

There are real people in there?

Blogging at the University of Worcester

Based on a presentation given at the UKSG seminar 'Caught up in Web 2.0? Practical implementations and creative solutions for librarians and publishers', London, 22 November 2007

Communication has long been one of the major issues facing us in the library profession. Communication with our users, with our wider organization and even amongst ourselves had been highlighted at the University of Worcester as an area in need of vast improvement. In 2004 we took our first tentative steps into the Web 2.0 world as a potential method for providing the library with a much needed online presence.

This paper will demonstrate our evolution from static web pages, delivering half-hearted and wildly sporadic attempts at news, to an institution fronted by an actual human voice. It will also show that Web 2.0 is ironically not about technology, but about the style of communication it encourages, and how the University of Worcester Library has been able to use these applications to return to some of the traditional values of librarianship in a truly modern, relevant way.



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'Blogging'; 'Web 2.0'; 'instant messaging'; 'wikis': all words which will either widen your eyes in anticipation or fill you with a weary sense of déjà vu, depending on your disposition. Yes, more technical 'solutions' to leech your working day and add another layer of complexity to the library environment! Except, this isn't about the technology at all. This isn't about rehashing the content on our websites or producing flashy front-ends for our marketing campaigns. This is about re-introducing conversation into the work we do.

Talking – to our students, institutions and even each other – has been the involuntary casualty of some of our technical progress in information management, and that was certainly true of the online presence at Worcester. We were providing a plethora of fantastic services to our users, delivering resource access at an unprecedented level within our institution, and yet we weren't telling anyone. Of course, we'd offer information literacy sessions and the usual face-to-face enquiry

services, but our library persona online was cold, mechanical and criminally uninformative. What we managed, with the help of Web 2.0 tools, was to begin to re-introduce the human voice into communication with our users, delivering information directly to those closest to the service, in their own words. And our users even talked back.

This paper tracks a few of the ways in which we've done this. Probably the most important thing to say here is that I stand by the assertion made at the beginning of this article: Web 2.0 is not really about the technology, but instead is more people- and content-driven than any of our previous forays online. Each of the examples below can be up and running within half an hour, and no technical know-how is assumed. All that I'd ask is that you have something to say to your intended audience and broad enough shoulders to hear their, often startlingly honest, feedback.

So, starting with our largest user group, our students, here's a quick countdown of some of the

ways our online communication has evolved since 2004. It had always been clear that we weren't talking to our students as much as we really needed to. And, of course, we still haven't entirely solved this, but we are at least now heading in the right direction. Those students who physically came into the library and talked to us may have been aware of what we offered as a service, but the vast majority were missing out. And it really was our fault. Obviously, we had a website back in 2004, and it did include a news page, but it was certainly never dynamic in any sense of the word. There were generally two or three updates to the news page in a typical academic year, principally because only one or two people had editing rights. In reality, what should have been a quick and easy way to update our users on new services was actually a convoluted process of passing information through various people until it finally appeared online. If your information made it through this filtration process, chances are that it no longer sounded like your voice any more, and often didn't even say what you intended in the first place. This is a prime example of how the web used to, and often still does, work. Controlled, protected, diluted.

Our static website also included a links page for those users savvy enough to locate it. So, we'd

allude to information in one area of the site, and on another we'd place links for further reading. Given a site map, unlimited patience, and an hour's free time, you might be richly rewarded for your online experience.

Away from our website, students could give us their opinions on the services we offered. The ever-present suggestions box sat virtually untroubled in the foyer and, while non-technical solutions should never be discounted even today, this simply wasn't enough to solicit quality feedback. Perhaps the odd suggestion would be posted, and maybe it would be acted upon, but the fact remains that this process was never a true dialogue between the library and the students. Only one student would be involved, and our contact with them was limited at best.

So, in 2004 we started to look for serious improvements. Having been vaguely aware of weblogs (blogs) for a short time and, perhaps more importantly, discovering that we could set one up for free, it seemed worth a try. We chose WordPress¹ as our blog provider and, within half an hour, 'ILS Matters'² was born (see Figure 1). At its most basic level, ILS Matters was, and still is, a straight replacement for our old news web pages, but there are some absolutely key distinctions which have made it so much more successful.



