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LIBRARIANSHIP IN PRACTICE

Hide-and-seek in Macquarie University Library: geocaching as an educational and outreach tool¹

Andrew Spencer*

Library, Macquarie University, North Ryde, Australia

* Email: andrew.spencer@mq.edu.au

Abstract

Geocaching is an activity which libraries of all types can use as an educational and promotional tool. It is a variation on a scavenger hunt and allows libraries to showcase their services and facilities to people who may not be regular users of the library. Geocaching can also be used by libraries as an educational tool, and examples of educational outcomes related to geocaching are provided. The placement of a geocache within the Macquarie University Library building is used as an example of a library using geocaching as an educational and outreach tool. The geocache has received a very positive response from the local geocaching community. This article provides some background to geocaching, as well as examples of library-related geocaches from around the world.

The issue

Libraries are always looking for ways in which they can attract people into their facilities and showcase the services and resources that they offer. Making the library attractive to the community can be one way in which libraries justify their existence, in a time of reduced library funding and calls for libraries to demonstrate their value and relevance. In order to be effective, outreach activities need to be 'ongoing, creative, and meaningful to their intended audiences' (Kowalski 2011, 67). One of the tools which libraries can utilise as part of their outreach activities is geocaching.

The usual definition of geocaching is a high-tech version of hide-and-seek or scavenger hunt. The website www.geocaching.com describes how geocaching originated on 3 May 2000 and explains how the activity works. A geocacher hides a container (the geocache) and records the latitude and longitude where it is hidden. The hider then creates a listing for the geocache, which includes the latitude and longitude of the hiding spot, on one of the geocache listing sites. Geocachers who wish to find a geocache can obtain the coordinates of its hiding place from the listing website, and then go and search for it. When they find it they sign the logbook inside the geocache to prove that they found it. If they wish they can then log their find on the listing website. The most widely used listing site is www.geocaching.com, which in November 2014 listed over 2.5 million active geocaches all over the world and over 6 million users.

The proliferation over recent years of smartphones with GPS (Global Positioning System) receivers built into them has made it easier for many more people to participate in geocaching. By using one of the several geocaching apps that are available, GPS-enabled smartphones can display a map of nearby geocaches.

Geocaching is an activity which people of all ages can participate in – from families with children, to retirees travelling around the country. This makes geocaching an ideal way for all types of libraries to showcase their services and facilities, and engage with their community.

Initial assessment

There are several examples of geocaching being used in an educational context by libraries. Adam and Mowers (2007, 40) explain that school libraries can use geocaching as a way of ‘engaging important content and making authentic connections’. The Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County created a series of geocaches as part of a local Big Read programme. The clues to the locations of the geocaches could be found within the book *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the title selected as the feature title for the Big Read (<http://librarygamingtoolkit.org/plcmcgeocaching.html>).

The learning opportunities that finding a geocache offers are described by Clough (2010). These include:

- Intentional learning opportunities: for example carrying out searches on the internet to solve a puzzle cache, learning something about the area in which the cache is hidden.
- Active learning opportunities: for example how to use a GPS receiver.
- Constructive learning opportunities: learning based on wanting to learn rather than having to learn.
- Authentic learning opportunities: opportunities to overcome real-world challenges, for example a puzzle cache in the field.
- Cooperative learning opportunities: for example learning from fellow geocachers, gathering information from the online logs of previous finders.

Geocaching can also be applied as an educational technology. It is a way of engaging with students that uses technology they are familiar with, but which allows them to use that technology in a novel way as part of their learning.

Educational caches are not solely the domain of libraries within educational institutions. A geocache could be placed in a public library to educate cachers either about the library itself, or about the local area and its history. This could be done having geocachers complete a search for clues within the library and/or at local historically significant sites, which lead cachers to the cache hidden in the library. Suarez and Dudley (2012) note how geocaching can be used as part of a public library’s programme aimed at teenagers by teaching them new technology-related skills and also providing them with outdoor activities.

Libraries can also utilise geocaching as a way of attracting people to the library who may not otherwise come in to the library. It falls under the definition of outreach used by Dennis (2012, 369): ‘any initiative that reaches an audience that otherwise may not have been exposed to library resources or services.’ Geocaches in libraries can be used ‘to provide

covert library orientation and marketing’ (Nolan et al. 2008). Nolan and colleagues placed a geocache in the Natural Sciences Library at the University of Washington, and found that geocachers who were not associated with the university were encouraged to visit the library in order to find the geocache, a prime example of an outreach activity. Geocaches can also provide ‘a way of making the library more fun to our users as well as attracting more folks to our library’ (Musser 2008, 131). Musser reported that their geocache had been found by people who regularly passed by the building but had never gone inside. This was one the reasons that a geocache was placed in the new Macquarie University Library building – to attract people inside.

Action

In August 2011, Macquarie University opened a new library building which features the first Automated Storage and Retrieval System (ASRS) in a library in the Southern Hemisphere. There was a lot of interest in this technology from staff and students on campus, as well as from the general community. Staff conducted tours of the new building for many groups and were looking for a way to promote the new library and the ASRS to those people who were unable to take a tour. One of the ways decided on to publicise and showcase the building was to place a geocache inside the library. The reasoning was that this would encourage people who may not use or be aware of the library (which includes students and staff of the university, as well as members of the general public) to visit and gain an understanding of what the library can offer them. After preparing a proposal for library management, which was accepted, the geocache container was built and hidden. The proposal addressed issues such as the benefits of having a geocache in the library, who would maintain the geocache, and the potential impact on the library of having a geocache in the building. On 31 May 2012 the geocache (titled ‘Bibliotheca Robotum’, or ‘Robot Library’) was listed on www.geocaching.com. The first geocacher to find it did so just after 8am on 1 June 2012.

