

LASSIE: Libraries and Social Software in Education

Case Study 4: blogging and libraries
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This case study explores how blogs and blogging can enhance library services. Establishing a project blog was an important first step when the LASSIE project was launched and to date the project team's experience of blogging has been very positive. Through studying a number of blogs established by libraries, this case study will explore the advantages and disadvantages of blogs and make recommendations about how they might be used to add value to library services.

1. Background

The library 'blogosphere' has expanded significantly in the last year. The LASSIE literature review found many examples of librarian blogs or blogs hosted on library websites. This phenomena was worthy of further exploration. In addition the value of using a blog to report on a current ongoing project was evident even in the first few months of the project. It enabled the Steering group and those outside the project to monitor progress. It also allowed the principle researcher to reflect on ideas and track progress of the project.

2. Aims and Objectives

- To document the experiences of using a blog as part of the LASSIE Project and for departmental communication in the Centre for Learning Technology
- To document the experiences of one library / archive who recently set a blog
- To make recommendations about the use of blogs by library and other related services

3. Overall Approach

This case study is based on experiences of the project team as well as interviews with LSE archives staff who recently set up a blog.

4. Project Outputs

- The project blog was established as part of the project
- A report on the benefits and value of blogging in the library community, based on the experience of the project blog and two other recently established blogs in the library/education field
- Recommendations for libraries who wish to establish a blog about best practice.

5. Benefits

This case study will be of interest to any library considering setting up a blog or currently using one to enhance their services. It will provide recommendations of interest to the wider library community as well as documenting the process of using a blog as part of the LASSIE Project. The LASSIE Project's experiences of using a blog have to date been highly successful, so where possible the reasons for this will be captured.

6a. Results – The LASSIE blog

The rationale of the LASSIE Blog

It was decided at the first Steering Group meeting that LASSIE should establish a blog to explore how this type of technology could be used in a library research project. It was established for the following reasons:

- To explore the wider value of a blog in the library community
- To gather first hand experience of how easy the technology was to use,
- To explore the value of blogs to researchers as a reflective tool
- To explore the impact of the blog on the level of engagement with the LASSIE Project in the wider community, for example, if people reported reading the blog and if comments were posted
- To document the progress of the project so the Steering Group and others outside the project team could monitor progress

Set-up of the Blog

The blog was hosted on a local server based in the Centre for Learning Technology (CLT), using the WordPress software. The CLT host several blogs for use by the team and teachers at LSE, therefore the required software was already installed in the department. The blog was also set up by the CLT Systems Administrator, who had experience of this process. There was a perception that a locally hosted blog could be controlled more easily and customised to a greater extent than one hosted remotely. Therefore, this option was chosen at the outset of the project, rather than hosting the blog on the Word Press site (<http://wordpress.com/>).

However, a second blog was also set up on the WordPress site to compare the ease of installation. A remotely hosted blog has several advantages as it can be easily customised and the appearance can be changed very simply using WordPress 'themes'. Plug-ins can also be easily installed on a remotely hosted WordPress blog, which has an easy to use interface. By contrast, changes to the LASSIE blog required intervention by the Systems Administrator, for example to install new themes or add features like a link to the RSS feed. However, the simple appearance of the LASSIE blog was not considered to have lessened its value and adding images provided colour and interest without detracting from the main content.

Using the Blog: the LASSIE team

It was agreed that the principle researcher would largely post on the blog with weekly progress updates. Relevant information and news was also added occasionally by two other members of the project team, but the team generally used e-mail or a Moodle discussion group to communicate amongst themselves.

The software was easy to use with several nice features, for example posts can be drafted and saved for later, and images and files can be added to posts. The most important part of posts was to include hyperlinks to external websites of interest.

Developing a writing style for the blog evolved over time. The researcher wanted to make blog postings informative and relevant for readers, but not to appear sterile or impersonal. Therefore occasional personal details were added to blog posts. These postings seemed to generate the greatest level of feedback from readers – see below for more details.

The blog served a valuable function for the principle researcher, enabling her to document the progress of the project through blog postings and thus easily return to useful information. In fact, postings were often added several times a week, to avoid the creation of over-long posts. Short posts focusing specifically on one or two topics were found to be easier to write. In general the researcher would spend some time catching up on reading blogs relevant to the project (using Google Reader) and then add a post highlighting anything of wider interest.

