

Libraries are the hubs for learning and building inclusive, informed communities

*Community libraries are being downgraded and schools are removing arts and humanities from the curriculum. These decisions will have long-term detrimental effects on society, says guest writer and educator **Erica Jolly**.*

Community libraries are increasingly important as schools such as Henley High School close their libraries. Libraries provide multidisciplinary avenues of discovery, at multiple levels and with infinite variety, from the youngest child and their carer/s right through to the oldest members of the community. Users can browse books of different sizes, for different ages, and with different foci suited to everyone – men, women and children – in their local community area.

In schools, there have been moves away from a worthwhile focus on the arts and humanities with a concentration on science, technology, engineering and mathematics ('STEM'). In too many schools, we are losing the inestimably valuable avenues of learning, earning, discovery and creativity in the arts and humanities because subjects are seen as 'silos' disconnected from each other. In the UK, 1 in 11 are gaining their living from some aspect of the arts! In Australia, we have hardly begun to think about connecting STEM disciplines with the arts and humanities ('STEAM'). Libraries are the hubs we need for the future since formal secondary schooling is limited by the more regimented national curriculum.

Face-to-face conversations with a librarian willing to listen to people's needs and interests, and with knowledge about the possibilities in myriad forms of media held in a library, keep human-felt connections alive. Library visitors can access the internet through a booking system. Henley Community Library is packed with people at weekends. The Early Childhood Play and Learning Centre within the Library is just one of its high use and well attended activities. U3A (University of the Third Age) has a group meeting in the Henley Community Library. Other groups, such as older women enjoying crafts and moving away from commercial to more personal connections, need this encouraging space. The increase in individualism in politics, with its accompanying loss of a sense of community, of sharing ideas, thoughts and enjoyment, undermines the sense of belonging for the whole community into the future. Young people who are unemployed have no money to spare; they can't afford a Kindle or a computer. And what of families who cannot afford childcare? The love of learning that a welcoming library brings with it advances their children's success at school. And at no added expense to ratepayers!

Any effort to squash library resources and people into a smaller space will decrease the quality of human interaction that occurs at Henley Community Library. It is so easy for short-sighted councils to destroy valuable human connections. Council appears to have little understanding of the quality of investment in the future for all community members, not just the wealthy, that the community service of such a library brings to the mental health and wealth of everyone in the local community it serves.