

TOWARDS CULTURALLY SAFE LIBRARIES



NSLA Blakforce members at the CSLP video shoot. Photo by Joy Lai, State Library of New South Wales.

The Culturally Safe Libraries Program (CSLP), a major project of National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA), is a collaborative effort by the national, state and territory libraries to provide a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and colleagues. That is, one in which they feel supported and respected, and can express themselves and their culture, history and identity with dignity and pride.

While NSLA libraries have worked together on a wide range of projects around Indigenous collections materials for many years, this is our first collective attempt at genuine cultural change. As institutions charged with collecting, preserving and making accessible Australia's documentary heritage, we know that the information held in our libraries is an especially powerful resource for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The materials we hold can be both enlightening and wounding, and their sensitivity and significance means we have a responsibility to ensure that we are delivering respectful, culturally appropriate services.

RECOGNISING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Since NSLA's 2014 *Position Statement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections*, our libraries have worked together to consider how to address a range of barriers to delivering culturally safe services, including a lack of consistent and organisation-wide training, and the low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in most NSLA libraries.

It took a few years to develop a program that could meet the needs of 2,500 staff in nine libraries, but in 2017, NSLA CEOs committed to champion and fund cultural competency training for all staff, supported by

national Indigenous cultural competency principles and related governance measures. Alongside this program, a national network for First Australians staff was established: NSLA Blakforce.

CSLP is led by a steering group of representatives from each member library, including First Australians staff with expertise in collections and engagement, who are the local drivers of the program. Lesley Acres, Indigenous Services Program Officer at the State Library of Queensland, joined as the CSLP project officer in acknowledgement of the cultural knowledge, skills and experience needed to successfully implement the program.

BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

The basis of CSLP is AIATSIS's Core Cultural Learning, an online course supported by facilitated small-group discussions. By rolling out Core to all NSLA staff, we aim to establish a foundation-level of cultural competency that is reflected in our organisational cultures, policies, and interactions. Since mid-2019, 1,600 staff have enrolled in the training and by July 2021 all staff in NSLA libraries will have completed the course. Each library will maintain at least foundation-level cultural competency training for all new staff.

Anonymous post-training surveys have been overwhelmingly positive, with 89 per cent of participants saying they would recommend Core to a colleague. ALIA has endorsed Core as a recognised professional development activity for its members and we are currently working with a small number of public libraries to trial Core and provide feedback to ALIA about whether it is a good fit for them.

EMBEDDING THE ATSILIRN PROTOCOLS

Of course, Core is just the beginning, in both a personal and professional sense. Specifically, people whose work brings them into contact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections need to take culturally informed approaches to collection management, description, access and use of collection materials. To begin to address this, a full-day workshop was planned for each NSLA library focused on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network (ATSILIRN) Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services. The ATSILIRN Protocols outline the practical application of concepts such as secret and sacred materials, Indigenous cultural and intellectual property, and the right of reply.

NSLA libraries have long endorsed the Protocols as a framework, but members recognise that they are not as well-known or well-used in our collection practices and services as they should be. These workshops, to be co-facilitated by Lesley and a staff member with expert knowledge of the First Australians materials in the library's collection, aim to get participants thinking about how the Protocols might be practically applied in their library.

Scheduled to run between March and August this year, only one workshop could take place before libraries were shut down as part of pandemic measures. They will be re-scheduled in the first half of 2021.

SHARING WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

We created a suite of content to complement the workshops: videos featuring NSLA Blakforce members

giving their perspectives on the significance of each collections-related ATSILIRN Protocol, case studies illustrating the Protocols in action, and extensive links to further resources. We had always planned to make the workshop resources available for anyone in the GLAM sector to use but, given the delays, we decided to publish them before the workshops themselves.

Working with Indigenous collections (nsla.org.au/resources/cslp-collections) is freely available on the NSLA website, licensed under Creative Commons so that it can be used as widely as possible. We hope that these resources will contribute to the growing awareness of cultural safety in libraries, and the will to improve it.

This training is just the start of the journey towards cultural safety for NSLA libraries. To succeed, it needs to be supported by all branches of our organisations, from corporate services to collections to service provision, onsite and online, something that will be monitored through ongoing evaluation of our performance against the NSLA Indigenous cultural competency principles developed by the steering group. We have a long way to go, but together we are determined to get there. ✨

More information on the Culturally Safe Libraries Program can be found on the NSLA website:

nsla.org.au/our-work/culturally-safe-libraries

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Participants at an Indigenous Collections Workshop, State Library of Queensland. Photo by Lesley Acres.