VLEs in HE

History in an hour

Interactives at St Fagans

Local collections online

Social networking

welcome

This issue presents the findings from our Group membership survey along with your suggestions for future Group activity. We would also welcome any further input from members and journal readers.

Warm regards,

[signature]

Catherine Dhanjal, Managing Editor

Lucky winners
The final winners of the print version of the journal following our survey are: Angella Parker & Universitat Oberta de Catallunya
Changing font
The font from the February issue onwards will be a shade darker in response to reader feedback

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Social networking fires up academic librarians

Jon Fletcher, liaison librarian at Nottingham Trent University presents highlights of the MMIT Group's summer event on social networking in academic institutions from Liverpool to Leicester and London

Another event, another jaunt around a strange city following a little blue dot on Google Maps to locate the venue. This afternoon event was held in the Aldham Robert's LRC at Liverpool John Moore University, with a group of interested parties gathering to discuss social networking in their own institutions as well as to compare and contrast progress notes.

First up: Gareth Johnson (University of Leicester) with 'The thing on the doorstep: networking socially at Leicester'. Relating his experiences via a video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcRbOxNX2UE, he described how the library blog – started at first as an unofficial exercise – has now become officially accepted, being referred to by his Pro Vice-Chancellor and referenced as part of the library's three-year digital policy document. Rather newer is the library's Facebook page, which has 1,200 fans and is maintained by information librarians. However, with this site not being as actively used as Gareth would like, he prefers the example of their 'Graduate School Reading Room', which has less than 100 fans but is updated daily or twice daily by the Research Forum Facilitator with news about courses and items of interest to graduates. His advice: post often to keep up interest levels.

He also went on to talk about the University of Leicester's experience of using Twitter, which – though it only reaches those keen enough to use it – has engaged in a useful way with a "self-selected group of enthusiasts" and linked into this wider community. Some use is also made of wikis, which help share information and engage staff. Summing up, Gareth related

that he had learnt that use of such tools helps to humanise the library and present a friendlier image, and urged everyone to try Facebook and Twitter if they hadn't yet set up library accounts. Sometimes institutions can have worries about a 'loss of control' and about what is posted, but – as long as you use common sense – the bad is unlikely to happen and what will happen will be beneficial to your service.

Zelda Chatten (University of Liverpool) was next, talking about 'Social networking for the unsociable: the University of Liverpool experience'. Possessing the same subject role, job title and team title as me, I perhaps wasn't surprised when many of the things which they had thought about had also occurred to NTU. Liverpool's library began to use subject blogs (with varying success in engagement) in 2006 before setting up a Facebook page in 2007, moving onto having a Twitter presence for their Welcome Week in 2009. Indeed, the Twitter presence was promoted throughout the inductions as a method of asking the library staff questions. Should institutions be wary of accepting this, it is worth pointing out that many universities have such services now, and that the slight risks involved (which no-one can recall having transpired) are far outweighed by the benefits of interaction.

Twitter: post often to keep up interest levels

Zelda saw these developments positively; despite some staff worrying that students would feel that the library was out of place on Facebook, this is now a vibrant page with comments from students about a range of issues. The library also created a tool for searching the library catalogue which was put straight into FB (not without some problems; whenever FB update the site this has to be re-loaded) as well as including some other tools which are freely available (e.g. a JSTOR and COPAC searchbox).

Recommendations for using Twitter were just as interesting – by optimising TweetDeck (a service which constantly updates

with news you are interested in as well as allowing you to search for mentions of selected topics automatically) they can find useful items to retweet and see who is writing about them, responding if necessary. Given that this is a far quicker way of disseminating information than via the library website, it has increased the flow of information as well as allowing users who might not engage with the website to ask questions. And by using feeds cleverly (e.g. blog feeds are directed to Twitter, etc) the information burden is reduced. Stats are difficult to pull out – you'll not know how many people read your posts unless they click a link which you've made trackable, and there will always be lurkers – but it has raised the profile of the library. A lively Q+A session resulted in a discussion about the most manageable way to upkeep this service – aside from keeping an eye out for useful retweets, having a bank of staff who can contribute useful information to be tweeted (as the University of Warwick try to do) would always be the ideal.

a 'CampusM' app built for LSE (free to download) which their staff and students to find their friends and use university services

A break was held, followed by Dave Puplett (London School of Economics) presenting about the LSE library and social networking. Making very efficient usage of Prezi, his slides (see http://prezi.com/_4yxg2rr9iqs/lse-library-social-networking/) outlined that his motivation to experiment with social networking was much the same as others: to see if there were additional ways of communicating with users, as well as wishing to keep in line with the offerings made available in

other institutions. LSE's library began by using Twitter on a small scale – as an instant service update about their new cataloguing system with about 100 followers – which was then transferred to a feed about the library itself. Whilst LSE don't actively promote this feed (it is mentioned only once, on the library catalogue) they have a fair number of followers, and they are finding this a worthwhile method of service promotion. There was some debate about whether traffic should be one way (library to user) or two way, and I would certainly be interested in looking at ways in which two way communication could be encouraged. They also have a Facebook page (with a widget enabling books

Use of social networking helps to humanise the library and present a friendlier image

to be renewed), some Flickr posts of old photos of the library (done to catch people's attention), a mass of Delicious tags and – interestingly – a 'CampusM' app built for LSE (free to download) which their staff and students to find their friends and use university services.

