Introduction

This document serves as the evidence base for the findings of the *Digital Access to Collections Stage 1 project report* and *Draft national framework for digital access to Australia's collections.* It should be read in conjunction with these two documents.

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Case studies

Case study 1: Dolord Mindi at Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre, Western Australia

www.mowanjumarts.com

Summary

This is a strong example of how support from a large organisation (the State Library of Western Australia) can assist local people (Mowanjum Community) with their project to deliver culturally appropriate digital access to important collections.

Background

The Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre (MAACC) is a creative hub and Dolord Mindi a keeping place for the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal tribes, who make up the Mowanjum Community some 10 km outside Derby, Western Australia. MAACC and Dolord Mindi service the people of the vast geographic area at the top end of Western Australia.

These three language groups are united by their belief in the Wandjina as a sacred spiritual force and the creators of the land. They are the custodians of Wandjina law and iconography and continue to paint the Wandjina image to share their culture, knowledge and understanding of their way of life. The community uses contemporary materials such as acrylics and print-making as well as traditional boab nut carving and new digital technologies.

Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre

MAACC hosts exhibitions, workshops and community projects, as well as the annual Mowanjum Festival, one of Australia's longest running Indigenous cultural festivals. It is an independent and non-profit company, 100 % owned by the community and governed by a committee of artists. Proceeds of the sale of artworks are returned to the artists and their community organisation.

Dolord Mindi at MAACC

Dolord Mindi is home to the Mowanjum Community Collection and Media Space. This space allows the community to explore and deepen cultural knowledge through digital media platforms. The project aims to preserve and collect archival records, while training staff to create new digital media stories.

In this space, community members can engage with an evolving collection via a community controlled database called Storylines — part of the State Library of Western Australia statewide Storylines Project. Storylines has the potential to reach communities connected to the Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal language groups with satellite internet access.

The aims of MAACC and Dolord Mindi are to:

- Balance the provision of access to the collection and the preservation of the items in the collections;

- Maintain the physical, historical, and aesthetic integrity of the items in the collection;

- Aim for standards, both practical and ethical, current in the practice of conservation in Australia; and

- Apply resources efficiently and effectively to the preservation of the collection through trained staff and outside advice when needed.

- Expand public education spaces to support learning for the community and visitors.

Employment and skills

MAACC

The Mowanjum cultural advisors are elders, community leaders and artists who value the art centre's potential to make positive changes in the lives of community members. They are the keepers of ancient knowledge, mentors, teachers and friends. They guide Mowanjum program development as well as processes for managing community

Left to right: Maitland Ngerdu, Digital Collections Officer and Sherika Nulgit, Digital Collections Officer at Dolord Mindi, Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre (Wandjina image pictured at right).

Photo credit: John Petersen

collections and their continued support is of the greatest importance and is the reason why MAACC projects continue to grow stronger every year.

Every year, Mowanjum facilitates a professional development workshop with a visiting trainer or with Mowanjum Community elders. These workshops are aimed at extending the skills of Mowanjum staff and engaging the broader Kimberley arts and museum community.

MAACC has a growing number of trainee Digital Collections Officer positions allocated to Mowanjum Community members. All trainees are excellent at community liaison, connecting families with relevant archive content, and as Storylines administrators and advocates in the community.

Volunteering at Mowanjum offers a two way learning exchange or partnership between volunteers, Mowanjum arts workers, artists and community members.

The Western Australian Storylines Project

The Storylines Project started in 2013. A central archive contains photographs, oral histories, maps, ephemera, film and stories from the State Library of Western Australia heritage collections. The archive is being used to return material to Aboriginal families and community archives and in turn to revitalise the State Library's archives. In addition to this central archive, the State Library is working with remote communities to build and support local digital keeping places as safe repositories for Aboriginal cultural items and stories.

The Storylines Project at Mowanjum Community was the first of these community archives. MAACC modifies the State Library's central archive model according to its own protocols and the requirements of language groups and knowledge holders and to meet its own community's needs.

