



# ALIA WA Library Technicians Conference Grant

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## Post Conference Report 2007:

Report on the ALIA National Library & Information Technicians Conference 2007

Having returned from the Conference recently, I have found it difficult to reduce my presentation on the conference, to just a few highlights. I have learned so much (my brain actually feels a little full), and there were so many great events and speakers.

I discovered something about myself after hearing so many speakers in such a short space of time. I discovered that I prefer certain types of presentations. It probably has more to do with my own particular style of learning. What I am trying to say, is that I am not going to read to you from PowerPoint slides today. I appreciate the assistance of other conference delegates in providing some images of some of the conference events., which you can see on the screen. I hope that you don't find it too distracting, but then, that might be a good thing too. What I would like to do, is highlight some of what I learned, what had the most impact on me, and what I will take away from the experience of attending the conference.

I am really grateful to the WALT group for the conference grant. I have benefited in so many ways, including increasing my knowledge of facilities, services, different types of libraries, and the people who staff them. Networking opportunities were many, and I believe that some of the people I met have become friends.

When I applied for the conference grant, I wrote a short essay that highlighted my keen interest in assistive technologies and facilities for the disabled. Little did I know that at the conference I would have the chance to meet some of the people who were on the cutting edge of designing and implementing these technologies.

One of the sessions I attended was entitled "The virtual mobile library: Reaching your community". It was conducted by Rachel Johnson of Vision Australia. Vision Australia services approximately 16,000 members who are vision-disabled, most of who contact service via the telephone. As you can imagine, this is a very different clientele than most of us serve. I learned that they have found ways to construct a patron's profile using a telephone reference interview. They publish the new titles advisory on a phone message system, and post a reader's advisory on the radio on their own program. They view their relationship with their patrons as a "living partnership". Vision Australia posts items to readers throughout the country including NSW, ACT, Qld, and the NT. Other areas receive an assisted service, such as Western Australia where Vision Australia works with the Braille Institute for distribution and inter-library loans. They hope to be able to broaden their contact with us in the future. The social needs of the vision-disabled patrons are of paramount concern, and Vision Australia is making real progress in keeping their patrons in touch with the rest of the



country and indeed with the world through the internet services. They have adopted a number of physical aides for their clients such as use of the DAISY format for recordings, which enables them to produce a book on a single disc. They provide the book port free to their patrons to listen to the disc. I was able to view a number of the adaptive technologies at the conference. This is truly a different library – it is a partnership more than a service.

On Wednesday afternoon, I was able to participate in a session with Colleen McCombe, from Vicnet of the State Library of Victoria along with representatives from ComTEC, Scope and Vision Australia. Their topic was "Internet access and participation for people with a disability: More than just the equipment". They discussed the findings of a report commissioned to look at problems with internet access for the disabled. One of the key findings referred to the need for library staff to provide support to patrons with disabilities. While this may sound obvious, libraries are not always well funded, staffed or have staff trained to provide this support. Staff members need training to know how to address the needs of the disabled. They need training on utilizing some of the new adaptive technologies, they need additional time to spend with these patrons, and they need knowledge about the limitation of various disabilities. What is seldom mentioned is that we need to take an interest in helping all people make use of the plethora of information available today, something we tend to take for granted.

The report showed that most of us are not aware of the contents and implications of the Disability Discrimination Act. The report showed that the disabled find it difficult to know what is actually available in the library and how to access it. In turn, the community is not aware of the needs of the disabled. Just getting to, getting in, and being comfortable in the library is a major obstacle for many. There are many accessible information formats available for people of all abilities. However, communication is a two-way street and it is essential that we find out what people need, and their perspectives on what is available.

