

# **The Mitchell Library**

## **Finite Spaces, Infinite Demands**

**Kerrie Burgess**  
**State Library of New South Wales**

### **Introduction**

Evaluation is a familiar term at the State Library of New South Wales. It is a word that, for many staff, usually suggests statistics, performance indicators and other fairly dry but necessary 'stuff'. Evaluation is often perceived as being conducted for 'them' in government and does not necessarily inform Library planning and services.

I would like to think that our current evaluation program has challenged such preconceptions. Indeed, for staff involved in the program our activities have produced some sort of catharsis, a feeling not normally associated with the evaluation process!

In relating the Library's experience to the themes of this conference, our evaluation program has played a pivotal role in the articulation of challenging issues such as ownership of the Library's physical and social spaces, competing and increasingly diverse client needs and the use of electronic resources and technology.

Before discussing these issues in greater detail, I will provide some background for those not familiar with the State Library of New South Wales. Secondly, I will outline the Library's Research and Evaluation Program. I will then focus on the aforementioned issues the project has highlighted.

### **Background**

Briefly, the State Library of NSW is the oldest public library in Australia, tracing its origins to 1826 with the establishment of the Australian Subscription Library. The Library houses two major reading rooms: the Mitchell Library and the State Reference Library. The Mitchell Library holds the Australiana collection, which includes David Scott Mitchell's bequest. Within the Mitchell Library is the Dixson Library, the area where original and rare materials are issued. The State Reference Library holds the general reference collection. Apart from an extensive exhibition space, the Library also includes a book shop, café and function rooms. To indicate the size and activity of the Library: we hold almost 5 million items in our collection as well as 10,000 linear metres of manuscripts and almost 5000 hours of oral history. Last year we had approximately 1.16 million visitors through our doors and 5.5 million hits to our website.<sup>1</sup>

Until 1997, research and evaluation at the State Library was conducted on an ad-hoc basis that usually focused on quantitative measures based on internal processes rather than client perceptions. The majority of surveys were neither rigorous nor comprehensive. Furthermore, there appeared to be an underlying assumption that staff knew what clients expected. The current program is a response to such limitations.

The evaluation discussed in this paper has to a large extent arisen from the current State Librarian and Chief Executive, Dagmar Schmidmaier's commitment to develop comprehensive information on Library clients that informs Library policy, services, products and programs. To this end, commencing in 1998, the State Library embarked upon an extensive research and

evaluation program that aims to collect data on the changing face of the Library, and in particular, Library clients.

The research program, which is ongoing, comprises of:

- A State Library Research Group
- A quality program
- Individual Library projects
- Client research and evaluation

The State Library Research Group consists of staff representatives drawn from all areas of the Library. The Group's main aim is to feedback into the Library at large, issues arising out of the research and evaluation program. The Group also aims to draw upon the diverse skills and backgrounds of its members to ensure that their corporate knowledge informs Library projects.

The Research Group attended training developed by myself in conjunction with the University of Technology, Sydney. The training provided members with an overview of social research and evaluation and a greater awareness of its application to the Library.

Within my own section, Planning and Evaluation, a skills development opportunity was created to allow the staff member to undergo extensive professional and on the job training. Here, the aim was twofold: firstly, to equip the staff member with a thorough understanding of research and evaluation and; secondly, to provide much needed support.

The second component is the Library's quality program. Quality projects aim to meet the three criteria of increased efficiency, client satisfaction and reach. It is my responsibility, as one of the key support members of the program, to research and evaluate proposed projects. In turn, I monitor the projects to ensure that outcomes match stated objectives. The most important initiative to come out of this program has been the development of the three tier service model, a framework developed to meet all State Library clients' needs by offering a tiered and tailored approach to Library services, products and programs.

The first tier is designed to offer introductory and basic, information and services, for example a brochure explaining the Mitchell Library and a course designed for people wishing to conduct research at the Library. This tier will also offer assistance on the reading room floors, allowing clients, if they have a query or problem, to contact staff without being referred to a service point.

Request and information desks comprise the second tier. This tier is aimed at providing a service to clients who have a basic understanding of the Library and wish to access and use its resources.

The third tier is the specialised tier, designed for professional researchers with advanced requests that usually require the assistance of specialist staff. Researchers, for example, will be able to book the services of a curator for a set period of time. Other services will include a 'set aside' service whereby people can request to have material set aside until their next visit to the Library.

State Library projects, the third area in the overall program, focuses on the Library's internal services and processes. The projects tackled to date include a review of the Library's mail service and an evaluation of current work practices within the reading rooms. Projects are usually instigated by individual sections of the Library. Again, I ensure that projects meet agreed criteria and inform our wider research and evaluation activities.

