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Libraries as a social space: enhancing the experience of distance learners using social software

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Introduction

LASSIE (Libraries and Social Software in Education) is funded by the Centre for Distance Education, University of London and runs March – December 2007. Led by London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Institute of Education, project partners also include London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the University of London Research Library Services and the Open University Library. Colleagues at LSE represent the Library, the Centre for Learning Technology and LSE Archives.

LASSIE is exploring how ‘social software’ (or web 2.0, see definitions) might enhance the use of library services by distance learners. The project addresses two concerns; firstly that University of London External Programme students don’t make full use of the electronic library resources. The reasons for this are varied, including a low awareness about accessing library resources and information literacy issues. Secondly, LASSIE provides an opportunity to explore how social software is affecting libraries and their services. The project will gather empirical evidence about which technologies enhance the experience of students, specifically distance learners, and those which were less valuable. The project also provides advice for the wider library community.

Another important element in the project is to examine 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 built to reflect this shift. LASSIE is therefore interested in how virtual libraries, might become more social. This paper is largely based on the literature review completed in July 2007.

Project overview

The research for LASSIE to date has primarily been gathered through a review of the literature focusing on three key areas:

- Libraries and social software: definitions and key developments
- What are the current issues in supporting distance learners and how might social software address these?
- How are libraries developing as a physical and virtual social space?

The full report is published on the LASSIE website (Secker, 2007). However, because of the fast pace of change in this field, it will be updated in late 2007. The literature review was published at a time when many UK libraries were either actively exploring social software or considering their next step, therefore, it's value goes beyond LASSIE. The review enabled the project team to identify key initiatives to date, and informed the second phase of the project; the case studies. The case studies are scheduled to run from July until November 2007, and are a series of small scale pilots. Selected social software will be used to support a library service and feedback will be collected from librarians, students, course tutors and administrators, about the potential value. The case studies are briefly reported in this paper, but work is still ongoing. LASSIE will produce a final report in December 2007.

The web 2.0 literature review

The process of undertaking a literature review was itself a valuable research exercise, demonstrating the challenges faced when doing research in the web 2.0 world. Gilster (in Martin & Madigan, 2007) highlighted these challenges and therefore tools such as news readers (e.g. Google Reader) and internet search engines, were used to supplement the references found in traditional bibliographic databases. In undertaking this literature review on social software, the project team developed new research skills and tried out new tools, using social software wherever possible to facilitate our research. However, it remained a challenge to stay abreast of developments in this fast moving field.

The literature review

From the literature review it was clear that many libraries in the UK are currently grappling with the concept of social software or web 2.0 and are exploring definitions of 'Library 2.0'. A lot of experimentation is being undertaken, much of it as a sideline rather than officially funded research. Developments in the United States appear to be around 18 months ahead of other countries. In the UK, librarians clearly feel they should be doing something to address the development of social software, although many are uncertain what exactly it is, and what might be effective or useful. The LASSIE literature review therefore usefully provides some valuable definitions of social software, of Library 2.0 and an overview of the key technologies that libraries might consider using. Feedback to date has suggested that this section of the review was particularly useful for librarians wanting an overview of this topic.

Definitions

The project decided to use the term 'social software' rather than the more abstract, and controversial phrase 'web 2.0' although we recognised these terms mean broadly the same. Providing a clear and simple definition was challenging, however it is clear that the internet has changed recently. 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 keywords created by users, to items to aid retrieval.

Key technologies

The ideas and concepts associated with social software are best understood by considering some of the tools and technologies that fall into the definition. To many people, social software simply means blogs and wikis and taking this narrow definition leaves many librarians struggling to see how these tools might be used in their organisation. Ironically some of the most valuable social software tools, such as utilising RSS to provide information, and social bookmarking are less well known. Librarians are also less clear about how social networking could be used to support learning, although many are clearly dabbling out of curiosity.

The literature review therefore provided an overview of the key technologies which included:

- RSS feeds / Syndication / Atom
- Blogs
- Wikis
- Social bookmarking and resource sharing
- Social networking sites: (MySpace, Facebook, Elgg, LinkedIn, Ning)
- Media Sharing
- Virtual Worlds
- Other social software

Details about social software tools are available in the literature review (Secker, 2007) and constraints on space mean these are not included in this paper. Nevertheless it is worth briefly mentioning a few tools such as RSS, which is not social software, but a way of communicating information in an XML format that News Reader software can understand. RSS has become an important way of using social software effectively. Most blogs have RSS feeds, which you can subscribe to, to ensure content is pushed to you, rather than having to visit the blog. Bradley (2007) argues that RSS is fundamental to web 2.0 technologies, and while people don't need to understand it technically, RSS underpins most social software and hence is paramount. Blogs meanwhile are probably the most popular type of social software and establishing a blog was one of the first activities the LASSIE team undertook. Social bookmarking tools allow users to store their bookmarks or Internet Favourites remotely on a site so they can be accessed from any computer connected to the internet, rather than being stored within a browser. Sites such as del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us>) were particularly useful for storing and sharing any relevant websites for the purposes of the project. LASSIE set up an account which is available at: http://del.icio.us/lse_lassie/

