

Social Libraries: Collaborating Worldwide from the Comfort of Home

Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis and social bookmarking have been the subject of many conferences and articles in recent years. The Information community has been quick to recognise and capitalise on opportunities to deliver a range of services to our users, giving rise to the term “Library 2.0”, which has as many definitions as “Web 2.0”, being, at base level, the application of Web 2.0 by information services.

Perhaps heretically for a career cataloguer and taxonomer, I don’t want to spend time defining these terms, for reasons that I hope will become clear in the course of this informal talk. Instead I want to focus on the more recently-coined description “Social Libraries” and, in particular, on the ground-breaking course *Five Weeks to a Social Library (5 Weeks)* organised by a group of North American information professionals led and inspired by well-known library commentator and ‘Queen of the Wiki’, Meredith Farkas.[1]

Social Libraries: the Basics

Wikipedia - and despite the controversies about accuracy that rage around Wikipedia, I fear in a talk about “social libraries” we really cannot ignore it - defines “social libraries” as “Sites that allow visitors to keep track of their collectibles, ranging from books, records and DVDs. Users can share their collections and recommendations are generated based on the ratings using statistical computation and [network theory](#). Some sites offer a buddy system, as well as virtual checking out of items for borrowing among friends. [Folksonomy](#) is implemented on most sites. Examples include [discogs.com](#), [LibraryThing](#) and [lib.rario.us](#)” [2]

In short, “social libraries” are pieces of web-based software that allow groups of individuals to come together (the “social” part of the term) and swap online articles, books, music and films and details about offline books, music and films. So the “libraries” part of the term is derived from a public understanding of real-world libraries - that is to say, the services that we as information professionals create, curate and make available.

Small wonder that first- and second-generation adopters of social software in libraries should be so keen to promote its use amongst our fellow information professionals. In the most basic terms, these technologies are making it possible for us to deliver our core services in openly-accessible, user-friendly ways, by-passing the needs to buy expensive equipment, host large amounts of data on our own servers or get bogged down in endless negotiations with our systems vendors or IT departments (although, clearly, professional courtesy as well as common sense stresses the importance of communicating with all who might have an interest in new online ventures).

Reclaiming the “Social Library”

At last, here is a range of software specifically designed to meet our needs, complete with WYSIWYG editors to make design and input easy, and draft and privacy settings to

enable us to play around with the software and demonstrate its capabilities to management and peers without alerting the whole world to our interest in it.

The birth of “social libraries” on the web has led to interesting developments for information professionals. For example, a recent study found that 28% Americans have used the internet to tag content [3] - and, again, while we may have reservations about the methodologies involved in creating tags from our ‘purist’ perspective, this is a figure too high to be brushed aside.

Indeed, long before the term “user involvement” was touted, has it not been one of our key remits not only to serve our community but to involve as many members of it in our service provision? If this new software offers us a way to communicate with our users, canvas their opinion and harness their expertise, what librarian could turn their back on it? Should we not be reclaiming the term “social libraries” as our own - redefining it as the way in which our information services - “libraries proper” - harness these new technologies?

Cost Implications

Especially if I tell you that the monetary cost of implementing these technologies is zero?

“Zero?” you say, “Free?”

“Indeed, the cost of most of the functions libraries would want to use for our purposes is nought - the software is free; the web-hosting is free; the documentation to learn how to use the software is free. If you have a computer and a connection to the Internet, and the time to play around with the technology, these services are free of charge,” I say.

“But what about all those training days we’ve seen advertised - £50 for small local events to £300+ for the slick commercial ones with the nice sandwiches?”

“Yes, well ...”

Courses, of Course

Courses on social software generally concentrate on two things: showing how blogs, wikis, etc. can be used effectively by libraries, and teaching the nuts-and-bolts of using the software. Put in other terms, they evangelise and demonstrate the technology.

Remember when email first became mainstream? As well as learning how to actually send emails using whatever software we had been issued, we had to make an imaginative leap to realise that emailing might be a better way to send out our newsletters - no postage, quicker delivery time; less (or perhaps just different) opportunity for things to be mis-delivered. Some of us jumped on the e-news bandwagon quickly, some hedged our bets sending out both e- and snail-mail versions of our newsletters, and some of us stuck with print format.

