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The adventures of LASSIE: Libraries, distance learners and social software

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The adventures of LASSIE: libraries, social software and distance learners

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the University of London's Libraries and Social Software in Education (LASSIE) Project, led by LSE and the Institute of Education. The project explored whether social software, or Web 2.0 technologies, could enhance the distance learners' experience of libraries. It included a detailed literature review which defined concepts such as Library 2.0 and provided examples of libraries using tools like blogs, wikis, social networking sites, social bookmarking sites and media sharing sites. LASSIE also undertook five case-studies to explore in more detail: social software and reading lists; social bookmarking and libraries; podcasting and information literacy; blogging; and Facebook and libraries. It concluded that social software might be best utilized to enhance information literacy support for distance learners.

Introduction and background

This paper provides a short overview of the Libraries and Social Software in Education (LASSIE) Project which was funded by the University of London's Centre for Distance Education. It was led by the Centre for Learning Technology at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). LASSIE was a nine-month project that ran from March until December 2007 and explored how social software might enhance the distance learners' experience of libraries. The project was extremely timely and gained a lot of publicity in the library community. Members of the Steering Group were invited to speak at numerous conferences and events, and their experiences from the project went on to inform developments in their own institutions. This paper will provide an overview of the project, including the literature review and the case-studies, and report on the key findings.

The project Steering Group included members from the University of London Institute of Education, the University of London Research Library Services, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Open University and colleagues from the Library and Archives at LSE. LASSIE publications and reports were completed in February 2008 and made available on the project website (http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE.php) and via the project blog: (http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/). The case-study reports attracted wide interest from the library community as they explore practical applications of social software. The extensive literature review was published as a draft in July 2007 and updated in January 2008. Feedback has suggested the value of the literature review goes beyond the project team and it will be published in the journal *Program* later in 2008.

The literature review

At the outset of the project it was agreed that a detailed literature review would be undertaken to explore three areas:

1) to provide a snapshot of social software initiatives in the library community
2) to review current issues in distance learning librarianship
3) to examine the literature on libraries as social spaces.

Our research found that the phenomenon known sometimes as 'Web 2.0' had recently received a lot of publicity in the mainstream media. In addition, the library world was full of people exploring how social software might be used to enhance their services. However, at the outset of the project the team felt it was important to provide some definitions for the library community. Terms such as Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 were being used with increased frequency and definitions were considered helpful. For this reason the literature review also examined different types of social software (such as blogs, wikis, RSS feeds and social bookmarking tools) and provided definitions and examples of how libraries were using these tools and services. The draft literature review[1] and the updated literature review[2] are both available on the project website.

To summarize some of the work of the literature review, LASSIE concluded that social software or Web 2.0 was primarily about a technological change in the way the web operates. Whereas, the early web (or Web 1.0) tended to consist of a few web editors creating content that users of the web could read, Web 2.0 technologies allow a far greater degree of participation, communication and sharing. So, for example, websites like the BBC now allow people to add comments and opinions to the site. The term 'Library 2.0' meanwhile was coined in 2005 by Michael Casey, who saw Library 2.0 being primarily about 'user-centred change'[3]. The term encapsulates the idea that we can enhance library provision using social software and Web 2.0 technologies, although again the terminology itself has proved to be controversial. Miller, a keen advocate of the Library 2.0 movement and concept, 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 to reach potential beneficiaries where they happen to be, and in association with the task that they happen to be undertaking."

Finally a recent OCLC report[5] on social networking, while sceptical of the value of social networking for libraries, was actually highly positive about the Library 2. 0 concept and concluded that libraries need to be brave, to relax their rules and to encourage mass participation in the social library, which inevitably will be messy.

In terms of practical applications of social software, the literature review found numerous examples of libraries using new technologies. Firstly, librarians have become keen bloggers. In the US (and to a lesser extent in the UK) libraries are using blogs for news information and to reach out to their users. See, for example, Kansas State University library blogs (http://ksulib.typepad.com/). An example of a UK university using blogs is the University of Worcester, where they launched *ILS Matters* (http://www2.worc.ac.uk/wordpress/) to raise the profile of library services to students. Worcester are also using blogs to reach out to their academic staff and for internal communication amongst library staff[6]. The LASSIE team felt that blogging was of particular interest and decided to focus one of the case-studies on the role of blogging in libraries. This was partly based on our own experiences of running a blog for the duration of the project. The LASSIE project blog (http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/) proved

to be a valuable way of documenting the progress of the project, of reflecting on what the team were doing and also on publicising the project. The blog developed a solid readership throughout the project and continues to be maintained.