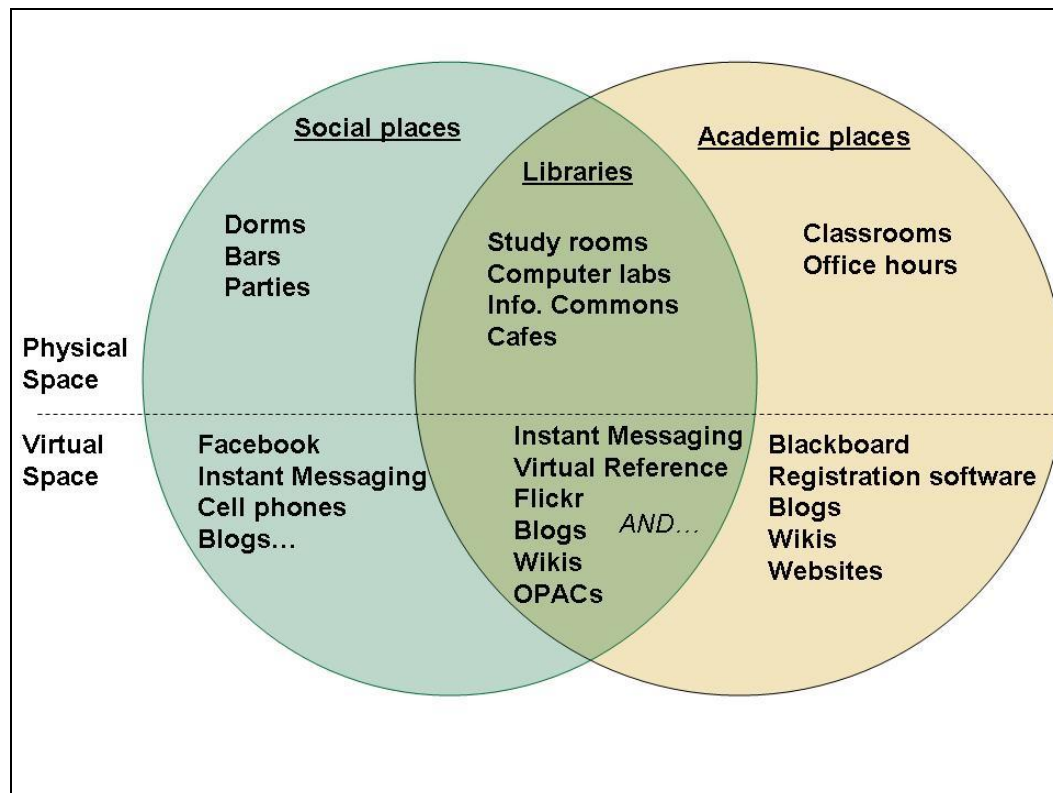
Social Software in Libraries and Library 2.0

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, 2006). The term encapsulates the idea that we can enhance library provision using social software. Library 2.0 is a somewhat controversial term Crawford (2006) found 62 different views and seven distinct definitions. He argues that librarians focus on the phenomena made possible by social software rather than

the technology, meaning participation and the facilitation of conversations. Miller (2005), meanwhile argues:

Leveraging the approaches typified by Web 2.0's principles and technology offers libraries many opportunities to serve their existing audiences better, and to reach out beyond the walls and Web sites of the institution. (Miller, 2005)

A useful diagram, by Michael Habib, available from Flickr, encapsulates his view of Library 2.0.



From Michael Habib's Flickr site (Licensed under Creative Commons):
http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=222296001&size=o

Libraries using social software

LASSIE found many examples of libraries who 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 following section includes examples of libraries using social software. Again further details are available in the literature review. (Secker, 2007).

RSS feeds at MIT Libraries <http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/barton/>

MIT Libraries are using RSS feeds to highlight new books on the library catalogue. Select a feed according to subject interest and this can be added to any web page. This functionality could be particularly useful for adding feeds to subject web pages or directly into courses in the VLE. MIT Libraries also have a Library News feed and a feed for new theses added to their repository. They also maintain a useful link of RSS feeds for research which includes information about which publishers offer RSS feeds: <http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/feeds.html>

University of Pennsylvania Social Bookmarking Tool:

<http://tags.library.upenn.edu/>

PennTags is a social bookmarking tool developed by librarians at the University of Pennsylvania for locating, organizing and sharing online resources. Users can collect and maintain URLs, links to journal articles and records in the library catalogue. They can develop bibliographies and reading lists which can be shared with the community. Users download a specialised toolbar or use a something called a 'bookmarklet' which allows content to be added to PennTags.

