

Living Libraries Australia – A national strategy for bringing communities together



Chatting over coffee at the Living Library DVD Launch

ALIA has recently joined in partnership with the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the Lismore City Council to manage Living Libraries Australia. Living Libraries Australia is a national strategy for connecting and strengthening local communities through conversation. Members of the public are able to 'borrow' a living person for a conversation rather than a book.

Living Libraries Australia promotes and supports the establishment of Living Library projects to communities across Australia by providing a website of downloadable resources, promotional strategies and materials, and a National Network for information exchange and support. ALIA has recently appointed a Living Libraries Project Officer who is tasked with further developing the Living Libraries Network, fostering the sharing of information, and spreading the word about Living Libraries.

Origins

The first Living Library was developed by a youth organisation called "Stop the Violence". It was held in the year 2000 as part of Denmark's Roskilde Festival, a music festival. Over 100 000 people attended this festival over four days and 75 Living Books were available to borrow. This event aimed at reducing the likelihood of violence by delivering an experience that focused on diversity and understanding.

The first Living Library in Australia was held in Lismore on 3 November 2006. The event was devised by Sabina Baltruweit, a member of the local Lismore community, and developed over a twelve month period by a committee made up of community members, community organisations, the Lismore City Council, and Lismore City Library. The initial event was very successful and, although originally planned as a one-off event, due to community interest is now held on a monthly basis.

Living Libraries throughout Australia

Living Library events are being held or planning is underway for their conduct in all states of Australia. Living Libraries can be held as one-off events, for example to mark an occasion like Mental Health Week, or as regular events.

Some Living Library organisers are also conducting outreach programs, aimed at reaching out to the community and visiting settings like schools and aged care facilities. Lismore's Living Library has a program entitled *Link Up*, which gives students the opportunity to connect with Living Books from the Lismore Living Library.

Living Libraries Australia Network

Organisations that are conducting or planning to hold a Living Library event are invited to join the Living Library Network. This Network provides a vehicle for communication between fellow network members. To join the Living Libraries Australia Network, contact the ALIA Living Libraries Project Officer.

Resources

The Living Libraries Australia website (<http://www.livinglibraries.org.au>) offers a wealth of information and entry points to assist with the conduct of Living Libraries:

- Living Libraries Resource Kit, detailing the process of setting up a living library;
- Living Libraries in Action video which provides information regarding the development of Living Libraries and gives an insight into the process from a reader and a Living Book perspective. Copies of this video on DVD can be requested from the ALIA Living Libraries Project Officer;

- Living Libraries Australia wiki and e-list which enable Living Libraries Australia network members to communicate and collaborate.

Case Studies

City of Melville Living Library

An Indigenous Living Library was developed by the City of Melville in partnership with the City of Cockburn, Djidi-djidi Aboriginal Women's Corporation, and Murdoch University. This collaboration resulted in two events being held at the Spearwood Library and the Murdoch University Library. The result of these events were recorded in an evaluation report which noted that, "One of the major contributing factors of the success of this project was the diversity of the 'books', with 'books' from Northern Territory, Goldfields, Pilbara, Kimberly region, Perth metro, and the south-west country region. This diversity allowed readers the opportunity to learn that Aboriginal people are not the same and that the diversity is apparent when information is shared about country, culture and growing up". http://www.livinglibraries.org.au/images/uploads/melville_report09.pdf.

Redland City Council Living Library

The Redland City Council Living Library was first held in May 2008. Since that time, Living Library events have been held on a quarterly basis. The sessions are managed by the Council's Corporate Librarian and have been held at the library's three mainland branches. Living 'books' have included a refugee, graphic artist, transplant recipient, transsexual, Islamic woman, deaf person, and an immigrant. There has been a very positive community reaction to this program which has empowered both 'books' and readers. To see further information about Living Books in the Redlands, go to <http://www.redland.qld.gov.au/Residents/Library/Pages/LivingLibrary.aspx>.

Southern Cross University Living Library

Southern Cross University recently conducted its second outdoor Living Library in August 2009. The event was held on the Coffs Harbour campus in the picturesque Sacred Garden. The garden has a rotunda and some lovely sculpted seating areas which are conducive to one-on-one conversation. Living 'books' covered a range of topics including being a graffiti artist, living in Iran, spending life in a wheelchair, being a big wave surfer, undertaking a Tree Change, and coming to Australia from Sierra Leone. This event is organised by the University's Regional Engagement Officer.

Swinburne University of Technology Living Library

Swinburne University of Technology held a Living Library event on 29 October 2009 with the theme, "Safety @ Work & Play", to coincide with Victoria's Work Safe Week. This event was run as a joint venture with Eastern Regional Libraries as a community initiative. 'Books' were people who represented groups in the health and safety industry and its associated professions. The Living Library initiative is seen as a simple, yet effective way to create a stronger Swinburne community, a community that celebrates diversity and fosters tolerance and understanding. This event was organised by the Wantirna Campus's TAFE Liaison Librarian, along with key library staff at Swinburne and Eastern Regional Libraries.

More information

The ALIA Living Libraries Project Officer, Tahnee Pearse, can be contacted via email at tahnee.pearse@alia.org.au and more information regarding the project is available at <http://www.livinglibraries.org.au/>.

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