VALA2006: Connecting with users

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Oh how quickly the fire in the belly subsides. Try as you might, and despite the rush of professional adrenalin which sees you fill your free SWETS note pad to the brim with frantic notes, it's always difficult to keep the embers burning when you get back home. By the time you've packed up your vendor freebies, taken a few extra days of personal leave (to take advantage of the interstate trip), you're back at work, you've barely come up for breath and the conference is fast becoming a distant memory. You've barely spoken to your colleagues (except maybe to share some free vendor goodies) let alone passed on any gems of insights. So, in an effort the re-spark my own fire and possibly ignite some interest for those who couldn't attend, here are some of the 'gems' as I saw them at VALA 2006.

The first mention goes to the pre-conference meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Regional Enduser Group. The organisers had promised a surprise guest and no one would have guessed that Gough Whitlam would walk through the doors later that day to launch the University of Western Sydney's Whitlam Institute (http://library.uws.edu.au/whitlam/). The second highlight for me was taking the time (as part of a treasure-hunt competition) to actually interact with other Endeavour libraries and their services, like the glorious Matapihi (http://www.matapihi.org.nz) from the National Library of New Zealand and the historic beauty of Manuscripts Queensland (http://www.manuscriptsqld.slq.qld.gov.au) from the State Library. Too often we get caught up in our own 'library world' and it becomes increasingly difficult to find time to explore other sites (as users), so it was refreshing to step outside this constraint.

At VALA, I found myself drawn to two key concepts, which cropped up in a number of papers. Firstly, digitisation projects with a strong emphasis towards user interaction. It is no longer just about delivering access but delivering an interactive 'experience'. The second concept follows on nicely from the first, the savvy nature of our up and coming users who are comfortable 'playing' in an online environment and have growing expectations of online delivery.

The highlight presentation on digitisation was the keynote address by Professor Balakrishnan from the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. His address on the 'Universal Digital Library: Connecting Users to Digital Content' (http://www.vala.org.au/vala2006/2006pdfs/93_Balakrishnan_Final.pdf) was presented with an infectious enthusiasm and relayed a 'can do' attitude that you often find weighed down in our profession. The project aims to provide access to all of the world's recorded information (218 000 books have already been scanned) and follows a unique selection process – just scan everything! You can't know the value of something in the future and anyway, the time spent making the decision costs more than it would have to just scan the document in the first place: as the professor stated 'just do it'. The project has included a transliteration package that provides phonetic mapping of languages. Despite the urgency of the project, the preservation of knowledge and cultures, the Indian public still prefer to access print material. The project provides access via a mobile van that prints on demand – and for 50 cents readers can have a bound version of the digitised copy.

In contrast to the Digital Library Project, the guidelines developed by the State Library of New South Wales in the paper 'Digital Practice: Picture NSW and the Development of Guidelines for Local Digitising Programmes' (http://vala.org.au/vala2006/2006pdfs/53_Peppard_Final.pdf) nominated selection as the key guiding principle. Digitised collections are not separate from a collection development plan and item selected for in-clusion should be guided by the same principles. The Guidelines, which aim to be achievable (rather than discourage people from adopting them), are available via the web.

Daniel Clancy from Google provided some insight into the Google Book Search (and why the name change from Google Print – users kept clicking on the print text thinking it would let them print). It was surprising to hear that 65 per cent of the scanned content is in 'snippet view' (one of the three categories of content display) which is deemed not to harm the print market. Other topics of note were the technical challenges (minus the in-house scanning technology as this is a trade secret and couldn't be discussed), quality issues and the 'revenue share partnerships' generated through advertising on covers. Usability concerns like navigation and browsing were highlighted as needing further development.

Sandra Jeffries and Corey Wallis's 'Exploring application of RSS for Library staff Development' (http://vala.org.au/vala2006/2006pdfs/10_Jeffries_Final.pdf) provided some great tips to redesign traditional methods of staying informed and their project aim, 'experience new technology in house before rolling out to clients' is a sensible approach. The presentation covered project implementation as well as addressing the technical challenges, so this one was definitely a 'take-home concept'.

Peter Thompson's presentation 'Does it Matter if the Users Are Actually Dead? A Database to Reconnect With the Borrowers and Collection of a 100 Year Old Library' (http://www.vala.org.au/vala2006/2006pdfs/38_Thompson_Final.pdf) was a smaller scale project but was equally inspiring. Not only has Peter provided access to the historic collection but he has also captured unique information about how the library was used, library procedures, borrower histories and notably the changing classification schemes. For anyone interested in historical librarianship this paper is worth a look.

In 'Choosing Technology That Can Evolve with User Needs' (http://www.vala.org.au/vala2006/2006pdfs/97_Payette_Final.pdf), Sandy Payette's observations on technology trends and keeping up with the evolving needs of a younger generation who interact and play with technology was mind-boggling. There has been a shift in the way information is delivered: from packaged software to interactive services and user domains. This change (being fed by Generation Y who are keen to adopt online communities) creates a user expectation for services that provide collective intelligence (information that can be built up, mixed-up, overlaid) and 'collaborative classification' as seen in sites like Flicker (http://www.flickr.com), a 'sharing application'. Although the paper goes on to describe how libraries can enable users in this 'new world order' if you're already feeling a little left behind by this shift on the web, weren't aware of Web 2.0, software 'mashups' or Gen Y's willingness to 'build and nurture relationships with/by technology', then a good starting point is Richard Giles 'Top Ten Tech Trends' delivered via teleconference at VALA (http://www.cliquecomm.com/blog/2006/02/09/vala-top-ten-tech-trends-presentation/).

Take a look – even for a Gen X-er this was enlightening (I'm obviously out of touch!) – I hadn't even heard of BitTorrent, MySpace or Second Life. This shift in communication will have a huge impact on how we provide services to our users in the future. ∎