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Lifelong learning communities with Web 2.0

Abstract: The emerging resources of the internet, known as Web 2.0, are facilitating a renaissance in public library services. 'Lifelong learning communities with Web 2.0' reviews some of these services, reflects on the sharing philosophy of the read/write web and investigates the possibilities for collaboration between all libraries in the pursuit of lifelong learning.

During the lead up to the 2001 Federal election, leader Kim Beasley launched the Australian Labor Party's education policy 'Knowledge Nation'. While the philosophy of 'lifelong learning' had been on the horizon for some time, the announcement of this policy coincided with a strong focus on fulfilling this philosophy and equipping school leavers with the ability to continue to grow and develop intellectually over a lifetime. This article, while not attempting to be comprehensive, reviews the role of public library services as continuing educators showcased at the recent State Library of Victoria conference, 'Libraries, Web 2.0 and other internet stuff'.

Although schools, universities and associated institutions are considered society's primary educators, increasingly, the public library system is assuming a role. The European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996 was a hallmark year and public libraries have continued to explore the territory since that time. In fact, Maureen Kahlert (2000) goes so far as to nominate the public library system as 'the seat of lifelong learning'. As a result, the emerging collaborative and interactive resources of Web 2.0 have been wholeheartedly embraced by public libraries to support their commitment as educators.

A fundamental shift is occurring in the information-power landscape as the read/write web consolidates. To make the distinction, Web 1.0 (as it has been retrospectively named) is the original

web which consisted of static websites, databases and electronic encyclopedias. Web 2.0, on the other hand, is the read/write and sharing web where communities of interest gather. According to the Internet World Stats (2007) website it has been responsible for a 225 % growth in the use of the web during the period 2000-2007.

What is Web 2.0?

This collaborative web was named by Tim O'Reilly (2005) in his article 'What Is Web 2.0' when he said it 'refers to a perceived or proposed second generation of web-based services—such as social networking sites, wikis, communication tools, and folksonomies—that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users..’ He described the concept of harnessing the ‘collective intelligence of everyone who uses the web to upload, download, add comments, provide feedback, add tags and actively engage in the creation of new knowledge’. As the diversity of sites increases weekly, they share a common feature in providing a high level of user interactivity and participation that expands their value.

The vocabulary is also developing quickly as online communities use the web for a new range of activities such as:

- sharing interests and photos with through social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Ning or LinkedIn,
- writing opinions or posting comments into a blog on Blogger or Wordpress,
- contributing knowledge to a shared wiki such as Wikipedia or Wikispaces,
- sharing photos through Flickr,
- submitting a slideshow presentation to Slideshare,
- saving favourite sites on the social bookmarking spaces Furl or del.icio.us,
- subscribing to RSS feeds from selected sites with Bloglines or Yahoo Pipes aggregators,
- viewing videos for fun or knowledge on YouTube,
- downloading podcasts or webcasts of missed programs,
- creating a mashup illustrating a literary tour on Google Maps,
- adding tags as personal descriptors to various web content.

Patrons as authors

Since the early days of computer technology, librarians have embraced the power of the electronic environment to enhance access to resources through the provision of online catalogues, informational webpages, research guides and databases. Web 2.0 provides all that, but takes it to another level where the patron is not simply gathering information, but actually plays an active role in the construction of knowledge.

As it evolves, the concept of Web 2.0 is being further defined according to use with labels such as Business 2.0, Education 2.0, Health 2.0. Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk (2006) introduced the term 'Library 2.0' in an American Library Journal article when they wrote that Library 2.0 'is a model for library service that encourages constant and purposeful change, inviting user participation in the creation of both the physical and the virtual services they want'. It is 'user participation' that is the key to these new services. Once services are set up by the library, patrons are invited to write book reviews, link their social networking pages, add tags and interact in a way that establishes personal ownership of the library's virtual space. While this appeals to traditional library patrons, libraries that have already implemented Library 2.0 services are recording a high level of engagement with increasing numbers of patrons.

Trailblazing libraries

Who are the trailblazing libraries? The recent State Library of Victoria conference showcased a number of instances of best practice that reflect the imagination of librarians and serves to inspire all libraries to venture further. The freedom from the constraints of learning management systems, issues of student privacy and network firewalls that tend to hamper development in school libraries are not such a hindrance to the public library system and, as a result, they are leading the way in providing an invigorated library service.

The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) is one of the trailblazing 'new generation' library services. Helene Blowers (2007), PLCMC Public Services Technology Director describes Library 2.0 as being about 'human conversations' and 'cultivating communities'. PLCMC (2007) website is a rich source of interactive programs and resources catering for all levels of society.

