

# A splendour of letters: communication across the generations

By Judy O'Connell

## Biography



Judy O'Connell is a Course Director in the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University (CSU). She takes a lead role in the Master of Education (Teacher Librarianship) and Master of Education (Knowledge Networks and Digital Innovation). Judy is keenly involved with quality learning and teaching in online environments, and has also worked at CSU as Quality Learning and Teaching lead for the Faculty of Science.

Prior to employment at CSU, Judy worked as Head of Library and Information Services at St Joseph's College; Library and Web 2.0 Consultant with Catholic Education, Parramatta Diocese, Western Sydney; Head of Library and Information Services, Hills Grammar School; Director of Information Services, MLC School, and Curriculum Coordinator and Teacher Librarian at Bethlehem College.

Judy has published in the areas of digital learning environments and pedagogy; school libraries; virtual worlds; literature and reading. Her research has a focus on online learning, academic integrity and digital scholarship.

This is an abridged version of the closing keynote address at the ASLA XXVI Conference, celebrating 50 years of ASLA, held in Canberra in April 2019.

**The image of the uncertain voyage of the written word through the seas of time and imagination captures an extraordinary story that should empower the creative culture and scholarship of learning that underpins school libraries today. A great library is connected to the ages, as well as to the generations to come. The challenge before us is both humbling and exhilarating and deserves every scrap of our attention as we help shape individual lives of children and youth today.**

## Our story

The story of human communication is indeed extraordinary, and something we could well take the time to remember as a source of inspiration in our work. The world's oldest love poem records emotion and culture,

and that record remains captured on the cuneiform tablet of *The Love Song for Su-Sin*. This tablet was taken to the Istanbul Museum in Turkey where it was stored in a drawer, untranslated and unknown, until 1951 CE when the famous Sumerologist

Samuel Noah Kramer came across it while translating ancient texts (Mark 2014).

Amongst other forgotten treasures is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is an important part of literary heritage, but for the greater part of its history, it was lost. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the earliest great work of literature that we know of and was first written down by the Sumerians around 2100 BCE. The fullest surviving version, in the Akkadian language, was found on 12 stone tablets in the ruins of the ancient library of Ashurbanipal.

The Assyrian Empire fell in 612 BCE to a coalition of Babylonians and Medes, who sacked and burned the Assyrian cities. Nineveh was the great capital where the king Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE) had



*The Epic of Gilgamesh tablet*

On this Sumerian relief, the marriage of the goddess Inanna and the Sumerian King Dumuzi is depicted.



established his library, which housed copies of every literary work he could find throughout Mesopotamia. As these works were written in cuneiform on clay tablets, however, the fires which consumed the library did nothing to the tablets but to bake them. Even so, the buildings which housed these works were destroyed, burying the literature of Mesopotamia beneath them for over 2,000 years until they were rediscovered (Mark 2018).

*Many writings from antiquity, of course, have been deliberately destroyed over the centuries as a matter of political expediency, and religious zealots of every persuasion had had their moments as well* (Basbanes 2004, p. 67).

Yet the importance of literature and learning has remained with us from earliest recorded history. Today technology helps to share this historical and cultural heritage with current and future generations in ways that were never dreamt of when human writings were first gathered and archived. The Long Room at Trinity College Dublin stores amongst its treasures the *Book of Kells*. The book was created around 800 AD in a monastery in either Britain or Ireland. This same book is now digitised and online, as are many other important collections from around the world.

School libraries are often met with a different future than the one those supporting them



These illustrations come from a miniature book of classical Persian poetry (Library of Congress, African and Middle East Division, Near East Section Persian Manuscript Collection).

envisioned. Yes, school libraries continue to matter a lot to many people as children build friendships, parents connect with the school community and teenagers learn to navigate the information-rich world of today. At the time of writing, the most recent addition from the Library of Congress is an astonishing collection of classical Persian poetry, which includes a copy of the *Shahnameh*, an epic exploration of pre-Islamic Persia, consisting of 62 stories divided into 990 chapters of 50,000 rhyming couplets (Solly 2019).

Technology has made it possible for libraries to share globally, through the technological revolution. An exhibition by the Getty Museum, titled *Devices of Wonder*, also put a new spin on supposedly revolutionary things like 'multimedia' and 'virtual reality' by showing that interest in sense-enhancing and image-making technology dates back to the Renaissance and before.

Literature, technology and artefacts are glorious achievements of humanity, and foundational to the professional activities of librarians. Teacher librarians are connected to a marvellous thread of literature and

learning through the aeons. Our pride in our heritage should drive our future directions. It is so important to stay connected to this heritage as well as work as teachers, educators and librarians in a modern, curriculum-driven school setting.

### The technology wave

Our world changed in April 1993 when the Mosaic 1.0 browser was released to the general public. Now, anyone with access to the World Wide Web can go far beyond the passive consumer model to contribute content on the Web. Choices are always central to planning and futures, but the technology has been both a positive and negative influence on our work in school libraries. Without delving into that historical shift any further, the emphasis should still remain on 'the splendour of letters' and that we can and should continue to exemplify the best in humanity.