In order to find the geocache, geocachers need to find a waypoint outside the library which has a ‘secret code’, that is, a call number, on it. This waypoint is hidden near one of the viewing windows into the ASRS, which allows visitors to see the ASRS at work. These viewing windows are located at a little-visited part of the library building, so it was hoped that placing the waypoint here would make them more popular. Armed with the call number, the geocacher needs to enter the library and find the ‘book’ which has this call number. This book has been hollowed out to allow a container to be placed inside it to hold the logbook and trinkets. It is shelved as the last book in the collection, so finders need to make their way through the whole building in order to find it. Having the geocache located here also makes it easier for geocachers to replace it in the correct location on the shelf, as they do not need to know how to read a Library of Congress call number in order to re-shelve the geocache.

Results

In the time that the geocache has been active, it has been found 100 times (as of 5 November 2014), and it has received many positive comments from finders, such as those listed below:

I knew this would be a good educational trip when the 5 year old asked what a library was for, and why students needed to spend time in one!

Thanks for putting together such a well thought out cache, and for giving me a reason to look through the new library [former Macquarie University student].

Wow. Just wow. As of this moment this is my favourite cache!

I'm in love with this cache [current Macquarie University student].

A fabulous caching experience, and a trip to an area in the library I wouldn't have otherwise visited [current Macquarie University student].

Excellent cache! Really enjoyed peeking in at the underbelly of the ASRS.

Having briefly worked with the robots, I am ecstatic to see a cache was made for the new library! [former library staff member].

Have been meaning to do this one for a while, and now that I've done it, I am sooo glad I did. What an awesome idea and awesome cache!

As shown by the comments above, the geocache has encouraged previous students and staff to return to the library, and has increased the awareness of the library within the local community. This was one of the goals of the geocache – to use it as a marketing and promotional tool. In this regard, staff feel it has been a success. The www.geocaching.com website has a 'Favorites' system, which allows geocachers to assign 'Favorite Points' to those geocaches which they enjoyed finding. Our geocache currently has 50 Favorite Points, which makes it the second-most Favorited geocache (as of 5 November 2014) out of the 594 active geocaches within a 10 kilometre radius of the library. It was listed as the 'Geocache of the Month' for February 2014 on the website of Geocaching NSW. Library geocaches are generally well-received by the caching community, so they are a viable outreach and promotional tool that libraries can use to promote themselves and their services and collections.

Lessons learned

The time and cost involved in placing the geocache in the library has been worth it, based on the positive reception that it has had from the geocaching community. Staff found that it is important to educate library staff about the geocache, as geocachers may ask for assistance at the information desk, and it helps to make the geocacher's visit pleasant if the staff have an idea of what they are looking for. Some examples of geocacher-staff interactions (as recorded by the geocachers in the online logs on the geocache page):

The guy at the info desk helped point me to the right floor and area

Made my way into the library and found the information desk where I showed the gentleman my information. He was keen to look it up to make sure it was still available and had not been borrowed by someone else. I assured him it would be there and he seemed a bit surprised at my confidence but when I added it was a geocache he said he understood. He then pointed me in the right direction and I headed off and soon had CIH [cache in hand]. On the way out I

thanked the gentleman at the desk and told him how much I had enjoyed it and he said the owner would be really pleased another person had hunted it down.

I again went back to my friend at the information desk and showed him the reference and he pointed me in the right direction.

I approached the front desk and ask the Gentleman if he knew what Geocaching was about and say he "kind of knows" and I show him the info and tells me where to go.

While in the library we got an unexpected surprise, as a library staff member showed us into the room where the retrieval system is operated, and we got to watch some books get retrieved and sent back.

Uncharacteristically, I actually asked for help, and was politely directed to where I needed to be, and I had the cache soon after.

I took the easy approach and engaged an assistant, and as I learned new things, so did my guide learn about geocaching.

Geocaching provides a way for libraries to connect to their users in an interesting and out-of-the-ordinary way. The activity appeals to all sections of the community, so there is the potential for many types of libraries to get involved. As geocaching becomes more popular, there will be more opportunities for libraries to take advantage of it and use it as an educational and outreach tool. Several research groups around the world are investigating and developing navigation systems which will work indoors (Fallah 2013, Guo and Cao 2012, Ozdenizci 2011). If these come to fruition, a whole new range of geocaching opportunities will be possible.

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Note

1. This article is based on a presentation given at ALIA Information Online, Brisbane, 12-15 February 2013.

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Note on contributor

Andrew Spencer currently works as a Research Librarian at Macquarie University in Sydney. His role is to provide support to the postgraduate students, academic staff and researchers within the Faculty of Science. Andrew’s professional interests include altmetrics and bibliometrics, information literacy, and establishing partnerships with teaching staff. His Twitter handle is @GeocachingLibn.