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# Libraries, languages and linking up

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### Abstract

There are many large organisations that have within their charter an expressed commitment to provide services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The challenge for these institutions is to find a way to meet such a pledge, and to do this in ways that have meaning for the people with whom they aim to connect. This paper describes the process by which the State Library of Queensland extended its services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through offering support for language programs. It covers the development of the project from the initial consultation processes through to the organisation and delivery of training workshops and creation of resources, in a collaboration between the State Library of Queensland, the communities and partner organisations. It provides an example to other institutions of the outcomes that can be achieved when services are effectively and appropriately adapted to support the initiatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.

With a charter to support Indigenous cultural heritage and a bent for innovation, the State Library of Queensland embarked on a visionary project to link its considerable resources with the needs of even the smallest community projects, giving welcome support to the revitalisation of Indigenous languages in Queensland.

These places are filled with volumes written about Indigenous people and not nearly enough, by them. This is where Indigenous people can be telling the real stories, recording their own histories, and in their own languages. These are very much your libraries. (Queensland State Librarian Lea Giles Peters to members of the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee 2007.)

The commitment of the State Library of Queensland would encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to actively record their stories, to be stored and shared

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with others as they deemed suitable. It would help bring together people in all parts of the state, many with no prior involvement in language programs, and it would support people to learn to record languages and create resources for the sharing of their language knowledge.

### **The question**

The Queensland Indigenous Languages Project was initiated by the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) in 2006 in response to some of the recommendations from the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report* from the year before. This survey, which had been commissioned by the Commonwealth government to document the status of languages in Australia, contained disturbing statistics pointing to the rapid decline in the use of traditional languages in Queensland and the imminent loss of many of them. It was within the charter of the SLQ to support the preservation and promotion of Indigenous culture and the organisation was recognised already for the depth of its Indigenous library services. These included the network of 16 Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs) in the more remote areas of the state, and projects to support the delivery of information technology to these communities.

The concept underpinning this project was: with such a critical situation in terms of language preservation occurring, how could the SLQ make a difference? What resources do libraries have that could be of help to people working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language programs? To find the answer to this open-ended question the SLQ project team began consulting with community representatives around Queensland. The group most directly involved was the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee, with members holding a breadth of experience over many years in the development of programs aimed at revitalising and preserving their traditional languages.

So began a process to list the resources that could be accessed through libraries and had potential to be of use. This was interesting, because it required a new way of thinking about the resources that are taken for granted by people who work in such a large system, looking with new eyes to see what value they could have for people who had been working with very limited resources.

### **The possibilities**

Bringing together SLQ staff and the Indigenous language consultants, ideas soon began to flow as to how best to form a productive partnership. People saw the potential benefits of using the library spaces for meetings where there was no language centre available to fill this role. Helping language workers with access to computer equipment and internet were also considered, as well as the fact that some of the libraries were equipped with listening post facilities with multiple headsets for shared learning.

The network of over 330 libraries in key locations were considered as possible venues for the promotion of Indigenous languages through special exhibitions, and through

the display and promotion of the books and resources that have been created through local projects. The public libraries were seen to represent an excellent distribution channel for language materials and, where desired by the community, public library services could be approached to purchase and distribute these published materials.

Website promotion was also considered, and the potential to include in the SLQ website some pages specifically devoted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. These would also be used to direct people to online access of the library resources catalogues.

In terms of the research that is integral to any of the language projects, the discussions highlighted the potential benefits of promoting greater connection between library staff and community users, to offer support to people as they attempt to manoeuvre their way through historical records and catalogue systems. But the point that came out most strongly through these consultations was that people wanted to learn to make their own language recordings. The SLQ could contribute immediately to the revitalisation of languages by teaching community workers how to record their own people and to show how computers and technology could be used with these recordings to make teaching resources. With the race against time that many people now acknowledge they are engaged in, the language workers were ready and willing to put the time into recording the sounds of the remaining speakers, given the appropriate training.

More than just a wish to see recordings being made, there was also a strong drive to reclaim control over the processes of linguistic documentation and recording which was seen to have been so firmly in the hands of non-Indigenous academics to this point in time. The sentiment expressed in these talks was that for too long people had been coming into communities and recording, writing and leaving with the outcome of their research. The books and recordings were acquired by visitors to the communities through the gifting of knowledge, time and effort generously afforded them by their hosts. People in many cases were then left with a challenge to gain access to recordings made of their own family members and were not credited as being custodians of the knowledge they had shared. This was, of course, not the case in all instances and was acknowledged to be a practice that is changing for the better. However the impact from those negative experiences was a key issue reflected in these talks.

With this background as added incentive one of the first tasks of the Queensland Indigenous Languages Project became the coordination of training workshops to provide the skills people wanted in order to take control of their own language revitalisation.

### **The workshop**

The first of these training workshops took place in Townsville, north Queensland. It was coordinated with the North Queensland Region Aboriginal Corporation Language

Centre (NQRACLC) with people from six different language groups from around the Townsville area taking part. The number of participants was more than expected and it was seen from the outset that the program needed to be adaptable to cater for the unexpected.

