

Transforming Schools Engagement Through Partnerships

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Abstract

In an age of shrinking budgets and a focus on sustainable library practices, school engagement activities are sometimes seen as lesser priorities for academic libraries, despite the educational, social and socio-economic benefits they produce. The University of Tasmania Library is transforming its school engagement program to respond to users' changing needs and provide a sustainable service in partnership with teams within and outside the Library. This paper will explore how customising activities to meet students' needs has had a greater impact on their engagement and learning than offering generic content. It will also argue that tangible experiences of Library and Cultural Collections can generate a sense of excitement and enthusiasm, promoting lifelong learning and an ongoing relationship with the **Library**. Working in sustainable partnerships can overcome traditional time, cost and staffing challenges, increase opportunities for engagement, and contextualise the Library within the University's academic and social mission.

Keywords: schools engagement, school outreach, partnerships, collaboration, experiential learning

Introduction

Tasmania's clean air, natural beauty, unique flora and fauna and relatively small population are just some of the many qualities enjoyed by visitors and those who live and work there; however, the state has high levels of economic disadvantage, stemming from poor educational, socio-economic and health indicators that are almost the lowest in Australia (Primary Health Tasmania, 2022). According to a report by Libraries Tasmania, almost one in two adult Tasmanians lack the functional literacy skills they need to participate fully in their workplace and community (26TEN, 2015). In addition, Tasmanians have a higher burden of disease and injury than other Australians, partly resulting in poor lifestyle choices such as smoking, alcohol misuse, physical inactivity, and unhealthy food consumption (Healthy Tasmania, 2022).

In tandem with the Tasmanian government and various organisations, UTAS is committed to improving the educational outcomes for future and current students and members of the community. As the only university in Tasmania, UTAS has a unique opportunity and responsibility to make a difference to the literacy, life choices and well-being of Tasmanians.

According to its current Strategic Plan (2019), some of the ways in which the University seeks to achieve these goals is by:

- increasing access to educational opportunities for those in regional communities;
- eliminating social and cultural barriers to study by developing an aspirational mindset, especially among students from disadvantaged or non-academic backgrounds;
- increasing partnerships with industry and other organisations; and
- deepening its collaboration with schools.

The Children's University and UTAS School Engagement have been working towards these goals for many years. The Children's University is an international program that encourages informal, lifelong learning in children between the ages of seven and fourteen, by connecting them with 'learning destinations'. Children complete a set number of hours by participating in activities at libraries, museums and art galleries, school holiday programs, and school and community events and clubs, and their achievements are recognised in a graduation ceremony. The program aims to promote educational achievement and encourage children to be responsible for their own learning (Children's University, 2024). The UTAS School Engagement team liaises with academics from all Colleges within the University to offer discipline-based activities for schools. These are promoted to all schools in the state via the Schools Portal and a regular email newsletter. Activities are held either on campus or in-school, and include tours, talks, workshops, challenges, and professional development workshops and field trips for teachers. School Engagement activities provide an opportunity for students to learn from and ask questions of experts in the field, many of whom can contribute valuable industry experience and advice.

Recent review of the literature

Like many other university libraries, the UTAS Library has been keen to encourage relationships with school students and staff, and even more so now that strengthening collaboration with schools is a priority for the University.

A review of the literature from the last ten years reveals that the main motivations for outreach to schools have been to improve students' information literacy, ease the transition from high school to university, provide access to the library's resources and study spaces, and encourage students to continue their education after Year 12 (Barry, 2021; Cameron, 2019). The most common services cited have been library tours and teaching sessions that have been reactive rather than proactive in nature (Cameron, 2019), however collaboration with schools to support dual enrolments and IB research has grown in recent years (Ono, 2021).

Despite these motivations, there are numerous challenges in providing services for schools. Not all librarians see schools engagement as core business for the library. It is often undertaken by a small proportion of staff who have the confidence, skills and passion for the task, and this may not be sustainable in the long term. Staff time and library spaces are in high demand at certain times of the year. This does not always coincide with the rhythm of the school calendar, which may limit when and where sessions can be held. Even if students have their own device, which not all of them do, connecting to the university's internet can be a time-consuming and problematic experience. An important question remains: if librarians are going to dedicate a significant amount of time to planning and delivering activities for schools, how they will measure success and therefore justify their commitment? (Barry, 2021).

Transforming schools engagement

The Library's schools engagement program for secondary students, formerly under the banner 'Step Up', had a well-established workshop design with an almost exclusive emphasis on teaching digital literacy skills. A library tour prior to the workshop allowed students to view the building and its collections, but it was a small component in a visit that otherwise centred on confining students to a computer lab to learn about the Library's digital platforms. Working from the assumption that excitement and enthusiasm are desirable, if not essential, elements in encouraging research, the present workshop design was failing to inspire much of either.