We are history; we are culture; we are a community. We are more than the technology, political trends and social issues of today. Never forget that, as we build connections and foster growing knowledge through our school libraries. Trauma and social upheaval (and even personal bias) are not our pedestal. But literature and communication are! A wonderful example of this communication of humanity through literature, media and reporting was the BBC *Newsnight* response to tragic events in London. In response to the Westminster attack on 22 March 2017, the actor Tom Hollander read William Wordsworth's *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*. There was a time in schools when learning poetry 'by heart' was part of the cultural heritage experience of students. At least today a good poetry collection and poetry events in the school library can still connect our students

to the aeons of literary output of humanity and in so doing help introduce them to the emotional connection and communication of poetry as a 'splendour of letters'.

Digital libraries remain at the core of our human endeavours and daily interactions within the work of school libraries. But understanding more of the possibilities in digital environments is also crucial to the work of the teacher librarian. These possibilities are stupendous and comprehensive around the globe. In Australia, the National Library of Australia has its Australian Web Archive — a massive, freely accessible collection of content that provides a historical record of the development of World Wide Web content in Australia over more than two decades. The material includes:

- more than two decades of the PANDORA Web Archive — a collection created in partnership with cultural institutions around Australia;
- government websites formerly accessible through the Australian Government Web Archive; and
- websites from the .au domain collected annually through large-scale crawl harvests.

At the international level, the astonishing Internet Archive — a non-profit library — offers millions of free books, movies, software, music, websites and more. Even better, this astonishing digital repository hosts the WayBackMachine — letting us roll back time and view information as it was on the internet in the past. Now the web is a communally authored space that contains everything from official government announcements through mainstream news reporting to personal homepages. It provides

a record of cultural activity and public debate that is far more comprehensive than the written materials that survive from earlier periods in human history. The web is also the Dark Web (the part of the World Wide Web that is only accessible by means of special software, allowing users and website operators to remain anonymous or untraceable). Not all of the Dark Web is about illicit drugs and human trafficking, however, as people operating within closed, totalitarian societies can use the Dark Web to communicate with the outside world (Egan 2019).

In other words, teacher librarians should remain aware of the meaning of culture, literature, literacy, digital environments, archiving or information and access issues any time, anywhere!

### Who we are

As a librarian and information professional, we as teacher librarians are connected to a history that extends back in time to a love song recorded on a cuneiform tablet. Our work is connected to more than curriculum or the latest app or technology tool. On the contrary, school libraries are places of potential and possibilities. School libraries are changing the reading and information encounters for our students; changing creative opportunities and encounters;



changing connected learning; and through all this, changing the scope knowledge paradigm we are working with.

It is our role as teacher librarians to remain connected to our cultural and human heritage, which is also changing and adapting to the current needs and approaches to connected learning.

Our heritage of literature, curation and promotion involves:

- **Communication** — sharing thoughts, questions, ideas and solutions.
- **Curation** — collecting and reflecting on what we encounter.
- **Collaboration** — working together to reach a goal by putting talent, expertise and 'smarts' to work.
- **Critical thinking** — looking at problems in a new way by linking knowledge across digital spaces.
- **Creativity** — new approaches to get things done through innovation and invention.

Bawden (2008) further detailed the digital environment as:

- 'Knowledge assembly', building a 'reliable information hoard' from diverse sources.
- Retrieval skills, plus 'critical thinking' for making informed judgements about retrieved information, with wariness about the validity and completeness of the internet source.
- Awareness of the value of traditional tools in conjunction with networked media.
- Awareness of 'people networks' as sources of advice and help.

- Being comfortable with publishing and communicating information as well as accessing it.

Teacher librarians are the key leaders in our schools in the knowledge futures of education. As we work with students, we are engaging with knowledge activities that ensure that our students can acquire that knowledge. Ultimately, our aim is to cultivate scholarly inquisitive mindsets; and help them acquire quality literacy through engagement with literature and learning activities.

In 2019 we saw once again the absolute joy of a scholarly inquisitive mindset in action when scientist superstar, Katie Bouman, designed an algorithm for gathering the data to create an image of a black hole — the first recorded in human history (Shu 2019). The sheer joy on her face, as splashed across the media, exemplified creative and scholarly endeavour. This same spark of joy is the centerpiece of our work as teacher librarians, through all the complexity of the role as it is today.

When you stand at the door of your school library and look inside, do you see your school library dream in action? If we remember that learning today is built on reading and information seeking in a connected world, then what we do must be built upon our own knowledge and love of our human heritage combined with the curriculum and learning needs of today and the future. School libraries must be vital, showcasing and empowering the best in good reading and research for immersion in knowledge. School libraries and teacher librarians can and should lead learning in today's interactive knowledge environments.

*Teacher librarians need to be research wizards, literary warriors, smart leaders with a good ear for gossip and a smile for the bookworks* (Bechtold, 2019).

