with course content? Or will many of them be looking for something more, a local physical location where they can meet up with other learners, discuss their studies, seek assistance from trained research professionals, and even access professional learning support? Will they, in effect, be looking for a venue that is a hybrid student centre, café, learning support facility, and study group setting?

**Lifelong learning, beyond schools and universities**

Let’s take a moment to look at this scenario from another perspective. What about the adult worker who has been working in a blue-collar job since leaving school and now, at the age of 35, is looking for something more? What about the young mother who left the workforce to look after children for five to seven years and is now keen to apply for work, perhaps in a field adjacent to her earlier expertise? What about the retrenched 55-year old (let’s not forget that as our economy transitions from one of primary production to a knowledge-base that many jobs are going to disappear) searching for a new career? For many of these people, pursuing formal education in the form of a TAFE course or university degree is a daunting prospect. The local library provides a far gentler re-entry point or pathway into learning, because it is open to the public, free, anonymous for those who wish to remain so, and can provide informal learning services that assist even the shyest, most at-risk and disadvantaged residents.

**Libraries as economic growth engines**

There are further benefits to this vision for public libraries. To the extent we are all concerned that libraries maintain their relevance amongst councillors and council budgets, then positioning libraries as an engine of local economic growth and development – via the delivery of educational skills and services to local residents – is a powerful narrative. The key driver of employment, as we all know, is educational attainment. In order to foster a vibrant economy, communities need educated residents, and where educational attainment is insufficient to meet the needs of employers, communities need to make every effort to encourage skills development on the part of their residents. Libraries can and should play a central role in this process; they are best positioned to deliver educational experiences and have the physical resources and intellectual capacity to make good on such a promise.

This is far from a “pie-in-the-sky” vision. No less a figure than Catherine Livingstone, chair of the Business Council of Australia, in her address[[3]](#footnote-3) to the Universities Australia delegates on 12 March 2015 described a dramatic rethink of the university sector, including an end to semester-based, degree-focused activities and toward a pathway of continuous learning of life and career skills. She was roundly praised, both by the delegates and in the media in subsequent days for challenging the status-quo and recognising that our traditional view of education has to change, if only to meet the needs of employers in the years ahead.

**What does your Community Campus look like?**

There’s one final point we should remind ourselves of as we reimagine the public library’s future. This vision of the community campus or learning hub has relevance to the broadest segment of the local population – essentially school-aged children to retirees. The demographics public library services have traditionally served exceptionally well are the youngest and oldest of us – those from zero to five years of age at one end of the spectrum and retirees at the other. The community campus vision of the local library targets the 80 per cent of the population between the ages of, say, 10 and 70, and delivers educational experiences and employment opening opportunities that can be life-changing. This has the potential to dramatically widen the user base of libraries, thereby strengthening their position in, and value to, our local communities.

I should conclude by stating that I write from personal experience. Much of my work over the last decade has been in delivering online learning services to public libraries, schools, TAFEs and universities. Over the course of the last year, our team has dramatically expanded the scope and capacity of our online learning service to move beyond the academic learning needs of high school students. We now assist educational institutions of all sorts to meet the academic and employment needs of their populations – whether they be tertiary students engaged in diploma or bachelors studies or adult learners seeking to improve their written English skills, relearn a maths concept, refine a resume, and grammar-check a cover letter to a job application. Demand for such services by adult learners of all backgrounds and abilities is proof that there is an enormous thirst for learning, and that libraries are perfectly positioned to become the bridge to a brighter future for all in Australia.

**Key Learnings**

1. The digitisation of education – and the transformation it is bringing to the tertiary sector (Universities and TAFEs) – represents an opportunity for Australia’s public libraries.
2. Libraries that embrace the transformation into community campuses and learning hubs will expand their relevance to a broader population base and also prove their economic value to their councils.
3. The “community campus” vision for public libraries has long-term potential and is unlikely to be subject to the same transitoriness of many technology-driven innovations of the past.

*Note: This article and associated presentation are based on my experience over the past decade and a half working with public libraries and librarians on two continents. Please share your thoughts, comments, feedback and criticism with me at* [*jgoodman@yourtutor.com.au*](mailto:jgoodman@yourtutor.com.au) *or* [*jack@betterlibraries.org.au*](mailto:jack@betterlibraries.org.au)

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**Notes and references**

<https://m.timeline.com/stories/library-makerspace-books-tools-technology> (viewed 17 March 2015)

2 <http://www.open.edu.au/student-admin-and-support/study-resources/oua-connect-library-program/> (viewed 17 March 2015)

3 <http://www.bca.com.au/newsroom/speech-by-catherine-livingstone-to-the-universities-australia-higher-education-conference> (viewed 17 March 2015)

1. <https://m.timeline.com/stories/library-makerspace-books-tools-technology> (viewed 17 March 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.open.edu.au/student-admin-and-support/study-resources/oua-connect-library-program/> (viewed 17 March 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.bca.com.au/newsroom/speech-by-catherine-livingstone-to-the-universities-australia-higher-education-conference> viewed 17 March 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)