
Around the nation: Tasmania

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LIBRARIES AND THE VALUE OF LIBRARIANS

According to Wikipedia a library is “a collection of sources of information and similar resources, made accessible to a defined community for reference or borrowing. It provides physical or digital access to material, and may be a physical building or room, or a virtual space, or both”. What that definition fails to mention is that the *sine qua non* of a library is a person known as a librarian.

Earlier this year, the Tasmanian Department of Justice, as an openly stated cost reduction measure, directed the Integrated Law Library Service, operated by the Crown and the Law Society of Tasmania, with each party contributing 50% of the funding of the operation of the library collection of the Law Society and the Departmental, Magistrates’ and Supreme Court Judges’ collections, to make whatever cuts were necessary to save an arbitrarily established sum.

The Tasmanian judiciary and legal profession are not alone. In New South Wales in 2014 “Library Services” was formed as the result of a restructure of five existing court libraries which merged into a single “business” standardising services and work practices, rationalising collections and library staff. Other examples can be found in the legal profession in other Australian States and overseas. Government cuts to public library services in Australia are frequent and worrying to the Australian Library and Information Association.

Like the Wikipedia definition however, those merging law libraries into a single business often ignore the invaluable role of the librarian, in particular the still emerging role of the “embedded librarian”. The idea behind the embedded librarian is that librarians can be more than just gatekeepers and can be taken out of the context of the traditional library and placed closer to their clients “on site” so as to allow greater collaboration as to the library users’ needs.

In the recent rationalisation of the Tasmanian Integrated Law Library Service libraries that resulted from the government’s cost cutting edict, the judges of the Supreme Court of Tasmania lost their treasured chamber’s librarian of 28 years, Dorothy Shea. Dorothy was a pioneer.

Dorothy grew up on the Darling Downs in Queensland at the end of a branch railway line. The stories of her father’s droving mates offered her tantalising glimpses into a world far beyond a small dairy farm on the banks of the Condamine River, so she left school at 16, got a job as a secretary and studied by distance education for her Queensland Matriculation. When she found out university fees in Western Australia were about half those charged in other States, she applied to the University of Western Australia for admission to a Bachelor of Arts degree and was offered a place. She completed an Honours Degree in English Literature and, as all she ever wanted to do was read, she completed a Graduate Diploma in Library Studies in the late 1970s.

The sense in which Dorothy Shea was a pioneer and of relevance to the theme of this note is that she evolved unwittingly as an embedded librarian long before the term entered the lexicon of her profession. The one thing above all else that Dorothy took from her studies was the idea that librarians should not only exist to provide people with what they asked for, but that they also needed to connect with library users to make sure that what they were requesting was in fact what they needed.

Perfecting the “reference interview” is apparently one of the hardest skills for a librarian to acquire. It requires tact and a genuine interest in satisfying the information needs of a range of individuals without making them feel that the librarian is prying. Lawyers, and judges in particular I suspect, can at times be precious about their ability to assess their own research needs. I will return to this subject in the context of modern online libraries in a moment.

Dorothy knew at the end of the 1970s that her preferred career path was as a one-person librarian, and was lucky to obtain a position with the Advisory Council for Intergovernment Relations in Hobart, allowing her to leave Western Australia where it had become a habit to cross to the shady side of the street to escape the burning sun, and to settle in Tasmania where she found she was crossing the street to catch infrequent bursts of sunshine.

Her leapfrogging onto a variety of employment lily pads finally stopped when Dorothy obtained the position of Supreme Court Librarian in 1988. The principal employment requirement was compatibility with Chief Justice Green. Since then she worked with Chief Justices, Cox, Underwood, Crawford and Blow. Dorothy also worked with a further seven puisne judges and two Masters as well as with the present five serving judges and the Associate Judge.

Over the years there has been a steady decline in the time needed for traditional library tasks in the Supreme Court Library. This has been offset by an increase in more general tasks, including web publishing, archiving, proof reading and contributing to increasing the range of Tasmanian legislation and case law online.

The library is now responsible for providing online access to a wide range of Court information: judgments, sentences, practice directions, circulars, fees, publications and all prescribed and non-prescribed forms. The librarian combines the tasks of managing information coming into the library and providing Court-related information to external users.

To use the vernacular, there is no doubt that times have become tough for all types of libraries and librarians. When Dorothy Shea arrived in Tasmania in 1981 there was a thriving community of government librarians, but in 2016 that community is on the endangered list. Indeed, many universities no longer offer degrees in librarianship and such qualifications are often not essential to work as a librarian. In countries like the United Kingdom and the United States there is a move towards outsourcing library services, and the pressure to go down that path is likely to be felt in Australia in the coming years.

With most law reports now available online, there is potential to decrease the amount of shelving space in a law library, but electronic access has not made law reports cheaper, and in fact it contributes to the ever expanding universe of case law, with the associated increased costs for the library budget.

Dorothy Shea's view is that at its worst electronic access provides an "all you can eat" menu, delivered directly to the desktop of the user, bypassing the filtering function of the law library, which in the past has provided a cohesive information resource that caters to the specific needs of the organisation. She is drawn to a suggestion from Graham Greenleaf of AustLII, who, speaking recently at a future of law reporting forum, proffered that publishers should only produce slim volumes of headnotes for all cases, leaving users to match the headnotes to the freely available text of the judgments. Dorothy feels that another suggestion would be for judges or courts to authorise their own judgments, thus making access to judge-made law as freely accessible as legislation now is.

What our now retired and highly regarded former embedded librarian believes is that the qualities required for law librarians will always be in demand by organisations that value in-depth research ability, communication and training skills, early adoption of technology and readiness to embrace meaningful change. Until the day when people stop talking face to face and communicate via screens, she opines that a real live librarian, in a physical space, is part of the glue that holds organisations together.

So the message for those who control library purse strings appears to be to value our librarians, and combine collections by all means but embed librarians as well.

In 2014 the Australian Library and Information Association published a report entitled *Future of the Library and Information Science Profession: Special Libraries*. The authors of the report noted that there has been much concern expressed about government library and information services being centralised, and that there were problems caused when subject specialists were removed from frontline interaction with clients. The report noted that users may fear the results of centralisation, but that the reality was that governments will continue to look at a pooled library and information service as financially astute.

The ultimate suggestion made by the report's authors was that the future lies in convincing those who would move to centralising collection management, cataloguing and other technical services, to also embed library and information professionals in areas that require a steady flow of high quality information and a high degree of subject expertise. I suspect Dorothy Shea would say, "hear, hear!" to that.

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