**Engaging with Communities: What Indigenous Services has done to make the State Library of NSW more accessible to Indigenous Australians**

**Abstract**

Libraries and other memory institutions provide important sources of information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. However, Indigenous resources/collections are often difficult to locate within these institutions, and big institutions can seem inaccessible. As a result of this, since its inception in 2014, the Indigenous Services Branch of the State Library of New South Wales has been working toward making the library a more welcoming space for Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, the Branch has been engaging with Indigenous people and communities, onsite, online and on tour. This paper will discuss the methods Indigenous Services has been working toward to achieve this. These methods include:

- Implementing the ATSILIRN (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network) Protocols at the State Library of New South Wales: This paper will discuss importance of the Protocols for promoting services for Indigenous people, including increasing access for Indigenous Australians.
- Launching the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website: This paper will delineate how the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages project, and website, has assisted Indigenous Australians access library collections. Additionally, it will discuss what dialogue and community consultation has taken place as part of the project.
- Promoting Library collections and services by hosting events and exhibitions pertaining to Indigenous Australian history, culture and issues: This paper will discuss how building new audiences around Indigenous collections can promote the services of the Library.

This paper will share experiences for the Indigenous Services Branch and aim to inspire others to build responsive services for Indigenous people and communities.

**Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would acknowledge the traditional custodians of Hobart, the Mouheneer people and pay respect to elders past and present. In addition to this, I would like to acknowledge the Wiradjuri people from whom I descend from.

**Introduction**

The following paper will discuss the Indigenous Services Branch of State Library of New South Wales (NSW) and how, since its inception, it has worked towards making the State Library and its collections more accessible and engaging to Indigenous Australians.

It will also discuss how the Indigenous Services Branch is committed to establishing a dialogue and consulting with Indigenous Communities. This paper will delineate the methods used so far by Indigenous Services to achieve this. These methods include: Implementing the ATSILIRN Protocols; launching the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages Website; and hosting events. First, this paper will discuss the history of Indigenous Services at the Library.

**Establishment of the Indigenous Services Branch**

Prior to the formation of the Indigenous Services Branch, the State Library of NSW had recognised the significance of the Indigenous material held within its collections (Briggs & Jackson, 2008) and the Library has demonstrated this recognition through: a multitude of exhibitions; publications; and the offering of research grants that focus on these unique collections (Briggs, 2005). However, before the 1990s, the management and mediation of the Indigenous material was managed by many non-Indigenous people through a predominantly Western framework (Briggs, 2005).

In 1991, Melissa Jackson and Ronald Briggs were appointed as the first Indigenous cadets. The appointments came about after a push by Indigenous Australians, activists, academics and a shift in library and archive zeitgeist (Thorpe & Galassi, 2014; Briggs, 2005).The State Library of NSW created two Indigenous cadet roles with the purpose of increasing the cadets knowledge of the information profession and for them to assist in managing the Indigenous material and

making the collections and the State Library more accessible to Indigenous Australians (Briggs & Jackson, 2008).

In 2013, the original vision of making the State Library of NSW more accessible to Indigenous Australians was boosted when the State Library, under the leadership of current State Librarian & Chief Executive Officer, Dr Alex Byrne, established the Indigenous Unit, which later became the Indigenous Services Branch (Thorpe & Galassi, 2015). The Branch is currently made up of the Manager of the Indigenous Services Kirsten Thorpe; two Indigenous Librarians, Melissa Jackson and Ronald Briggs; Project Officer, Monica Galassi; Indigenous Library Assistant Carissa Glynn, and an Indigenous Library Technician (the author of this paper). We, as a Branch are committed to developing new services and programs to engage Indigenous Australians and increase their access to collections, as well as work to ensure Indigenous perspectives, opinions and context are an integral part of the collections and/or the management of collections (Barini, 2013).

**Implementing the ATSILIRN Protocols**

The following section discusses ways in which the Indigenous Services Branch is implementing the ATSILIRN (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network) Protocols, and discuss why this is important.

<u>The Protocols</u>

The ATSILIRN Protocols are a guide to the preferred practices in establishing and/or progressing projects, services, programs and collections for Indigenous Australians in a library and archive context (Garwood-Houng & Blackburn, 2014). These Protocols address an extensive array of library issues, such as intellectual property; accessibility; governance; sacred materials; staffing and resource description (Thorpe, 2013). As result, the Protocols can assist information professionals with some of the most complex issues regarding Indigenous Australians in a library and archive context (Nakata, Byrne, Nakata & Gardiner, 2005).

