

# A watershed conference



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Were you lucky enough to attend the ALIA 2002 conference in May this year?

As I said in my closing address, I predict that we will look back on this conference and see it as a watershed. For many years we, as a profession, have been circling and snapping at our major cross-sectional conference and we knew that it was time for radical change. The NSW based committee, lead by State Librarian, Dagmar Schmidmaier, took up the challenge and delivered a very different, exciting and stimulating conference.

Usually the highpoints of a conference are the keynote speakers, but for ALIA 2002 every address was a keynote and every speaker a star. For the very first time our distinguished speakers were invited to look at libraries and information services and our profession *from the outside in*. While some confessed to a degree of uncertainty in meeting the brief given to them, all privileged us with their honest and thoughtful approaches to the conference theme. Importantly, just as our speakers broadened our horizons and challenged our thinking, I think we too broadened their understanding of us and the unique roles of libraries in the social, cultural, economic and intellectual life of their communities — be they rural communities, suburbs, commercial firms, educational institutions or other kinds of organisations.

Other components of the conference included the Issues Forum, conducted through a moderated list in the lead up to the conference; the online chat sessions with the speakers during the event and the trade exhibition that allowed us and our organisations to maintain relationships with vendors and also to follow up new contacts and leads. The conference and these events engaged over a thousand people in exploring ways in which we might power our futures.

The speakers brought home the discontinuities that surround us and touch most aspects of our daily lives. It is clear that incremental change is no longer an appropriate response to the turbulence that we experience. It is transformation that is required and this will be sometimes disruptive, sometimes threatening, sometimes exhilarating, sometimes breathtaking but always challenging. The Futures Foundation tells us that this century is 'the century of the invisible. Success for organisations will come from the way they gather and share information, knowledge and wisdom; from their rate of learning, adaptation, innovation; the quality of the culture, values, relationships; and from design, ideas and creativity'. The Foundation also reminds us that 'systems thinking is the key to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' and will shift us from industrial age ideas and approaches to 'newer more sophisticated ways of thinking about people,

work, community, society'. In other words we *can* create the future: it doesn't have to just happen.

At the beginning of the conference Dagmar Schmidmaier, conference chair, urged delegates to join conversations, think and have fun. We should not however, confine these activities to the conference. As we hunker down at work and have the priorities and pressures of the workplace upon us it is easy to forget how critically important these things are to our success as individuals and as a profession.

## Conversations

Just think about this word, even say it in your mind or whisper it. Conversation wanders or meanders and is often formless or shapeless. It relies as much on listening as it does on speaking. Compare 'conversation' (from the Latin for dwell or associate with) with the more goal directed 'discussion' (from the Latin for struck asunder) and with the highly structured 'debate' (from the Old French for to beat). Conversations allow us to share ideas, create meaning and explore common ground. They have elements of unpredictability as well as serendipity. Understandably, conversation is the language of courtship and the forming of relationships.

We heard a lot about collaboration during the conference. Perhaps conversations will be the building blocks of the new kinds of collaboration or connection that we need: collaboration that perhaps has a more subtle form, more nuanced and characterised by trust. The language and tone of collaboration in the future might reflect a shift in focus as the knowledge economy connects with people's social and cultural lives. We clearly need to attend to collaboration within our sector as well as with external partners. The Peak Bodies Forum represents a promising start especially as a way of re-creating public information. We also have to strike up new conversations especially with the younger, the older, the isolated and the marginalised. Our conversations must be inclusive.

## Think

We need to be regularly encouraged to think in new and different ways, lest we fall into the easy trap of the known. Some of the associated words that we heard during the conference include creativity, imagination, innovation, invention, learning and lateral thinking. These approaches to thinking were linked to rebuilding communities, building capacity, developing e-learning networks. They are fundamental to the creation of knowledge.

Perhaps we need to adopt more subtle approaches in our own thinking and the expression of our thoughts. So often we think in dichotomies (or silos): providing access to or

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building collections; print or electronic collections; academic or public or special libraries; national or international initiatives; museums or archives, galleries or libraries; public sector or private sector information services. Maybe we need to think in terms of continuums to avoid cutting off any options. Perhaps we need to start thinking about our libraries and information services not as institutions but as relationships.

#### Have fun

If we are to engage with each other in fruitful collaborations to turn dreams into reality then we will no doubt respond to what we do and achieve in different ways. Bold and adventurous action rests on passion and commitment and is guided by values.

At the Colloquium on Research Libraries hosted by Dagmar Schmidmaier, the state librarian of New South Wales, the chief justice of NSW, Justice James Spigelman, spoke about the tension between managerial and professional values: one set based on quantifiable measures and derived from the world of commerce, the other on qualitative judgement and derived from service to the public. It will be interesting to see how we allow

## powering our future

contribute to the information agenda → ALIA 2002

these values to play themselves out.

Lastly, let me publicly express, on behalf of ALIA members, our appreciation of the courage Dagmar Schmidmaier as conference chair and Neil McLean as co-chair, the conference committee and the conference sponsors have shown in daring to be different. Through their daring they have shown us the positive impact of risk taking. If we ain't seen nothing yet in terms of information and communication technologies, we certainly ain't seen nothing yet in terms of a learning society powered by information, knowledge and wisdom. Our challenge is to articulate our vision for this future.

And so I urge you — converse, think and have fun. Remember that ALIA is our professional forum and our future.

*This column is an edited version of Joyce's closing address at the conference. Check out the conference papers at <http://www.alia.org.au/conferences/alia2002/programataglace.html>.*

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