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Virtual Libraries as virtual learning spaces: the experiences of the LASSIE project

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Abstract

This paper reports on outcomes from a nine month project which explored possible uses of social software to support distance learners in their use of libraries. The paper highlights key issues arising from the literature review with more in depth discussion of five case study reports which aimed to explore practical uses of social software tools in library contexts. The researchers used social bookmarking tools to provide lists of resources and to encourage students to share web based resources with others. They also used blogs in a variety of ways and explored the social networking site Facebook. A podcast was used to develop students' information literacy skills and feedback demonstrated its potential uses. Outcomes from the project show that uses for social software in libraries are still in their infancy and also suggest a continuing need to embed information literacy skills in course programmes which will require building relationships with academic teaching colleagues.

Keywords

Web 2.0, Library 2.0, social software, libraries, distance learning, learning spaces

The Libraries and Social Software in Education (LASSIE) project

This paper reports on outcomes from a project funded by the Centre for Distance Education (CDE), University of London which ran from March to December 2007. The CDE's primary role is to support the development of distance learning across the University of London and specifically within the University's External Programme. In order to develop this role the CDE offers a number of Fellowships to staff employed in the various colleges of the Federal University of London. As a Fellow, Gwyneth Price met with a number of librarians within the University to discuss how libraries might better support distance learners and a proposal was made to the CDE for funding of what became known as the LASSIE project. The principal researcher was Jane Secker from the London School of Economics (LSE) and project partners were the Institute of Education University of London (IoE), the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), the University of London Research Library Services (ULRLS) and the Open University (OU) Library.

The project addressed two concerns: firstly that University of London External Programme students, who study entirely at a distance, seldom make full use of the electronic library resources available to them; the reasons for this are complex and include a lack of awareness about accessing library resources and other information literacy issues. Secondly, LASSIE provided an opportunity to explore how social software is affecting libraries and their services. The project aimed to gather empirical evidence about which technologies enhance the experience of students, specifically distance learners, and those which seem less valuable. The project also hoped to provide advice for the wider library community.

Definitions

The project team decided to use the term 'social software' rather than the more abstract, and controversial phrase 'web 2.0' although we recognised these terms are broadly synonymous. Providing a clear and simple definition was challenging, however it is clear that the internet and its uses are evolving. Adding content to the web has become easier, communication and collaboration have become increasingly important and more software is now hosted remotely and accessed via the internet, rather than installed on a desktop PC. Some overall characteristics of social software were identified as:

- The development of social networks;
- Content created by users rather than created by an organisation;
- The development of user profiles;
- The use of 'folksonomies' or tagging to attach user-created keywords to items to aid retrieval.

The project was managed in two main strands: a literature review and a number of practical case studies. The extensive literature review has been made widely available (Secker, 2007) and only a brief discussion of the process of reviewing such a dynamic "literature" will be made here. This paper will focus on some aspects of the second strand, which consisted of a number of case studies which have begun to explore practical uses for social software; and will also explore the future possibilities for its use in supporting distance learners as well as other students particularly in networked learning environments.

The literature review

Conducting a literature review in a Web 2.0 environment, as described by Gilster (2007), provides challenges of its own. An increasingly valued role of librarians, at least in Higher Education, involves the teaching of a range of information literacy skills to students and researchers. Librarians generally encourage the use of bibliographic databases where users can be confident of the content, whilst also stressing the increased importance of evaluation skills for those using search engines, such as Google, to search more widely across the internet. The LASSIE team were very aware that the traditional academic databases were unlikely to provide the most up to date references to such a fast growing area as social software became during the course of 2007. The team used various tools to share resources and information. A project blog was established in March 2007 (<http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/>) and this continues to be used by the principal researcher to keep the team and the wider community informed of developments. It also proved to be a valuable way of documenting progress: the entries are dated, feedback is received from blog readers (through comments) and writing provided a valued opportunity for reflection. The team also used social bookmarking to share resources which proved to be a helpful way of collecting internet resources and allowed team members to be alerted to relevant resources that others found. Social networking sites provided useful contacts for LASSIE, specifically the site Ning (www.ning.com/) which has a Library 2.0 group, but also Facebook (www.facebook.com) and LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com). Finally, a news reader to monitor blogs and news sources by subscribing to RSS feeds has been invaluable. Many of the new tools and publications have been picked up through subscriptions to blogs, rather than having to search the web. Google Alerts were also used with limited success to trawl the web for recent information on distance learning and Web 2.0. Experience of using a variety of what might be considered non-library resources has helped us as practicing librarians to better understand the needs of researchers and students seeking very current and fast changing information and will influence the ways in which we teach information literacy classes and develop on-line support.