Utilising these Protocols can also assist libraries and archives to develop and maintain positive relationships with Indigenous Australians and communities (Thorpe, 2013). Furthermore, the Protocols can be a resource for libraries and archives to increase cultural awareness among their staff and the implementation of the protocols in these organisations may open up dialogue that can promote awareness of Indigenous issues, not just in an information professional context, but more broadly as well (Nakata, Byrne, Nakata & Gardiner, 2005). This dialogue may subtly shift the established Western library framework toward an Indigenous knowledge keeping framework or at least serve to incorporate Indigenous knowledge keeping practises into the current framework (Thorpe, 2013).

Implementing the ATSILIRN Protocols at the Library

As beneficial as the ATSILIRN Protocols are, Garwood-Huong found that very few organisations have implemented them (Garwood-Houng, 2008). As such, The Library Council of New South Wales approved the adoption of the ATSILIRN Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services as a guideline for engagement with Indigenous peoples. Since then, the Indigenous Services Branch has been working towards the adoption and implementation of the Protocols across the State Library of NSW (Thorpe & Galassi, 2015). In fact, the Indigenous Services Branch believes that implementing the ATSILIRN Protocols is so critical to making the State Library more engaging to Indigenous Australians that they were listed as a prominent part of Indigenous Services Branch's first business plan (Thorpe & Galassi, 2015.)

While working toward implementing the Protocols across all of the library, the Indigenous Services Branch has already utilised the Protocols in small but meaningful ways. First, for the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages Website project, discussed below, the Protocols guided many aspects of the project (Thorpe & Galassi, 2014).

The Protocols have also been utilised in project work undertaken in the State Library of NSW's Innovation Project, where the State Library trialled a number of social media tools to engage with different audiences. Within this project the Indigenous Services Branch assisted in having the Protocols incorporated into the project's procedures and all staff who were involved in the project were taught about the protocols as part of their training for the project (Thorpe & Galassi,

2015). The Innovation Project's use of the ATSILIRN Protocols provided a yes / maybe / no framework. This framework's aim was to encourage staff to be aware of potential risks and to pause and consider these risks before making any decisions relating to utlising Indigenous material for social media. For example, uploading a picture on Instagram of an Indigenous elders group, who visited the library and have filled out written consent forms is a 'yes', but pinning a picture of an Aboriginal man in shackles without context on Pinterest is a 'no'.

However, the Library acknowledges that it is important to promote Indigenous material as some Indigenous communities and people may be unaware of material relating to their community, family or culture that is available in the collection. The framework was more about risk management rather than risk aversion. As such, there is the 'maybe' portion of the framework (Thorpe & Joesph, 2015). The 'maybe' portion of the framework aimed to reduce the need for regressive or overly cautious decision making from staff, which could end up closing down or censoring material without due consideration. This guided, and more importantly empowered, staff to respectfully promote and utilise Indigenous material through social media and overall gain knowledge of the Protocols that would then be transferable to other aspects of their work (Thorpe & Joesph, 2015).

As for the future, the Indigenous Services Branch will assist the New South Wales Public Library Network to work towards a similar objective of implementing the Protocols; and the Indigenous Services Branch will, through consistent and successful application of the Protocols, demonstrates the relevancy and usefulness of this framework which, in turn, encourages others to adopt the Protocols in their own archive and library settings.

**Rediscovering Indigenous Languages Website**

This section of the paper discusses the Rediscovering Languages Project, its background and how it aims to make the State Library more engaging for Indigenous Australians. Additionally, this section outlines how The Rediscovering Indigenous Languages initiative has been and will continue to be the catalyst for the start of conversation between community and the State Library.

Background of the Project

Started in 2011, with the assistance of funding received from Rio Tinto, the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages Project was an initiative to assist in making Indigenous Language material, within the collection of the State Library of NSW, more accessible by locating, describing and digitising this material and then developing a website to host this important information. This initiative had four main components:

- Research, discovery, care, description and digitalisation.
- Consulting with community and creating awareness.
- Developing the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website.
- Developing educational resources.

Because of this project, and with the help of Dr Michael Walsh, over 200 language items have been identified within the collections of the State Library of NSW. This material contains language from all around Australia from 40 + Indigenous Language groups.

Why the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages Project?

