

Don't Believe the Hype: Blogging with Your Feet on the Ground

The last five years have seen a landslide of information heralding the future of the online library as a shining utopia, laden with indistinct technologies and remarkably fuzzy waves of service-changing applications. Web 2.0 would redefine our profession, but just wait for Web 3.0, and then we'll be able to do *so much more*. Library 2.0 looked like a new dawn, but again so many of our successes were implied, or simply yet to come. Conferences were bogged down in unfulfilled anticipation and crystal ball gazing, where we collectively 'oohed' and 'aahed' at the next set of possibilities. The future looks so exciting, and believe me it actually is, but when do we get to the bit where we start doing rather than waiting? When does the technology get to the point when it's tested and complete, when it's safe enough to put out there in front of our patrons?

Well, the short answer is that it'll never get to that point, and if we wait, then we'll continue to wait indefinitely. But that's only half of the story. The point is that all of these applications labelled as Web 2.0 are in a perpetual beta test, developing and testing new ideas and functionality in a live environment. They are expanded upon and evolved by their customers just as much as their creators. If we don't use them now, they will become something else by next year, and their potential will have altered, putting us into a permanent state of 'catch-up'. Confusing and bewildering I know, but it's this fluidity which is the most attractive feature of this latest wave of technology. They provide the tools, and we provide the uses for them. The technology is really just the starting point.

So, let's take a look at what we can do right now – today. The future is full of dramatic leaps in web services, streamlining our information and making links between applications, but our needs as a profession are here and now. And there are plenty of uses for what have up until now been seen as fairly 'fringe' pieces of software.

Firstly, a fairly easy question to answer. Do you want to communicate with the users of your library? Forget posting opening hours online and providing a set of links to your databases – do you *really* want to communicate? Do you want your staff to speak openly about their roles, knowledge and expertise? Do you want your users to speak just as openly back? Do you want to hear what they have to say? I think that in the competitive world of information management, the answer has to be a resounding 'yes'. If our users don't believe in what we do, they will quite simply turn to Google. If they don't understand the benefits of being guided to the highest quality sources of information, and trust us to take them there, then they can so easily find others who will claim that they can. So, just talk to them. Let the staff who provide the services sell them in their own words. That's the fundamental reason that we blog at the University of Worcester – we have to communicate.

There are several reasons why blogging is the staple of our communication strategy. As mentioned above, the applications are constantly changing, so their potential uses are down to us. Technorati, and other blog search engines, will expose millions of these applications online and, in terms of content, they are absolutely no different to websites. Name a subject and I'll show you a thousand blogs. In fact, at first glance, it can be difficult to distinguish any difference at all between traditional sites and the most basic of weblogs. Text, pictures and even the odd video clip, all

accessed through a browser, providing information, opinion and links out to similar sites on the web. Except that this is where we come back to the thorny issue of communication. Blogs are spectacularly easy to set up, so in twenty minutes you could build, configure and post to a blog with no technical expertise or previous experience necessary. This is a level of accessibility which we've just never encountered before, even with the advent of Content Management Systems and hosted website builders. Put simply, everyone is a potential blogger – you just might not know it yet.

Given this unprecedented ease of use, blogging has side-stepped our more traditional library sites, in terms of style and ownership. Don't fall for the hype delivered in the last few years about blogging being a revolution on the web, with every author a new journalist, contributing to a politically active global society – the vast majority of bloggers have remarkably little to say – but this accessibility does open doors for us. In a library setting, a blog is still seen as a fundamentally 'fringe' application, something a little experimental or flippant. Yet, at the University of Worcester, our student focused house blog (ILS Matters₂) is viewed by hundreds of our users daily, delivering news and information in a way which is simply unmatched by the traditional website. It's current, focused on delivering information at the time of year when it is most needed and, perhaps most importantly, it's relaxed, welcoming and even provocative when the mood takes.

The single biggest factor which makes ILS Matters a success here at Worcester is that it sounds deliberately like a human voice. Without resorting to amateur psychology, it's fairly easy to see that people respond to the style and, crucially, feel able to talk back. It seems, and is, actual communication. One person, feeling that the whole audience should know a particular piece of information which they have come across, posts it in their own terms. They bring with them their own strengths and weaknesses, particularly in the field of grammar, but the readers at least know that somebody has explicitly tried to tell them something. Nothing to do with XML, web services or interoperability. Just one person with a platform, where they can tell others about the job that we do. Simple.

The 'alternative' nature of these systems also provides another benefit. As a blogger, I can post information in a style which just wouldn't be appropriate on a static web page. If we prefaced a page detailing our power-saving option on the library PCs with a picture of Frank the Pixie, firstly our web team would dismiss it out of hand, and consequently the article would be delivered in a formal style, remaining forever unread. Yet, ILS Matters is the second result in a Google search for ILS and "University of Worcester"₃, so as flippant and experimental as it may at first seem, it's one of our most effective marketing and information channels.

The potential and flexibility of blogging software has proven invaluable yet again in some of our other forays into the Web 2.0 world. If what we're essentially talking about is a tool for people to quickly and easily publish their thoughts, with a mechanism for others to respond, then the possibilities expand considerably. No project at Worcester is complete without an ongoing blog to chart progress and solicit feedback. Why wait for monthly meetings to discuss the issues when anybody associated with the work can post in five minutes flat? Why run the risk of staff feeling alienated and 'in the dark' when a few lines a week can keep everyone informed? This is something which has proved hugely successful in Worcester's latest RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) project, giving all department members a say in the development of the service₄. Don't make it the only method of communication, but it can be a remarkably efficient supplement.

Each of our desk services at Worcester also carries a blog, surpassing email as a source of communication between those who work at those points, and delivering a ready-made FAQ database_{5,6} – a searchable point for those particularly blank moments. Once again, the human voice is key, making online conversations stream in multiple directions, with answers recorded for prosperity. Throw in a little RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and one blog ties to another, stretching that conversation to other interested parties.

So here's the suggestion. Blogging, and other tools in the Web 2.0 stable are not the answer to every problem we've ever experienced at our institutions. They are fairly demanding creations, calling you to let your audience in on your information over and over. They are undeniably geeky to anyone who has never used one. Oh, and they are addictive. So addictive. Yet for all of this, they work undeniably well. If any of this sounds remotely interesting, just do one thing today. Create a blog (I'd try Wordpress.com as a starting point) and write one posting. If it does nothing for you, then forget it ever existed and move on. If, like me, you can think of a million and one ways to use them to ease information onto the desktops of your library's patrons, then write another post tomorrow. You won't stop there. And when the next tool comes along in this Web 2.0 wave, pick it up and use it – it's what they are there for after all.

References

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