The use of images, particularly photographs that had been uploaded to the photo sharing website Flickr was effective at enlivening posts. Personal photographs were added to posts, as were public photos on Flickr that had been licensed under Creative Commons.

Use of the Blog by those external to the project

Gaining feedback from readers of a blog is generally provided for by the use of 'comments' which can be posted by anyone. Unfortunately blogs are prone to spam attacks and so the LASSIE blog insisted users registered before they posted a comment. We also installed spam protection.

Between October 2007 and the launch of the blog in March 2008, there were 62 posts on the blog which generated in total 32 comments from users. However, the use of the comments for finding out who was reading the blog was not altogether satisfactory. It was believed that far more people were reading the blog than had posted a comment. Other ways the team used to establish who was reading the blog included:

- Finding out who had bookmarked the blog on del.icio.us – by bookmarking it ourselves we were able to see how many other users (and who) had also bookmarked it
- The same process was also undertaken in Bloglines, to see how many people had subscribed to the blog

- Usage stats – hits on the server were considered, however given the high level of spam the blog was receiving this data was artificially inflated and not considered very useful.
- Other blogs linking in to our blog – WordPress can automatically detect when another blog links to a posting on our blog. These ‘blog reactions’ are collected by Technorati (www.technorati.com) and between March and October 2007 there were 28 ‘blog reactions’ to a posting on LASSIE.
- Anecdotal evidence from talking to people at conferences and events and in particular from announcing a piece of news on the blog and seeing how many e-mails, phone calls, personal communications etc. were generated.

The launch of the literature review (announced via the blog) in July 2007 generated a considerable number of e-mails and phone calls from people who were interested in the project. However, a humorous blog posting which included a photograph of the researcher’s cat sitting next to a book about Web 2.0 also caused a considerable reaction and for several weeks when visiting events people would approach the researcher saying ‘I like your cat!’ Another particularly interesting post was one asking for information about what research was going on in Australia and New Zealand. A comment was added to the blog within a few hours from a researcher in Australia.

Conclusion

The LASSIE project’s experience of using a blog was considered to be successful, both as a tool for the researcher to reflect, but also as a way of generating interest in the project. This may partly be due to the timely nature of the project and the fact that many other individuals were also exploring how social software could be used by libraries. The importance of having something to say is stressed in several books about blogging, and this concurred with our experiences. The weekly update mode of using the blog occasionally felt a little constrictive and so this was varied throughout the project. However, it did act as a catalyst to stimulate the researcher to find something useful to say each week! Finding meaningful titles for the blog posts was however challenging at times.

Drawbacks with the blog were few, however the researcher found sometimes the blog felt like a one-way communication channel. The importance of getting feedback on blog postings, through comments (either directly to the blog writer or using the comment function) cannot be understated. Throughout the project the researcher was always pleased when people claimed to be reading the blog and in this instance anecdotal evidence that they were reading it was more encouraging than statistics and usage data.

A few members of the project team confessed to ‘forgetting’ occasionally to check the blog for updates. Using a news reader was one suggestion to ensure this didn’t happen and the more avid readers of the blog were undoubtedly reading it in this way, rather than visiting the blog periodically to see what was new. However, using a news reader requires a change in working practices and if a large number of blogs are added to the reader it can become overwhelming to keep up to date.

6 b. The Archives Blog

The rationale

The 1967 And All That exhibition was a HLF-funded project involving the Hall-Carpenter Archives of lesbian and gay activism, which are held within LSE Archives, and the Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive, based at Middlesex University. The team decided to set up a web presence for a touring exhibition hosted on blog software. This is available at <http://1967andallthat.blogspot.com/>

The blog runs in parallel with the project website (<http://www.1967andallthat.org.uk/>) which already existed and is maintained separately. The idea of using a blog initially was because it would allow comments and feedback to be obtained, but also because the software is free and can be hosted remotely. It is also easy to update, customise and brand.

Initially the project team discussed the idea of maintaining two blogs, one which would contain the exhibition information and another which would facilitate communication between the project team and also to serve to demystify the behind-the-scenes work on the project to the general public. The exhibition blog was established, however the team blog was not, as some team members were not happy using this technology. In addition neither blog had featured in the original project bid and were

not resourced in any way. Therefore, there was a concern that only one main contributor would post to the blog and it would consequently be of limited value.