The fourth and final section aims to develop comprehensive information on all State Library clients. Library clients include Mitchell Library and State Reference Library users, visitors to exhibitions, participants in our programs and events as well as clients who access us via our website, email, telephone, fax and letter.

### **The Mitchell Library evaluation**

The first State Library client project to be completed as part of this program was an evaluation of the Mitchell Library with specific emphasis on reader perceptions and evaluations of the Library's services, products and programs.

The evaluation began in November 1998 and was completed in August 1999. This project involved both research and formal feedback to Library staff and readers by way of a series of presentations.

Taylor Nelson Sofres, a consultancy with expertise in social and government research, was briefed to conduct the evaluation. I acted as project manager.

The evaluation consisted of eleven in-depth interviews and six focus groups involving regular Mitchell Library readers. Specific individuals were targeted in an attempt to gather support from important stakeholder groups associated with the Library. Apart from discussing readers' use and perceptions of the Mitchell Library, we also gathered feedback from readers regarding our three tier service model, in particular the third tier which is aimed at readers familiar with the Library.

As part of the qualitative phase, I conducted a focus group that explored tertiary students' current perceptions of the Mitchell Library and libraries in general. Students were drawn from the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), as this year the Library formed a Strategic Relationship Agreement with UTS. The agreement encourages collaboration between the State Library and UTS in research, teaching and professional development in the areas of information and technology studies.

A feedback session was provided for readers who had participated in the in-depth interviews and focus groups. This ensured the evaluation was a transparent process that was in the readers', as well as the Library's best interest. The session presented the evaluation findings and acted as a forum for readers to discuss some of the changes the Library had made in response to their comments and some of the proposed changes the Library was considering.

The qualitative phase generated significant interest within the Mitchell Library reader community. To ensure that all readers, who wanted to participate, could do so, the second phase of the project involved a questionnaire mailed to over one thousand current readers.

The questionnaire consisted of thirty seven questions based on attitudes and ideas raised in the interviews and focus groups. The questionnaire also collected awareness, usage and evaluation information on the Mitchell and State Library services as well as demographic data.

The random sample included overseas, interstate and non-metropolitan clients of the Library. Questionnaires were available in the Mitchell and State Reference Libraries for a three week period. The return rate was 55%. This is an excellent response, considering the length of the questionnaire and clearly indicates the strength of feeling surrounding the Mitchell Library.

Such a large sample has allowed us, for the first time, to clearly define various reader groups and the reasons why they use the Mitchell Library. In general, readers fall into the following four areas:

- Professional readers
- Personal interest readers
- Work or business readers
- Students readers

The professional reader is defined as the historian, academic and researcher specialising in the field of Australian history. The objective for these readers is primary research focused on original materials. While professional readers are in the minority, they are the most regular, and presumably the most sophisticated users of the Mitchell Library.

Personal interest readers are, in the main, amateur family or local historians. Research for these readers is usually a recreational activity. These readers are generally, less experienced library users.

Work or business readers overlap in definition with professional readers. These clients are for example, freelance picture researchers or writers. This difference between this group and professional readers is that they do not necessarily specialise in Australian history.

Students comprise of readers studying on an undergraduate and postgraduate level, in particular Phd candidates. This group also includes recreational students, for example participants in vocational education or self directed learners.

Analysis of the questionnaire data indicates that there are distinct differences between these reader groups, usually defined by attitude and usage. The varying themes arising out of the two project phases highlight these differences.

In the qualitative phase, which focused primarily on professional readers, emphasis was on the importance and the ownership these readers attribute to the Library's physical and social spaces. The main issue being the sensitivity this group feels towards any changes to the Library's spaces that does not involve them or correlate with their perceptions of what the Library should do.

In the quantitative phase, (the questionnaire) the focus shifted to service issues such as use of the Stack Service (the service that

enables readers to request and be issued with items from the collection). The change in focus can in part, be attributed to the wider group of respondents. In particular, a third of Mitchell Library readers reside outside of Sydney. For these readers a trip to the Mitchell Library is infrequent and time pressured, consequently, efficient and timely services are of utmost importance.

The key theme to emerge in both phases of the evaluation is the notion of the reader as an independent client within the Library. The majority of readers would like to use the Library without necessarily having to rely on staff to access, understand and use the facilities and materials. In particular, readers require more information in the way of guides and brochures that offer basic explanations as to the resources available within the Mitchell Library. This is an issue that the Library has already started to address; for example, we now produce a fortnightly newsheet informing clients about the State Library's services.

While reader independence is relatively easy to address, equally critical social and policy issues have also arisen out of the evaluation and it is these that pose a greater challenge to the Library. Issues of equitable access to services, meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse reader community, addressing the demands of a new library client, the virtual client, and providing guidance to clients in the areas of new library technology all place considerable demands on the Library.