At the time of Australian settlement in 1788, there were some 250 known Indigenous Australian languages spoken. It has been estimated that, roughly, only 20 Aboriginal languages are now spoken comprehensively (Gamble, 2011). In 2007, Census data reported that only 12% of the Indigenous population spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language at home (Koori Mail, 2007). This loss, or detachment, from language has been devastating and has caused much grief (Walsh, 2010). This could be because language is quite a large part of cultural identity (United Nations, 2008). It is argued here that the work undertaken to rediscover these languages can, over time, offer some restoration of this aspect of Indigenous culture.

Internationally, many have made links between Indigenous peoples' loss of language and poor mental health (McIvor, Napolean & Dickie, 2009). Linguist Ghil'ad Zuckerman, who has been working in the field of revitalisation of Indigenous languages has previously spoke of this loss 'The loss of language is the loss of everything, the loss of intellectual sovereignty, the loss of

spirituality, the loss of the soul, the loss of cultural autonomy, it's the loss of well-being, it's the loss of mental health' (2013).

Because of this, there has been recent government and community initiatives, such as OCHRE who have established local language and culture nests, that are attempting to address this loss. Initiatives like OCHRE are currently revitalising and preserving Indigenous languages and bringing Indigenous - and non-Indigenous - attention to some of the oldest languages in the world.

Assisting these initiatives and communities revitalise and/or preserve languages is the main motivation for the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website (Thorpe & Galassi, 2014). We hope by having the historical Indigenous material freely available online, to be analysed and researched, will help communities and linguists revive and/or strengthen languages.

Community engagement

Indigenous Australians are, and Indigenous communities are, the custodians of the Language content within the material on the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website (NSLA, 2015). Because of this, one of the most essential components of the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages initiative is community consultation and engagement. This consultation allows Indigenous ideas, opinions and perspectives to be incorporated into the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages process to make the initiative a collaborative partnership that supports Indigenous control (Thorpe & Galassi, 2014). This collaboration helps establish trust and can be the start of a long term ongoing dialogue and a relationship between the State Library of NSW and Indigenous communities.

Digital repatriation

One of the key reasons for us engaging with community is the repatriation of language collection items to the relevant communities. For community members we have met with, we have provided copies of language material relating to their area, some of this material was previously unknown and never before seen by these community members. This repatriation and future

repatriation of Indigenous material has been greatly aided by the State Library's digitisation initiatives.

Community Stories

A hopeful outcome of collaborating with community is the 'Community Stories' section of the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website. This section provides community members an online space to add their perspectives and stories regarding language, the language material, and their community on the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website.

This is important because most of material on the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website is historical (in that it belongs to the past) and was recorded by Europeans and as result of this the material, while containing Indigenous content, lacks Indigenous perspectives; as is the case with most oppressed people and records created about them by outsiders (Jimerson, 2003). By providing a space on the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website for communities to add their stories and perspectives, we are supporting an inclusive and comprehensive view of history (ATSILIRN, 2012). In addition to this, it adds more history and context to the manuscripts which can provide a more human element, which help others connect to the material.

Furthermore, the 'Community Stories' section will also support communities and language organisations to add language interpretations. For example, in the form of corrections or explanations about use of spelling, relating to the language material. This can be beneficial because the material on the website is predominantly recorded by Europeans, many of whom were not professional linguists or had linguistic backgrounds. As a result, many of the records can have misinterpretations of language (Troy, 1994).

A famous example of a misinterpretation, even though it has been found to be erroneous, is the word Kangaroo. Sir Joseph Banks, a botanist on board the *HMB Endeavour*, interacted with the local Guugu Yimithirr people while in North Queensland and asked what was that animal, referring to a kangaroo, and they said Kangaru, which as the story goes means 'I do not know' or 'I don't understand you'. While not true, this story exhibits how easily the language in the records can contain misinterpretations and why having input from Indigenous Language speakers

and teachers is important (McCarthy, 2012). Especially, for those who perceive the words written in the material as the unequivocal truth.

How we have consulted with community

To consult with community we have met community members on site and online, as well as offsite. We have utilised many methods to establish connections. These methods include:

- Rediscovering Indigenous Languages Reference Committee: A Reference Committee was established to support and advise the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages initiative. This Reference Committee was made up of individuals who had linguistic or Indigenous engagement backgrounds. Reference Committee member and the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Mick Gooda accepted the role of patron of the Rediscovering project, and he, and the Committee assisted in connecting the State Library to whom they should consult with in the communities.