Figure 1 ILS Matters – aimed primarily at students

Firstly, blogs are superb tools for organizing information. If we think of the content, our postings, as the information which we hope our users will find, a blog allows us to categorize it, date-stamp it, and attach other metadata to make it so much more accessible. Taking information, organizing it, attaching metadata, making it accessible to our users? That sounds familiar...

Secondly, ILS Matters is very conversational in tone. With the immediacy of blogging, we can present our users with whatever information we like within minutes. The simplicity of the applications is possibly their biggest advantage, and this means that, with around half an hour's training, we can get any member of library staff providing their own take on the services they know best. No more filters as other people handle the information. No intimate knowledge of HTML tags required. And crucially, because the information comes straight from the source, it simply doesn't sound like overcooked marketing quotes. It's library staff, talking to students, in their own style, perhaps as close as we can get to a human voice online. This is absolutely key to using blogs within the library setting, and blogging as a culture really lends itself to this ethos.

This level of accessibility for our staff also means that the blog is far more dynamic than the old web pages. We're posting new stories, pointing to new resources, and asking for new feedback at a rate which simply wasn't practical with a static web page. The advantage here is clear. Constantly updating information equates to regularly-returning users, while our old web pages just didn't warrant a second viewing. If we couple this with the next key advantage, the benefits become clearer still.

An ingrained part of the blogging culture is the interlinked nature of the blogosphere. One author posts on a subject, and within the content they link out to another blog, which provides their own viewpoint, and links out again. At Worcester, we've also taken to the value of the in-post link to direct people to resources or other interesting places on the web. It's not about keeping users on your website, but rather being the beginning of various paths to quality information. Again, isn't that what librarians have always done?

There are two more benefits of blogging which have fitted our purpose as a source of library news. Firstly, blogs are quite explicitly interactive. Students, and other users, can respond to our postings, again providing that sense of conversation which we had been lacking. Of course, the feedback isn't always useful, but the odd 'hilarious' comment amongst the useful postings at least means that we are communicating at some level.

The last of the most obvious benefits comes in the form of RSS feeds. Although we're still promoting this within our institution, and it's far from universal, there is a significant portion of our users who find this invaluable, even if some of them don't know it as RSS. With this technology, which is automatically built into most blogging platforms, we can push our information out to our users, without expecting them to keep returning to the library's website. So, those users who are technical enough to have an aggregator will receive the postings as soon as they appear, along with all the other content they are interested in. Add to this the potential for including feeds for catalogue searches, account details and new database content, and we will really see usage rise. In the meantime though, a very helpful development has been the addition of an aggregator to our student portal. This means that, whenever they log in, the latest headlines from the library blog are one of the first things they see. It's all about delivering our services to wherever the student is likely to be. Why should they come to us?

Having looked at the way a blogging application has helped us to reinvigorate library news, it's worth shifting the focus to some of the other uses we've found, and which have benefited from those features described above. One of the most dedicated champions of the blog at Worcester has been the Academic Liaison Team. This team had been spending a lot of time trying to promote relevant resources to their departments, which they often communicated by e-mail, and which were consequently deleted by the academic staff five minutes after reading. They had masses of quality information to aid researchers, but again their biggest challenge was to efficiently disseminate it. So, after a little consultation, we decided to launch a second blog, this time aimed primarily at academics and researchers. This blog, 'Update'³