### **The Mitchell Library – spaces, cultures, readers and resources**

To state that libraries represent important physical and social spaces within our community is nothing new. Indeed, as the notion of community re-emerges, as a possible antidote to globalisation, the library, in turn, serves an increasingly important role within the community.<sup>2</sup> This is recognised in recent ABS data that suggests that amongst all cultural institutions, libraries are considered to be the most important cultural venue within the community, amongst users and non - users alike.<sup>3</sup>

Amongst Australian libraries, the Mitchell Library accords a 'very important' rating. This is due to its origins, history and resources. For scholars, particularly in Australian and south - west pacific history, the Mitchell Library is recognised internationally as one of the most extensive sources of original material.

Holding such materials has resulted in many readers defining the Mitchell Library as their primary workspace. This is significant as, for one important group, the professional reader, the Library fulfills a personal as well as public role.

Some professional readers have been using the Mitchell Library and other State Library services for over fifty years. Many of these readers would have started to use the Library as postgraduate students and have continued, through their research and academic careers, into their retirement.

Many of these readers have developed a close relationship with staff and other readers. Indeed, until the late 1960s it was customary for the small group of regular readers to have their favourite seat, which was never used, by other regular readers. In addition, staff would personally deliver material requested to readers.<sup>4</sup>

A combination of intense use and reliance on Mitchell Library resources and an ongoing relationship with staff and other readers has resulted in this small, tight knit reader group developing a strong personal investment in the Mitchell Library. These readers are attached to the physical and social spaces within the Library in the way an employee personalises their office

space. For employees, office space can take on many individual and often emotive meanings. Changes to a company's space can therefore have a major impact on its employees.<sup>5</sup> I would suggest that parallels can be drawn between the work space of the employee and space occupied by the professional reader. It is clear from the evaluation, that these readers takes change to the Library's 'spaces', (their 'space'), very personally and seriously.

According to the professional reader, the Mitchell Library imbues a culture steeped in the notion of the Library as a place of orderly, scholarly learning and research. Assumptions as to what constitutes a library, reader and valid (serious) research underpin this culture. As Burns (1998) points out, these notions are very much linked to the concept of the library as a collector and preserver, which makes orderly sense out of information.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, as the evaluation revealed, these readers feel that this culture, their culture, is one that should be shared by all Mitchell Library readers. As one reader commented:

*"That (an) attempt be made to instill some understanding of library 'culture' and manner in regard to fellow readers..."*

However, questionnaire responses suggest that the wider group of Mitchell Library readers do not share the views held by the professional reader. Rather, the former represents a complex mix of readers and ensuing perceptions and attitudes. In brief there is no longer one Mitchell Library culture.

This is a trend that the professional reader has become aware of and is, in some respects, concerned about. As one reader from the focus groups stated:

*"There's a concern amongst the historical profession – in these anti intellectual times – concern that the Mitchell Library will lose sight of what it is for."*

Diversification of the Mitchell Library community can, in part, be attributed to changes in demographic, educational and research trends, and a simplification in reader's ticket criteria. As a result, the number of personal interest readers and students using the Library has grown significantly. In brief, these two groups represent 75% of the Mitchell Library reader community.

The personal interest reader presents its own challenges, namely, their experience and use of the Mitchell and other libraries is generally less than that of the professional reader (one third of readers have been using the Library for less than six years). As a result, servicing these readers can be resource intensive. This is an issue that has not escaped more experienced readers:

*"... it's very frustrating to get stuck behind some old retired gentleman that wants to tell the librarian his grandfather's history as sea captain."*

Personal research readers hold a more pragmatic approach towards the Library. For these readers, while there is an emotional connection to the Mitchell Library in the sense that they find it 'inspiring', their main focus is on the delivery of effective and

efficient services for their specific needs. Unlike the professional reader, this group does not hold such personal investment in the Library.

Students, the other growing group of Mitchell Library readers, present their own challenges. Many students have departed from traditional subjects such as history and moved to multidisciplinary fields, for example, cultural studies. Students studying such subjects approach their studies from a different, 'postmodernist' framework. Emphasis is placed on subjectivity and critical-fictive writing rather than 'traditional' notions of objectivity and academic prose. Indeed, one of the students in the focus groups had been a history major until her honour's year. She then transferred to UTS to conduct her last year in cultural studies. This student admits she is struggling in the transition from one conceptual framework and set of methodologies to another, which in turn places pressure on her research approach and skills.

If a student who is reasonably conversant in both disciplines has difficulty in moving from one approach to the other, what kinds of challenge does it present to Mitchell Library staff, where traditionally, emphasis has been placed on staff as subject specialists within a certain field? We are currently investigating ways in which we can support such changes to research criteria and methodologies.

