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CHECK THIS OUT!: HOW MURDOCH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY IS “HUMANISING” THEIR CLIENT SERVICES USING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will identify recent initiatives that Library staff at Murdoch University have developed and implemented to “humanise and transform” Library Services for our Murdoch University User Community to ensure sustainable Library Services which meet the needs of the current and future generations of students.

There has been concern for some time that a large body of learning support and other Library Services are available to our Academic staff and students at our offshore campuses via our Library website but we are not convinced that we have communicated that support effectively. The Library is a crucial component of student life no matter where our staff and students are geographically located.

Library staff have recently initiated a geographical location service as an entry point to our website. Because of this capability we have established an option for staff and students in Dubai, Singapore and Malaysia to automatically be directed to a page specifically developed for their campus with relevant and appropriate information regarding available support both at the offshore location and from our Library in Perth, Western Australia, all within our existing website.

A further initiative at our Rockingham Regional Campus Library is a ‘Computer Buddies’ community service program which has been successfully developed and implemented. This Library offers a seamless Library service to three stakeholder groups - Murdoch University, Challenger Institute of Technology and The City of Rockingham. The program has been an enormous success for everyone. The Library is able to facilitate a sustainable community service, local high school students are able to meet their community services obligations driven by their school curriculum requirements and any member of the community can attend the informal ‘Computer Buddy’ sessions to learn about computers and mobile technologies at their own pace without cost to them.

The author will identify the benefits to students and staff, describing some of the feedback received as an outcome of these initiatives. The experiences of Murdoch University Library may assist other Libraries in “humanising” their Library Client Services.

INTRODUCTION

Murdoch University is located in the southern suburb of Murdoch in Perth, Western Australia. The Murdoch University ethos is one of Equity and Social Justice where students from all backgrounds are provided with an environment to support them to perform at their best. We have approximately 1,400 staff and more than 18,000 Undergraduate and Postgraduate students and in addition to that a diverse group of researchers.

Murdoch University Libraries support teaching and learning across the University community at the main South Street Campus, Rockingham Regional Campus and the Peel Education Campus in Western Australia. Murdoch University Library also supports the teaching and learning of staff and students at partner institutions in Dubai, Malaysia and Singapore from its main South Street Campus Library in Perth.

I would like to share our experience and some evidence with you regarding a recent Murdoch University Library initiative that is an attempt to 'personalise' Library and Information services for staff and students at our offshore campuses using technology; and also discuss the 'Computer Buddies' program that was developed and implemented at our Rockingham Regional Campus Library and highlight how a particular group of our clients actually became our service providers.

INITIATIVE 1: "HUMANISING AND TRANSFORMING" LIBRARY SUPPORT FOR OUR STUDENTS USING TECHNOLOGY.

THE BACKGROUND

Like any higher educational institution Murdoch University Library is a very important component of student life no matter where our staff and students are geographically located. We are committed to ensuring that our offshore students experience the same support from the Library equivalent to those of our students studying on one of our local campuses or externally across Australia.

To meet this important need our Library provides a large body of learning support and other Library services to our Academic staff and students via our Library Website but at Murdoch we were not convinced that we were well placed to effectively communicate that wealth of support to those located at our offshore partner institutions. The questions uppermost in our minds that generated the cause for us to take action were; what could our Library staff do to be reassured that we were fully supporting our students in offshore campus locations? And; when these students visited our Library Homepage did it appear to be more predisposed to assisting students studying onshore? We anticipated that the answer to the latter question was in all honesty, yes.

To address these concerns the way forward quite simply was to personalise our offshore support using an assistive technology, in fact technology was our only option.

This was most definitely a project for a small group of very creative Generation Y staff at Murdoch University Library that I mentally refer to as “our bright young things”.

The group was given a background brief; they were also advised that the only non-negotiable outcome was that any solutions identified must fit within our existing Library Website. This requirement would greatly reduce any need to maintain and edit the solution separately to our existing Library Webpage. Oh and the last but not surprising piece of advice that I think really encourages creativity is – “there is no budget for this project”.

CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

These aforementioned “bright young things” identified geographical location as an entry point to our Library Website as the solution.

This means that we can identify the country a visitor is coming from and change our Library homepage to suit them.

Because of this capability we have established an option for staff and students in Dubai, Singapore and Malaysia, to automatically be directed to a page specifically developed for their institution with relevant and appropriate information regarding available support, both at the offshore location, and from our Library in Perth, all within our existing website. While the Project team were in constant communication with myself and the Library Systems Librarian during the development stage of this project, it was also critical for me to consult regularly with our Library Director and the Murdoch University Educational Partnerships Service Centre to ensure all political, cultural, censorship and contractual considerations were observed. Regular liaison with the Manager of the Murdoch University Organisational Capability Unit to identify key people at the partner institutions to support us with the project was also important. We needed those key people at the offshore locations to confirm that, “what we hoped they could see” on their computer screens and mobile devices was actually visible at their country location.

We are using MaxMind Geolite’s IP database to provide the functionality for this service. The offshore servers respond very simply – with a country code. We do not redirect users’ browsers to their country-specific page; quite simply all we do is make it available for them to click through to, from our front page. The project team members advised that to force a new page to load is not generally good practice, and a number of measures are commonly in place to stop this so called “browser hijacking”.