Wherever possible Dave recommends the use of services such as Google Analytics to track usage stats, though he too accepts that social networking sites make it difficult to gather stats due to the fact that they often can't be found. Still, he recommends getting these stats when you can, as it is important to track these statistics.

The final presentation of the day came from the University of

Huddersfield's Andrew Walsh, entitled 'Library or @hudlib?', who outlined many of the points covered earlier in relation to his institution. Like Dave, he is of the opinion that if people are talking about your library on social networking sites then it's better to know what they're saying than to ignore it – furthermore, if you engage with users then they're likely to teach you something. Huddersfield's Facebook page is not promoted at all, offers some services such as the ability to search the library catalogue from within Facebook and makes available useful updates for those who are signed up to the page. Talking about the assumption that the library shouldn't be in Facebook, Andrew asserted that – whilst the library might not be involved in all the social aspects of 'the Facebook party' it can at least be the barman at the party who gives a useful service; it won't be "the sad uncle on the dancefloor" whose presence is an embarrassment. He too likes to follow what is being said about his library, as he finds this to give useful feedback.

the library created a tool for searching the library catalogue which was put straight into Facebook

Twitter at Huddersfield's library is interesting, in that they have two streams – one for the main library and one which advertises items which have been put into the institutional repository. Academics seem to like the latter, as they often retweet news of their own publications to their own followers. Furthermore, most pages in the library homepage had an embedded Twitter feed linked from the main stream, providing users with up-to-date news. And, of course, Huddersfield have various blogs which are kept not only to communicate with external users but also for staff purposes; they also invite comments from users about how useful they found library books (rated from 0-5) as well as allowing comments to be posted about videos they stream onto YouTube.

Andrew stopped part of the way through his presentation

to ask how many of those attending (about 20) had library Facebook pages or Twitter accounts. Few did – reasons generally cited were that institutions could be wary about handing over 'control of their brand', about what students could write and about what could happen as a result. However, all who attended agreed that, as long as comments were properly monitored and responded to, the risks were far outweighed by the potential benefits. This is not a debate about the potentials of Technology X or Application Y; it's instead about assessing what the potential usefulness of a resource is, realising how many of your potential users can be found in this space and then doing your best to engage with them in the manner in which they wish to communicate. Thinking like this also prepares a service to migrate platforms should Technology X or Service Y cease to exist.

To end his presentation, Andrew introduced further an application which Dave had previously mentioned named Foursquare (http://foursquare.com/). Something of a mashup, it pinpoints locations on Google Maps, invites comments about them and introduces an element of competition and gaming into the proceedings – those who visit a location earn points for doing so, and the 'Mayor' of a location is the one who has visited it the most times. With a kindred service GoWalla (http://gowalla.com/) also active for the previous year, Andrew likes the idea of using these services to pinpoint library areas, which can then be found (though this can also be done via other functions) on Augmented Reality browsers – tags can be applied which users can pick up simply by pointing their phone at an area of space, and libraries can make available to them virtual information. Huddersfield hope to merge all of these into an application they hope to build (a decision is pending) called Lemon Tree, which will let users earn points for things like taking out library books, using library services and going to the information desk.

Overall, this was a very interesting and timely microcosmic look at what academic libraries are doing in the realm of social networking. Progress to date seems to be patchy in the sector as a whole, though there is doubtless more that can be done, and there are certainly librarians who are up for the challenge. ∎

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Going where your users are: embedding library resources into VLE course pages

Jon Fletcher, liaison librarian at Nottingham Trent University, gives an account of his experiences of embedding library resources within Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) student course pages

Introduction

While trends in higher education (HE) libraries come and go, embedding information skills into the daily practice of students and staff has been a constant goal. Whether the VLE survives long-term or is replaced by Web 2.0 tools/Personal Learning Environments (Davis, 2009; cf. Power, 2009 and Kate, 2009), there is no doubt that VLEs have shaped the educational experience of a vast number of students in the UK, and that their provision has enabled many academic staff to offer a more standardised educational experience. However, it is still commonplace for librarians involved in liaison activities to have a fragmented involvement in VLE resources; material made available on online student course pages – where students find many of their main resources for study – is often beyond the authorial access of librarians. This article – written from my experiences as a liaison librarian for science and technology – highlights some of the benefits of being actively embedded in student course pages, as well as relating how this was achieved and offering some advice for best practice. With the focus of this article proving to be of interest in other recent publications (Daly, 2010, Simone, 2010 & Turner and Myer, 2010), it is hoped that this will provide some useful reflection as well some practical advice if required.