In 2022, UTAS School Engagement invited the Library to include a formal program of workshops in the Schools Portal. A new approach was adopted, promoting library resources and services to all students, not just those in Years 11 and 12. This was supported by research from Ono (2021), which revealed that an increasing number of university libraries see the importance of providing information literacy activities for all ages. The Library and Cultural Collections teams had only recently become one entity, so it was decided to coordinate and jointly promote the outreach offerings from both. As part of the process, a *Resources for Schools* libguide was created to address many of the questions commonly received from schools, primarily concerning access to resources and spaces. Other content included information about the generic workshops offered, and links to digital resources used in the sessions (University of Tasmania, 2022).

Librarians representing both the Library and Cultural Collections brainstormed and selected an initial set of four workshops to add to the School Engagement program. These were:

- The John Elliott Classics Museum, which had already established good relationships with schools over many years
- Plimsoll Gallery exhibitions
- Two information literacy workshops – *Fake news*, and *20 things you can get for free*, a workshop on using quality websites for research. Both workshops were offered in person or online.

All workshops were able to be customised for different ages and group sizes. The Library workshops were advertised on the Schools Portal, in their newsletter to schools, and through the Department of Education's communication channel. While the Library received a few enquiries from schools for the information literacy workshops, teachers seemed more interested in accessing teaching and learning resources that could be implemented in the classroom. Some of the challenges shared by schools were coping with a crowded curriculum, and the amount of time and effort required to organise an on-campus visit. The Classics Museum saw no noticeable increase in their bookings, but they continued to have return visits.

Case studies - Eric Waterworth Collection and Children's University

The Library had started moving away from a 'silo' approach by collaborating with the Cultural Collections and School Engagement teams, but there was clearly a need for further development. In 2023, School Engagement and the Queen Victoria Museum and Gallery decided to plan a joint event for National Science Week. Students who had attended a talk by Dr Karl Kruszelnicki in the nearby Tramsheds Function Centre were invited to participate in a round of workshops that complemented the theme, *Innovation: Powering future industries*. The Inveresk Library volunteered to be part of the event, which was so popular that numbers were limited to 200 students from public schools only.

In collaboration with members of the Special and Rare and Cultural Collections teams, a workshop was created on the life and work of Eric Waterworth, a Tasmanian inventor who produced gun sights for the Allies during World War 1. Waterworth's story was not just about the incredible achievements of a man without post-secondary education; it also highlighted the role of women in the workforce, and the work ethic and innovative mindset typical of the depression and war years. The teams curated a display of original items which students could observe, draw and extract information from. The Geology department loaned magnifiers for a hands-on activity about lenses, and students recorded their observations of the display items in a printed brochure about the story, which they could take home and share with their families. Three groups of Year 7 students participated in the Library workshop as part of a series of rotating activities on campus.

As each group consisted of about twenty-five students, a student ambassador studying Education took half the group on a library tour which focused on technological innovations, while a librarian conducted the Waterworth workshop. Students then completed the parallel activity. The workshop was later repeated with a Year 5 group from a small Central school in the north of Tasmania, and was then expanded to include additional activities for two separate groups in Hobart. A member of the Cultural Collections team, who had expert knowledge of the topic, co-presented the workshops in Hobart. In each instance, the Waterworth workshop was one of three or four activities the school groups experienced as part of a university 'Taster Day'. The School Engagement staff member who accompanied the Year 5 group reported, "The students loved this activity so much - they walked away discussing some of the surprising facts they learnt, and the teachers would love to continue this in their classrooms."

Following National Science Week, the Children's University invited the Library to provide a school holiday activity and tour of the new Inveresk Library. The children would be mainly primary school-age, with parents and younger siblings also in attendance. The main goals for presenters were to be welcoming, to share one's passion, and to help break down perceptions of the university as a place of elitism and exclusivity. The library, though willing to get involved, had to first overcome the difficulties presented by the age of the children, the need for a hands-on activity, and procedures around wifi access, none of which lent themselves to a traditional information literacy approach.

The UTAS Library at Inveresk was completed in 2021, so library tours have been a popular way to engage with the community. Rather than focusing on technological or sustainable features, as in previous tours with schools, it was decided to focus on the broader purpose of the Library as a place of ideas, and on the idea of 'place' itself. While books, online resources and teaching were obvious ways that ideas could be shared, knowledge and ideas could also be communicated through artworks and cultural objects. The children learned about and discussed the meaning of the carpets that had been designed by Caleb Nichols-Mansell, an emerging palawa artist. They also explored the vast painting, 'Weathering at the edge', by artist and UTAS lecturer Troy Ruffels, along with cultural objects from the Riawunna collection, the Centre for Aboriginal Education at UTAS. All of these reflected aspects of the natural environment surrounding the Library. The children and their carers were then invited to draw and talk about a place that was significant to them. This workshop was one of three activities on campus the families participated in during their visit.

