

Northern Territory Library projects helping to keep culture strong in Aboriginal communities.

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Abstract:

Australia's Northern Territory is a curious jurisdiction. Sparsely and slightly populated, its total inhabitants represent just one percent of Australians. Of the 210 000 Territorians, approximately one third of them are Aboriginal. Most Aboriginal Territorians live in remote townships known as communities, where a variety of complex social issues have created considerable levels of disadvantage and poverty. Many Aboriginal people have English as a second, third or fourth language and low English literacy levels. The Northern Territory also has an exceptionally young population: In 2010, 23% of the population was aged fourteen years or younger.

How then, does the Northern Territory Library fulfil its mission to help ALL Territorians connect with the past, contribute to the present and learn for the future? Collecting the documentary heritage of a 60 000+ year old non-literary culture with a predominantly oral tradition, and with more than 100 languages and dialects in the Northern Territory alone; the task is complex and fraught with difficulty.

The Northern Territory Library supports the network of Public Libraries and Knowledge Centres that operate throughout the Northern Territory of Australia. While the larger municipalities provide regular, mainstream public library services, the residents of the smaller communities have found that the Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) Program better meets their needs.

The LKC program assists Aboriginal people to preserve and share their cultural heritage, including languages that are at risk of being lost, using the *Community Stories* database. Community members archive digital recordings, photographs, film, stories and songs in local languages or English, using the technology available in the libraries. A key component of the program is the creation and capture of contemporary and popular culture. Communities often do not have readily available record of their social history – there is no local newspaper and families can find it difficult to maintain personal possessions such as photo albums, for a variety of reasons.

The presentation will focus on the success of the Northern Territory Library programs in supporting the early years literacy initiatives through the production of bi-lingual books for babies (Baby Board Books) and through digital story telling (i-Stories, and *Community Stories*). Children are an integral element of the success of these programs and early childhood principles are used to engage families with technology to improve literacies across the generations.

The paper will conclude with a description of key strategies which will drive further development to facilitate the preservation of contemporary culture using tools such as the mobile digitisation units, make your own e-book, collecting oral/video histories and art.

Keywords: Northern Territory, Aboriginal, Library, Remote, Indigenous.

Preserving and Digitizing All Forms of Children's Literature, to Create the Future

In order to be fully representative of a community's history, a comprehensive library collection must collect children's content. The voices of children should be heard and valued by those who aspire to collect, preserve and make available the 'story' of a place and its people. Children's voices are essential to a collection's context perspective, particularly from a social history standpoint. Library collections should include and value the thoughts and ideas of children but also the language, idiom and phrasing of young people's speech and writing.

As retrospective collecting of children's material is beginning to be embraced by mainstream and children's museums¹, libraries can broaden their collection policies to include contemporary children's content and material. Over time, this collection development process will be acknowledged and the value of the breadth of the collection will be recognised. Future areas of research may even be brought to light by the collection's inclusive nature.

Another important consequence of collecting children's material is the ongoing personal links that can potentially be built between children and collecting institutions. A child's active participation in a community collecting space such as a library exposes them to new experiences and new sectors of their society. This can have positive influences on their social skills and self-worth. Other valuable skills might include content management principles, improved social inclusion, information literacy, and an interest in and appreciation of history and the past. All these may have positive consequences for their future employment prospects, social inclusion, and building a sense of societal responsibility.

In the Northern Territory, retrospective collection of children's content has revealed aspects of the people, place and historic events in a new light. Northern Territory Library is the State Library in Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory. Its involvement also includes public and community libraries across the jurisdiction, including in some of the most remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. In 2007, NTL won the Gates Foundation's *Access to Learning* award for a purpose-built software solution called *Community Stories* which facilitates the capture and management of local content in Aboriginal communities.

In 2011, the Northern Territory Library celebrated its 30th anniversary by showcasing thirty 'Treasures';² interesting, unique or evocative items from its collection, which were curated into a physical exhibition and an exhibition catalogue published with short historical context for each item. Taking the Treasures "out of the vault" allowed NTL to reflect on the types of items found in its collection and how to shape its collecting policy into the future. Two of the thirty Treasures were unique historical items created by children.

One of the Treasures identified by NTL is a diary, written by a schoolboy named Harold Giles at the turn of the last century. His careful handwriting describes daily events on the remote pastoral property where his family lived. The activities, thoughts, and perspective of a north Australian child's daily life in Australia's Federation period (1901), provides a different sort of insight into the history of the place.

