

ALIA DARLING DOWNS: HOW COVID-19 HAS RESHAPED LIBRARY SERVICES

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ALIA Darling Downs is a regional professional community in its infancy. It exists to provide a platform for library practitioners in the regional Darling Downs area to network with other library professionals, stay up-to-date with library practices and attend professional development events. This group has members from a wide geographically dispersed area where the librarians are usually the only information professionals in their local communities. Our focus is to facilitate discussions and build our community. We aim to ensure the continuing involvement of Darling Downs library staff in matters pertaining to the profession. One of the biggest issues impacting the industry at the moment is COVID-19.

COVID-19 was characterized as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11 2020 (World Health Organisation - Regional Office for Europe, 2020). Even though it has a low mortality rate at 3.8%, its high infection rates, (Ahn et al., 2020) the lack of vaccines and herd immunity (Randolph & Barreiro, 2020) has caused alarm in many countries. Transmission between humans occurs through airborne droplets that linger after an infected person coughs or sneezes or by droplets that land on surfaces (Department of Health, 2020). Its ability to target people with compromised immune systems, for example, the elderly, people with heart conditions, diabetes (Guo et al., 2020), and its novel status caused the Australian federal and state governments implementing social distancing measures to reduce the risk of transmission (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020). These measures resulted in both study and work from home solutions. For libraries, the prospect of live viruses on surfaces such as tables and books resulted in new problems which required interesting solutions.

Three months into the COVID-19 crisis, we hosted an online meeting to discuss how different libraries had adapted. Members of our ALIA Darling Downs group shared their own experiences from a variety of different library contexts, including university, school, public and health libraries. Here are their stories.

University Libraries:

In the first of the university examples, Mandy Callow describes how a regional university, the University of Southern Queensland, catered to student requirements of study material. The second example by Jenny Young, also from the same university, talks about the challenges of working from home and lessons learned.

Providing essential resources during service shutdown

Mandy Callow

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At the University of Southern Queensland, the Government enforced Library shut-

down due to the COVID19 pandemic, resulted in the inability to provide access to essential hard copy only resources, particularly course textbooks. Normal lending and patron digitisation services were suspended in late March 2020. Even though many students purchase their own copies of course texts, there is still a significant number who rely on the Library to access their course textbooks.

Initial work was to identify where e-text copies of course texts were available for purchase. Due to budget limitations, the Library was not able to buy a copy of all available e-texts. Usage of the physical copies was determined to prioritise e-text purchase. With the available funds, a total of 56 e-texts were purchased. When the Library was not able to purchase e-texts (due to budget constraints or non-availability), digitisation of texts or sections of texts was carried out. Under section 200AB of the Copyright Act we were able to copy more than the usual 10%/1 chapter as long as specific guidelines were met (we had no alternate access to the text, the sections of text digitised were required in order to complete the course, the digitised copies would only be available during the COVID 19 crisis).

A total of 5,564 pages from 47 titles was digitised. Students also lost access to physical resources for research and to support assessment. To boost available ebooks, the Library took advantage of publisher/vendor offers for free temporary packages. A total of 5 packages were activated which provided an additional 18,359 ebooks.

Vendor Loads and Different Systems during COVID work from home procedures

Jenny Young

Data Quality and Curation Librarian

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As part of my cataloguing duties, I am also responsible for Vendor loads into Ex Libris Alma. The procedure is relatively simple. The files are obtained from the various vendors, downloaded into Microsoft teams, uploaded to Ex Libris Alma Sandbox, tested, and if all is well we do the same in Alma Production.

Challenges were initially encountered with learning to work within Microsoft Teams, downloading software such as Marc Edit onto my home computer and getting all the systems to work harmoniously together. I experienced both drop-out problems with broadband speed and data quota issues until my provider came to the party and adjusted both the above. The biggest problems occurred with excel spreadsheets not working properly between systems, with some functionality just not there. I had to download frequently and adjust with using whatever editable version would work at the time.

At-home work practices were challenged. Downsizing from three PC monitors to one initially made working painfully slow with a lot of flicking between screens on just 1 monitor. Concentration levels were heightened to remain on task and deal with system crossovers. Problems also existed with documents left on my work PC and having to remote in to get these.

Communication issues also slowed tasks, as a result of having to wait for email responses or trying to explain a detailed issue to a colleague as opposed to having someone there to simply ask and get an immediate answer.

However most issues were overcome, but with others it meant coming up with some clever workarounds.