Another important technology explored as part of the LASSIE project was RSS feeds (sometimes called Really Simple Syndication). RSS underpins many Web 2.0 technologies and is a dialect of XML. Put simply, it is a machine-readable language, much like HTML, designed to provide a framework in which information can be contained. News information is particularly useful when provided in RSS format as, rather than a reader having to visit a website to see what's new, they can be continuously kept updated by subscribing to a feed. Libraries in the US in particular are encouraging their users to subscribe to a variety of RSS feeds to keep up to date with library news, the latest acquisitions added to the library catalogue and new electronic resources. For example, MIT Libraries maintain a list of RSS feeds (http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/feeds.html) available from their site. Meanwhile, closer to home, London School of Economics and Political Science, have developed a Training portal (http://www.training.lse.ac.uk/) which uses RSS technology to pull together training events from around the institution. The RSS feed has also been incorporated into the VLE, Moodle and the institutional portal to provide a list of upcoming training events for staff and students. The Open University is another example of a Library using RSS feeds to keep people up to date with library developments (http://library.open.ac.uk/services/lib20servs/rssfeed/index.cfm).

The inclusion of 'user generated content' (such as ratings, book reviews and user comments) into the catalogue has been implemented in several libraries. For some this is seen as challenging or revolutionary as many librarians view the library catalogue as an authoritative source that should be maintained. For some examples of libraries including user generated content in the catalogue see Hennepin County Library (http://catalog.hclib.org/) and the University of Huddersfield (http://webcat.hud.ac.uk/) which are now allowing students to rate books. Huddersfield also use features similar to those employed by Amazon, which suggest titles to borrowers, based on the user data. So for example, the catalogue now includes the feature 'users who borrowed this book, also borrowed…'. Arguably, this initiative gives the user a better experience when using the catalogue, making it more similar to the online shopping experience they are invariably more familiar with.

The LASSIE literature review[2] provides details of many other social software initiatives in libraries, such as the use of media sharing sites and social bookmarking tools. The review also includes shorter sections on current issues in distance learning librarianship and the role of the library as a social space. The overall sense was that finding and accessing resources are still among the greatest challenges for distance learning students and that information literacy initiatives are essential to support students studying remotely. In terms of libraries as a social space, it was clear that physical libraries are very much becoming social learning spaces. However, the case-study on Facebook in particular suggested that students still have some reservations about mixing their social and learning spaces in the online environment.

The case-studies

The LASSIE team undertook five case-studies to explore how particular tools might enhance the learning experience of real distance learning students. These are available from the project website: http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE.php

Case-study one explored whether traditional reading lists can be improved using social software. The project team explored the use of four online reading list or book list systems including: CiteUlike (http://www.citeulike.org/) H20 Playlists (http://h2obeta.law.harvard.edu/home.do) LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com) and Bibsonomy (http://www.bibsonomy.org/) to present reading list information to students on a University of London distance learning course. CiteULike and H20 Playlists were clear preferences in the feedback from students. However, social software reading lists do not currently integrate with library catalogues, making them useful for presenting information to students, but less useful for librarians.

Meanwhile, case-study two explored the social bookmarking tool del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us/) to collect useful resources for the project, but also as a way of directing students to web-based resources. Several institutions in the US and Australia have developed web-based subject guides using del.icio.us. The research concluded that this tool is extremely flexible and can be incorporated into institutional or personal websites easily. Stanford University have an excellent example of how this can be used by library subject specialists to direct students to relevant resources (see (https://www.stanford.edu/group/ic/cgi-bin/drupal/delicous). Members of the project team also used this tool with different groups of students and collected some feedback that suggested it was valuable as a tool for both librarians and students.

Case-study three focused on information literacy support for distance learners and produced a citing and referencing screencast. Using the Camtasia software, a training session with audio and screen capture was prepared. A menu system allowed students to pick and choose how they accessed the material. They could view the presentation from start to finish, but were free to jump about using the menu. Feedback was gathered from students on the role of online training or 'podcasts' in delivering training and in general students concluded they would like more online support, but they would also like to be able to attend face-to-face classes for the interaction they provide. The resource is available on the Library website at LSE: http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/insktr/citing_referencing.htm

The fourth case-study explored libraries and blogging and is briefly mentioned in the section above. It provides good practice guidance for librarian bloggers and discusses the set-up, maintenance and role of several different blogs.

The final case-study looked at the role of the social networking site Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/) as a tool for librarians and for library services. This case-study was largely literature based, although it also drew on experiences of project team members who have joined Facebook. It includes some good practice guidance for librarians using Facebook as well as highlighting library-related applications in Facebook. It concluded that social networking tools are clearly hugely popular with the Google generation and that many libraries are keen to explore how they might be used to promote their services.

Conclusion

LASSIE's adventures sadly had to come to an end in January 2007 and a final report was submitted to the project funders. The project had provided the team with a wealth of valuable experience and knowledge about social software. In addition, the real life examples of using social software with students and the feedback that was gathered provide timely evidence for the library community, as many are considering whether or how to use social software. The Project Steering Group met for a final review of LASSIE in February 2008 and hope that what they have learnt can continue to be disseminated

through presentations and ideally some hands-on training events for librarians. The team were clear that distance learning students studying at the University of London do need additional support to access and use library resources. Using the virtual learning environment, Moodle and social software initiatives, several members of the team hope to develop appropriate information literacy resources for students by building on LASSIE's experiences. The project blog will be maintained for the foreseeable future and will be updated with developments in this area. The team are also considering other possible funding opportunities so that LASSIE can continue her adventures!

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[NB - Page number to be filled in later!]

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