In order to try to understand why distance learners appear to experience greater difficulties with using electronic resources than their on-campus counterparts, the literature review explored three specific topics which impact on our study: firstly current activity in libraries using social software and the concept of 'Library 2.0'. Secondly a broad picture of how libraries provide services and support for distance learners. The third strand is an exploration of the role of libraries as a social space. LASSIE recognises that physical libraries have changed considerably over the last ten years, to reflect changes in the nature of education. The importance of collaboration, group work and communication in teaching and learning

are widely recognised and libraries as key learning spaces, are being redesigned to reflect this shift. LASSIE was therefore interested in how virtual libraries might become more social.

The literature review demonstrated that recent reports on Web 2.0 and teaching and learning barely mention the role of the library, seeing the key roles as preservation and advice about IPR (Franklin & von Harmelen, 2007a; Franklin & von Harmelen, 2007b). This does not reflect the increasingly central role libraries play as learning spaces and the role of librarians in creating resources to support the development of information literacy and deterring plagiarism. The idea of Library 2.0 and Librarian 2.0, as described by a number of librarians (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006; Cohen, 2007; Miller, 2005) has had a mixed response, but in many ways reflects developments in academic libraries over the last ten to fifteen years. LASSIE found many examples of libraries that are experimenting with social software to enhance their services. Libraries in the US began exploring social software somewhat earlier than others and lessons can be learnt from their early experimentation. Librarians in other countries outside the US are also starting to explore using social software, for example O'Connell (2007) who works in school libraries in Australia. A few useful monographs have been published very recently, notably by Farkas (2007) who also developed an online course called 'Five weeks to a Social Library'. Bradley (2007) provides a valuable overview of web 2.0 technologies and how they can be used by librarians both personally, and to enhance library services. Other notable books on the subject include: Casey & Savastinuk (2007) and Sauers (2006), which looks specifically at blogs and RSS.

The third section of the literature review highlighted how physical libraries increasingly serve an important role as a social space, reflecting the changing nature of teaching, where group work and social interaction is more important. The development of 'Information Commons' throughout the US, Canada and Australasia is linked to this movement. Two related ideas about library space have also gained ground in library literature more recently: "The Library As Place" and the library as the "third place". Librarians sometimes call the library a "third place," a reference to Oldenburg's book 'The Great Good Place'. Oldenburg (1999), a sociologist, lamented the disappearance of good public places, arguing that society desperately needs third places -- that are neither home nor work. These spaces allow people from different parts of a community to come together and engage with one another. Many public libraries in the US and more recently in the UK, are recognising that they play an important role as a 'third place'. The funding to put in place the IT infrastructure in UK public libraries (The People's Network) means that all public libraries have internet access. Many are also extending their opening hours, providing drinking and eating facilities and trying to shake off their image of being simply places with books.

Libraries also form a social space by bringing together learners from different parts of an institution and LASSIE was partly inspired by a personal observation at the enquiry desk. A student having problems with library passwords was waiting at the desk one day and encountered another student carrying a stack of books. Noticing the books were on a similar topic to her own interests, they struck up a conversation and left the enquiry desk together realising, that while on different courses, they were interested in broadly the same topic. As anyone who has used LibraryThing (<http://www.librarything.com>) can testify social software allows these connections to be made far more easily. However whether students want to visit a virtual library for social interactions is unclear. For example, evidence suggests that students want virtual social spaces to be purely social, rather than having input from faculty or library staff. Recent media reports in the UK suggested students were alarmed to find academic staff on Facebook. Some librarians also find 'mashing up' (to use a social software term) personal details one might reveal to friends, with details you might share with work colleagues, uncomfortable. The jury is therefore still out on whether libraries can and should replicate a social space.

