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

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Introduction

There is currently a lot of hype about a phenomena known as web 2.0 or social software and not a day goes by when there isn't a new story about the social networking site Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/), or a company buying space in Second Life (http://www.secondlife.com/). Librarians and libraries are certainly no different and web 2.0 or 'Library 2.0' as it has been called, has been receiving considerable publicity recently. Even our professional body CILIP opened offices in Second Life and has been encouraging CILIP groups to set up blogs. There have also been a number of recent publications on implementing web 2.0 technologies in libraries, such as Phil Bradley's *How to Use Web 2.0 in your Library* (Bradley, 2007) and Meredith Farkas *Libraries and Social Software* (Farkas, 2007).

A team based at the University of London and led by Dr Jane Secker at LSE's Centre for Learning Technology, have spent the past nine months working on the LASSIE (Libraries and Social Software in Education) project to explore how social software might enhance the distance learners' experience of libraries. The team includes librarians, learning technologists and archivists colleagues from the Institute of Education, the Open University, University of London Research Library Services and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. This short paper will present an overview of the work of the project to date, as well as some initial findings about how these technologies are being used by medical libraries.

What is social software?

In July 2007 the LASSIE team published a draft literature review (Secker, 2007) which found the library world is full of people exploring how social software might be used to enhance our services. The literature review also provided a useful overview of what social software (or web 2.0 – we use the terms interchangeably) is all about for those new to the concept. Most people have heard of blogs, and a few might have experimented with wikis or joined the social networking site, Facebook. But what is this phenomenon all about and is it really any different from what we've always done?

In short web 2.0 is all about making the web more participatory, so rather than having websites created and maintained by a few web editors, social software tools allow us all to add content, comments and reviews to a site. Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org/) is a good example of how people can work together to build up an online encyclopedia which is the sum of their combined knowledge, making it comprehensive and up to date. Yet, Wikipedia is also an example of the problems associated with letting content be managed in this way, with entries needed to be locked down to prevent malicious editing.

Web 2.0 has been described as an 'attitude not a technology' by Ian Davis (2005) and LASSIE largely steered clear of debates about terminology. However, what was clear was that something had happened to the web in the past few years, which has made it more participatory, easier for users to contribute, share and work collaboratively. It is also clear that the concept of Web 2.0 is becoming mainstream and the tools and services are becoming extremely popular. To summarise, the project has identified some overall characteristics of social software or web 2.0 including:

- development of social networks
- content created by users rather than created by an organisation
- development of user profiles
- use of folksonomies or tagging to attach keywords created by users, to items to aid retrieval

Meanwhile JISC in their recent paper on web 2.0 (Anderson, 2007) highlight six key concepts related to this subject, which are:

1. Individual production and User Generated Content
2. Harness the power of the crowd
3. Data on an epic scale
4. Architecture of Participation
5. Network Effects
6. Openness

It is not in the scope of this short paper to provide an overview of the all the different social software tools that are available, but anyone less familiar with this topic would be advised to read the LASSIE literature review in full (Secker, 2007).

Libraries and social software

The library community particularly in the US, have been exploring the potential of social software to enhance their services for a number of years. The term "Library 2.0" was coined by Michael Casey in 2005 who sees Library 2.0 at it's heart, being about "user-centred change" (Casey, 2006). 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. Crawford (2006) found 62 different views and seven distinct definitions of the term which he usefully brought together in *Cites and Insights*. He argued the term is confusing, and as well as a concept, it is also a bandwagon which has been used to "*deride libraries as being irrelevant, rigid and unresponsive to change"*.

LASSIE found that librarians have become keen bloggers and in the US many libraries are using blogs for news stories and to keep their website looking fresh. See for example Ohio University Library Business Blog (http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/businessblog/) and Kansas State University library blogs (http://ksulib.typepad.com/).

Library 'patrons' are being encouraged to subscribe to a variety of RSS feeds to keep up to date with library news and acquisitions to the library catalogue and electronic resources. MIT Libraries maintain a list of RSS feeds available from their site (http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/feeds.html). Meanwhile, closer to home London School of Economics and Political Science, have developed a Training website (http://www.training.lse.ac.uk/) which uses RSS technology, and has a feed that is being incorporated into the VLE (Moodle) and the institutional portal.

In a more revolutionary move in some libraries, user generated content, such as book reviews and comments is being added to the library catalogue. See for example Hennepin County Library (http://catalog.hclib.org/) and the University of Huddersfield (http://webcat.hud.ac.uk/) which is allowing students to rate books.

The health sector has also started to experiment with web 2.0 technologies. Examples we found in the health library sector include the use of RSS technology on the National Library for Health (NLH) website (http://www.library.nhs.uk/Default.aspx). Various RSS feeds are available and these are moderated by a team of medical libraries to check the content meets the following criteria:

- is the it health related?
- does it derive from a reputable source?
- what is known or can be inferred about the quality of the authorship?
- is it appropriate to an NHS audience?

On the News & RSS page of the NLH there are four RSS feeds: 'Hitting the headlines', 'Focus on….', 'What's new' and 'Document of the week'. There are further RSS feeds in other sections of the site. The 'specialist libraries' section (http://www.library.nhs.uk/SpecialistLibraries/) also includes RSS feeds which are supplied by the contributing libraries for the specific area. The newsfeeds are catalogued and indexed with subject headings from a controlled taxonomy. This

has been mapped to other health taxonomies as a means to ensure compatibility with existing work.

Blogs are also being used in the health sector. The NLH blog (http://nlhnews.blogspot.com/) provides updates on NLH activities as well as information on forthcoming events. The library for the School of Health and Related Research at the University of Sheffield is piloting a blog (http://scharrlibrary.blogspot.com/). Postings include information on funding opportunities, health related news as well as some more light-hearted links.

The Case studies

Over the next few months the LASSIE team will be publishing a number of case studies which explore in more detail how particular tools might enhance the learning experience of distance learning students. As part of the project a citing and referencing screencast (http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/insktr/citing_referencing.htm) has been developed, the team has also using the social bookmarking tool del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us/LSE_LASSIE) to collect useful resources and exploring reference management tools such as CiteUlike (http://www.citeulike.org/) and H20 Playlists http://h2obeta.law.harvard.edu/home.do) to present reading list information.

The team have also written up a case study on blogging and libraries, partly based on their experience of running the LASSIE blog (http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/) since March 2007. This blog is a great way of keeping up to date with developments in this area but has also been useful for reflecting on ideas and getting feedback from the Steering Group and from others interested in the project. It has also been a good way of documenting progress. Further details about the five case studies will be published on the project website (http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE.php) in December 2007.

Conclusion

LASSIE will continue her adventures until the end of December 2007 when a final report will also be made available from the project website. The literature review will also be updated at this time. The project has been a valuable opportunity for the team to spend time exploring social software and the project hopes its recommendations will be of value to the wider library community. Rather than simply jumping on the web 2.0 bandwagon, we are aiming to be able to recommend specific tools and services that can be utilised to improve library services. In a forthcoming article by Booth (2007), the author highlighted the 'evaluation by-pass' that seems to be occurring in libraries over the implementation of web 2.0 technologies. We therefore hope that LASSIE will help to provide practitioners with some concrete evidence over how these tools can be used.

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