The Library's approach to schools engagement has evolved from a focus on access to resources and the teaching of information literacy skills, to an immersive experience based on collaboration, customisation and exposure to the broader concept of what a library is. Storytelling and object-based learning have been powerful ways to share knowledge and ideas in a more relational, contextual and informal way. This approach has allowed us to highlight and explore important themes, stimulate students' interest and inspire further learning. Moreover, the practice of bundling the Library's workshop with activities from other departments within the university, neighbouring organisations such as QVMAG or community events, has clearly made the excursion worth the effort for schools. It has also had the effect of sharing the administrative burden, making

the Library's involvement more sustainable. Working with members of the Special and Rare and Cultural Collections teams has brought extra knowledge, perspectives and variety to library workshops, and interaction amongst all stakeholders has strengthened relationships and raised the Library's profile both within and outside the University.

Case study - Guilford Young College

In conjunction with the success of the aforementioned partnerships and programs delivered to younger students, in particular the use of materials from the Special and Rare collection and the library building itself, a modified approach to workshop design for visiting upper secondary school students was trialled. The ongoing collaboration between UTAS library and Guilford Young College (GYC), a senior secondary college in southern Tasmania, allowed for successive groups of students to test this new model.

Digital literacy remained the focus of the workshops. Sessions continued to be built around introducing students to UTAS resources and teaching them research skills specific to their assessment requirements, whether for UTAS units studied as part of a dual enrolment scheme or for independent research projects. This component was either condensed, or the workshop lengthened by negotiation, to allow more opportunities for students to physically interact with the library space and its collections.

This interaction was principally achieved by incorporating a visit to the library shelves. Though there is nothing inherently new in this idea, when placed against the ubiquity of screen-based learning, the library shelves and their printed books offered students a novel experience, one both tactile and immersive. Students appeared to relish the palpable weight and physicality of the books - notably the larger, hard-bound academic books in the collection. Furthermore, being surrounded by so many books in the shelves provided a floodlit view of the breadth of information available, in contrast to the often ethereal, roaming spotlight of online research. These observations were in keeping with the findings of Berg, Hoffman and Dawson (2011), who found that students appeared to experience a firmer 'sense of place' by virtue of the 'tangible characteristics of print books'.

The students' liveliness and energy were immediately evident when they began wandering among the shelves. A group of philosophy students studying Friedrich Nietzsche reported being motivated by coming face-to-face with a vast collection of texts by and about the philosopher, while a group of English literature students, inspired by the space, expressed their intention to form a study group that would meet in the library independently. While most students reported that they still preferred to use e-resources when researching, they tended to regard print books as possessing more reverence and authority, qualities that arguably carry a better chance of imbuing the research process with meaning. GYC classroom teachers observed a similar engagement in their students with the print collections. English teacher Christina Martini reported that 'many students were bitten by the "research bug" and experienced the academic excitement of finding great resources with which to develop their ideas.' Anita Manners, English Faculty Head at GYC, said of the campus visit more broadly that 'for them to be able to picture the environment, move through the spaces and see the other students has had a positive impact on the sense of their future identity.' Psychology teacher Michelle Harris labelled the visit an 'immersive experience' that enabled students to 'visualise themselves in that space in the future.'

All the feedback received from the Library's schools engagement activities has been anecdotal, whether verbal, by observation or email. Barry (2021) notes that anecdotal data in the form of comments and repeat visits is a valid form of assessment, given the difficulties in tracking the impact on individual students over time.

Improving students' research skills and supplementing school library resources remain an important part of the library's service to schools. Print-rich environments have long been recommended for enhancing children's literacy and improving their overall wellbeing (Dowhower & Beagle, 1998). No contention is being made that that same exposure and interactive experience are similarly beneficial to older students, nor that engagement necessarily equals learning. Indeed, the UTAS library purchasing guidelines for books have stipulated for nearly a decade that electronic books are the preferred format, making much of the print collection increasingly outdated. But as an exercise purely in generating excitement for the often dry practice of researching, spending time among the shelves and the print collections carries the potential to introduce the spark that ignites a passion for research.

Conclusion

In an attempt to develop a sustainable library schools engagement program in 2024 and beyond, the Library plans to create workshops that are linked to four displays over the course of the year, which will be curated by the Special and Rare and Cultural Collections teams. Themes will be chosen in collaboration with School Engagement and Children's University, and coincide with recurring annual events where appropriate, such as National Science Week. The workshops will be customisable for groups of different sizes, ages and of varying duration, and will be designed so that any librarian can facilitate workshops if required. The Library will continue to respond to ad hoc bookings for tours and research sessions as time, space and staffing allow. Despite the many challenges to providing services for schools, the educational and socio-economic benefits for students, the university and the wider community are a potent incentive for retaining and developing this as a strategic priority.

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