The case studies

Our case studies provide an opportunity to explore the role of the library within two institutions within the University of London, the LSE and the IoE, and the need for libraries to be embedded in the institution's policy and practice. Most UK HE Institutions focus on their VLE in the development of e-learning and libraries and their e-content are still not fully embedded in the VLE. A specific aim of this

project was to explore the possibility of learners "meeting" students from a variety of courses within the virtual library, something that is not possible within a course specific area of a VLE.

At the IoE the librarian-researcher was concurrently involved in a Pathfinder project funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). One of nine such projects in the pilot phase, From Pedagogic Research to Embedded e-learning (the PREEL project) aimed to embed the wealth of research into e-learning carried out at the IoE and related institutions into institutional practice. 11 course and module leaders were provided with staff development opportunities and individual support from learning technologists to help to develop elearning within current or new courses. For the librarian this provided opportunities to discuss the role of librarians as well as library resources in elearning and resulted in a greater awareness of the need to embed information literacy development in courses as well as providing appropriate electronic resources within the VLE; in particular a sharp increase in the use of resources digitised under the Copyright Licensing Agency's (CLA) trial licence resulted in considerable pressure on a service which had previously been developing quite slowly.

Sharing resources

One group of case studies focused on the use of a variety of Web 2.0 technologies for resource sharing including delicious (<http://del.icio.us/>), CiteULike (<http://www.citeulike.org/>), H2O playlists (<http://h2obeta.law.harvard.edu/>), Librarything (<http://www.librarything.com>) and Bibsonomy (<http://www.bibsonomy.org>) to construct reading lists. The tools all allow reading lists to be created for presentation to students and the team experimented with putting the same reading lists into four different systems and presenting it to distance learning students. A short online survey was created to collect feedback about student preferences. The web 2.0 reading list tools have some features in common with commercial reading list management tools. However most commercial reading list systems are integrated with the library management system and often serve an additional function of helping libraries purchase appropriate stock levels of particular texts, by obtaining information about how many students might need access to a particular resource at a given time. It is unlikely that this type of information could be extracted from one of the social software tools we have examined. Nevertheless our case study found that students did like online reading list systems and were particularly keen on visual presentation, preferring systems where the book covers were visible. H2O Playlists emerged as a clear favourite amongst the students, who did also like CiteULike and Librarything. They were less keen on Bibsonomy with many saying the system was not user friendly.

These social software tools prove more useful in situations where staff and students wish to create lists of resources to share. Librarything (for books) and del.icio.us (for web resources) are particularly useful in this situation and the project team experimented with del.icio.us in various ways. Del.icio.us is easy to use and the project team used it to share resources and "push" items to the researcher. The ability to add a 'tag cloud' to a web page or within an application such as Facebook makes resources very visible. As of November 2007 there were 120 internet sites that have been bookmarked in the LASSIE delicious account (http://del.icio.us/lse_lassie). Using tagging the team have also used the account to bookmark resources of relevance to particular presentations that they have given and resources relating to this paper can be found at http://del.icio.us/lse_lassie/NLC2008

The team wanted to explore the potential value of del.icio.us for sharing resources with groups of students. The literature review had found several examples of more innovative library services maintaining subject guides on del.icio.us. A notable and inspiring example is available on the Queensland University of Technology's Library website which have several internet subject guides in del.icio.us and use the tag cloud on their home page to present the links to students.