Storylines is an online platform that allows for access to be restricted. The majority of material in the central archive can be universally accessed where appropriate. There are different layers of access to material including community, staff, artist, local area member levels of access. It is often used by community members through local wifi hotspots. People use their own mobile phones and devices. Reconditioned laptops with wifi access are available to community members at low cost. There is relatively inexpensive local internet access. To help spread the word, team members take laptops into communities to introduce themselves and their work and demonstrate Storylines and show how it benefits the community.

Storylines allows digitised images of objects, people, places, stories, plants, animals and technology to be tagged and linked to create data knowledge profiles which reflect the many languages, stories and perspectives of Aboriginal Western Australia. The Storylines Project is managed by the State Library under guidance from an Aboriginal Reference Group.

Dolord Mindi

Dolord Mindi is supported by a team of Digital Collection Trainees recruited from Mowanjum community. Training in collection management addresses community unemployment rates, creates culturally relevant jobs and long-term employment opportunities for community members.

Trainees are also able to extend their experience though professional development workshops. These are held locally as well as interstate through art centre, museum and gallery networks. In 2015 Digital Collection Trainee Sherika Nulgit was a recipient of the 2016 National Film and Sound Archive Indigenous Fellowship.

Collections

Mowanjum Community Collection

The Mowanjum Community Collection contains cultural materials, artworks, photographs and recordings that are important to the community and preserve important elements of its heritage.

The collection includes bark paintings, boab nuts, boomerangs, coolamons, didgeridoos, digging sticks, dilly bags, flakes, maps, ochres, shields, spears, spear heads, spear throwers, stone tools, strings, fibres, hair belts, pearl ornaments and other items. The objects were donated by people with personal collections. Most common donators were residences with some family connection to mission workers, health care facilities and old Mowanjum.

Artefacts from the Kimberley are represented in various collections worldwide, however the items held at Mowanjum are especially significant because of their continuing links to country, as well as to the people who created and used them. Their descendants, the Mowanjum community and people living in related homelands are the current custodians of this culture.

Dolord Mindi Storylines

This collection features photographs, videos, sound, documents and object information. Dolord Mindi coordinates diverse recording projects that document the stories of people and places of cultural significance for families and language groups. Recordings are stored in the archive and are to be accessed by the community.

Storylines delivers an interactive platform that supports the maintenance of culture, language and law, as well as intergenerational teaching and learning. Having a community controlled database

allows Aboriginal families and communities to gain control of their own history, and assists in the return of photos and other information directly back into the community collection. In this way, the project also provides pathways for further repatriation from private collectors and major collecting institutions around the world.

An historic collection of rock art site photographs by German explorers in the 1920s and 30s has been imported into Storylines assisting current site identification and preservation. Traditional dances and songs have also been revived through reference to historic photos, recordings and videos.

Software

Dolord Mindi aims to maintain Mowanjum Community heritage through providing facilities and the Storylines digital database for community members to engage with the collection of archived cultural material, supporting intergenerational knowledge transfer as well as cultural production services and youth engagement programs.

Storylines software is used because of its simple interface and functionality, which has been designed with Aboriginal cultural protocols in mind. The Mowanjum Community's version of Storylines is independent of the State Library of Western Australia's version to support privacy and the platform can only be accessed with a password. The digital collection is not available for general public access because the collection belongs to the community and is culturally sensitive. Cultural material of restricted access including men's business and women's business is included in the archive but not in the database.

Process

The Digital Collection Officers scan and upload images of privately owned items, including photographs, brought to the Centre by community members. The officers tag the items so that they are linked to places and profiles of people. There are currently 3,245 profiles of people in the database which include information on family trees and language group. A profile contains a person's name, DOB, place of birth and siblings, mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, partner, totems, Dreaming, and if they have passed away Date of Death. Images of deceased people are restricted for a time determined by family members whether by culture or family preference.

The images are uploaded as JPEGs (and can be printed off for community members). Information, including the stories of elders about items is recorded into a spreadsheet before being entered into Storylines. Artefacts are accessioned into the keeping place and also photographed and documented for Storylines with advice and knowledge from a Council of Advisors comprising elders.