- Pre-established Relationships: Indigenous Services Librarians, Ronald Briggs and Melissa Jackson and Indigenous Services Manager, Kirsten Thorpe have worked in libraries and archives with a focus on services for Indigenous Australians since the 1990s. Since that time, they have all established relationships with various Indigenous community members. We have contacted many of these community members to consult with them about the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages initiative and the Indigenous Services Branch more broadly.

- The Hidden Gems Symposium: In 2013, The State Library of NSW hosted an international symposium on revitalising language. The Symposium created awareness about how libraries and archives can assist language revitalisation. During the Symposium the Indigenous Services Branch made contact with many in the field of language revitalisation and established a dialogue with them.

- Far Out: The Learning Services Branch of the State Library of NSW do a program called 'FAR Out!' This program aims to address issues of equity of access to the State Library's treasures for students and teachers across NSW (State Library of New South Wales, n.d.). Indigenous Services Branch members have gone go out with Learning Services to regional and rural schools to be part of the Far Out! program and when we

have, we have always made an effort to meet with Language teachers at the schools and find out what they are doing and explain how the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website can help them, as language teachers, as well as their communities.

- Social Media: Using the social media tool Tumblr, the Indigenous Services Branch is promoting the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website and the services the Branch provides. Just recently, the Indigenous Services Branch has started a 'word of the week' (#wordoftheweek) on their Tumblr page, which highlights a word each week that has been chosen from Indigenous language lists in State Library's collection. We are hoping that the word of the week will not just create awareness of the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website, but will also be the catalyst for conversation and possibly debate. For example, if our word of the week is Moree which we say according to language lists by Royal Anthropological Society of Australasia means "a stone", we could post this and a community member from Moree or someone who speaks Gamilaroi could comment and say that is wrong and Moree actually means 'x' thus offering increased meaning, and integrity, to the word lists being created. This could open up a dialogue and we may approach this person to see if they want their comment and other comments to part of the content of the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages website.

Future of the Project

Regarding the future of the project, it is not meant to a static, but, rather, an evolving initiative. Hence, at the moment we are working at improving the user experience as well as developing a future educational component of the website with artist Lucy Simpson and the Learning Services Branch.

As for community consultation, the Indigenous Services Branch will be consistently working to establish connections and relationships with communities. Recently, the State Library of NSW engaged linguist Dr Sophie Nicholls to assist in our work with communities and the community stories section. The Branch is also aware the consultation is not a one-time thing and for it to be meaningful, the Branch will need to work toward maintaining a dialogue with communities (Nakata & Langton, 2005). Therefore, we do not look to just make initial contacts with communities, but are seeing to establish, and maintain meaningful relationships.

**Events and Exhibitions**

The Indigenous Services Branch hosts a number of Indigenous events, such as talks, presentations and exhibitions. The purpose of these events is to promote Indigenous collections that can assist to connect Indigenous Australians to material in the collections of the State Library of NSW and libraries and archives in general.

In addition to this, we have hosted events such as the Indigenous X talk 'Indigenous Voices: speaking out and changing the conversation'. While talks like this are unrelated to the State Library's collection or services, it demonstrates that the State Library of NSW acknowledges that Indigenous voices have a role in society's current dialogue and that the role of the State Library is to connect with diverse communities. This is important as much of the State Library's historical Indigenous material, as noted here, only represents Indigenous Australians through a Eurocentric bias (Thorpe & Byrne, 2014).

Furthermore, we host exhibitions that display a number of Indigenous materials that the State Library holds. Again, this demonstrates the commitment of the Library in exposing collections relating to the rich culture and history of Indigenous Australian peoples and communities.

The Indigenous Services Branch also goes out to attend external events, such as this year's Yabun Festival where we shared a stall with City of Sydney. Being a part of external events like Yabun, connects us to people who may have never entered or been aware of the State Library and Indigenous Services before. It also allows us to network with other Indigenous organisations and possibly form partnerships.

**Conclusion**

This paper has outlined how the Indigenous Services Branch is committed to meeting the needs of Indigenous Australians. The Branch is still only in its infancy and will grow and develop in the upcoming years to ensure the State Library of NSW and its collections are accessible and

made available as a great resource for Indigenous communities and the wider public across New South Wales and across Australia.

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