Moving to social software, becoming a Social Library, is quite similar. Some of us will, some of us won't, some of us will do a little. And our reasons for moving or not moving are affected by similar things - time, inclination, user opinion and our confidence in the technology.

Self-guided Learning

The key difference between emailing newsletters in the late 80s and blogging newsletters now is simply that the technology has become more intuitive. We don't learn how to email at library school these days because it's too basic - one of those things we can teach ourselves or pick up by osmosis. Blogging is similar, if a little shinier. Suggesting we email our current awareness lists would probably be seen as a waste of meeting time nowadays, while blogging our current awareness items has led to a host of invitations to speak for me. Because blogging is new.

But it's intuitive. I taught myself to do it, not because I am clever or techie but because it's been designed to be easy for anyone to learn on their own. The entry screens look very like basic word processing programmes, saving and posting are point-and-click operations and there's a host of online documentation and demos to help when you get stuck - *if* you get stuck, would perhaps be a better way to put it, as you probably won't.

Where people need a little help is with finding the time and with what 80s band *Sisters of Mercy* called "that Vision Thing". Depending on your hourly rate and the other demands on your time, £50 - £300 might be fair exchange to spend one day learning about how other libraries have used social software, its impact on their services and users, and getting started on blogging, social bookmarking and wiki-ing yourself.

The 5 Weeks Philosophy

This is where *5 Weeks* comes in. Back in May 2006, Meredith Farkas posted a germ of an idea on her blog, *Information Wants to be Free*, following the ALA 2.0 Bootcamp:

In the age of the Read/Write Web, couldn't we plan the conference for free online and market it well enough to get great presenters and participants? ... In theory, I bet we could find a way to do Web conferencing for free or almost nothing and there is certainly open source forum software, so I bet it could all be done for the cost of Web hosting ... Couldn't we regular librarian folks be in the drivers' seat in developing a free online conference for our colleagues? My answer is a resounding yes. And what is more 2.0 than developing things (be they services, community, educational programs, or conferences) from the bottom up?

[4]

This seed eventually grew into *5 Weeks*. With the help of a range of library innovators - Michelle Boule, Dorothea Salo, Amanda Etches-Johnson, Karen Coombs and Ellysa Kroski - Farkas put together "the first free, grassroots, completely online course devoted to teaching librarians about social software and how to use it in their libraries ... developed to provide a free, comprehensive, and social online learning opportunity for

librarians who do not otherwise have access to conferences or continuing education and who would benefit greatly from learning about social software ... [and] taught using a variety of social software tools so that the participants acquire[d] experience using the tools while ... taking part in the class. It ...[made] use of synchronous online communication, with one or two weekly Webcasts and many small group IM chat sessions made available to participants each week.” [5]

The Programme

So what did this look like in practice? Those of you familiar with Helene Blowers’ Learning 2.0 Project will spot some similarities - and those of you not familiar should check out its website for ideas to get into Library 2.0 [6] While Learning 2.0 centres around 23 things, and was originally an incentivised programme within one library, the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County, *5 Weeks* reached out to participants across different cultures and time zones skilling them up on social software and aiming to inspire them to transform their information service into a Social Library.

The tools covered were:

- blogs
- RSS
- social bookmarking
- wikis
- flickr
- social networking / virtual communities

Crucially, the final week of the programme looked at techniques for “selling social software [at] your library”[7]

Compulsory live webcasts and chatroom-hosted classes were supplemented by asynchronous screencasts and reading lists. Participants were expected to contribute to the course wiki [8] and to maintain their own blogs [9] for reflective practice and discussion about the things they were learning.