¹ Darian-Smith, K. and Pascoe, C.(eds), Children, Childhood and Cultural Heritage, Routledge, Exeter, 2012 p216

² <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2011/06/01/3232911.htm>

Another of the Treasures is a more mysterious item created by an unknown child in the mid 1870s. It is a hand-drawn map, attributed to an Australian school child of the period, which has several interesting features and is a rare example of nineteenth century Australian children's schoolwork. The borders and shading illustrate the geopolitical construction of late-colonial period Australia and reflects a brief period of use of an alternate name for the Northern Territory – Alexandra Land. The inclusion of the map in the collection demonstrates to contemporary school children the relevance of their own output, and that the contributions of children are valid and valued.

Collecting the material of childhood also ensures that local languages, stories and culture are captured and maintained. This aspect of collecting institutions' responsibility is particularly important in the Northern Territory.

An important aspect of traditional Australian Aboriginal culture, but which is global in its significance, is the intergenerational learning that is used to transfer cultural knowledge. This method of learning and teaching is used and valued by many communities – it works because it shows respect to the individual, the story and the culture. This will be increasingly important as globalisation turns 'culture' from an abstract concept into an economic one.

“...culture must not be seen in an abstract way, but in the context of an economic variable, based on production, distribution and consumption.”³

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I-STORIES

Funded by the Australian Government as a Parental and Community Engagement program, i-Stories is an ongoing project being delivered by NTL in three Aboriginal communities (Milyakburra, Umbakumba and Angurugu) on Groote Eylandt. The objectives of the program are to increase the number of community members participating in community activities and being actively involved in their community. The small public library at Angurugu is a meeting place; a place for safe-keeping and accessing local cultural materials. It is also a technology hub for the community, where families, individuals and local service-providers can access training, computers and the internet for free. The library is a place for children's learning, both formal and informal.

The i-Stories project uses iPads as the technology of choice. Interestingly, in this sub-literate and impoverished community, computers carry a certain stigma. Project officers report that computers, found in official buildings such as the welfare office or police station, have enough negative associations to some Aboriginal people to seriously affect their desire to become information-literate. For the purpose of this project, iPads are much more accessible, shareable, portable and less intimidating.

Through facilitated play sessions, children and their caregivers read, talk together, and learn with the iPads. The programs and resources provided in the library are attractive and relevant to the children. Through the introduction of the technology, many families have purchased devices of their own and literacy and numeracy games and activities are now regular activities in many homes as well as on bush and beach trips.

The technology's potential for telling and sharing stories has been quick to catch-on with participants on Groote Eylandt. Photos, videos, sound and multimedia recordings are being made and shared via iPads and allowing local traditional and contemporary stories to be re-imagined and retold. These born-digital items are an important record of current Groote Eylandt life, from the perspective of all age groups, and NTL is committed to capturing this content for posterity. Several platforms exist to capture the material, including NTL's digital repository, *Territory Stories* and the *Community Stories*

³ <http://allafrica.com/stories/201301080769.html>.

database; NTL's award-winning purpose-built software for managing local content in Aboriginal communities.

i-Stories is also operating in Darwin, via a Special Education facility for children and young adults with disabilities; Henbury School. The school has introduced iPads as educational and communications tools, and students are encouraged to tell and share their stories using the device's multimedia functions. This invaluable record of the stories of children living with a disability in the Northern Territory are added to, shared and celebrated in *StoryNT*⁴ - part of NTL's online digital repository where a collection of Territorian's stories bring to life their experiences of living in the region, now and in times past.

i-Stories, and some of the other projects being managed by NTL in remote communities, are delivered in partnership with a range of other government and non-government agencies. (Sometimes several agencies funding different iterations of the same project, which can become confusing!) By partnering with other agencies, NTL engages multiple networks, with multiple targets and focuses. As a library, the organisation can have a broad picture of its potential impacts and so is an ideal agency for collaborative work, in that the goals and targets of funding and support bodies are usually in line with our expansive aims.

i-Stories is funded by the Australian Government under their Parental and Community Engagement (PaCE) program. PaCE is a community-driven program which focuses on the development and implementation of creative and innovative approaches to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal school students by enhancing parental engagement with schools and education providers. The PaCE Program supports Aboriginal families and communities to 'reach-in' to schools and education providers to develop partnerships with the aim of enhancing their children's educational outcomes.

i-Stories builds on a Northern Territory Library pilot program which took place on Groote Eylandt, in 2010 called *Bonding, Bopping and Books*. In the pilot program, shared creative play sessions involved family members and their young children in listening and responding to music, visual art, dance, literature and multimedia, to enhance oral language and emergent literacy understandings such as book familiarity.

