

Collection Connections Project

Report on the first quarter

31 March 2009

1. **Project Background**

Australia's public archive, library, museum and gallery collections hold the material and documentary evidence of the nation's social, economic and cultural life; as well as the natural history of its plant, animal and geological life. At last count, Australia had some 500 public libraries, 500 public archives and more than 2000 museums of various kinds, including public art galleries and historic properties (ABS, 2007). These collecting institutions are the custodians of records and objects of local, regional and national significance. Their collections comprise the legacy of the nation's history and are the foundations of its collective knowledge and memory.

Many small collecting organisations, particularly in rural and regional Australia, lack access to the tools, infrastructure and support that would enable them to document and display their collections electronically. Most of these collecting organisations are small and rely on volunteer effort. Typically the skills do not exist in these organisations to develop and support online activity, and it is often not easy for people working in these organisations to access training or easy-to-use instructions that would help them engage with the online environment. A number of national initiatives, such as *Picture Australia* and *Collections Australia Network*, have enabled some of these collections to become visible online via central portals, but a majority of collecting organisations and the items they hold remain unrepresented online. Moreover, existing initiatives are not targeted at building local communities of interest, which we believe is the key to increasing public participation and commitment, and thus contributing to the sustainability of collections and their custodian organisations.

The advent of 'Web 2.0' technologies shows great potential to provide smaller organisations with low cost, localised ways to display and promote their collections online and to develop new ways to create public engagement and participation in collecting, conservation and interpretation activities.

A wiki-based model of developing local communities of interest in heritage collections has not yet been tried in Australia, although there are successful examples from the USA (e.g. Minnesota Historical Society www.placeography.org) New Zealand (eg. Horowhenua Library <http://horowhenua.kete.net.nz/>) and UK (e.g. Science Museum: <http://objectwiki.sciencemuseum.org.uk/wiki/Home>)

Collections Care is one of the key initiatives proposed by the Collections Council of Australia to support the long term sustainability of collections in regional and remote Australia. The *Collections Connections* Project is an action research project designed to explore the potential of new web 2.0 technology to engage and sustain interest in local heritage collections. The aim of the project is to demonstrate that wikis provide a low-cost, sustainable way of increasing interest, knowledge and participation in the preservation and interpretation of heritage collections. The target organisations to use the wiki are generally very small and are often staffed by volunteers. A wiki platform that is hosted externally but which includes training and support for participants will provide the best opportunity to employ Web 2.0 technology to support heritage collections within rural and regional communities as envisaged in *Collections Care*. The pilot project is funded by a grant from the .auDA Foundation with matching resources from the Collections Council.

2. Project Objective(s)

The objective of the *Collection Connections* Project is to develop a sustainable business model and technology platform to enable small collecting organisations to create and manage participative online heritage projects. Through a pilot application of wiki technology with a single small collecting organisation, the Project aims to investigate the factors which contribute to the success of such online initiatives and to identify those which inhibit or impede its success.

Should the pilot prove successful as developed it will provide a model and a platform for the utilisation of wiki technology within the Regional Hubs model proposed in other Collections Council's initiatives, including *CollectionsCare*. and the *Australian Framework for Digital Heritage Collections*.

3. Target Outcome(s)/Benefits

The outcomes/benefits expected during the Project are:

Table 1: Outcomes, benefits and associated measures during the project

Target Outcomes	Measure
Development of a robust and replicable wiki platform for use by rural and regional collecting organisations.	Successful establishment of wiki; performance and scalability.
Practical experience in establishing and maintaining a community of interest around local heritage collections.	Familiarity with wiki technologies within CCA and pilot organisation.
Greater knowledge of technical and organisational issues, to inform further development and future implementations.	Awareness of technical and organisational issues amongst CCA staff and pilot organisation.
Increased sector and public awareness of the potential of Web 2.0 technologies to support collections.	Promotion of the project within and beyond the sector.
Increased interest in the potential of wikis as instruments for building communities of interest in rural and regional Australia.	Enquiries about the project, proposals to extend or replicate the project model.

Table 2: Long term target outcomes

Target Outcomes	Measure
Increased understanding of the potential of wiki technology to support small collecting organisations.	Empirical research findings on effective business models and technological platforms. Promotion of research findings through publications, conferences etc.
Increased awareness within the collections sector of new collaborative tools for promoting collections.	Increased uptake of these technologies within the collections sector.

