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# 2008 Allis (Accessing Lancashire Library & Information Services) Staff Development Group Conference

Engaging your Community,  
Woodlands Conference Centre,  
Chorley, 20 May 2008

Conference reviewed by:

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My accomplished friend, recently appointed to an important new job, described to me her 'creeping impostor syndrome'. She related how she's never had the luxury of feeling more than six paces away from the full public exposure of her (imagined) inadequacy. As someone who struggled with literacy at school and who went to university relatively late, I recognise the fraud disorder. In my case I'm expecting the 'rumble letter' to arrive in any day; my distinguished friend is prepared for two burly security men to appear in order to escort her from the premises.

Judged 'kim-kind-but-dim' as a child I am inevitably drawn to debate on the support and engagement of non-traditional and difficult to reach library users. My emotional investment in the subject can make that involvement hard; I am transported back to bewildered youth. As such the Allis staff development group conference on the theme of Engaging your Community, with its presentations on engaging the Traveller community, the ethnic community and a prison community, contracted to be a moving affair; and so it proved.

Delegates represented a range of library sectors, public, health, prison, further and higher education. We began by thinking about our own ideas of community and who in particular we felt we needed to work to reach. Over 60% of learners at my university are part-time and, as such, non-traditional. I'm keen to ensure that students juggling a raft of domestic and academic demands, (and probably an impostor syndrome to boot) recognise and feel able to access the library and information support that I'm here to provide. My colleagues spoke about the need to connect with teenage customers, prison officers, foreign nationals, young adults, offcampus and overseas students, Travellers, the elderly and users with mental health, mobility or access problems.

#### **TRAVELLER EDUCATION SERVICE**

Our first three presenters are involved in the support of Traveller communities. Seb Smith is an area team leader in the Traveller Education Service at Lancashire County Council. He immediately answered the question we all dither about but don't dare to ask; the issue of terminology. The terms we can use (stick with me; I know some good stuff now), as long as we apply them precisely, are Gypsies, to refer to the people whose ascendants left India a millennia ago (they were once thought to be from Egypt, hence 'Egyptians'); Irish Travellers, for the group who have been roving England working as travelling tradesmen, knife sharpeners and tinsmiths for over a thousand years; Showmen, for the circus and fairground families, who travel from March to October; New Travellers, to refer to those people, often resistant to mainstream culture, who set out in a variety of forms of modified transport during the 1960s and 1970s; Boat People, for those whose economic way of life involves narrow boat or barge travel along the country's inland waterways. Traveller is a generic term that is broadly acceptable to all groups.

Seb spoke about the slaughter of 15 year old Irish Traveller Johnny Delaney in 2003. He was kicked and stamped to death by two 16 year old boys. One of the killers allegedly commented to an onlooker, 'He deserved it, he's only a fucking gypo'. Seb demonstrated how entrenched casual racism against the Traveller community is. He replaced the terms Gypsies and Travellers in genuine recent captions with the words Black or Jew. This created statements like 'The Sun's war against Blacks' and 'Jews are more dangerous than nuclear fall-out'. Seb described how Travellers find themselves bullied and excluded

and trapped in a cycle of misunderstanding and mistreatment.

Travellers have low life expectancy rates, high infant mortality rates and the lowest educational achievement of any minority group. He encouraged us, as information professionals, to make the small modifications that can lead to the big changes. Seb's team are happy to advise groups and institutions on how they can change attitudes but he recommends that we can start by normalising the use of the terms Gypsy and Traveller, including material and displays relating to the Traveller way of life in our libraries and information centres.



*Seb Smith concentrating on his art during Prescap's screen painting activity*

*Photo: Dougie Stuart, Prescap [www.prescap.co.uk](http://www.prescap.co.uk)*

#### **TRAVELLERS IN SPACE**

Our second speaker, Catherine Carruthers is based at the Harris library, Preston. Part of her role is working with the Traveller community. In order to build up relationships she visits children at home to read stories and conduct art activities. In 2007 she was awarded Allis funding for the art projects 'Travellers in Space'. The scheme was designed to promote mutual understanding of Traveller culture and of library culture. Two groups of children were involved; they worked at their home site and at the Harris. Young school-attending children created on a 3D craft display and older home-schooled teens designed and created futuristic space fashion outfits.