The new project iteration, i-Stories, adds value to existing early childhood programs in the region by involving families and other community members in creating, producing and using context-specific literacy materials, for example: bilingual singing stories, picture stories, talking stories and e-stories, with accompanying artwork, music and audiovisuals. These print and electronic materials are created on iPads and Talking Photo Albums. With relevant permissions, this material may then be preserved in the local *Community Stories* database (community members are custodians of this digital archive). The early literacy materials are one way of collecting, transmitting and preserving knowledge of local culture and heritage.

BILINGUAL BABY BOARD BOOKS

It's not the usual role of libraries to *create* new resources. Libraries usually collect, preserve and share resources. But where the resource we want to collect and share is the oral tradition of Aboriginal people, their songs, stories and language, a different approach is needed.

An exciting and engaging project from Northern Territory Library has at its heart the preservation of Aboriginal culture. Since 2009, Northern Territory Library, in association with various funding agencies and in collaboration with Aboriginal communities, has produced fourteen beautiful community-specific bilingual baby board books for families to share. Collaborative workshops in

⁴ <http://www.territorystories.nt.gov.au/handle/10070/176320>

communities are used to develop the stories and artwork. Ten of these bilingual baby board books also have children's songs and recordings in Aboriginal languages associated with them.

The bilingual baby board books promote a love of reading and sharing of stories with families, and assist in the promotion and preservation of Aboriginal languages from around the Northern Territory. The project supports positive early book experiences for children and their families. The concept of local, community-specific, appropriate baby board books as early years literacy tools for communities is beautiful in its simplicity and has been enthusiastically received, with additional projects, partnerships and funding applications planned for the future.

One of the successes of the project model is the collaborative workshop-based process used to create the stories and artwork. The workshops help to engage the broader community in the project, and ensure that community priorities and interests for early learning are identified. By engaging families in the content development process the resulting books have a higher likelihood of success, thanks to real community ownership and involvement. This is also another way that traditional intergenerational learning styles are used, as the active participants involved in creating the content for the books are often older people who identify the stories and images to pass on to the younger audience of parents and babies.

A further benefit of the project has been the professional development for staff of the Northern Territory Library. Through this project, their capacity to engage in community development activities has grown enormously. Increasingly, this model of remote service delivery is being implemented, with service providers working alongside service consumers to develop mutually-acceptable outcomes.

The physical results of the project not only include the baby board books, but the original artworks created through the workshoping process to illustrate the books. These unique art pieces are being preserved in the *Territory Stories*⁵ digital repository as an important record of contemporary Aboriginal art and culture, including as a record of participation in the project's workshops.

READING AND COMMUNICATING WITH KIDS

Reading and Communicating with Kids (RACK) is a literacy program supporting the acquisition of literacy skills and improving school-readiness in young children from birth to five years, in several remote and semi-remote communities in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory. Katherine is a small town with a population of 10 000, approximately 300km south of Darwin which has a significant percentage of Aboriginal residents. Many Aboriginal people live in remote camps and communities outside of the main town, most without any library or early childhood services. Serious social issues including welfare dependency, alcohol abuse, poor health and low educational outcomes are endemic; literacy levels of all ages in these communities are generally very poor.

The RACK program employs twelve local Reading Mentors for up to three hours per week in the communities of Binjari, Rockhole, Barunga, Mulgan Camp, Jilkminggan, Kalano, and Wulgular. Early reporting suggests that project outcomes are already being met and exceeded. The project's five foci are:

- Establishing a 'reading culture' within the community.
- Enhancing individual children's cognitive development so that they enter the school system with a positive outlook on books, as well as improved social and language skills.
- Fostering a community-wide recognition of the importance of language and literacy development skills to young children.

⁵ <http://www.territorystories.nt.gov.au/>

- Developing the Reading Mentors, who receive the enormous and wide-reaching personal benefits associated with employment, and are also recognised by community members as credible and knowledgeable about early years literacy development.
- Increasing literacy resources available in the community.