Key resources to improve profile and practice

Having had access to all student course pages within my subject remit since January 2009, I have been keen to provide embedded access to key resources whilst avoiding duplication of effort. The Nottingham Trent University Online Workspace (NOW) bears prominent links to our library catalogue and our federated search service (Metalib) on its landing page; other links may also be found which connect to the main library web page hosting most of our information. However, students often head straight to their course pages, and might not know about the links to our services on the NOW landing page. My motivation was therefore to create subject-specific resources which can be put into course pages (see pg 23) – not only do these offer links to the catalogue and Metalib, but they also offer a recorded audio welcome from myself, information about key subject databases, inter-library loans and SCONUL access details, referencing and plagiarism advice (with a guide to RefWorks) as well as further help and training information. These links (highlighting key library resources) were chosen by liaising with academics to ascertain key subject requirements, as well as using my own experience of what should constitute essential student knowledge.

embedding information skills into the daily practice of students and staff... a constant goal

Since I gained permission to put a block of library resources into all Science and Technology course pages, the remote use and face-to-face benefits have been clear, both for my target audience and for myself as a professional. The resources are available 24/7 to those who need them, and - with students more likely to log onto NOW than to the university website - there is an increased chance that library services will be used. Students are also far more likely to use the full range of library services if they are accessible from a one-stop-shop alongside their other course materials. Having access to these course pages means that I can make specific resources available to students; if I am preparing a session for students, all the resources, handouts and information will go into their course page, which means that they can access these themselves without the necessity for paper hand-outs (which may need to be resupplied should students mislay them). I find this access particularly useful when giving sessions with hands-on exercises, as I can post the answers for students and they can

article encompasses my experience as a liaison librarian for science and technology ▶

Photo: ©James Steidl | Dreamstime.com
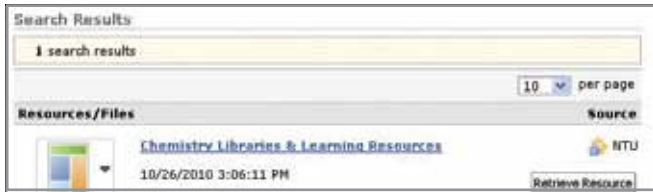
practice these in their own time if wished. Students who missed a session can also access these resources – the argument is sometimes cited that posting resources results in students not attending sessions, though attendance is far better enforced by other means (e.g. registers). Not only do students often use my links on how to contact the library and how to email through for extra help when needed, but an additional benefit (though hard to quantify) is that lecturers also see my resources in their course pages; I have had several staff say that they now have a better idea of library resources due to finding my materials. Furthermore, academics often do not attend sessions with their students, and it is very beneficial for them to know about these resources so they themselves know how to point students towards them.

Managing your generic subject resources

Planning and upkeep is key to any information architecture strategy, and it is essential that the resources developed are easy to distribute, maintain and update when necessary. Nottingham Trent University uses a VLE from Desire2Learn, which allows resources to be authored in my own personal course page and then exported to other locations; this was a satisfactory population method for my 2008-2009 pilot, though in 2009-10 I wanted to develop and restructure my offerings to improve what I made available. This meant revising and manually replacing my resource links, which represented a time commitment I wanted to avoid in the future.

staff and academics now have a better idea of library resources due to finding my materials

The solution was to use a learning object repository, which allowed me to store my resources and dynamically link these to course pages; a block of resources could then be exported to unlimited course pages and – when changes need to be made – these changes are reflected instantly, with all pages being updated. NOW has its own learning object repository (SHARE, 2010), though other institutions may have their own or can use systems such as JorumOpen (Jorum, 2010). The importance of these repositories cannot be understated – no matter how perfectly one plans, it is always possible that something might need to be added, altered or amended in the course of a year, and this has allowed me to update my resources as required. With lecturers encouraged to rollover my resource blocks from one year's course pages to the next (or to download the resources straight from the Learning Repository), embedding a dynamic link once should be sufficient to keep a course page resourced by myself from year to year.

sustainability is a key issue which must be given careful consideration from the very start

The thorny question of who will upload the resources to course pages does need to be confronted – will this be done for all course pages or key course pages (e.g. research methods), and will academics or librarians do this? This will be a matter for each individual/institution to consider, though I have moved from personally trying to put a link to my generic resource blocks into each course page (which was very labour intensive and unsustainable) to informing academics that these resources can be downloaded, whilst also putting key resources into learning rooms as needed. Sustainability is a key issue which must be given careful consideration from the very start.