The set-up of the blog

The blog was hosted remotely on the Blogger.com site. This required fairly minimal technical knowledge to establish, although the person who created the blog was familiar with the technology. The blog does not operate in a typical way to other blogs which often have dated 'posts' appearing in reverse chronological order. The text from the exhibition panels was added to blog posts, however these were arranged in such a way as to provide a more static set of web pages. This is described in more detail below.

Some teams might be concerned about the blog being hosted on a remote site, rather than on a local server. Since Blogger.com was bought by Google, the Archives team felt the service was likely to be fairly stable. In addition Blogger.com allows the entire content to be exported in XML format, so it can be stored locally and set up on a different server if need be. Once the blog had been created this process was undertaken to ensure the project had a local copy of their material for preservation purposes.

Using the blog: the project team

The blog was set-up by a member of the project team with some experience of using this type of technology. Prior to selecting blogger.com as the hosting site, several other blog hosting web sites were evaluated, including WordPress, TypePad and Livejournal.

The idea was to create a web presence for a touring exhibition so that it could be seen by a wider audience. It was felt that using blog software could support this idea very well, as the content could be structured using one blog post to contain the information and images from each exhibition panel (six in total). Each panel could then be linked to via the most recent post, which would serve as a homepage. This last post could then be edited repeatedly with news updates. The static links menu displayed next to each post was used as a table of contents, so that navigating between panels/sections was easy.

Because the blog was used in an atypical way, some thought was invested in the construction of the site to ensure material appeared in the correct order. This necessitated posting material in the reverse order that it should be displayed.

The language used across the blog was therefore relatively formal, as it was narrative text copied and pasted from the exhibition panels.

External use of the blog

There was some concern amongst the project team, in case spam comments appeared on the site. To deter this the decision was taken that all comments needed to be moderated before they appeared on the site. There was a feeling that this might deter some genuine people from posting comments, as their comments don't appear automatically on the site and it could take several days before they appear. This seems to undermine one of the main reasons for doing the blog which was to engage in dialogue with users and gain feedback from them.

It was felt that users may also have been put off by the atypical use of blogging software – it presented narrative text from an exhibition and was not a blog in any of the expected senses of the word – newsy, musing, analytical. Users expecting a blog of this nature may have been disappointed or put off from revisiting as no new content was expected. Equally, those who were expecting to see a straightforward exhibition website may have been put off by the layout or design which was necessarily constrained by the use of a blog template.

Over the course of the project very few comments have been added to the blog, which means feedback has been difficult to gauge. The project team plan to investigate further who has been linking to their blog, but to date this information has not been received.

It should be noted that the blog was not promoted on any of the project publicity and did not feature on any mailouts to mailing list members. It was linked to from the main project website but received very little other publicity. This was due to time pressures on the staff involved, and the lack of any

marketing strategy. The blog had been developed spontaneously and did not feature in any of the project plans so once it was up and running no further action was taken beyond the moderating of comments.

Conclusion

Overall the successful aspects of using a blog in this project were the ease of use of the software and the fact it was free and quick to implement. The team involved also felt the project was interesting and good fun.

The team were slightly disappointed that comments were not posted onto their blog and were concerned that using the software in a less conventional way confused some visitors to the site. The information on the site was largely static which is atypical of blogs in general and meant that visitors to the site expecting to see new content might be disappointed. There was also some hesitancy from the project team about using a blog in a more conventional way.

This project was an example of using a blog in a fairly formal way, relating to an exhibition. From their experience, the Archives project team felt that in general blogs seem to work best if you make your postings fairly informal. This tends to elicit comments from readers who may be more used to using blogs in a non-professional way. However, the project demonstrated the flexibility of blogging software, which allows a professional, branded website to be created and hosted for free, with fairly minimal effort.

6 c. The Centre for Learning Technology Blog

Prior to the launch of the LASSIE project, the Centre for Learning Technology had been maintaining a blog for internal communication and to facilitate the sharing of information to others interested in learning technology developments.