All other options to locate our services and teaching and learning support are still available under these dedicated pages and will remain the same as has previously been offered.

Because everything is managed on the user side, and not on ours, it is a matter of making their browsers do what we want, in response to the choice they make, as opposed to giving them what we want them to have.

This initiative went live in Dubai on 8th November, 2011 and on 24th December, 2011 for Singapore to commence a new teaching period on the 9th January, 2012.

We chose to implement this project incrementally because Singapore was a greater challenge; Murdoch University has arrangements with two different partners in Singapore and those partner institutions actually operate in competition with each other.

Our page in Singapore therefore had to be unbiased to equitably serve these two different study centres but also address the unique needs of the two institutions.

Professor John Grainger, Pro-Vice Chancellor/Executive Vice President, Murdoch University – Dubai Study Centre emailed me: *“A big thank you to you and your team for developing a dedicated Library Homepage for Murdoch University International Study Centre Dubai – it is an excellent innovation that adds value for all of our staff and students in Dubai and further enhances relationship building between the two campuses. A great deal of effort has gone into tweaking the available technology and you all deserve heartfelt congratulations for your perseverance with this project”*

OFFSHORE RESPONSE

So what have Murdoch Library staff learned over the course of the previous six months about providing Library support to our offshore staff and students?

Students in Dubai immediately began using the page and accessing the resources relevant to their studies with over 691 hits on their page in the first thirty days after it was published. At the end of January, 2012, after being published for just one month, the Singapore Landing Page was providing very reassuring raw data and statistics to Murdoch University Library staff that students in Singapore were actively seeking access to the specific resources, e books and databases relevant to their course requirements from this dedicated space. Students are using their page in greater numbers on weekends. We have embedded our Facebook page on the offshore landing pages and in general, students in the Singaporean partner institutions are beginning to use Facebook as a primary means of contact for Reference help and not solely as the social space we intended. We believe this is because a number of the Singaporean students are studying in the evenings when our Online Librarian Chat service is not available. Friday night has been identified as the most popular night which complements the peak usage times of our landing page over weekends. We assume the students choose to use Facebook rather than email for assistance as they perceive the response via Facebook to be more immediate. This student-driven need for us to respond with help in that space will be the cause of further evaluation and investigation by Library staff about how best to respond and further develop support if this trend continues.

Fortunately for the moment the Murdoch Reference and Information Librarian who is also our Facebook Administrator is happy to respond to these students but we cannot expect this Librarian to sustain that support single handedly and especially in her own time.

CREATION OF OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

National Year of Reading 2012 Virtual Bookclub

Murdoch University Library is a partner in the National Year of Reading, 2012. Across Australia, libraries are partnering with authors, the media, bookshops, publishers and many other associations to encourage Australians to read, to 'rediscover the magic of books'. Margaret Allen, Chair of the National Year of Reading 2012 and State Librarian of Western Australia said *"For 2012, we're creating a collection of books which, read together, describe the Australian experience. We're hoping that thousands of readers will take a journey around Australia through the pages of the selected eight books and come out of it with an even greater depth of understanding about what it means to be Australian."*

Murdoch University Librarians believe that the focus on Australian literature and culture in the final eight titles could be of particular interest to our international and offshore students and decided to encourage interaction and discussion by our wider Murdoch Community, across all of our campuses by creating a Virtual Book club on a dedicated Facebook page. Our Students in Dubai are enthusiastically participating in this Book Club.

THE FUTURE

Prior to the development and implementation of this initiative Murdoch University Library staff could only presume we were providing vital Library support to our staff and students working and studying in our offshore Partner Institutions. We are now beginning to turn that presumption into a confirmation that we have taken the right path in developing Library Services and support in a more personalised way by choosing and working with the appropriate technology available to us. These pages will remain a work in progress!

INITIATIVE 2. OUR CLIENTS BECOME OUR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Staff at Murdoch University Library have developed and implemented another initiative that is all about using technology as a tool to humanise and transform our Library services at Rockingham Regional Campus Library, one of our southern corridor campus locations.

INTRODUCTION

The Rockingham Regional Campus Library is a joint-use Library that serves three very different stakeholder communities - Murdoch University, Challenger Institute of Technology and the City of Rockingham. This Library has been internationally recognised as a 'best practice' Library and continues to receive accolades for service excellence and innovation

some 14 years after its establishment. One such innovative service is the “Computer Buddies” Program. This program has been developed and established merging two very unique perspectives of Library client need and an almost overwhelming service demand that Library staff quite frankly were struggling to meet at all, much less in a planned and sustainable way.

THE BACKGROUND

Senior students of a number of high schools within the City of Rockingham local government boundaries were required to complete twenty hours of community service during their last two years of study. These twenty hours had to be completed before students were allowed to graduate in order to demonstrate a number of prescribed learning outcomes. Over the period 2009/2010 the number of requests made for students to complete this community service at our Library reached a point where it was not possible to accept all students who were interested. The Library did not have the staff to supervise these students and ensure that each student had a meaningful experience. However we really wanted to support these students.