Selection Process

5 Weeks used conventional processes to attract presenters. A call for papers was issued in a range of sources [10] It is worth highlighting the direction that “Preference will be given to presentations that 1) are very ‘nuts-and-bolts’ or 2) describe a successful use of the technology that could be replicated in different types of libraries.” [11]

The need for a certain amount of technical savvy was hinted at in the description of the ways in which the presentations would be submitted and broadcast - “Webcast ... Screencast / Vodcast ... Podcast ... we will accept a very limited number of text presentations, but we greatly prefer presentations that incorporate audio and video. In addition to developing a presentation, presenters must also make themselves available via AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) for questions from students.” [12]

The cfp also stressed the organisers' aim that the course should be free and open access: "All presentations will be made available under the Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License." [13]

Participants also underwent a selection process "designed to ensure that the course [would] benefit those librarians who [had] the most to gain from learning about social software and who would not otherwise have access to conferences or continuing education." [14]

Building a Community

The result was a group of individuals, mostly from North America, but with a few from as far afield as Australia, Guatemala and even the UK. We were brought together by a range of online activities - creating a wiki, blogging, making / viewing presentations and chatting via AIM and / or in the course chatrooms.

Presenters were requested and participants required to create a profile page on the wiki. As course leader, Meredith posted an example [15] complete with informal photo, ambitions for the course and three fun facts ("My best friend and I wore viking costumes for a month in our senior year of high school" was my out and out favourite). Some people really went to town - I LOVE Jocalyn Gervasio's page with its course aims, "interesting / unusual / funny facts", favourite TV shows and "out there" photo. Others gave straight resumés or linked out to profiles on other sites or to their presenter's page on the wiki.[16]

Participants and course organisers were able to get to know those in their small chat groups [17], webcasters took Q&A sessions and screencasters chaired chatroom or AIM sessions.

Blogging

By far the most generally sociable element of the course was blogging. Participants were asked to introduce themselves through their blogs, which were displayed together or could be viewed individually on the course's Drupal site [18]. They also used their blogs to reflect on their learning experience and discuss elements of the course.

I noticed that at least one of the organisers posted comments on each of the early posts, encouraging the participant who had written the post and stimulating further discussion. Given the slow uptake of comment facilities on general independent blogs, I thought this was a good move on the organisers' part. In the chatroom session I hosted, several people expressed concern about how to get their library users to comment on their service blogs, seeing this as a measure of the blogs' success and, in many cases a reason for their interest in blogging in the first place.

The reality is that, like any new publication, a blog takes time to build a readership and even longer to get to the stage where that readership wants to share their thoughts and opinions. As well as commenting on participants' posts herself, Meredith incentivised

posting by highlighting some of them each week on *Information Wants to Be Free* and encouraging her readers to leave comments on the *5 Weeks* blogs [19]

Outcomes - Participants

Each participant was asked to devise a project for implementation in their own information service, based on one or more of the things they had learned during the course. [20] These are listed on the course wiki [21] and, given that the course finished in March and it's only mid-April now, the projects are at different stages of implementation. Here are just three examples.

Linda Bedwell, Reference and Instruction Librarian at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, identified a particular issue in her institution's website that could be resolved or circumvented using social software. "In [its] current format, these subject pages allow for only five listed websites, with no immediate opportunity for users to contribute their suggestions." [22] Linda proposes trying out a wiki and social bookmarking site and that "pilot project run until the end of the Fall 2007 term, at which time feedback (in the form of an embedded poll), usage (as identified by web page statistics), and participation (as evidenced by patron contributions) should be evaluated in order to determine which social software, if either, provided excellent service." [23] A pbwiki site [24] is already up and running, which she intends to convert to mediawiki.

Matthew Murray, Librarian at Urbana High School in Illinois, decided to start blogging for his school book club. [25] I'm highlighting his project as he's really embraced the "suck it and see" nature of social software. Although in his proposal he makes it clear that a primary concern for him as a school official is the security of the site and contributors to it, the fact that already the blog [26] is up and running shows that he is comfortable with the security features on Blogger combined with talking to kids and parents about online security and, presumably, with the idea that the blog, its entries and comments can be deleted if it does not meet the Club's needs - for whatever reason.

Meanwhile, Josalyn Gervasio has created a pbwiki site to celebrate her library's 50th anniversary. [27] As the users of her public library referred to the site will know that it is about their library, Guilderland Public Library, the site is simply called *The Library's 50th Anniversary Wiki*. As well as space for information on history and celebration events, there's scope to post pictures to flickr and even a sample chat page (with plans for more private chatting).