The first experiment involved preparing an online library guide for students on a distance learning programme at LSE, called TRIUM. These students visit LSE at the outset of the course and have access to library resources throughout their studies. Many are based outside of the UK and they rarely visit the LSE Library in person. This course uses the virtual learning environment Blackboard, and in previous

years a paper document was given to all students at the outset of the course, outlining the most important library resources. As an alternative to a paper (or PDF guide) these resources were added to del.icio.us. They were all tagged with the word 'TRIUM' to produce an online resource list. This is available at: http://del.icio.us/lse_lassie/TRIUM Del.icio.us allows a tag to be annotated and so it was possible to include some information about the set of resources, who they were aimed at, who compiled the list and some basic information about the Library at LSE.

At the IoE interest in del.icio.us had been generated amongst tutors on the PREEL project and a tutor working on the ICT specialism of the Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) agreed to work with the liaison librarian to trial the use of delicious with 240 students. Resources on the module reading list were added to del.icio.us using the tag 'ioepgce2007'. Students were encouraged to create their own delicious account, search for the tagged items and add them to their own lists and add resources themselves, using the common tag. Thus a large shared resource is created which students can tap into for ideas and library staff can use to help to understand and anticipate the needs of students. In a few cases the choice of resources may also raise concerns about appropriateness for purpose and help library staff plan and provide appropriate information literacy support. Six weeks into the experiment the tutor and liaison librarian met with the students in early December and many students expressed enthusiasm for del.icio.us while others were less confident about how useful it might be. The initial attraction certainly came from the possibility of accessing favorites wherever users might be (without needing to be at their own PC); students had not grasped the potential of being able to see and make use of others' favourites. A number of students expressed a lack of confidence in deciding on suitable tags and many were keen to improve their use of electronic journals and databases to find more appropriate resources for their studies. The liaison librarian now has evidence of the need for appropriate information literacy support, some of which is already available for use in the course VLE but has not been added to the course due to lack of interest from tutors.

In the first six weeks since the tag was created, students added some 200 items (from the original 29). The view the resources tagged by staff and students see: <http://del.icio.us/tag/ioepgce2007>

Blogs

Blogging is very popular with librarians and made the literature review process both easier and more diverse. Using RSS feeds we were able to keep abreast of developments around the world and on one occasion when we appealed for assistance in finding out what was happening in Australia and New Zealand the response from the antipodes was almost immediate. We came across some excellent examples of blogs being used by librarians to provide information about resources and some attempts to make this more interactive. The case study on blogging reflects on experiences of the LASSIE team in using a blog for the project, as well as the experiences of a team of archivists. The case study provides recommendations for best practice and suggests ways in which blogs can be used to enhance library services. A suggestion by Pomerantz and Stutzman(2006) to use a blog for virtual reference enquiries looks potentially interesting but we weren't able to explore it further. Work by Anastas and Cochrane, presented at the Networked Learning Conference in 2006 discussed how the use of blogs might help students to engage with electronic resources (Anastas & Cochrane, 2006). Their research found that many students identified lack of time as a reason not to engage with resources and technology; we also found that academic teaching staff, while sometimes keen to try new approaches to learning and teaching, were restricted by time constraints and a need for evidence of benefits to students.

Facebook

2007 was the year in which Facebook attracted a massive following and a deluge of media coverage. We were very fortunate to have agreed to investigate Facebook as a potentially useful tool for learning and teaching and to have had an excuse for playing with it throughout the year. There were some key areas where Facebook proved useful to us, not least that we used it to get to know other members of the project team informally during the nine months that we worked together; but we found Moodle a much more helpful tool for formal communication and as a place to record and discuss what we were learning. Facebook was also very helpful in building relationships with academic colleagues and it sometimes seemed that we were all more likely to show our human, and often more playful, side within the virtual

world of Facebook. We joined a number of groups within Facebook but didn't find that we learnt much from them and we were very aware that students might not like to be "friends" with tutors or librarians, although some clearly did. Facebook is still an unknown quantity and we will be interested to see how it develops further.