Some 90% of photographs are digitised and catalogued, 30% of objects and 90% of tape (but only 5% of the tape is uploaded to Storylines). Excel spreadsheets are entered into Storylines. For objects or materials record sheets are also generated containing all the metadata. This sheet is stored in a folder so the team have a paper and digital version on site.

Challenges

Staffing

There are challenges in terms of the team's capacity to make items digitally accessible. The collection is continually growing and the team is still uploading a backlog of data.

It also takes time to disseminate information about the project and to build the trusted reciprocal relationships with extended and geographically dispersed community members necessary for them to access Storylines and also contribute items to it.

There is an insufficient number of capable and trained staff to support the ongoing development of trainees.

Funding

While the State Library has donated the software and annual licence for Storylines, it cannot provide other operational funding. The project is fully set up with equipment but struggles to secure a sustainable model because of a year by year reliance on competitive grant programs, which are generally for project funding rather than for operations.

In particular, funding for the Collections and Media Space Manager position remains insecure. Arts workers are modestly paid through the National Jobs Program. The Dambimagarri Aboriginal Corporations has previously pledged matched funding and Lotterywest has funded the project.

"Storylines software is used because of its simple interface and functionality, which has been designed with Aboriginal cultural protocols in mind."

Connectivity

The team have cable internet and wifi. The connection is good but during the wet season there are often power outages.

Software

As a pilot study, the team is pushing the boundaries of what the software is capable of doing. They discuss and workshop their needs and ideas with staff at the State Library of Western Australia who then communicate with the *Keeping Culture* software developers. Functions for further development include mapping components and the use of local graphics. The team is working on the latter with Mowanjum artists.

Privacy and security

Storylines manages sensitive personal and cultural information well. It has a 'restrict button' to manage and vary access levels to particular material. The project ensures respect for sensitivities associated with images and profiles.

There is a fear of people from outside the three language groups using information for unauthorised professional research that does not benefit the groups. However, Storylines has a log in entry for the people from the three language groups only and MAACC works closely with the State Library about security concerns.

The team has established cultural protocols which are held in the platform's metadata and has determined with the Council of Advisors that some material will not be included in the database, while other material has restricted access for cultural reasons or family preference.

Opportunities

Storylines

Access to technical support from the State Library of Western Australia has been extremely helpful and Storylines is robust and suitably flexible to accommodate the needs and interests of its user group. It is user friendly for people who have basic computer literacy.

There are multiple ways to connect related stories and express them through different kinds of audio-visual materials, for example, a story may be told through a dance, song, totem, book, audio voice recording, photograph. Within Storylines, these different mediums can all be connected through the tagging function and levels of appropriate access can be determined by the community.

Usage

The team has recently created a private Storylines visitor access point in MAACC.

Positive and trusted relationships with community members and word of mouth are the key to encouraging community access and also sourcing additional material. Taking staff and laptops out on the road and into communities where the collections and local knowledge are located is a significant driver of a project that operates out of the Centre but is in reality networked through communities across a vast geographic area, not only electronically but also through personal relationships.

The material held within Storylines has demonstrated its capacity to revive cultural practices and traditions within the community.

Employment and skills

Storylines trains and employs people and develops community capacity and cultural development both in maintaining cultural traditions and nurturing contemporary artists.

Conclusion

Access to technical support from the State Library of Western Australia has been extremely helpful and Storylines is robust and suitably flexible to accommodate the needs and interests of its user group.

This program has increased employment and skills opportunities, and placed the management of culturally sensitive material in the hands of the community to whom it belongs.

Recurrent funding is required to sustain the program, including funding for the project manager's position, maintaining the steering committee and continuing to engage elders and compensate them for their time and knowledge.

Sources

- Katie Breckon, Collections and Media Space Manager, Maitland Ngerdu, Digital Collections Officer and Sherika Nulgit, Digital Collections Officer at Mowanjum Art and Cultural Centre
- Dr Inge Kral, Evaluation of the Wurnannangga Storylines Project (Mowanjum), Report for State Library of Western Australia (August 2015)
- Mowanjum Art and Cultural Centre fact sheet
- State Library of Western Australia staff