Another common and constant request Rockingham Regional Campus Library staff were experiencing was for an increase in the number of computer classes conducted by Librarians. With limited staff and other stakeholders to support, librarians were already at the point where their existing program was becoming unsustainable let alone having the capacity to offer more. Besides the demand for computer classes many Library Clients were also visiting the Library for personal assistance to book holidays, search genealogy databases, send job applications, set up email accounts, correspond with Government Departments and so the list goes on. The world was moving at a very fast pace to the online environment and many Library Clients did not have a computer or even know how to use one. But they all wanted to learn. This expectation of personal support was also stretching staff resourcing but of course again we wanted to help.

THE COMPUTER BUDDIES PROGRAM

During a regular staff meeting the usual conversation that arose each fortnight about how we might support all these client demands gave us our best idea to date. “Because teenagers are so technologically savvy why don’t we make them the teachers?” This would allow them to complete their twenty hours community service and we could provide our computer laboratory for them, supervised by one of their school teachers. They could help community members learn how to use a computer or create an email account and send email.

Contact was made with local high schools to canvass interest in this initiative but for most schools, except one, transporting the students to and from the Library was problematic. Tranby College was very excited to develop this program with us and they had their own

bus. We entered into discussion with the school Community Service placement teacher, addressed the insurance and duty of care issues and concerns and we had the Computer Buddies program off and running.

Students attended the Library as a group to familiarise themselves with the area they would be teaching in and a discussion took place about the 'do's and don't's' associated with the personal information they shared about themselves and what it was appropriate to teach community members. After discussion it was established that the students would only teach their pupils to use Gmail, so lessons would be consistent and websites were identified that were easier for people to learn about. Once the pupils felt able to try other sites they could do so at another time outside of class.

These classes were to be free of charge, flexible and attended on a needs basis. Community members were to be buddied up with a school student and learn what they wanted to learn at their own pace and could come as often as they liked, we just asked them to book in so the Library could ensure enough computers were available.

Library staff advertised this program widely, especially when asked for personal assistance and the local newspapers were more than happy to advertise free of charge. Of course the participants also encouraged other family members and friends to participate. Over time lovely friendships between the older students and the young teachers started to form and many lives have been enriched because of this program. The program support has become quite dynamic because the demands for assistance using a number of different technologies has been experienced over this time in keeping with the fast pace of technology and moved to, "can you help me load the pictures on my camera to the computer" and "could you just help me with my new mobile phone" has seen a real shift in the help currently being offered in the computer buddy classes.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

If some weeks there are more 'teachers' than 'pupils' the Library staff then get really excited because they invest the time to teach the students to shelve. This investment is always a bonus for Library staff as the students became proficient at it. Another task that has been established if there are more teachers than students is to encourage the high school students to create "how to" help sheets to be used as hand outs in the Library. 'How to send an email' is among the most popular guides. High schools students can also be asked to tidy shelves or perform some resource maintenance.

CELEBRATIONS

Late in 2010 The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) recognised the Computer Buddies program with a 'Highly Commended' in the ALIA Library Stars 2010 national awards. This award recognises new, exciting and inspirational programs for Library Clients.

WHAT DO WE KNOW THREE YEARS ON?

When the concept for the Computer Buddies program was first developed it was designed so that high school students could use their knowledge and abilities with computer technology to assist members of the public to learn to use computers. At the same time, the program allowed the students to fulfil their obligation to complete 20 hours community service, a requirement of their school curriculum before they graduate in Year 12. All this could be facilitated in a trusted, supportive and appropriately equipped environment. Portable technology devices now pervade our lives and the students have expanded their range of assistance to help others to store digital photographs, and to use digital cameras, smart phones, tablets, as well as send emails and search the internet more effectively. The Service Learning Coordinator from Tranby College is very happy about the way this program enables students from the college to assist members of their own local community to embrace technology by using their knowledge and skills base. *“It is a great service for the local community and it helps to empower the students.”* This service is also a very positive way to change some of the negative attitudes about teenagers within their communities. (Seeber, 2012)

The Murdoch University Manager for Regional Library Services believes the program continues to be an enormous success because the Library at Rockingham Campus is able to continue to support the Computer Buddies classes in this sustainable way. The program offers a new perspective on the fast pace of development and consumer access to assistive and portable technologies because it is their Library clients that teach another group of their clients how to use them.

CONCLUSION

Murdoch University Library “is a vital partner in the teaching, learning, research and community service activities of Murdoch University. Our objective is to provide the best possible library service, and to be responsive, innovative and professional in everything we do. (Murdoch University Client Service Charter, <http://library.murdoch.edu.au/About-us/Client-Service-Charter/>) The two examples described in this paper about initiatives developed and implemented by Murdoch University Library staff have demonstrated enormous and very positive leaps forward to support our staff, students and our wider community clients. We have used technology as a tool to help us personalise our Library support and services rather than as an alternative to the job of a Murdoch University Librarian. The author hopes that by sharing details of these experiences we may assist other Libraries in “humanising and transforming” their Library Client Services.

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