Catherine explained that circumstances sometimes slowed progress of the project but that the children enjoyed and were committed to their

activities. For the younger group involvement was contingent on regular school attendance and attendance did improve. She feels that her work has allowed Harris staff to become more familiar with users from outside their own cultural frame and made regular library visits seem ordinary to the children involved and to their families. Catherine will continue to work with the Seb and his team to raise awareness and aims to extend her scheme with a 'make a book' project. She is also working with Sure Start encouraging young mothers and older sisters to run Bounce and Rhyme sessions.



*Travellers in Space photos: Catherine Carruthers, Harris Library, Preston.*

We saw pictures of Catherine's Traveller children with their work. Of course they didn't look exotic or other; they just looked like children, like your children, shy and proud. Seb's photograph of Johnny Delaney in his school uniform with his brown eyes and fair-red hair, reminded me of my grandson, William.

#### **THE DRESS: THIS IS MY VOICE**

Linda Robinson spoke next; she is based at Morecambe public library. With colleagues, she was responsible for the regional survey of home-based and outreach library services that has resulted in the compilation of a set of strict customer care guidelines for the Morecambe and Lancaster area. She devised the Luck Book Riders Club, a reading scheme designed to keep young Travellers reading.

Linda also received an Allis award. She worked with Gypsy and Traveller girls to devise an item of clothing depicting the girls as they perceive themselves.



'The Dress' is a talking representation of the girls in contemporary society; an integral CD player allows the viewer to listen to the authentic voices of the items' creators. The bodice is made up of panels designed by the girls and the skirt comprises a cascade of photographs taken by each member of the group to capture everyday element of their lives. The work is self-explanatory, so it can be transported to Traveller events for display. When I spoke to Linda it was on exhibition at the annual horse fair in the Cumbrian town of Appleby where the Gypsy and Traveller communities have been gathering each year since 1685.



Linda described how the project allowed the girls to develop confidence in their own ability and in the force of their own culture. In addition the participants accrued further IT, research and literacy skills; they joined the library, conducted online searches and set up email accounts.



*The Dress photos: Linda Robinson, Lancashire County Library, Morecambe*

#### **RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: HOW TO ENGAGE WITH THE ETHNIC COMMUNITY BEYOND YOUR LIBRARY**



*Photo: Kim McGowan*

Alan Seatwo, Knowledge Management Specialist at Edge Hill University, recounted how he moved to Britain from Hong Kong when he was seventeen. His family lived within the poor Liverpool Chinese community. However, he

recounted that the city's public library provision meant that access to books and knowledge, rather than poverty, defined his earliest experiences of the country, and provided him with the focus of his future career.

As I understand it, knowledge transfer ensures that the *very important stuff* we do in university is actually available to benefit society. Alan uses academic information and skill to improve the lives of disadvantaged individuals and communities. For example, he provides training opportunities, information skills support and funding application advice to businesses and people working in the voluntary sector. In terms of raising self-belief there were parallels with the

work of previous speakers; a volunteer working with victims of domestic violence commented to Alan, *'I am dyslexic and this course gave me the confidence that I didn't have. Not only did I learn the community work skills, I also learnt the skills to find information to support my work. I used to think only academics know where to find these things'*.

Alan's understanding of engagement with ethnic communities echoed Seb's. People from Hong Kong are not happy to be treated as if their cultural identity is the same as that of communities from mainland China, and vice versa. This is a sentiment I recognise, at university, I distanced myself from attempts to herd me together with other 'mature' students; resenting the assumption that our shared elderliness meant we shared interests and experience.

Despite Alan's sensitivity to cultural issues he is conscious that people can be suspicious of our motives. Those he approaches can assume that he is out to sell them a product or is trying to get them to sign up for a demanding academic programme. He cautioned us that we need to take time to develop relationships, be prepared to employ a range of techniques including public events, surveys, art and innovation (as Catherine and Linda use) and persistence, and that we work with group leaders, influencing the influencers.