Just one of their many successful projects is the live homework help for members via Brarydog.net website. This saw five thousand local students develop their own Brarydog websites within the first twelve months of its launch in 2000. Sites are customized to reflect individual needs with preferences selected including any of a large range of online databases, encyclopedias and web resources. Students stamp their own identity on the site while customizing it into a useful learning support tool.

Western Springs History (2006), a joint local history project of the Thomas Ford Memorial Library and Western Springs Historical Society is another illustration of success in using the resources of the web to harvest the wealth of a community's historical knowledge. With an interactive Google map placing homes within a visual context, this local history blog displays photographs and descriptions of some historic homes in Western Springs. Organised by streets, entries have comments enabled that can be used by the public to add details or ask questions about the individual properties. This project has the potential to become a powerful historical document. A similarly valuable community document in Australia is the Pictures Catalogue (2007) of the State Library of Victoria which invites the viewer to add their own information to individual pictures via a comments function. This is powerful knowledge building and an encouragement for those with historical information (often the elderly) to remain involved with their communities.

Darien Library, Connecticut (2007) is another example of a public library committed to learning with a learning and technology blog directing patrons to free tutorials on the net varying from learning to crochet, health matters through to learning programming languages. Darien also hosts 60 community websites and ten blog sites administered by eleven librarians who must post at least weekly. While this can be an onerous undertaking for staff, it's a necessary commitment if the project is to succeed. The popularity of YouTube has been embraced as establishments such as Denver Public Library (Denver Public Library 2007) have run competitions for the best video launched onto YouTube which illustrates how patrons are using their library. While encouraging positive community interaction, this project also takes advantage of YouTube's position as one of the most

popular sites on the web guaranteeing an advertising message that has been produced by patrons, features patrons and is totally free.

Skills and sharing

Participation in this new wave of library development, however, requires the conquering of one of the biggest challenges facing libraries regardless of the sector, namely, the development of staff skills. While the generation of 'digital natives'; those educated in the era of the internet, embrace the new technologies, the framework still has to be established. It's quite fortunate, therefore, that the very nature of Web 2.0 offers its own solution as the collaborative spaces libraries are planning to use function interchangeably for either recreational or professional purposes. A person can use Flickr to share photographs amongst friends and family; a library can use that same tool to display photos of a school or library event. Privacy levels are adjusted according to the individual and the photos are available in an anytime/anywhere context.

Although in common use, mastery of Web 2.0 sites can still leave a library manager with the quandary of dealing with the staff issues of reluctance to change and access to training. The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PCMLC) has simplified matters through the Learning 2.0 (2007) program that is being widely utilized by libraries the world over to train library staff. The philosophy of this online training site is typical of Web 2.0 services in that it is made available free of charge under Creative Commons (2007), i.e. libraries may adapt the program to their own needs on the agreement that they give credit to the developers. The knowledge building potential of this no-cost training is powerful as those who train then develop local learning facilities to be used by their own communities.

The Victorian Public Library Network and the State Library of Victoria have taken advantage of the Web 2.0 culture of sharing in the development of the Statewide Public Library Development Project - Learning 2.0 (2007) which is based on the PCMLC project. All Victorian public libraries are encouraged to participate in this skills building program.

Self-paced instruction, however, is not necessarily attractive to all learners. The 'Five weeks to a social library' (2006) site managed by a group of United States academic librarians may be the

preferred option for some. With the philosophy 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', it is supported program consisting of a mixture of real time, synchronous online communication and chat.

A final example of the 'knowledge building' web is an Australian public library initiative by the Wyndham Library Service (2007) called 'WynLearn'. Designed to bring together information about local learning opportunities and provide access to learning programs with the ultimate aim of increasing 'awareness of and participation in lifelong learning among the residents of Wyndham'.

Renaissance times

Public libraries are reinventing themselves as leaders in community learning through the functionality of Web 2.0 technology. They are providing a virtual meeting place in which every member of the community has an equal opportunity to become a contributor in building a knowledge society. All can benefit from what Tim (2005) says are the 'network effects from user contribution'. When discussing Library 2.0, Michael Stephens (2006) envisages it as an opportunity to reach members of the community who may previously have had no use for any type of library. He believes that it will be a 'meeting place, online or in the physical world, where library users needs will be fulfilled through entertainment, information and the ability to create and contribute'.

Finally, it is possible to say that, although the concept of joint-use community and school libraries has not generally been successful in this country, this collaboration in training and professional support will auger well for future joint initiatives. The potential for local and international partnerships exists across all library sectors as the common goal amongst them is the development and sustenance of community lifelong learning. ##

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