And the Blog Goes On

Participants have posted regrets that the course is ending, thanks to the organisers and final reflective comments on their *5 Weeks* blogs. Meredith and her husband have agreed to keep the Drupal site alive on their webserver (from which it has been running throughout the course) and, barring major incident, the only thing they plan on changing is the facility for non-course members to post comments. [28] Those of us with accounts on the site can continue to share experiences and observations there.

Given the quality of the posts on *5 Weeks*, I'm sure I'm not alone in hoping that Tiah Edmunson Morton will be only the first of many to announce the birth of a new blog through *5 Weeks*. [29]

Outcomes - Presenters & Organisers

It's still early days for the presenters and organisers, too. We have all benefited by seeing course participants become enthused by social software, and, as with any course, we've had the buzz of sharing our ideas and receiving feedback from our colleagues, which helps us develop personally and professionally.

I, for one, have learned a lot about the aspects of social software with which I was least familiar: I'm using private wikis for library procedures and for our journal, *Druglink's* book reviews, and choosing which of the free software to use was made much easier thanks to the comments and mini-reviews of *5 Weeks* participants.

Presenting on the course has also opened up other opportunities. Nanette Donohue will be presenting her "Blogging Beyond the Basics" Program at the Illinois Library Association's conference in the Autumn [30] and Dorothea Salo announced last week that "there will be a poster session on *Five Weeks to a Social Library* at ASIST [the American Society for Information Science & Technology] 2007 this October in Milwaukee." [31] Amanda Etches-Johnson (organiser), Helene Blowers, Kelly Czarnecki and Beth Evans (all course contributors as well as innovators in other ways) were recently named *Library Journal* Movers and Shakers for 2007 (following in Meredith Farkas' footsteps last year). [32]

Outcomes - the Course

Meredith Farkas is beginning to draw together her own thoughts about the course. At the moment, these are taking the form of what she calls "meta-posts" on *Information Wants to Be Free*. These will, no doubt, inform more formal writing and speaking about *5 Weeks* in future.

In her post 'Making Five Weeks to a Social Library happen: the down and dirty' [33] she describes many of the processes she and the organising team went through, including how to choose the participants, how long to make the course, when to schedule the webcasts and how to deal with people who did not participate fully. These notes, along with her thoughts on what she would do differently next time, will be invaluable not only in documenting the history of the course, but for anyone contemplating organising an online course using *5 Weeks* techniques.

Outcomes - Observers

This is one of the ways in which the course is useful for those who did not take part, in the course directly. As a model for online courses, my initial observations as a not particularly techie course presenter are:

- *5 Weeks* succeeds in demonstrating that online courses can be run by groups of interested individuals - although, without organisational backing large

- commitments of time and technical support need to be made (remember Meredith Farkas hosted *5 Weeks* on her family webserver).
- Elements of *5 Weeks* could be adapted to suit less ambitious projects or run alongside conventional real-world training events - for example, I'll be running a wiki to support the 'Blogging from the Backroom' event the Cataloguing & Indexing Group is planning for June.
 - While webcasting requires confidence in technical knowledge and reliability, asynchronous screencasts are far easier to create and broadcast and have the advantage that any blips or glitches can be recovered from and an attempt made to view the screencast at a later date.
 - *5 Weeks* exemplified how to create a community out of a group of individuals from different information sectors, different technical backgrounds and different time-zones. Thanks to the technology, it really was possible to collaborate worldwide from the comfort of home.
 - The social element of the course - the group chats and communal blogging and wiki-ing activities really sustained participants and spurred most of them on to complete all the requirements of the course. As Meredith Farkas has pointed out herself, without these elements, some of the richness of the course would be lost.[34]

That last bullet-point notwithstanding, it must be said that one of the tangible outcomes of this course for anyone interested in finding out more about social software in libraries is that you do not need to spend £300 on a course; you do not even need to spend £50 - our presentations and support material are all available and free to use online. So, for the target demographic identified by *5 Weeks*' organisers - those without access to courses or continuing education - access to information continues to be a reality, from the comfort of their own workplace or home.

Notes and References

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