It was hosted on a LSE server using the WordPress software and all members of the CLT team were able to post on the blog. The blog was intended to:

- Share news information about new developments of interest between CLT team members and those with a wider interest in learning technology
- Report on recently attended conferences by team members
- Post news, announcements about changes to services offered by CLT or to alert LSE staff to training events

A key advantage of using a blog was believed to be the fact it would reduce e-mail traffic and become a key place to keep up to date with what's new in CLT. The blog also had additional functionality in that it allowed items to be tagged as 'CLTnews' which automatically meant they would appear in the news section of the CLT website. This saved team members time in updating their departmental web page and meant news could be added more regularly to keep the website looking fresh.

Over the past few years our experiences have been mixed. While team members continue to post on the blog, e-mail has remained the main communication channel for sharing information between team members because of its immediacy. In addition, a CLT email list was established because team members realised that by posting information the blog, items that were tagged as news and appeared on the website, were not always reaching the desired audiences. LSE staff do not routinely visit the CLT website and despite considerable encouragement (and training classes in how to do this in practice) very few subscribe to the blog feed. Therefore, the blog has not meant the level of e-mails has been reduced significantly and if CLT want to be sure staff receive a piece of information it is better to send a message to the e-mail list.

Nevertheless, the blog is providing a valuable record of conference attendance and team members now regularly post conference reports on the blog (often while actually at the conference). In addition, the ability to post news to the blog and for this to automatically appear on the CLT website is extremely advantageous. CLT do not routinely monitor who is reading or linking to their blog so have no real sense if it will become more valuable over time, as more people become familiar with RSS technology. However, the blog serves a useful function and supplements the information that is sent out via e-mail.

7. Other observations about blogs and blogging

Our research suggests that the Library community have responded enthusiastically to the development of blogging software, with numerous examples identified in the literature review. These broadly fall into two categories, which are institutional 'library' blogs and personal blogs maintained by librarians, with some blogs including elements of both. Both the blogs examined in this case study were institutional blogs, although the LASSIE blog was set-up for a specific project and developed in some ways like a personal blog for the lead researcher.

The case study suggests that project blogs can be highly valuable. Projects provide a focus for a blog and the short term nature of most projects and the intensity of the work, mean that having something to say is rarely a problem. As our experiences in LASSIE demonstrate, blogs are useful as a means of publicising your project, but also allow progress to be documented and provide an opportunity for reflection. The novel way the Archives team used a blog demonstrate that the software is highly flexible and easily customised. It also allows for feedback to be collected through comments, although in practice these are less common than one might expect.

During discussions with the Archives project team the idea of a blog as a records management tool was discussed and in particular how it might compare for example to distributing information to a team via e-mail. Blogs can be a useful record of a project and its development and have a big advantage over e-mail, which results in sending multiple copies of a message and any file attachments to the recipients. Many people are frequently overloaded by e-mail and may delete e-mail attachments or messages in a bid to manage their inbox. This can result in losing information. In contrast, posting information to a blog means that one copy of the message or attachment is stored in a central place and can easily be returned to at a later date. Tagging can facilitate ease of accessing this information. So from a records management perspective, a blog might be a more efficient way of distributing information to a group of people.

A final observation based on the experience of running the CLT and LASSIE Blog relates to problems with spam. It is vital to have good spam protection installed on a blog, as the comments feature of blogs makes them vulnerable to spam attacks. Any blog installed on a server at CLT also had spam protection installed, however this acts in a similar way to a junk mail filter and the spam comments go into a specific part of the blog, where they can be deleted. It is vital that comments are moderated to prevent spam attacks.

8. Recommendations for good practice blogging

- Think careful about the purpose of your blog and how will people discover it. Posting something to a blog does not guarantee that your intended audience has received the information. Blog postings might still need to be highlighted by e-mail messages.
- Develop an appropriate writing style – our evidence suggests people seem to respond better to blogs being written in a less formal style. Getting the balance between formal and informal can be difficult
- Write regularly – people will soon tire of a blog that isn't updated frequently. It might be helpful to set aside a time to post on the blog each week.
- Tag your posts appropriately and try to keep posts fairly short and concise with lots of useful links.
- Exploit some of the extra functions in blog, for example RSS functionality that allows certain posts to be embedded into web pages, VLEs or portals. The CLT blog has a wider function as a way of communicating within a team, but also allows news information to be automatically added to the department's website.
- If you are going to set up a blog remotely make sure you can export the resulting files for local storage for your own internal backups.
- Ensure you have good spam protection in place