

Reference Excellence: a tool of the trade

In early 2009 the State Library of NSW launched an online training tool, Reference Excellence, <http://wiki.libraries.nsw.gov.au/>, (nicknamed Ref-Ex) to help new and existing staff learn about providing reference and information services in public libraries, or update existing skills. Based on Ohio Reference Excellence (ORE, <http://www.olc.org/Ore/>), the NSW Ref-Ex project came from a suggestion in 2004 by reference librarians in the South and East metro region of Sydney who, impressed by ORE, were inspired to develop something of similar value for, and specific to, NSW public library staff. Since gaining approval from the Ohio Library Council to modify their work, the NSW project has taken some time to get off the ground; however the end results have been well worth the efforts of all those involved.

Overseeing the Ref-Ex project was the NSW Reference and Information Services Group (<http://nsw.risg.googlepages.com/home>), formed in 2003, consisting of representatives from both country and metro public libraries. This group has facilitated the sharing of information, fostered collaboration, and reinforced a sense of community by using a range of web 2.0 tools and technologies – blogs directed at three distinct areas of discussion (general reference, emerging technologies, readers advisory), a wiki for readers advisory (Wetpaint), and an online forum for the entire group. The development of a wiki for the Ref-Ex project was viewed as a logical evolution of the group's online presence, despite initially being considered as a website (as per the Ohio Reference Excellence site). The Media wiki facilitated collaboration at a distance, essential when those involved in setting up the wiki, uploading information, designing layout, and editing were widespread across New South Wales. It was also the best option for enabling – indeed encouraging – shared (though controlled) editing. The use of GoogleDocs also supported the sharing of ideas and information for the development of the wiki and enabled telephone conferencing to enhance the overall process.

It has been by no means easy. Initially the Ref-Ex project was going to be a website and design began accordingly. After a number of hiccoughs and delays the whole process began again, this time as a wiki. Of those involved not many had experience with Media wiki, though there was general experience with other wiki designs, blogs, and a range of web 2.0 tools and technologies which enabled those involved to feel confident in learning, and conquering, this strange beast. Delays faced early on in the project further compounded existing issues, primarily that those involved already have existing busy positions in busy public libraries. Time spent developing the wiki was moulded around local priorities and fitted in where time allowed – sometimes the wiki just had to wait.

It has been a small core group of volunteers that has enabled this project to get off the ground. Some were in at the beginning; others came and went as they were able to provide assistance for small parts of the project; others have joined and stayed along the way. The current Modification & Maintenance (M&Ms) team has done much of the final work to get the wiki ready and all were happy to be able to launch the Reference Excellence project and Ref-Ex wiki at the ALIA Information Online 2009 conference at Darling Harbour in January (<http://www.information-online.com.au/>). The work however continues with plans to create additional modules for Readers Advisory and Local Studies as well as upload interactive media and images.

From a professional development point of view, this is a positive undertaking for NSW public library staff. Given current, and future, budgetary restraints, the Ref-Ex wiki provides an opportunity for all staff across NSW to access training which is common across the state. It establishes that standards for the provision of reference and information services can be scoped to ensure that existing high levels are maintained and future developments

can be adapted to. By using a wiki, the overall plan is to inspire practising library staff to contribute their ideas and experiences in a way that enhances the overall usage of the wiki and its value as a training tool. The surveys at the end of each module are therefore essential for responsively manipulating the wiki to better suit its clientele and the fluid nature of public library service. By maintaining a self-paced aspect, the wiki ensures that individual staff can explore each module at their leisure, fitting in around local priorities and changing circumstance. There is no pressure to complete all modules, though there is a rather nice Certificate of Completion to be gained at the end.

The NSW Reference Excellence project has been a concerted collaborative effort to develop an online training tool to meet a designated need among public library staff across NSW in such a way that enables all staff, no matter how remote, the opportunity to develop and enhance their skills and knowledge. As a collaborative project it has only been possible through volunteer participation and commitment to the end-product. It is a professional development opportunity that has been keenly awaited by NSW public library staff and has already enjoyed fledgling participation across an assortment of metro and country public library services and is sure to continue to meet an established need for current, freely available, self-paced, online training.

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Connecting the past with the tools of the present

Increasingly, the reason people aged 65–74 access and embrace the internet also reflects the community I often work with – people researching their family history and becoming involved in local history groups.

My role as Local History Librarian at Yarra Plenty Regional Library has led me in new directions since completing the '23 things' program. We now incorporate web 2.0 technologies to connect, inform, and inspire our community with their past whether it be family or local history researchers.

Our library service covers the outer municipalities of Nillumbik, Whittlesea, and Banyule in the north of Melbourne. Linked from our website, the Yarra Plenty Genealogy and Yarra Plenty Local History blogs use the basic Blogger platform. The blogs include short articles, posted at least once a week, with the aim of being relevant and interesting so the reader returns.

Yarra Plenty Local History blog was the first blog set up and one of the first specialised topic-based blogs for an Australian public library. Developed in October 2006 it was quietly launched on our website. The two blogs are set up to look quite different from each other. Local History has a brown concept. Its main focus is to promote services, events, and collections within the library service and within our region. This may include new items to the collections, titles newly published, events such as the Whittlesea Heritage Program, and profiles of local history groups or short articles.