Target Outcomes	Measure
Investment from government, sponsors and philanthropic bodies in online collaborative tools for small regional collecting organisations.	Follow up investment in online tools using the business model and technical platform developed in this pilot project.
Increased community use of Internet based technologies	Levels of take-up and participation.

4. *Project Progress Summary*

The project formally commenced in January 2009 with the finalisation of a formal project plan. After some preliminary enquiries, a pilot organisation for the project was identified with the assistance of the History Trust of South Australia. The Collections Council's has contracted a project manager, Mr Darren Peacock, to manage the project on its behalf.

Following an initial meeting in December with members of the Mallala and District Historical Committee, that group has agreed to participate as the pilot organisation for the project. Mallala is a small community, approximately 75km north of Adelaide, established in 1840, with a current population of around 500 people. The Mallala Museum was opened in 1969 in the old flour mill building (see below).

Figure 1. Mallala Museum building



The Museum is operated by a group of volunteers with the support of the Mallala and Districts Council. The Chair of the Historical Committee is Mr Marcus Strudwicke. In recent years, the museum has undergone a major refurbishment through the active contribution of the Committee and other volunteers.

After the initial meeting of the Project Manager with the Committee in December 2008, a second meeting was held at the Mallala Museum on 21 January 2009, where the Committee agreed to participate as the pilot organisation for the Collection Connections project.

Since then, there has been significant progress in establishing the infrastructure for the project, developing content for the wiki site and training volunteers, who are primarily retired older persons, in the use of computers and the Internet.

Two planning meetings have been held at the museum on 25 February and 25 March. A project management wiki has been established as a way to facilitate information sharing and for project participants to practice using a wiki tool.

Figure 2. Home page for the project 'practice' wiki.



Project participants have access to read, write and edit content in this closed wiki environment. In the first month of operation the project or 'practice' wiki has become the repository of first drafts of topics for the 'proper' wiki. The project wiki will continue to be the place where project participants can author, share and edit content and communicate about the project pending the development and testing of the 'real' wiki site.

In March, the Historical Committee took possession of a new laptop computer funded by the project. The laptop will enable museum volunteers to undertake content development for the wiki and to participate in the project management wiki.

This month also saw the establishment of the wireless broadband network on site at the Mallala Museum. This network provides Internet access at the Museum site for the first time. As a wireless network, it enables multiple devices to be connected to the Internet simultaneously which will facilitate group work with the wiki on site at the museum. With the new laptop, the museum's existing PC and the personal laptops of museum volunteers (two of whom have just purchased laptops at least in part because of the project) up to five people could be authoring and editing on site at the same time. The Project has committed to funding the set up costs and ongoing internet charges of the Museum for 12 months to support the project.

Training for participants in using computer technology is critical to the success of the project. In March an agreement was reached with the Gawler Volunteer Resource Centre, located in a nearby regional centre, to undertake small group training in their training room, which has 4 networked PCs. A four week program of introductory training has been scheduled commencing 27 April. At the end of that program, two further sessions of training in wiki use will be conducted by the Project Manager on site at the Museum.

The official handover of the laptop and establishment of the wireless network was marked by a visit from the CEO of the Collections Council to the museum on March 25. A media release of this event was prepared (see Attachment A) and a photographer from the local *Plains Producer* newspaper attended. The resulting stories about the project in *The Plains Producer* and *The Bunyip* are supplied as Attachments B and C.

5. Looking ahead

Ultimately the project wiki will be established using the *Mediawiki* software. The preparation of a functional specification for the site is underway as the content and services desired by the Mallala group become clearer. A test implementation of the software will be established on an externally hosted web server in April.

In January the Collections Council registered the domain name www.nowandthen.net.au which will serve as the first level domain for the Collection Connections Project. The Mallala wiki will use the sub domain: www.mallala.nowandthen.net.au

Mr John O'Brien will be contracted as the initial site developer. It is expected that the site will be able to be publicly released in July, once all the content has been loaded.

Once the site is public a number of sub-projects are planned to engage various community members and groups in contributing to the wiki such as school children, residents of the aged care facility and local sporting clubs.

From the period July to November ongoing monitoring and evaluation will assess the issues, achievements and learnings from the pilot project.

By the end of the year, a decision will be made by the Historical Committee on whether they wish to continue to maintain the project into the future.