User generated content in the catalogue University of Huddersfield

<http://webcat.hud.ac.uk/>

Increasing numbers of libraries are experimenting with allowing user content to be added to the library catalogue, including users book reviews or other comments. The University of Huddersfield have used social software to enhance their catalogue, adding functions such as user reviews, ratings and pulling content from Amazon into the catalogue. They have also added features such as making recommendations based on borrower records, providing users with a link saying 'people who borrowed this book also borrowed...'

Librarian and Library Blogs

Librarians seem to like writing personal blogs and there are several listed below on social software and libraries:

Information Wants to be Free: <http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/index.php>

The Shifted Librarian <http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/>

Phil Bradley's Web 2.0 blog http://philbradley.typepad.com/i_want_to/

Are you 2.0 Yet? <http://briangray.alablog.org/blog>

Library Crunch <http://www.librarycrunch.com/>

Many libraries in the US are using organisational blogs for posting library news. Examples include:

Madison-Jefferson County Public library: <http://mjcppl.org/>

Ohio University Library Business Blog

<http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/businessblog/>

Kansas State University library blogs <http://ksulib.typepad.com/>

Library Success Wiki http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Main_Page

This wiki was developed by Meredith Farkas, who is the Distance Learning Librarian at Vermont. The wiki is a best practice tool, which was created to be a one-stop shop for ideas and information for all types of librarians.

Libraries and Social Networking

Talis the library management supplier have funded Cybrary, which is their headquarters in Second Life and anecdotal evidence suggests that several libraries are experimenting with offering services in Second Life. A valuable report on Second Life developments in the UK further and higher education sector was published in July 2007 (Kirriemuir, 2007).

Some libraries have also set up MySpace accounts, however social networking sites have had varying attitudes towards whether they officially allow this use . For example see Brooklyn College Library which has over 3000 'friends' and is using MySpace to publicise library activities:

<http://www.myspace.com/brooklyncollegelibrary>.

Groups for librarians are flourishing in several social networking sites. Facebook has several groups for librarians, such as the Library 2.0 Interest Group which also maintains a website: and the group 'Librarians and Facebook' which has over 1000 members). Facebook also has a number of library related applications that can be added to a personal profile to allow users to share reading lists, social bookmarks and other resources they are interested in. The social networking site Ning has a useful Library 2.0 group (see: <http://library20.ning.com/>).

Libraries Supporting distance learners

The literature review also provided an overview of current issues for libraries supporting distance learners. One notable finding is that library services for distance learners are less well earmarked in the UK, than in Canada, Australia and the United States for example. The Open University, are the clear exception in the UK and are leading the way with developments to support their students. However, CILIP, the UK's professional body for librarians does not have a distance learning librarians group. Despite the growth in distance education in the UK, very few academic institutions have a Distance Learning Librarian post, whereas in the US and Canada this is fairly common. One explanation may be that UK library support for distance learners is often tied up with support for e-learning and off-campus users. UK distance learners in higher education have benefited from the provision of off-campus access to library resources. Similarly librarians in many UK institutions are increasingly making resources available from the virtual learning environment and not expecting their on-campus students to visit the library as frequently.

It is clear that in the US and Canada, where support for distance learners is most developed, information literacy and providing training and support for users is a key issue. The literature review provided a useful overview of the University of London's External Programme, which while long established, has historically provided little library support for students. Library provision still varies depending on the course, but increasingly services are being centralised through the University of London Research Library Services. The Library is however still grappling with ensuring distance learners know about the resources available and can get access to them at a more basic level. Nevertheless, research suggests that social software that improves access

to library resources, focuses on developing information literacy skills and allows students to interact with each other to motivate them in their studies, could all be of enormous benefit to improving learning.

Libraries as a social space

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 of 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

LASSIE is undertaking a number of small case studies, allowing the team to experiment using different types of social software and gain feedback on their value to distance learners. Case studies were chosen to explore particular tools and the issues they present not just students, but librarians, tutors and administrators.

The Project as case study

The LASSIE team have used various tools since March 2007 to share resources and information. So for example a project blog was established in March 2007, and this is used by the principal researcher to keep the team and the wider community informed

of developments. It is also a valuable way of documenting progress - the entries are dated, feedback is received from blog readers (through comments) and writing provides an opportunity for reflection. The team are also using social bookmarking to share resources (as mentioned previously) which is a valuable way of collecting internet resources and allows team members to be alerted to relevant resources that others find. Social networking sites have provided useful contacts for LASSIE, specifically the site Ning which has a Library 2.0 group, but also Facebook and LinkedIn. 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.

