Social Tools: More than Just a Good Time?

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By now, most of us in Libraryland are well aware of the phenomenon called Web 2.0, also known as the Read/Write or Social Web. Web 2.0 has many characteristics but three stand out: 1) the user (as well as the author) can create content, 2) the Web, and not an external software program, is the platform and 3) real-time communication is enabled and encouraged. Indeed, many libraries have enthusiastically embraced Web 2.0, eagerly integrating these technologies into library services. Others are just now taking the plunge. But can these social web applications really support a library’s strategic goals and objectives or are all of these libraries merely keeping up with the Techno-Joneses? At the Library @ Mohawk, we believe they can and we’ll explain how we’ve integrated social software into library service in order to support our goals and objectives.

Blogging: Not Just for Breakfast Anymore

One popular Web 2.0 technology is the blog – web-based software that takes the form of an online diary. The Library @ Mohawk became enamoured with blogging in February of 2002 when the eLibrarian and the Library Director attended a session on blogging at the OLA Super Conference. We admit that we were eager to find an application for this fun and fascinating new technology. At the same time, we wanted to increase our outreach efforts to faculty and were also searching for a means to encourage staff communication. For these reasons, we launched two blogs: The BRAIN_blog, a faculty newsletter and The BRAINTrust, an internal communications tool.

As the Library could not rely on the busy IT department for the technical implementation, the eLibrarian used the free Blogger software to create the two blogs. The blogging software was ideal because it was easy to set up and maintain, and uploading content for the newsletter was hassle-free. The comments feature was also ideal for the BRAINTrust as staff members could easily add feedback to postings, thereby generating discussion.


2 In case you are wondering about this consistent allusion to “brains”; the name of the library web site is TheBRAIN, formerly an acronym for “Basic Research and Advanced Information Node”. All of our library branding utilizes the “brain” concept.

3 We have since migrated our blogs to the newer and more feature-rich Wordpress.com platform.
The BRAIN_blog survived the initial pilot phase but the BRAINTrust did not. New campus portal software filled the need for online staff communication so the BRAINTrust was gently put out to pasture. The BRAIN_blog, however, garnered a steady increase in readership and two years later won the 2005 Micromedia ProQuest CTCL Innovation Achievement Award. Best of all, this new technology allowed us to achieve the strategic priority of outreach to our users.

Another use for the blogging software surfaced when the library’s Research Skills Instruction team was looking for a quick and easy way to archive files from classroom instruction sessions. Blogger.com to the rescue yet again! The streamlined interface displays the last entry first and allows one to categorize postings, making it easy for students to retrieve online class notes. Ease of use was also a boon for those librarians who did not have the time to learn HTML or other web coding. The Research Skills Instruction blog (now, like the BRAIN_blog, on Wordpress) is an easy-to-use database of library class sessions. In summary, the main priorities achieved by our blogging efforts are outreach and communication with users, and, in the case of the research skills instruction blog, knowledge management.

Social Bookmarking: Fun with Collection Development

Knowledge management is also achieved through the use of social bookmarking software. The Library @ Mohawk, like many libraries, maintains a database of authoritative web sites that are useful for research. These web sites have been selected and catalogued by staff and are recommended to our users as appropriate sources for completing assignments and research papers. We call our database BRAINlinks and it includes close to two thousand links. With such a thriving resource, we needed an efficient way for staff to recommend links that would avoid sending links via email to the already-overflowing inbox of the Collection and Access Management (CAM) Librarian. Furl saved the day!

Furl.net is a social bookmarking web site that allows one to bookmark and comment on other web sites. As it is web-based (like most social software), it can be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection. Good-bye, locally saved bookmarks! The Library @ Mohawk set up a single login for Furl to be shared among all staff members. Now, when a staff member sees a web site that she would like to recommend for the Library’s collection, she “furls it”, adds comments for the CAM Librarian, perhaps adds a clipping from the site, and is done. Sweet simplicity! Furl can also be used to recommend books that are listed on Amazon, Chapters or any other web site. One major benefit of this system is that if a recommended URL has already been furled, a message indicates that it is a duplicate.

In terms of strategic objectives met, Furl enables efficient collection management and encourages collaborative collection development; all staff members have a
say in the development of the collection. Furl also streamlines workflow as the web site cataloguers are able to see at a glance which web sites need to be catalogued and which subject areas are priorities.

**Wikis: The Way to Collaborate**

Another online tool that the library uses to encourage staff collaboration is the wiki. Wikis are web sites that allow many users to edit and add content. The Library @ Mohawk could not resist using this new tool to encourage information sharing in key service areas such as collection development, reference, and faculty liaison. Two wikis were created: one for collection development and one for reference services. The Collection and Access Management at Mohawk (CAMM) wiki contains information such as the Collection Development Policy, collection profiles, new title lists, weeding statistics, and information on college programs and schools.