Today teacher librarians are leading literacy, discovery and technology to empower culture and learning, yet it is the splendour of letters, that vast and storied landscape of communication across the generations, which can truly help school libraries achieve their current and future aims. A great school library cannot be constructed — it is the growth of ages and a place of inspiration for generations to come. Accept the challenge and the joy!

Whether you are an experienced teacher librarian, or simply beginning the journey in study of your first subject towards a professional qualification, remember to follow the adventure that is **our** story.

*Teacher librarians need to move with information technology and create inspiring learning spaces, that combine the best of the digital and the bound. They need to support and inspire. They need to create spaces for research, learning, and to whisper about boys. Spaces that capture our minds and hearts. They need to be the guardians and interpreters of knowledge ... or maybe that's a Marvel film?* (Bechtold 2019)

Would you like an adventure now, or should we have a cup of tea first?

<https://soundcloud.com/csuknowledge/networks/adventure-or-a-cup-of-tea>



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## Sphero® coaches kids to code with new Mini Soccer

*Sphero has released Mini Soccer — a sporty take on the popular Sphero Mini — a robotic ball and accessories that kick fun and learning into high gear.*



Mini Soccer has everything you need to get the ball rolling. Included is a Sphero Mini app-enabled

robotic ball — complete with a custom black and white shell resembling a soccer ball — plus eight cones to inspire creative challenges. Kick off the fun by syncing up your Mini Soccer with the Sphero Play app to activate a tackle with Kick Drive, program your robot with precision around the cones using the new Block Drive horizontal coding feature, or make the transition to learn more challenging functions through block-based programming in the Sphero Edu app. With hundreds of free STEM-based activities, the Sphero Edu app takes fun into overtime.

Mini Soccer comes equipped with colour-changing LEDs, accelerometer, gyroscope, a 10-metre range Bluetooth connection, and a rechargeable battery with 45 minutes of playtime.

Sphero has also introduced Block Drive into their Sphero Play app — a friendly introduction to basic robot coding, which is perfect for beginners. Movement Blocks tell your robot which direction to roll, while Light Blocks add playful, colourful LED effects.

*Small tech, big play.* Mini Soccer brings STEM tools from the classroom to the living room for soccer fans and learners of all ages.

Watch it in action [here](https://www.sphero.com/mini-soccer). Learn more at <https://www.sphero.com/mini-soccer>. For further information, visit [Sphero.com](https://www.sphero.com)



## Psychologist author releases book to help children deal with bullying and peer pressure

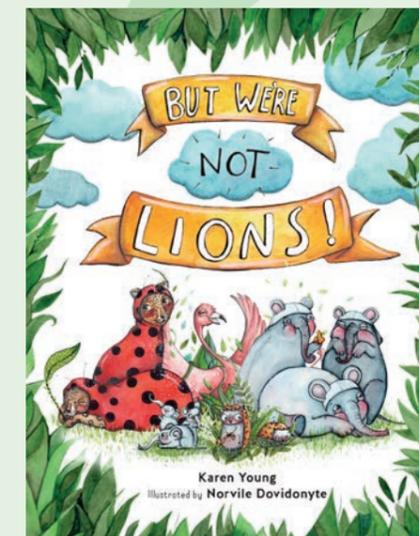
**As a psychologist, Karen Young saw first-hand how young lives could be empowered with solid information. With this in mind, Karen has written her latest book, *But We're Not Lions*, to strengthen children against peer pressure, bullying and anything else that might have them doubting that the very best thing about them, is them.**

This book provides a strategy for children to stay true to who they are, when they are being pulled to be something different. It opens the way to conversations about peer pressure, bullying, courage and kindness. With bullying being ever-present in our schools and society in general, including face to face and the emergence of cyber bullying, this book sends a powerful message to children that they are not alone. It also provides them with ways to deal with what they are going through.

Karen's first book, *Hey Warrior*, is a book for children about anxiety. It was also written to provide children with valuable insights and strategies to help thrive through the challenges that get in their way. *Hey Warrior* explains where the symptoms of anxiety come from and why anxiety feels the way it does. It creatively assists children (and the important adults in their lives) to understand



and manage anxiety. It empowers children by making sense of anxiety and offering them a way to find calm. By helping children understand why anxiety feels the



way it does, *Hey Warrior* helps to take the fear out of anxiety and moves children towards brave behaviour.

Karen has also written a follow-up title to *Hey Warrior*, *Hey Awesome*, which tilts the focus back to children's strengths. It explains that the same brain that can make us feel anxious sometimes, also comes with incredible strengths. The book includes easily explained, practical strategies to help children strengthen against anxiety in the short and long term.

Karen's books are not just for children with anxiety or those who are bullied. They are about strengthening important life skills for all children and helping them to be resilient in all areas of their lives.

*But We're Not Lions* is available in all good bookstores or online at [www.booktopia.com.au](http://www.booktopia.com.au)