

OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

What the L?

NSW State Librarian Dr Alex Byrne recently put the case for literacy, learning and libraries to readers of *The Sydney Morning Herald* online. This is what he had to say.

The announced closure of the Ford car plant in Geelong, waning employment in mining and forecast rises in unemployment have highlighted the need for flexibility in the Australian workforce.

A key factor in employability is literacy and there the news is depressing. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported recently that more than two-fifths (7.3 million) of Australians aged 15 to 74 years have literacy skills below the level needed to function in today's society. With limited literacy, people cannot read contracts or fill out forms and are easy to exploit. Employment opportunities are limited, especially for older people whose literacy levels tend to be lower, according to the studies.

These preliminary findings from an international study, which will be fully reported in September, show that another two-fifths of the population have skills at the basic level and less than a fifth is at higher levels. The findings confirm a 2006 ABS study which showed that we are not ensuring that all Australians can master the high levels of literacy needed for a contemporary economy.

A lifelong commitment to developing literacy is needed across the states and territories. Literacy development

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needs to be emphasised in the formal education system but must also draw on community based initiatives and programs including the use of volunteers and learning in informal settings which may be less intimidating to those who have left school.

Although outside the formal education sector, libraries provide keys

to building literacy. As trusted public institutions which are open to all, libraries offer welcoming environments in which people can find the information they need, engage with knowledge and ideas, and develop the literacy skills essential to actively participate in today's society.

Far from the dusty book repositories of the past, today's libraries are light-filled and vibrant places with extraordinary community support and very varied programs. Nearly half of the Australian population belongs to public libraries and many others attend library events or use other types of libraries including university, school and state. This level of community trust and libraries' long commitment to learning makes them a natural platform on which to address literacy wholeheartedly.

Public library programs relevant to literacy start early. Many provide 'book bags' to new babies and their mothers containing a first book and tips on reading at home. Rhyme Time for under two year olds and Storytime for preschoolers introduce children to the world of reading and language while their parents – sometimes grandparents – connect with each other. In some areas, such as Ryde, these activities are bilingual, recognising the diversity of our population.

During school years, students come to public libraries to borrow books, check the internet, play games and hang out, always absorbing the value of literacy. By high school, the library is a natural place to study, a habit that persists for many through tertiary education and on to career and business

development. After school and holiday activities deepen the interest in being literate and in learning as I recently saw with Indigenous kids in Eden.

But it doesn't stop there. Library programs reach into the lives of the most vulnerable in our community including prisons, hospitals and retirement homes. Programs are tailored to people with

disabilities and those with limited English as well as the young and the old and those in between. Libraries have easy reading materials as well as novels, histories and biographies.

Today's libraries are using their unique community position to work creatively in metropolitan, regional and remote areas to address literacy issues.

Community languages are a priority and a challenge. Blacktown City Library, for example, offers materials in 27 languages including Twe, Urdu, Somali and Hindi.

Audio books, which were once the preserve of the vision impaired, are today read by truckies, tractor drivers and mothers who can't find the time to sit and read. Online services in libraries enable people to access



information and fill out forms, often with the assistance of library staff. Books and pamphlets provide easy to read information including health and drug information and the State Library's plain English legal information access service. Partnerships with community groups provide volunteer literacy tutoring.

Improved literacy has great potential to enrich an individual's quality of life on

Why should libraries be in the literacy space?

In July at the State Library of New South Wales, National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) held an event titled *Brave New Worlds – Libraries, Learning and Community Needs*.

Brave New Worlds aimed to provoke discussion about why libraries are and should be involved in the literacy and learning space.

Many libraries have a strong and visible presence in this space, but should we? Isn't literacy and learning the remit of our formal education system?

By focussing on how partnerships and initiatives like the National Year of Reading can raise the profile of libraries, and how programs like 26Ten in Tasmania and Better Beginnings in Western Australia can make a real difference to literacy levels and to people's lives, *Brave New Worlds* aimed to encourage libraries to reach out to their communities across all ages to support vital literacy development and encourage and support learning.

Adult literacy was raised as a major issue, with Australia still suffering from

staggering rates of poor literacy, and this provoked discussion around how libraries might reach those most in need of support.

The NSLA Literacy and Learning Group will consider the possibility of similar seminars being held across the

which will assist libraries to determine how they are placed as learning institutions, and will provide libraries with some aspirational goals. Once the testing is complete, the Matrix will be made available to all libraries, along with guidelines and a diagnostic tool to help organisations work towards their goals. Further information can be found at www.nsla.org.au/projects/literacy-and-learning.

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Libraries can reach out to their communities to encourage vital literacy development.

country in the future. Broadening the audience beyond libraries provides opportunities for greater engagement with government at all levels and partnerships with other organisations in the community.

The NSLA Literacy and Learning Group is developing a Maturity Matrix



a personal, community and work level. We are fortunate that we have a great community institution that can help us tackle the challenge of bringing all Australians to the level needed today.

Today's libraries are using their unique community position to work creatively in metropolitan, regional and remote areas to address literacy issues. Many libraries have already adopted innovative programs to address the needs of their unique and sometimes culturally diverse communities. But we who provide library services need to better understand how to use our skills and our status as trusted public institutions in literacy

and learning. Working together with other community groups and the education sector, we can build a more literate and more resilient Australia.

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This article was first published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* online.

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