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What Does It Mean to Be a Science Librarian 2.0?

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Abstract

Science librarians, as well as other librarians, have seen ample new technologies come and go over the years. Librarians experiment and try to find ways to employ the new tools in our libraries. A driving force in our decision making about what tools to use should always be our patrons and whether the tools can help us do a better job of delivering services. This paper discusses what technologies have proven to be successful, as well as other thoughts to bear in mind as librarians evaluate Web 2.0 tools for science libraries.

Introduction

Blogs, wikis, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, del.icio.us, Meebo, RSS feeds, and the list goes on. All of these technologies make up the world of Web 2.0.

I am a librarian who thrives on change and enjoys experimenting with new resources and tools. I like to try new tools and new ideas to see what we can use in our library. In fact, I use *many* of these Web 2.0 tools. Since I am a librarian working in a science library and since I use many of these tools, this must make me a Science Librarian 2.0.

New Technology Comes and Goes

I have seen many new tools, new technologies, and new resources come and go. As I look back it's been amazing to see how many of these new tools quickly fell by the wayside. But those resources that were the "right" tools rose to the surface and remained the longest, often serving as a foundation to open the way for the *next* "right" tool.

A great example of this is the web itself. Remember the days when the world was first introduced to the likes of Gopher, BITNET, and other tools. Then along came the web and the first browser called Mosaic. Everything was turned on its head almost overnight. The creation of a graphical interface for the Internet (i.e., the web) was one of the "right" tools that laid the foundation for countless advances we take for granted today.

In a colleague's blog discussion about Web 2.0, I posted a comment back in 2007: "Web and Library 2.0 isn't about finding that next 'new' technology, but instead about finding the 'right' one" ([Fudrow 2007](#)). I believe that statement hits the nail on the head. The key is to find the "right" technology that may be just around the corner.

As new technologies come along, we need to experiment and try them out. But we should *not* use them solely because they're new and fun to use. We need to step back and ask ourselves:

- Are they fulfilling a need?
- Are they helping us to do a better job of reaching our library users?
- Are they helping our patrons find what they need or are they possibly creating another barrier to accessing their information?
- Are they enabling us to do a better job of providing services or are they simply demonstrating that we know *how* to use these new tools?

Do Library Users Care?

The driving force behind our decision about which new tools make the best sense to employ should be our patrons. My focus as a science reference librarian is *primarily* connecting patrons with resources. So a deciding factor for me is always the question: will our library users actually use the tool we provide?

In Summer 2008, the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) held their annual conference. The Engineering Libraries Division sponsored a session called "Are Engineering Students Typical Millennials?" ([Sweeney 2008](#)). The speaker/moderator was Richard Sweeney, University Librarian, New Jersey Institute of Technology. Engineering majors were invited to this session from Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh. The students were 50% women and 50% men, ranging in age from 18-29.

The speaker asked the students a variety of questions, many focused on their use of Web 2.0 technologies, as well as the use of these tools related to libraries. Two predominant themes emerged. These students use *some* but not necessarily most of these tools. They experiment widely with new tools but tend to only use a limited few of them on a regular basis. But more importantly, they were quite uncomfortable with the idea of faculty (including librarians) using Facebook or something such as Twitter to communicate with them. They felt those technologies were intended to serve largely as a social networking tool among their friends. They believed that they should *not* be used for exchanges between faculty/librarians with library users, namely, students.

This conference session underscored for me the need to ensure that we make decisions to use new tools *only* if they serve the purpose of helping us to do a better job of delivering services to our patrons. That is, helping to connect them with the resources they need.

What Tools Should a Science Librarian 2.0 Use?

So what technologies have proven to be successful -- to be the "right" tool?

Blogs and RSS Feeds

I created a blog called *CS Librarian News* that uses an RSS feed to deliver announcements to subscribers (<http://cslibrarian.net>). The blog provides a unified resource of news about activities in the Science Libraries at Carnegie Mellon relevant to research in departments I support: the School of Computer Science (SCS), Electrical & Computer Engineering (ECE) Department, and the Information Networking Institute.

The blog has proven to be a very effective educational tool for the community, averaging 200 visits per month. Faculty and students have responded enthusiastically to the array of content, which includes announcing new databases, new books added to our collection, new *Synthesis Lectures*, new journals and articles related to the interdisciplinary research of Carnegie Mellon, as well as new tools available from the University Libraries and around the world.

In addition, the blog assists me with collection development and determining the future directions of the blog. When examining which postings are of the greatest interest to readers (based on usage statistics), I can determine whether I am purchasing materials that are of the greatest interest to the campus community and in support of the curriculum. The statistics also enable me to determine the future content of the blog based on what kinds of announcements receive the greatest interest by blog visitors.

The blog has also proven to be an effective communication tool *outside* the campus community. Librarians and others subscribe to the RSS feeds to keep abreast of developments in these fields. The blog has also been frequently cited by other blogs and online resources.

Podcasts

I provide research support for departments that have programs and students around the world: Silicon Valley, Portugal, Greece, Japan, and elsewhere. I support all of them no matter where they're located. So I look for ways to reach out and let them know that I'm not far away whenever they need help.