The reference wiki (yet to be named) includes information such as reference staff schedules, reference stumper questions, and links to relevant articles and web sites. Staff uses these wikis to communicate with one another and to access required information. Both wikis were created using MediaWiki with the help of the IT department but as time passed the IT department did not have time to support these projects. For that reason, the wikis were migrated to the free and easy-to-use pbwiki software. Wikis meet our strategic objectives of efficient staff communication and collaboration.

**Google Documents and Spreadsheets: Spread the Love**

The goal of efficient collaboration was also met when staff used the social software tool called Writely.com (now called Google Documents and Spreadsheets). Library staff used Writely to collaborate on a short-term project, because it was an efficient way to share documents and to work simultaneously on the same document. Once the document was complete, a URL was generated so that the team could share the document with the entire staff in order to get feedback. This social tool definitely served the goal of collaborative efficiency.
Podcasting: Sharing the Good News in Stereo

The Library @ Mohawk began producing podcasts using the web site libsyn.com in September, 2006. Podcasting is one more tool in our outreach arsenal and is used to promote information literacy. Every two weeks a new podcast proclaims the good news of library research and resources. The podcasts (called BRAINcasts) have featured such tasty morsels as "CSI: Catalogue Scene Investigation", "E-Books: What Are They?" as well as audio walking tours of the campus libraries.

One of the Library’s strategic objectives is "to leverage relevant and emerging technologies in the creation of evolving service options." Podcasting definitely meets this objective. Through podcasting, we aim to make our users aware of emerging technologies and help them become knowledgeable in their use. In addition to producing the podcasts, we circulate iPod shuffles with the podcasts preloaded. We’re not entirely sure if the students listen to our podcasts every two weeks; however we are pleased that students are learning about new technologies through interactions with their library.

Chat: Instant Communication Gratification

Another communication tool that the library uses is instant messaging. We launched our chat service in February, 2005 with the buddy name “braintogo” and used the free software Trillian to monitor AIM, MSN, and Yahoo! chat clients. This project met our strategic priority to provide “anytime, anywhere” reference service. While chatting is obviously fun and exciting, the Library @ Mohawk embarked on the project after researching the use of chat by Millennials and discovering that many of our students use this mode of communication. The library offers instant messaging as a complement to our virtual reference service (offered through the use of Tutor.com software). Chat is also used as an efficient internal communications method for staff.

Ning: Choose Your Own Adventure

The library was thrilled to discover Ning.com, a web site that allows software developers to share their social web applications and customize these applications for their own use. Our collective mouths were watering at the thought of all of the social software we could create to communicate with our users. “Suggestion boxes” were listed as one of our strategic priorities for 2005-2006, so we used Ning.com to create an online suggestion box that would also

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double as a user forum. Sadly, our enthusiasm was greater than that of our users and we watched our lonely online forum gather dust: no comments were posted since its launch in January, 2007. Perhaps a forum about the library isn’t quite ready for prime time, even if it does meet the strategic priority of outreach to our users.

**RSS: Really Social Strategy**

The Library @ Mohawk was also thrilled to discover Bloglines.com, a free RSS aggregator. Not long after discovery of this new tool, we created a Bloglines login for staff to meet the strategic priorities of staff development and training. The library's Bloglines account acts as a communal reading room and a place for discussion of readings. We added the feeds for popular library blogs (such as Gary Price's Resourceshelf and Jenny Levine's Shifted Librarian), library journals and education journals and blogs. We shared the login among all staff members so that anyone could log in, read the latest news and clip or blog about what they had read. The implementation of Bloglines fulfilled the strategic goal of professional development for all staff; however, uptake has been slow as staff members warm to this new way of reading library literature.

**Keeping Up with the Techno-Joneses?**

Yes, we have been having a good time with social tools here at the Library @ Mohawk. But in addition, the social tools have helped us to meet strategic objectives, improve and streamline services, and increase efficiencies. Sometimes, we were merely keeping up with the Techno-Joneses; in the case of Ning.com and Bloglines.com, we were enticed by the technologies and desperately sought ways to integrate them into our services. In these cases, we were not entirely successful as usage was not as high as we had hoped. For the most part, however, the social software implemented helped us to meet goals.

A pleasant side effect also emerged. As we integrated these technologies into library services, our community (faculty and staff) took notice. We developed a reputation as innovators in our college, and faculty and staff asked us for advice when implementing social tools such as blogging and podcasting. We have been invited to present at internal workshops and conferences and have been asked to develop curriculum and classes on social software. Through these endeavours we have achieved our strategic goal of building a reputation as knowledge experts in our community.

**Next Steps: Keep Your Eyes on the Prize**

We continue to monitor new social tools and look for ways to integrate them into service delivery in such a way that they meet strategic objectives. Currently we are investigating the use of Second Life as a service point, myspace for communication with users, Flickr for marketing, and we are embarking on a
Learning 2.0 professional development program for all staff (modeled after that developed by Helene Blowers at The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County)\(^5\). We encourage other libraries to get out there and start having fun with social software. Don’t worry - you’ll be achieving strategic objectives at the same time!

\(^5\) For information on this programme visit the Learning 2.0 web site: http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com/.
Works Cited

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Further Reading

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