School libraries

According to Guo et al. (2020) transmission of COVID-19 occurs mainly between family members and between people who've had sustained contact with an infected person. Children are noted to display mild symptoms of CoV-SARS2 (National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, 2020), however, concerns remained over their ability to transmit the illness to other children, and hence their families, (A Current Affair, 2020) as well as teachers (Baxendale & Peel, 2020), significant numbers of who were over 50 and therefore more likely to be immunocompromised. In NSW for example, 31.7% of teachers are between 50-64 years of age (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Schools, as a result, started teaching students from home. The challenge for school librarians was for them to support the school curriculum, minimise the disruption to education (National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, 2020) and maintain a continued interest in reading.

Two school librarians in the Darling Downs region, Sheryl Morris and Gayle Stone recount their experiences

Reading for Wellbeing: Supporting Kids through Unprecedented Times

Shez Morris,

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In March 2020, schools began facing the prospect of implementing arguably the most radical flip in Australian education since digitalisation: national remote learning. This seismic shift in teaching and learning was only one of the weighty challenges students have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, which for many is the first significant community ordeal they have endured. Consequently, when Highlands Christian College (Toowoomba) eyeballed remote learning, we chose to focus not only on the academic requirements but however possible, to ensure the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of our students.

Naturally, the school library was eager to support this vision, particularly focusing on new methods of encouraging reading for enjoyment, which has proven to aid in manifold

wellbeing. Examples of new activities and processes included increasing borrowing limits and renewing all loans indefinitely; permitting students learning remotely to visit the library to borrow; continuing student book club meetings via Zoom; providing and promoting online reading engagement activities with teachers and students, and organizing our own "Highlands Readers Cup" when the official CBCA regional competition was cancelled. Throughout the uncertainty and upheaval of 2020, Highlands Library and its books continue to remain a refuge and escape for our students.

The Garden Library – Making our library bloom during COVID 19

Gayle Stone

eLearning Library Co-ordinator

Rangeville State School, Toowoomba

A decision was made at the beginning of Term two for the library to remain closed. To keep student reading and the library as a core focus for the school and to foster a sense of normality in student routines, I created the Garden Library.

I 'planted' tubs of books in a central location in the grounds for students to browse and borrowing times were set. In doing so I made a deliberate decision to extend and broaden reading selections through the chosen titles.

This service was also available for students learning at home but with a twist. They were able to browse through our online catalogue and send through requests that would then be packaged for collection. Students at home also had access to our Story Box subscription, where titles and associated activities were available via our One Note communication. To nourish the relationship between students at home and those attending school, library displays of work from students at home were displayed in the library with assistance from attending students were possible.

To ensure social distancing regulations were met at school a limited number of students were allowed to be in the Garden Library at a time and the tubs were 'planted' a metre and a half apart. When books were returned the covers were cleaned with a 90% alcohol solution and were placed in quarantine for 48 hours. During this time only nominated staff entered the library and hand sanitiser was available on entry to the library.

With support from our administration team and staff, the garden library was well received. The constant challenge was supplying enough books as demand grew strongly. This change in the way students borrowed allowed reading to remain a focus and provided them with an opportunity to experience reading outside in the comfort of our school grounds.

It was with a saddened heart that we closed the Garden Library and reopened conventional borrowing. To ensure that this remained fresh we had a Grand Re-opening with decorations, prizes, and small gifts for borrowers. Keeping books and reading in focus was critical at a time of uncertainty for our students.

By working around the Covid-19 impositions, I was able to keep reading and the library in focus for our school and continued to make our library bloom. To continue upholding the hygiene standards required we have opened 3 days a week allowing for 24 hours isolation in between each day. Students and staff are required to use hand sanitizer on entering the library and books are no longer cleaned on return but are quarantined for 72 hours.

Public Libraries

In times of crises, for example, Australia's 2011 floods (Australian Library and Information Association [ALIA] & Queensland Public Libraries Association [QPLA], 2011), and Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey in the US, public libraries become epicentres for disaster recover, knowledge access and out-going communication by the public (ALIA & QPLA, 2011; Braquet, 2010; Yelvington, 2020). This is due to the good ICT infrastructure generally found within (ALIA & QPLA, 2011; Yelvington, 2020). However, in this instance, the crisis meant infrastructure was not damaged, but the need for business as usual when delivering services was required. James Nicholson explains what the Moreton Regional Libraries did.