I found out at the conference, that 1 in every 500 people has some form of complex communication need. That means they can't speak or have speech that is very difficult to understand. Print disability includes sight disabilities as well as an inability to hold a book. Were you aware that only 3-5% of our print information is available to these people? I saw a couple of very simple but very useful aides. One was an alphabet board that included large letters that could be used to spell out words. The other was a word board with pictures and simple phrases, such as "I need some help", or "where is the...". These are not expensive items and could easily be placed in our libraries. I have a couple of websites that list where we can get them. In addition, they distribute a bookmark that shows the aides to which a patron can point. How easy is that? They come in with their bookmark (or even better, we have them on the counter), they point to the aide they want such as the simple phrase board, and we communicate.



I also learned that in Australia, 44% of our adult population have poor literacy skills. They need items in audio and large print formats as well as Braille, and Easy English. I saw a new genre sticker, which showed "Easy English" material – a great idea for these patrons so that they will not have to ask, "Can I have something easy to read" and so embarrass themselves. Websites are supposed to be "Accessible", "Useable", and "Readable" to all sectors of our population. There are many guidelines published to help us to develop accessible websites, have you looked at your library's website? How easy would it be for a disabled patron to find what he or she needs? One of the libraries I visited has adopted some of these ideas on their website. You can point to a picture of a magnifying glass to enlarge the letters, or point to a picture of a microphone to access the audio services.

I thoroughly enjoyed the keynote speakers at the conference. I have been stretched and challenged in my thinking. I found the session presented by Bob Pymm and Damian Lodge of Charles Sturt University very interesting. They dealt with the way managers perceive their skills and what their staff have to say about the skills of their managers. They pointed out that we actually think we all perform better than we do in many areas – this does not just apply to our managers.

On Wednesday, Kevin Hennah, a retail consultant, presented one of the sessions that caught my attention. His topic was "Interior Design for Libraries", and he challenged the way we present our materials to the public. His suggestions on what is good, bad, and downright ugly, were right on the mark. He asked why libraries carpet the end of the aisles, instead of using the "end of aisle" marketing strategy employed by retail stores. We all know how what is displayed at the end of the aisle catches our attention, and have heard how producers pay extra for have their goods to be displayed there. In a library, however, we carpet the end of the aisle, and wonder how to entice our readers to enjoy looking at the spine of books! The area in which I work will probably get a new library in the next few years, I hope that I will see some of the more progressive marketing ideas displayed there.

On the Tuesday before the official start of the conference, I participated in a tour of libraries in the north of Melbourne. These libraries were doing some very new (at least to me) and innovative things. One of the libraries was the Hume Global Learning Village. The top floor of this building is a library, and the lower floor is a learning centre, serving the whole community. Computers abounded, as well as great new technology solutions – such as interactive whiteboards and speaker systems. The facilities are rented at a very low cost to community groups to run courses, including homework help sessions, in exchange for their participation in community events put on by the centre. They have about 11 rooms that are in use most of the time with events from council meetings to first aid courses. We also travelled through the Yarra Plenty libraries visiting three libraries including a mobile library that is only a couple of years old. This was of special interest to me, as the city where I work will be replacing their mobile library in the next year and I have a few suggestions from Yarra Plenty on what they would like to change in design and features. At all the libraries we visited,



we asked questions regarding policies, special features of their libraries, and problems they encountered. This trip was truly one of the highlights of the conference for me.

On a more serious note, I have to say that I discovered an unexpected tension between librarians and library technicians. Both sides appear to be guilty of this. I actually heard a speaker say that they had found that while the desk staff normally say "no" to patrons, the librarians always "wanted to help people". I heard a lot about "professional" staff, and what was termed as "non-professional", and even "sub-professional" staff – referring to library technicians.

I believe that we are all professionals, we all have a desire to help people, and indeed we want to say "yes" whenever we can. While we have different levels of education, experience and job requirements, I believe that we all want to work together to assist our reader communities. Thank you again for the opportunity to attend the conference, I come away from it far richer. I would strongly recommend the next conference in 2009 in Adelaide. It promises to be a rewarding opportunity for all who attend.