#### **BEHIND THE WALLS: AN INSIGHT INTO ENGAGING A PRISON COMMUNITY**

Our final speaker of the morning was Jenn Ashworth, library manager at HMP Garth. Her shifting community includes the men and their families and staff members who range from segregation unit officers to smoking cessation counsellors. Over half of the 840 men are serving life or indeterminate sentences; their average age is 35.

The men do not have internet access so Jenn provides information and legal research support. A significant minority of her users are working towards higher degrees but many are foreign nationals and ESOL (English as a foreign language) service users. As a mother and published author Jenn brings a large measure of herself to her job. She works to support the maintenance of family relationships by running sessions such as Bookstart and Toddler Rhyme Time for visiting children and is aware that her participation in these gatherings has prompted fathers to attend the library for the first time. Around 50% of her users have low literacy skills;

the stigma associated with illiteracy is such that many men try to conceal their status and emergent and reluctant reader support plays a very large part in her role. She encourages reading for pleasure by running a creative writing and reading group and having guest writers to visit and work with the men.

Being reminded about literacy levels in prisons made me unbearably sad. There but for a few well-timed good influences could be kim-kind-but (actually Kim a bit truculent but bright as a box of monkeys). Jenn let some light in by reporting some myths and fables (all unfounded) she's gleaned from her library Orderlies:

*There are books in the library which are flagged in some way - if you take them out, the computer system sends a message to the psychology department (Jenn thinks this prison myth might have come from the Brad Pitt film, Seven).*

*The library provides a list of recently read books to the adjudicator at the parole hearing.*

*You're only allowed to use the library if you are registered on a course in the education department. You need to have the permission of your teacher or personal officer to come to the library.*

*If you read crime books that are concerned with the same kind of crime as the one you are convicted of, the librarian reports this to your wing.*

*The books with the orange stickers on the spine are the ones you get reported for reading (these books are actually ex-teenage fiction collection donated to Jenn by an outside library).*

*Jenn saves all the new books and doesn't put them on the shelves until the officers have taken what they want first.*

*Psychology give a list of names to the librarian - none of the men on the list are allowed to borrow books with female characters in.*

*Someone at the library office has to go through all the books and rip out the racy scenes (someone is doing this, but it isn't Jenn!).*

And then she finished with a poignant tribute from a regular, *'The library is the place you get to come and read whatever you like, and learn stuff you've never learned before. I read anything. I like biographies and inspirational books, but I also like reading science fiction and books about health and fitness. You can travel anywhere reading a book in your cell. Your brain is the one bit of you that they can't lock up.'*

#### **PRESCAP**

After lunch Becky Atherton and a team of artists from Prescap (Preston Community Arts Project)

came to work with delegates and speakers. Prescap is a community development company; they use art in dynamic ways to support regeneration and social cohesion. They prioritise work with hard to reach and socially excluded individuals, groups and communities. Our activity was four collaborative screen paintings portraying our library communities. Of course we started out abandoned by our internal visual artist. But the jewel-coloured paint was gorgeous to work with and it wasn't really possible to make a mistake. I made the gilded curly head of a non-traditional student juggling her raft of demands contained in golden balls; family, fees, work, study, egg and chips, impostor syndrome (not really that one). That makes it sound a bit better than it was actually, see picture. It was a grand activity and the finished canvasses will be available to display in the libraries of the participants.



*Kim McGowan (left), Helen Anderton, Catherine Caruthers, Margaret Toft, Michelle Moore and their screen painting on the theme of Engaging your Community*

*Photo: Dougie Stuart, Prescap [www.prescap.co.uk](http://www.prescap.co.uk)*

It was a terrific conference and good came out of it; I know several delegates have contacted speakers to continue their discussion on widening participation. In conversation with a colleague from the public sector I learned that she'd considered prison visiting for a long time; listening to Jenn has convinced her to get on and do it.

Resonant themes emerged. Creativity can be a huge cohesive force and source of self esteem to those muted by events or nonconformity. Libraries can and do transform lives. People are resistant to being branded and we treat groups as homogeneous entities at our peril; if we want a response we need to keep listening and keep talking. And it takes more than one go, don't give up, nothing is easy, with the astonishing exception of screen painting.