Social software and reading lists

The first case study involving distance learners considers how social software could be used to present reading lists to students, as an alternative to more traditional paper based or online reading lists. The researcher has some experience of using an online reading list management system, so a comparison can be made. LASSIE has set up reading lists using a reference management tool called CiteULike (<http://www.citeulike.org>). The tool is intended as a personal reference manager but lists can be shared with other users. A reading list for LSE external programme students was selected for inclusion. The reading list was constructed by pulling references from Amazon onto the list. Managing journal references with CiteULike generally seemed easier than book references as it was sometimes problematic finding the correct edition. Ideally a librarian might also prefer to pull book records from a library catalogue rather than from Amazon. One of the main drawbacks was the entire list could not be annotated (although individual items on the list could be). It also did not seem possible to put items on the list in a particular order. For an example see, the course reading list at : <http://www.citeulike.org/user/seckerj/tag/60introinfo>

LASSIE is testing other social software tools for example H2O Playlists (<http://h2obeta.law.harvard.edu/>), which was developed by Harvard Law School for managing reading lists. Initial impressions were that this tool is less easy to use than CiteULike, in terms of adding books or articles. Items needed to be added manually, rather than being able to pull records from Amazon or other catalogues. This slows down the process of creating a reading list. However the software has features such as the ability to add annotations and notes for students. It is also possible to add headings to the list and re-order the list. As part of this case study both systems will be piloted with distance learners in Autumn 2007 and feedback will be gathered.

Social bookmarking / resource sharing

A second case study has been exploring social bookmarking as a way of creating a subject guide of internet resources for students. Experiments are currently underway to create a list of resources for distance learners on the TRIUM course at LSE. These students are based around the world, visiting LSE briefly but then having remote access to library resources. In the past a traditional library guide has been made available from the virtual learning environment as a word document. An online list of resources has been created using the social bookmarking site del.icio.us and students will be given access to this. Feedback will be gathered from students where possible, however one of the main challenges was adding library resources to this type of list.

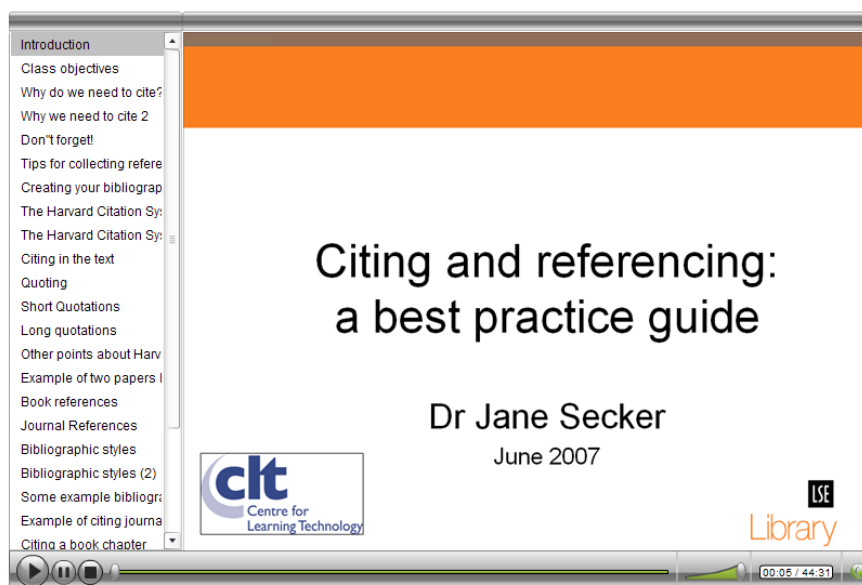
Many library systems, such as LSE's Electronic Library, do not allow deep linking to resources, therefore the key databases could not be added to del.icio.us. Access to library databases is often set up so that students enter the site from the link in the Electronic Library, therefore the number of resources that could be added to the list was limited.

Information literacy and social software

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 is currently being 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.

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



Further research

Other case studies that will be written up as part of LASSIE, including documenting the use of the blog by LSE Archives and the associated challenges and issues. Another case study examines how a team of librarians at the Institute of Education use a wiki to share information and to develop library guides. The case studies alongside the literature review should provide valuable evidence for libraries considering social software initiatives.

Conclusion

Social software has the potential to change the provision of library services. Our research suggests that libraries should experiment with technology, incorporating blogs or RSS feeds into their websites where appropriate. Some social software such as podcasting and resource sharing can also be used in information literacy initiatives. The adventures of LASSIE will continue until December 2007, and further evidence will be gathered from the case studies. LASSIE will make recommendations about the types of social software that are usefully employed by libraries; including those which provide valuable support for distance learners, and those that help all learners. As physical libraries become increasingly social space, so social software may provide valuable support to those users who never or rarely visit us.

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