Podcasts have proven to be a useful method for accomplishing this task. In some cases, questions have been given to me ahead of time. I have used these podcasts to answer those questions and to remind students that I'm just a finger-click away when they need

help. Students appreciate hearing the enthusiasm (and hopefully friendliness) in my voice, helping to encourage them to seek me out when they have questions.

VideoThread

Library instruction is a tool all librarians use to reach their users. I customize presentations based on the topic students may be researching for their courses. But sometimes an instructor is not able to find the time to invite me into a course to give an in-person presentation. When that's the case, I have used tools such as [VoiceThread](#) to combine PowerPoint files, web pages, possibly other files, and then record my voice as though I was talking to the students face-to-face in class. VoiceThread allows the developer to attach their picture to the presentation so the viewer can place a face with the voice they hear.

Chat/IM

Our library system provides a chat service during the week for seven hours per day. When the service is offline, messages can be directed to a designated e-mail account. We have experimented with a variety of tools: [LivePerson](#), [Meebo](#), [Pidgin](#), and so on.

Chat is a situation where I have struggled with the decision about whether to provide an IM widget to connect directly to my personal web site and research guides:

- <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~missy/>
- <http://tiny.cc/HgqrD>
- <http://tiny.cc/fL3hW>
- <http://tiny.cc/qrBBE>

I have observed colleagues who maintain an e-mail account, a blog, multiple IM accounts, and sometimes as many as 20 widgets on their blogs and personal web sites. At the same time, I witness a great deal of undue stress as they try to check these tools frequently. In many cases they find that it's far too much to try to balance.

If library patrons are using any of those technologies to contact us and we neglect to check the tool daily, we run the risk of alienating the patron. So I finally decided to *not* provide an IM widget for myself. Instead, I provide links to both my blog and my web site. I decided to focus on what I find to be the most *effective* means of communication and reduce the number of separate locations I set-up for patrons to contact me.

Cloud Tags

My first job in a library was as a cataloger. So I tend to think of organizing almost everything I touch. I have more than 100 folders that organize my e-mail account and enable me to find things easily as needed. So using Cloud Tags or Category Clouds became a natural tool for me to use in my blog.

Cloud tags are an open-ended labeling system that enables users to categorize content such as Web pages, photographs, and Web links. So I create my own categories and assign them each time I make a posting. I can assign multiple categories if I think it makes sense. The Category Cloud shows a visible representation of all of my posts, making it easy for the user to see all the categories at once, as well as to see which ones have the greatest number of posts in the blog.

YouTube

I have not had the courage to create a video to share on [YouTube](#). But many libraries nationwide have made creative and often innovative videos to reach their library users. Something about YouTube brings out the best in librarians. YouTube seems to inspire much more interesting videos than what librarians have created when using tools such as Camtasia or Captivate.

Occasionally the videos are about mundane topics such as how to find journals online, how to do cited reference searching, or to find your way around the library. But many libraries have used YouTube as an opportunity to show off their funny side, to show that librarians don't hide behind their desks, and that using the library can actually be fun! Some of the best YouTube videos are found on sites such as:

- Libraries on YouTube
[<http://www.ilovelibraries.org/loveyourlibrary/ILoveLibrariesonYouTube.cfm>]
- 100 Awesome YouTube Vids for Librarians
[<http://www.accrediteddegrees.com/2008/100-awesome-youtube-vids-for-librarians/>]

Does a Science Librarian Need to Use Technology at All?

Despite having so many new and interesting tools at my disposal, it occurred to me to consider using an old-fashioned tried and true "technology." Why not simply publish a newsletter. So I created a newsletter that I publish once per semester (three times per year): <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~missy/newsletters.html>. I never extend the content beyond two pages in length. I keep the articles short and to the point. I send the newsletter by e-mail, as well as in paper, to the hundreds of faculty that I support. I have learned that the behavior of most of our faculty is to direct such e-mails to a spam folder. So paper often becomes an important means to reach them.

Since establishing a blog and publishing this newsletter, these two tools combined have resulted in a *substantial* increase in communication between the faculty, students, and myself. Requests for library instruction, requests for help with reference questions, requests for library orientations, and *many* other exchanges have increased exponentially since creating the blog and newsletter.

In my observation, combining the "right" new tools with the old has resulted in better service to our library users, as well as better communication. They have also resulted in new opportunities for collaboration with faculty and students on significant research projects.

So What Does It Mean to Be a Science Librarian 2.0?

A Science Librarian 2.0 should be a person who is experimenting with new technologies as they come along. But we also need to retain a healthy dose of skepticism. Many tools are hyped way beyond their ability to deliver a service that is essential. So we need to thoroughly evaluate whether a new tool is appropriate for our workplace and will help further our mission to deliver services to our patrons.

But we also should avoid throwing out the old methods and tools. Why stop using something if it has proven to be successful over time. But better yet, occasionally when we combine the old with the new, we find that the combination can have positive and lasting results. Whatever we can do to reach our patrons, to better serve their research needs, and to improve communication will enable us to become an excellent Science Librarian 2.0 and to have some fun in the process.

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