

REGIONAL AND RURAL LIBRARIES

However remoteness, while making virtual connectivity a very attractive ideal also comes with the reality of telecommunications disconnectivity. Many regional areas in the Tablelands still have no mobile telephone coverage, the internet service offered to remote cattle stations or even medium sized townships such as Dimbulah is typically only dial up, and it is slow, cumbersome, and expensive to operate a home PC.

Out in the bush virtuality (and the home PC) doesn't work quite like it should. Staying connected is not a life style choice so much as a constant battle.

Scarcity of resources

Tablelands Regional Council (TRC) Libraries have just begun to engage actively with online technologies. In the past this has been hampered because of:

- Training – the remoteness of library locations makes it difficult for all staff to attend localised training.
- Set up costs – upgrading our library operating system from entry level to the more advanced platforms which enable interactive virtual spaces to be easily constructed.
- Availability of staff to implement and maintain virtual networks.
- Availability of infrastructure – we are reluctant to heavily promote online resources when there is only limited customer access to public PC's.
- The fears of staff of having to maintain virtual as well as a physical workplaces when amalgamation has meant that many staff are already undertaking the duties of multiple positions.

Our virtual environment now

The TRC Library system does promote the take up of online services and our technical services division have made this a priority because of the large area covered by the Tablelands Regional Council and the remoteness of many of our library locations.

We are now, or will be in the immediate future, using online interactive services including:

- The online Booking module which enables customers to book a computer online at home or from a library OPAC
- Online Request module including online forms for Inter-Library Loans and information requests
- Customised saved list & email notification – receive a list of recently available items from a specific author or genre
- Emailed notices – overdues/reservations
- Online bookings – customers can book a meeting room online

- Incorporate online resources into our catalogue and provide links to author and genre lists as well as linking to lists of award winning literature

We are using the 2.0 technologies made easily accessible through our library operating system but not extending this to create our own library blogs or include RSS feeds as an integral element in our catalogues. So are we just lazy? Or are we simply disenchanted by the wonderful online possibilities we have been offered in training and the stark reality that our remote systems cannot support the technology?

Conclusion

The problem, I believe, lies not in the creation of online sites or in librarians understanding of the value of social networking but with maintenance of virtual library spaces once they have been launched.

Podnosh (<http://podnosh.com/>), a pod casting consultancy which helps government groups and public organisations in the UK to use social media, acknowledges that the way we are using our online technologies is generally not maximising their potential. Podnosh claims that our hastily constructed virtual environments are failing and are in dire need of "social media surgeries".

In many rural libraries, where staff lack access to training and face the daily pressures of doing multiple tasks the major concern is that no one owns these online tasks and no one has the time to monitor and constantly update our virtual presence.

Maintaining an interesting *virtual* space takes *real* energy!

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Supporting regional TAFEs

The Victorian Association of TAFE Libraries (VATL) is a network of TAFE Institute Libraries which provides expert advice, support, and services to its members and clients to contribute towards the continuous improvement of the overall quality of vocational education and training in Victoria.

The VATL Executive Group is an elected body charged with strategically developing best practice and collaborative partnerships for Victorian TAFE libraries. It includes three subsidiary groups:

- Management Interest Group (MIG) which shares information about management development,

collaborative projects, and new ideas relevant to the management of TAFE Libraries

- Cataloguing, Acquisitions, Serials and Systems Group (CASS) which is a forum for the sharing of information, skills, and best practice relevant to acquisitions, cataloguing, and collection development in TAFE Libraries.
- Liaison and Information Technology Group (LIT) which shares information and skills which will further the development and promotion of liaison, information and training services in TAFE libraries.

Part of the mandate for each group is the support of our regional, non-metropolitan TAFE Libraries through training, professional development opportunities, networking, and collaborative projects.

For MIG at least one of its three professional development activities is always held outside of Melbourne. In 2007, Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE hosted sessions on wikis and blogs. In 2008, the topic of "knowledge management" was explored by three guest speakers at Gordon TAFE in Geelong.

In 2008, members of CASS ran a number of workshops and all were well attended by the regional TAFEs. The LIT group's 'Humanising the Web' program was held at South West Institute of TAFE, Warrnambool Campus in November 2008. This provided an enjoyable opportunity for more than 16 participants to listen and contribute to presentations from Michael Schack, Cameron Murrell, and Jane Wilson. LIT's most recent event was held at Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE's Yallourn Campus and its theme was 'Liaison and IL revisited'. 30 people attended.

This year, VATL & TAFE Development Centre (Vic) will be sponsoring a one-day professional development workshop to Canberra. Two nominated library staff members from every Victorian TAFE Institute will be heavily subsidised for the entire day trip. This is a tremendous initiative to combine professional development from the three groups into a major event which will cover workshops in the morning at Canberra Institute of Technology and visits to major libraries like ANU and the National Library.

VATL remains committed to its regional colleagues, both in terms of their active participation in metropolitan networking and training, and in reciprocating metropolitan engagement to rural and regional TAFE libraries.

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