Five steps to success: outlining the process
For those considering the approach I have outlined in this article,

the process may be summarised as follows:
(1) Consult
 • What would students and academics find useful? What form should services take? Where would they like these resources?
(2) Get Permission/Access
 • Resources can be embedded by academics, but personal access is preferred owing to the flexibility it offers for teaching. Have your remit outlined so you have an idea of a process (ideally this is formally ratified).
 • You may need to 'sell' what you want to do, why you need this access and outline a code of conduct.
(3) Embed resources in a sustainable fashion
 • Get an idea of timescale, workload and commitment; make sure this is communicated to interested parties.
 • Avoid overlap of effort – take a team/institutional approach.
 • Build in sustainability – resources must be futureproofed, easy to upkeep, update and maintain.
(4) Review and improve
 • Make adjustments as needed, based on statistics and user feedback – it is unlikely that you will perfect this the first time!

Future intentions

Whatever the future holds for VLEs, it is clear that libraries benefit greatly from being able to deliver their message in areas of the VLE where users are likely to work and study. Should (hypothetically) my institution decide to move towards a different format for delivering online educational resources, I am satisfied that I am embedded enough that I would simply adapt my resources into whatever the new environment is.

By having access to the spaces in which the students I liaise with study, I am able to provide an enhanced service in terms of resource provision, and this has further allowed my teaching practice to become much more ambitious in terms of materials

provided. This model will not be suitable for reaching all students (i.e. researchers) and users of a library service, though it is a valuable learning and teaching approach. With student and staff feedback being positive in relation to this provision, I will be continuing in this model in the future, and would recommend this to other librarians involved in information skills provision. ■

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Photo: © Nottingham Trent University | students in lab

There is such a thing as a free VLE

Ray Lawrence, director at HowToMoodle, explains the benefits of open source VLE, Moodle

Moodle is software that enables you to create courses, content, activities and communities online along with tracking and assessment tools. It is often referred to as a course management system (CMS), virtual learning environment (VLE) or learning management system and it allows users to produce internet-based courses by creating a Moodle website for this purpose. Its recent surge in popularity has mirrored the increasing use of the Internet as a computing platform and Web 2.0, the "new generation of web-based services that allow people to interact, collaborate and share information[1]".

There are no licence fees as Moodle is open source software which means that it is free to download and free to use. Users are also free to modify or extend Moodle to suit the needs of their organisation. It is distributed under the GNU General Public License. In essence "this means Moodle is copyrighted, but that you have additional freedoms. You are allowed to copy, use and modify Moodle provided that you agree to: provide the source to others; not modify or remove the original license and copyrights, and apply this same licence to any derivative work[2]". It needs to be installed on a web server at the organisation's premises or a web hosting company and is accessed by end users using their web browser such as Internet Explorer or Firefox.

Moodle is designed to be flexible and has a host of features available to users who can tailor it to the exact needs of their organisation. Modules on Moodle include: assignments; calendars; content; forums and chat; monitoring activity; option to add newsfeeds to the site; questionnaires; quizzes and choices; resource links; and wikis.

Features on Moodle can also provide a better mechanism for communicating than some of our existing tools, with IT commentators recently reflecting that "that workhorse of internal communication – email – is looking decidedly more tired as more effective and more efficient communication and collaboration tools devised in the consumer realm work their way into corporate life[1]". Features in Moodle such as forums and wikis can help "build richly collaborative communities of learning around their subject matter (in the social constructionist tradition) while others prefer to use Moodle as a way to deliver content to students (such as standard SCORM packages) and assess learning using assignments or quizzes[3]". SCORM-compliant or other 'packages' of content can be uploaded into Moodle, with no overall limit for size other than the server's own limit. Learning activity management systems can also be integrated with Moodle.

Uses vary from totally online courses to using it as part of a blended learning package. It can be used for a small number of users up to very large deployments such as for The Open University. Features such as wikis and forums also help learners to think, reflect and collaborate on what they've found particularly beneficial or enlightening on the course. IBM's 2008 paper, *The enterprise of the future*, based on interviews with CEOs across the world, recommended that in order to improve their workforces' ability to adapt to change that organisations should consider measures including embedding collaborative tools such as wikis into work processes that involve individuals distributed across multiple locations and elevate collaboration to a core competency by incorporating it into performance management, learning and recognition efforts.

HowToMoodle offers consultancy and training for organisations who wish to use or have already implemented Moodle.
www.howtomoodle.com   ray@howtomoodle.com

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A section of this article first appeared in e.learning age magazine