The RACK program supports the community-based reading ‘champions’, to help increase book ownership and reading activity within family groups. It is another excellent example of intergenerational teaching and learning. The literacy focus of the project is book familiarity. RACK mentors model and observe reading behaviours in the first, second and third years of exposure to a range of reading materials. Specifically, the Reading Mentors promote the importance of language and literacy development skills in the first three years of life through reading to young children. In turn, this increases their own confidence working with young children, (including their own children), and become recognised in their community as being knowledgeable about early years literacy development.

Modelling story time and reading aloud sessions provides opportunities in the community for the development of a love of reading that can grow to become part of children’s daily lives. It also increases individual children’s confidence as they enter the school system with positive associations around books, reading, group activities, structured play and improved listening and participation skills.

The target groups for the RACK project are Aboriginal pre-school age children, families experiencing locational disadvantage, kinship carers and grandparents, vulnerable children, families experiencing social and economic barriers, mothers and fathers. The program ensures families have access, in their homes, to a number of age-appropriate books which are read aloud with children on a regular basis. Parents receive assistance and support in how best to use the resources, and receive regular early literacy messages and books.

The emergent literacy program is evidence-based and has been developed with support from the Australian *Let’s Read* Program. One of the successes of the program is the capacity-building for the Reading Mentors. Ongoing support, training and mentoring is provided to the community-based reading champions, including workplace skills such as basic IT literacy and office work, record keeping, reliability and punctuality and other competencies which will support their future employment outside of the project.

Community Stories, Territory Stories and Trove

Northern Territory Library in partnership with Pitjantjatjara Council developed *Community Stories*, a new digital archive designed for community cultural material. *Community Stories* is a new version of the Pitjantjatjara Council *Ara Irititja* software. In 2009, the Northern Territory Library was given the opportunity to introduce many new features to *Ara Irititja* through its partnership with the Pitjantjatjara Council and this opportunity was taken up with gusto by the library staff. The software development project was funded as a result of the Northern Territory Library winning the 2007 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Access to Learning Award⁶. Funds from the award were used to enhance the software as well as the delivery of library services and programs to remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Library was granted a number of software licences in return for funding the software development project.

The software development was completed in early January 2012. The Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access (RIPIA) Project has also funded additional licences and a support agreement which includes updates to the *Community Stories* until February 2014. The Northern Territory Library is now working with Libraries, Library and Knowledge Centres and other community organisations such

⁶ <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/what-we-do/global-development/global-libraries/access-to-learning-award-atla>

as youth organisations and arts centres in the Northern Territory to implement *Community Stories*.

The three projects described above play an important role in developing the skills and knowledge required to create local content, which can be easily shared and made accessible through *Community Stories*. The content can be as simple as a short video clip of elders reading with children; art work created for the bilingual board books; or photos of the day-to-day literacy activities that go on in communities. This is important on micro and macro levels, including being of personal importance to many community members who might leave their homelands for employment, education, sport or social reasons. The ability to share stories and have ongoing ownership of and access to cultural material is a powerful tool in retaining connections to family and culture.

Community Stories has given Northern Territory communities an opportunity to develop a publicly-accessible collection of local historical information, which might include: family and community photos; images of ‘country’ (which has spiritual connotations to Aboriginal people) and significant cultural sites; short films made in or about the community; and recordings of traditional songs and stories. Contemporary materials produced by the Library’s literacy programs, videos of community festivals, public ceremonies, school excursions, etc., can be readily shared. This allows communities to build a more comprehensive, searchable, adaptable and flexible information archive about those materials they determine important to the community’s past, present and future. From *Community Stories*, items with a wider national or international significance can be selected to be made available to a broader audience through Territory Stories and ultimately TROVE⁷, the National Library of Australia’s discovery system. Broader access to this content tells the unique story of the Territory and may help engender knowledge of, respect for, and understanding of Aboriginal cultures.

Northern Territory Library will continue to work with communities to provide the tools required to assist in the preservation and digitization of all forms children’s literary works for future use. We hope it will encourage both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal involvement in literacy and library activities, and in sharing and understanding Australia’s historical and cultural knowledge. The records created will intersect and inform the collective memory of our unique history, today and into the future.

⁷ <http://trove.nla.gov.au/>