IT in primary school libraries

Robyn Boyd reflects on technology, traffic and teaching in the transit lane of the information 'super-highway'

Weaving through the traffic on my daily journey between three libraries I have the opportunity to reflect about the dim, dark ages (back in 1988) when the card catalogue, book card and accession register reigned supreme. Primary school library resource centres have come a long way in a relatively short period of time. Teacher librarians have embraced IT (Information Technology) with great enthusiasm and what a revolution it has created—particularly for multi-campus schools.

The benefits offered by automating a multi-campus library system are considerable when compared to the manual alternatives. Unlike its manual predecessor, automation achieves client access in a fast, informative, consistent and user-friendly way. Since library automation and the other information technologies e.g. CD-ROM, teacher librarians have been better able to address their school community needs. The fulfilment of these needs requires a unique mixture of an academic, public and special library all rolled into one: the school library. The academic library, to cater for requests by staff undertaking further study and research; the public library, catering for all clients' individual tastes and needs, both great and small; and the specials library, looking after staff and student curriculum needs and specialist teachers' needs for in-depth information and resources concerning their subject area.

Our school has taken advantage of the technology and in doing so has united the library system. The main computer (running ELM library automation software) is situated at our central library. The other two libraries are linked to this computer via modems, multiplexers and dedicated data lines. The central library (located on the senior primary campus) houses five access points—the main computer, two OPAC terminals, 1 OPAC PC, 1 circulation terminal and one slave printer. Also on the senior primary campus each classroom houses two computers with a shared printer. One computer in each classroom is linked using terminal emulation software to the library computer. This gives staff and students the capability of accessing the complete library database. They are able to reserve books, check their borrower records (e.g. for current loans), find out the availability of a resource, check bib-

liographic details while using a word processing package, or send electronic mail. The ability to search the database prior to arriving at the library means clients can maximise the use of the resources during their time there. Also, when the library is unattended, clients are able to check out their own loans using their card and PIN. A CD-ROM and two other computers that can be used for games, graphics, word processing etc., are also available.

The two junior school libraries have one circulation terminal and two OPAC's each. The library hardware on each junior campus has all the capabilities and speed of those operating in the senior site. The ability to send e-mail between campuses has greatly improved information transfer and interlibrary loans. The recent up-grading of computer hardware has enabled each junior campus to have access to a CD-ROM which is housed in the library but also time-tabled out to classrooms.

The implementation of these technologies has led to greater access, improved service and a new era for school library resource centres and teacher librarians. We may not be on the main highway yet—but our indicator light is definitely on. ∎

The infinite shelf life of libraries

Hugh Mackay finds links with the world of contemporary thought and with lessons from the past

Most literate people feel a curious combination of awe and affection when they enter a library. The awe is no doubt partly due to the fact that, from an early age, we are taught to keep quiet in libraries and to behave with appropriate decorum (a bit like church come to think of it…and a bit like lifts too.) No talking, no giggling, no whispering, no running, no eating or drinking and certainly no chewing gum.

My first experience of a library was a small room in the local primary school, with a correspondingly small collection of fairly old and unattractive books. (Don't let anyone tell you the late 1940s were the good old days, at least as far as children's books were concerned.) Its most attractive feature was a highly polished linoleum floor which was irresistible to small girls and boys, especially on wet days when we were allowed to take off our shoes.

The resultant high jinks led to the posting of a sign on the library door, made memorable, after all these years, by the fact that the typewriter had no 's': Zlipping and zliding on library floor iz ztrictly prohibited. (There was as little money available for the typewriter repairs as for the purchase of new books.) The library lost much of its initial appeal after that, but it still served as an introduction to the pleasures that lay ahead.

Much is now being made of the new technology of libraries. It is certainly impressive to learn about the dazzling possibilities of high-speed transfer of data from library to library, making it possible, ultimately, for a person in a small suburban library to have access to the pages of books from all over the world. For those using libraries as a resource for the specific facts and information, this is a great boon and one of the modern miracles of science which makes an obvious and immediate contribution to our welfare.

But it would be a pity if the new technologies of information retrieval and transfer blinded us to the rather simpler gratifications which every library offers us. I refer, of course, to the intensely civilised joy of browsing: feasting from the smorgasbord of the mind; drifting through the marketplace of ideas. When so much of our experience of contemporary life is so focused, so stressed and so organised, it is a particular pleasure to go to the library, browse for a while, and know that this is a place where you can sit down with a book you don't have to read.

It's a place where you'll come to realise that you are part of the continuous flow of human thought, that thinking is our best resource for coping with an unstable world, and that there's actually no need to hurry.

(Reprinted, with kind permission, from Hugh Mackay's column in the Weekend Australian *12/13 March)* ∎