Similar, in some aspects to personal interest readers, students hold a more practical view of the Library. Students understand the uniqueness and value of the Library, however they do not appreciate what appears to be the elitism of the small close knit, professional reader group:

*"It's elitist - there's a set of taken for granted assumptions, they can't see how difficult it might be. You can't scratch the surface unless you've been there for years."*

If there is a diversity of approach amongst the reader community, there is one issue that is shared by all, and that is, technology and its increasingly important role in information provision.

The questionnaire revealed that 84% of respondents consider new technology such as the Internet to be important research tools. However, of the 74% who are aware of such technology in the reading room, only half of these people (37%) actually use it.

This begs the question: if readers believe such technology is important, why are they not using it?

Results from the qualitative phase revealed that many professional readers are not all that familiar with electronic resources and do not know how to access them via new technology. A certain level of anxiety attaches to the use of such technology. This anxiety is part of a broader feeling that readers, due to the complexity of the Mitchell Library's catalogues and indexes, might be missing out on that 'break through' reference.

For some professional readers, such technology does not belong in the Mitchell Library, as it is not considered to be a 'serious' research tool.

On the other hand, personal interest readers are keen to use new technology. As one reader commented in the questionnaire:

*"I am over 80, so more access via (the) Internet ... would be appreciated."*

While eager to use the technology, not all of these readers have the skills to access and use the Internet effectively. This can in part, be attributed to their age and possible lack of exposure to technology.

The majority of students are realistic in their approach towards new technology, realising its advantages and disadvantages. Importantly (and contrary to some reader perceptions), this group is also conversant with more traditional research tools including card catalogues. Sometimes, students prefer these conventional tools, as unlike electronic resources such as the Internet, card indexes can put finite frameworks around one's research objective.

All of these groups consider the Library should provide some guidance as to how to make sense of and use new technology. This is something we are currently achieving by offering courses such as *Living in the Electronic Age*, a course designed for clients who are unfamiliar with technology and resources such as computers, the Internet and email.

The issue of technology becomes more complex when we factor in the growing number of virtual Library clients, that is people who access us via our website, email, fax and telephone.

Email reference inquiries, for example, have grown to the extent that the Library is considering offering an 'e-librarian' service, whereby a librarian is dedicated to answer information requests received by email.

Moreover, while the number of visitors through the State Library's doors remains constant, the number of visitors to the Library's website has more than doubled over the last two years. A survey of these virtual visitors reveals that they are not typical library clients.<sup>7</sup> Although this group resides in Sydney, they do not visit the Library. Virtual clients appear to view the Library's website as a credible resource amongst other (potentially less credible) Internet resources.

Meeting the needs of this new user group is a challenge the Library is currently addressing through its Digital Library Plan. At the same time, we will also need to be aware of and manage our virtual client's perception of the Library as a moderator and evaluator of virtual information and resources. While our role as an institution that makes orderly sense out of information has not changed, the nature, amount and diversity of resources has, calling into question how effective we can be in organising the virtual environment.

### **The way forward**

The State Library's first foray into extensive client evaluation has resulted in the development of comprehensive information on the Mitchell Library reader community, their behaviour, attitudes and perceptions. In particular, the project has highlighted the importance many readers place on the Library's physical and social spaces, the growing needs of an increasingly diverse reader community and the challenge new technology poses many readers. Some of these issues, for example, technology training, will



be relatively easy to satisfy.

However, it will prove more challenging for us to manage the impact felt by readers sensitive to changes occurring in their 'space', while at the same time, providing services to growing, yet less experienced readers. Further, we need to keep abreast of academic trends and new subject areas such as cultural studies in order to ensure that we can understand and meet the needs of our student readers.

While attending to the competing needs of our onsite clients, we must also, in our attempt to manage the growing plethora of relevant virtual resources, meet the growing demands of the virtual library client

Given that our program is ongoing, I will resist from claiming that these issues have been solved, or indeed are easily solved. However, ongoing consultation with our readers and the Library's three tier service model, will go some way to addressing these issues. Hopefully, by the time this conference reconvenes in a year's time, I or one of my colleagues, will be able to report in greater detail on the success or otherwise of our program.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Library Council of New South Wales (1998) *Annual Report*, Sydney, State Library of New South Wales

<sup>2</sup> Guldberg, H. (1995) "The economic and social role of public libraries", *National Public Libraries Conference*, Sydney, ALIA

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) *Public Attitudes to the Arts, Australia, 4157.0*, Canberra, ABS

<sup>4</sup> Berzins, B. (1982) "The Mitchell – a great Australian Library", *Australian Library News*, Sept/Oct, pg13

<sup>5</sup> David Lathrop in Vischer, J. (1999) "Will this open space work?", *Harvard Business Review*, May – June, pg 40

<sup>6</sup> Burns, M. (1998) "Borrowing from libraries", *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, No 89, November, pp 35 - 46

<sup>7</sup> See *Navigating the Economy of Knowledge* for further details on library client demographics.

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