Yes, you can ask that: Bringing programming online - tips and tricks

James Nicholson

Program and Engagement Leader

Moreton Bay Regional Council Libraries

I wanted to give an insight into how we developed and produced our most popular online program – an “Author Talk” - for the public library service I work for. Author talks are defined as a situation where an author comes into a library to discuss their book or latest project.

When COVID-19 first struck and our days were hijacked with scenario planning workshops and pandemic response meetings we were fortunate to identify the need for new and quality audio/visual equipment and managed to secure this before the most severe restrictions came in.

At the same time, we had spoken to a well-known author, whose live event we were forced to cancel. He agreed to an online offering instead. We emailed a set of ten questions, asked him to create recorded answers and we later stitched these together. This solution meant we could concentrate on other programs and issues while waiting for the responses to be returned. It allowed flexibility whilst offering a slightly different take on the Author Talk.

After evaluating our efforts to bring programming online, there are recommendations I offer. These include knowing what specific software and hardware skills your staff have and closely involving the marketing and

communication teams to help ensure that you communicate new concepts to the public gradually and clearly, the aim being to get strong 'buy-in' from your community.

Health Libraries

Health Librarians provide both a traditional array of library services while conducting literature searches to support doctors' clinical and research questions. In pandemic situations, this expands and includes information dissemination to health officials responsible for decision making (Featherstone, Boldt, Torabi, & Konrad, 2012). With COVID-19, the sheer volume of articles created also resulted in the curation of 2200 articles to support the dissemination of material to key stakeholders (Dar, 2020). Daniel McDonald's and Patrick O'Connor's traditional work roles were both curtailed and expanded on in unusual ways. They narrate their experiences.

Darling Downs Health Library Response to Covid-19

Daniel McDonald & Patrick O'Connor
Librarians,
Darling Downs Health.

In addition to their core library duties, Darling Downs Health (DDH) Library staff look after the principal lecture theatre at the Toowoomba Hospital, and also coordinate a monthly series of lectures known as "Grand Rounds". In the lecture theatre support role, library staff in early March attended a meeting of senior clinical leaders planning the initial, uncertain, phases of the local Covid-19 response. At the beginning of that meeting, an emergency physician stated: "This may well be the defining disease of our careers". A little later on in the meeting library staff asked what to do with Grand Rounds and the medical lead turned and bluntly said: "Cancel it". From that moment on the gravity of the pandemic threat to our local community was clear, as was the burden that would be placed on the health service and its workers. A surreal two months followed, full of intense work in an ever-shifting environment, and the DDH library was a key contributor to this response.

The library has completed at least 30 COVID-19-specific literature searches, and subsequently retrieved several hundred full-text articles drawn from these searches. Topics have ranged from false-negative swab testing, to risk with chest imaging, to cloth gowns for personal protective equipment, to burden of illness in neonates and children. Translation of articles from German ICU physicians have been sought, and direct correspondence has been entered in to with ministry of health staff in Iceland regarding their population-wide testing. The library has also co-authored several articles through to journal submission phase concerning aspects of the local response to Covid-19. As well, Library staff helped coordinate a visit to the Toowoomba hospital from the Queensland health minister and chief health officer. In addition, the DDH

library has been a source of guidance for many staff suddenly thrust into the unfamiliar role of navigating IT requirements and permissions for working remotely.

While all of this COVID-19-specific work was tumbling in and ramping up, the library remained open and fully operational so our typical activity levels did not diminish in any significant way. If anything, this workload also probably increased as, ironically (and thankfully) the expected escalation of sick patients did not occur, so many staff were able to turn their attention to research and education projects that they had been postponing. The library decided to keep its physical space open as it is a key source of computer access for hospital staff, so closing this area off would simply have required further concentration of hospital staff in other areas of the hospital. The odour of hand sanitiser and alcohol wipes has never been more prevalent in the library. Likewise, though, in our own small way, the sense of a meaningful contribution to the work of Darling Downs Health has never been more prevalent in the library.

Conclusion

The event discussion made it clear that all of these libraries had to rapidly respond to a novel crisis with little guidance or preparation. These libraries performed under unprecedented time pressures in a constantly changing environment. They kept their focus firmly on their clients' needs and adapted current services and developed new services to fulfil those needs. Sharing individual experiences through this event created a greater sense of community within our ALIA Darling Downs group with the realisation that though we were all from different libraries and different locations we were all dealing with the same overarching challenges. This crisis has demonstrated that librarians are well able to respond in innovative ways that turn a crisis into opportunities.

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