Podcasting

The literature review revealed that information literacy and students' familiarity with library resources and how to use them effectively and ethically is one of the key challenges for distance learning librarians. In the US, many libraries have developed online information literacy tutorials to tackle this issue. Social software through technologies such as podcasting, offers a new way of developing training materials. LSE Library teach classes to full-time students on a range of topics, however an experiment to create an online 'screencast' which included the powerpoint and audio, was developed as part of the LASSIE project. This has been made available to students from the library website. Feedback from students was gathered to establish how this type of tutorial might compliment or, in the case of a distance learner, replace a face to face training session. In general students clearly found the podcast valuable in terms of being able to go over points at their own speed, to access it remotely and to supplement and reinforce classroom learning. Many students mentioned that a podcast should not replace face to face teaching, but was a highly valuable addition.

The citing and referencing podcast has attracted considerable interest from other libraries and is available from: http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/inskr/citing_referencing.htm

Discussion

The application of social software to enhance libraries or "Library 2.0" was a phrase coined by Michael Casey in 2005. Casey sees Library 2.0 as being about "user-centred change" (Casey and Savastinuk, 2006). Many other authors are seeing Library 2.0 as a phenomenon beyond the use of technologies, which reflects and enhances developments in libraries over the last 15 or so years. Since the 1993 Follett Report (Joint Funding Council's Libraries Review Group, 1993) academic libraries in particular have seen great changes in the use of ICTs and the development of e-resources; consequently information literacy teaching has come to the fore as a major role for librarians in all sectors. The 2007 Horizon Report identifies six key trends most likely to have a significant impact on education in the next five years; one of these is Information Literacy, which 'increasingly should not be considered a given' (New Media Consortium, 2007)

Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk describe the changes in this way:

The heart of Library 2.0 is user-centered change. It is a model for library service that encourages constant and purposeful change, inviting user participation in the creation of both the physical and the virtual services they want, supported by consistently evaluating services. It also attempts to reach new users and better serve current ones through improved customer-driven offerings. Each component by itself is a step toward better serving our users; however, it is through the combined implementation of all of these that we can reach Library 2.0. (Casey and Savastinuk, 2006)

Library 2.0 reflects many of the key elements of Web 2.0, such as providing opportunities for users to participate in developing services and collections and consequently librarians will need to give up some measure of control. Librarian 2.0 is much more outward looking, finding ways to draw users to the library as well as taking the library to users especially in networked spaces. Inevitably such librarians are champions of change and highly flexible and tolerant in their thinking (Cohen, 2007). Librarians will of course be particularly challenged by the need to maintain the traditional library values of quality of service, collection management and classification and indexing which students and researchers continue

to appreciate (Research Information Network and the Consortium of Research Libraries, 2007), alongside this new tolerant view.

Weller (2007) refers to the potential role of the library in the university of the future as “on a continuum, from redundant to central” The challenge for librarians is to make sure we are central and that all our students, whoever and wherever they are, can and do make use of our expertise and the resources we have collected and organised. Social software may well provide some of the tools we can utilise to create a truly user-centred library but we also need to concentrate on convincing academics and administrators of our central role in learning and teaching as well as research.

Kirkwood (2006), in his study of learners on UK Open University courses, emphasises the intellectual components of information literacy which are at least as essential as operational skills. If learning is understood to be an active and collaborative activity then it follows that students will engage with the literature rather than be passive readers of set texts. The librarian’s role in such a networked learning environment will involve collaboration and conversation with students as well as academic colleagues and information literacy will need to be embedded in such a way that its relevance is easily discernable to learners.

LASSIE has been a valuable experience for the project team, allowing us time to explore the emerging social software tools, to experiment with some of them and to get some feedback from users about their needs. While the web 2.0 or library 2.0 concept has attracted criticism and is viewed by some as hype, it is clear that the web has changed and that the potential ways that people can and are using technology to communicate, is changing. While some may dislike the concept of Library 2.0, the idea of ‘Librarian 2.0’ is potentially more significant. It realises the importance of building relationships with teachers so resources can be embedded, but also the importance of recognising the information literacy needs of students. Facebook has become increasingly important for building up relationships outside normal communication channels – although it is still early days and this network is likely to soon be superseded by another even better and easier to use network. The project has made us recognise the importance of using a blog for developing a community of interested people and this is certainly the aspect of the project which the principal researcher will find hardest not to pursue.

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