In this first workshop people from the Girramay, Nyawaygi, Gudjal, Djirrbal, Ngadjan and Warrgamay groups worked together. Beginning with the basics of using audio and video recording equipment, participants worked in pairs or small teams to record each other demonstrating the sounds of the languages. They were able to produce videos that could teach correct tongue and mouth positions for forming the words. They recorded each other's oral histories and in interview settings. There were mistakes and laughter, embarrassment and pride as people struggled with and mastered unfamiliar sounds and skills. There was also a wonderful bonding between the older and younger students. Where some of the older people were short of computer confidence, they had the younger ones to help them. In turn the Elders shared their language knowledge and stories. As one of the teenage students later said:

I was always so ashamed to try to use language because I thought I would say it all wrong. But being here and hearing our Elders make mistakes too sometimes makes me feel really OK about trying. That's what I'll do from now and start to learn and speak it.

The project has highlighted the need for adaptability and innovation at times from people who are involved in capturing language. The primary aim is to teach people to make recordings on quality audio and video equipment, with appropriate microphones and attention to the immediate surroundings to produce best results. Digitising standards are taught for scanning and photography. However, as valuable opportunities for recording cultural information, stories and snippets of language may occur at any unplanned moment, the workshops have been helping to prepare the students in the use of whatever equipment is available to capture a recording. So, while best practice and archival quality recording remains the primary aim, participants are also shown how to record information on mobile phones, take video on small digital cameras and to record directly into a laptop without an available microphone. New ways are mixed with old in finding ways to teach language to community. These range from the use of podcasts and social networking sites to putting lessons on cassette tapes to be played in car stereos.

The project also covers some photography basics. While everyone knows how to point and shoot, the tricks to resizing for email, basic retouching of photographs and importing images to other applications are popular inclusions in the workshops. Also pivotal to the training is learning to transfer collected data to computers and to organise the information in retrievable, logical systems for future reference.

### **Partnerships**

This first workshop set a pattern of creating partnerships that has continued as the project moves around the state. Taking part in the Townsville meeting with SLQ and

the NQRACLC were the local Indigenous radio station 4KIG and the Arwarbukarl Cultural Resource Association (ACRA) from Newcastle, which has played a key role in a number of the training workshops conducted since. The staff at 4KIG provided a number of rooms to cater for over 20 participants with access to recording studio spaces, helpful links to local media and on-air promotion of the project.

ACRA is a recognised Aboriginal training agency that has provided major input to the recording workshops. ACRA has helped train people in the use of the most suitable computer programs and technologies for the work they want to undertake, and trains in effective practices for data collection and storage which are key aspects of the workshops. ACRA's Miromaa Language Program<sup>2</sup> is a community-focused computer program for the collection, collation and storage of language data. Miromaa has proven to be a valuable inclusion in the training workshops empowering people to begin hands-on work on their language projects while learning a range of skills to support their desired outcomes. Having a place on the computer to input wordlists, audio, video and relevant research data, with the ability to easily export to dictionary and document creation tools, has proven to offer both incentive and encouragement for people to be involved in language projects.

Accessing suitable equipment for the workshops is important to their success. A starting point is always to establish what people already have available to them and, from there, decide what needs to be brought in. In some cases there is equipment available which has had little or no previous use due to a lack of training for the staff. Providing this training has been a useful outcome from the workshops. SLQ has a number of portable minilabs with audiovisual recording and computer equipment. ACRA also provides an extensive range of transportable equipment. For the Townsville workshop the materials needed were contributed by ACRA, SLQ and 4KIG, again reflecting the collaborative nature that has extended as the project continued.

A key aspect of the project has been listening to the needs of the community group involved to determine their particular focus. This varies all the time according to whether people are just starting to work on languages or whether they are connected to a language centre with well-established programs.

### **The broader picture**

Although the training workshops are a major part of the project there are many other suggestions from the initial recommendations that have been taken on and are now expanding the reach of the project.

Through the SLQ website, pages have been made available to promote the language centres, their work and publications. This has been useful for the majority of Queensland language centres who don't as yet have an individual web presence. The SLQ website also displays a number of Indigenous language children's books

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.miromaa.com.au](http://www.miromaa.com.au)

in an easy to read and hear virtual format, and will soon be expanding its links to educational resources and research materials.

The Library is encouraging people to use its facilities for the safe storage of language materials, giving due recognition to issues of limited and appropriate access to the materials as determined by the depositor. This complements the work of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra and, it is hoped, will eventually provide people in this state with more ready access to copies of records also held there.

Supporting the growing network of communities who are becoming involved in language revitalisation is another of the project's roles. This takes the form of information-sharing using email networks and blogsites. Community outreach meetings are being held in areas where no established language centres are operating as well. These are jointly coordinated with nearby language programs or centres. They involve bringing people from established programs into a community to give presentations about their work and their achievements to date, and to offer encouragement to people who may consider starting work in their own communities. These meetings are also a way of linking communities with the staff and services of their local regional libraries.

The identification and digitisation of old language recordings is taking place, as is the reformatting and reproduction of language teaching materials and the creation of new resources. Issues of ownership of the materials are discussed with each community, with permission sought for copies of items produced to be held in the SLQ.

The project extends from Weipa and the far north Cape York communities to the southern border towns and western Queensland, with ongoing outreach planned. The web of contacts grows and the number of people who are willing to share their knowledge, and support new communities in their endeavours, is inspiring.

It is also inspiring to see the commitment of the SLQ to support Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in creating their own records of history and culture in this state; the message and the hope to tell your own story, and be heard in your own voice.

### *References*

Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies (2005). *National Indigenous Languages Survey report 2005*. Canberra: Department of Communications, Information Technology & the Arts.