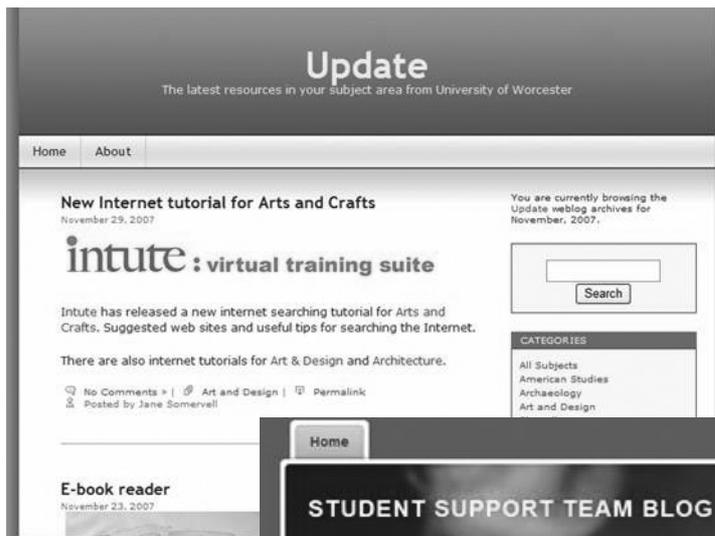


Figure 2 Update – aimed primarily at academics and researchers

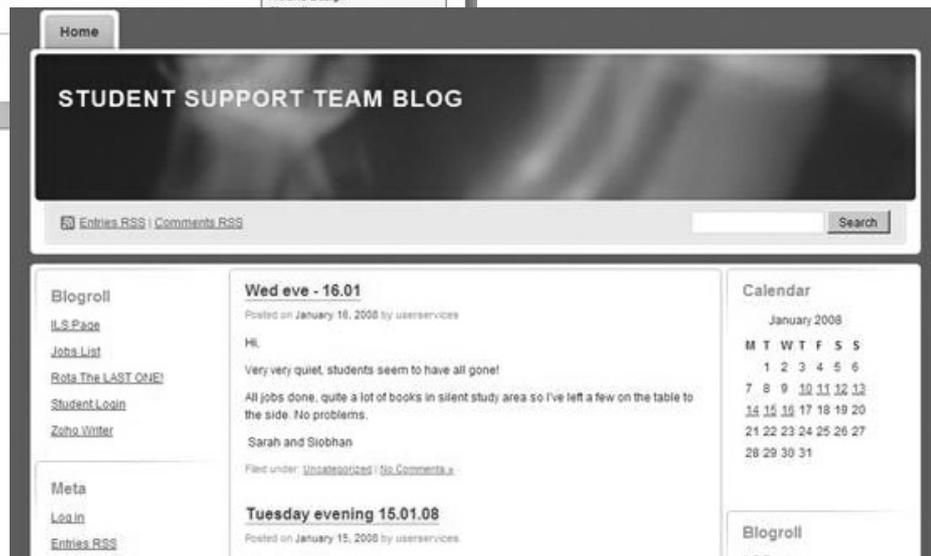


Figure 3 Student support team blog

(see Figure 2), has also been a huge success, mainly due to the fact that it's a central information point for the kind of added value which the Academic Liaison Team could unearth for researchers. Very different in tone from ILS Matters, it is a no-less effective communication tool, and new posts appear on a daily basis. The team also make excellent use of the organizational advantages of blogging described above, as they categorize all posts by subject area. It's the information which librarians have always been retrieving and organizing, but communicated in a more permanent, personalized way. It could also certainly be seen as part of a larger movement to return librarians to their key role of making sense of the masses of information out there, particularly in the online age.

So, we're communicating with students and staff through our blogs, but one of the most valuable uses we've found to date is in our communication with each other. Within our department, we have a whole host of blogs on various subjects, some tracking projects, some allowing for communication between different providers of the same service who don't necessarily meet, but all

promoting conversation, debate and involvement for our staff. A good example of this is our RFID project blog⁴. We are due to implement RFID technology in our library in the summer of 2008, and the project planning began in the autumn of 2007. Projects have traditionally been run through fairly regular meetings, with project members taking away various tasks and reporting on outcomes at the next scheduled time. This has always worked reasonably well, but the obvious downside was a lack of involvement for non-project members, and a lack of communication between meetings. With our project blog, we've been able to trigger conversation between all staff, often stimulating some real debate, but always ensuring that the progress of the project was transparent and an entirely open process. We've found this to be really popular with our staff, creating a very real atmosphere of inclusion, and widening our project group to include anybody with an interest. It has palpably changed the course of the project for the better on more than one occasion.

A final example can be taken from our student support team blog⁵ (see Figure 3). The University

of Worcester employs a team of students to staff the library in self-service hours, fielding basic IT enquiries, trouble-shooting photocopiers and providing low-level security. It has traditionally been difficult to communicate with this team as they begin work at 7pm, but we now have a blog for them to post a quick report at the end of each shift, highlighting any problems we need to attend to, and allowing us to convey any information they need to be aware of. Again, very easy, and a very popular addition to our blog stable.

Just a final, but very important, point to make here. It can be tremendously difficult and confusing for people to keep up with so many sources of information without an RSS aggregator. We currently have around a dozen blogs in our department, from those mentioned above to issue desk blogs, enquiry service blogs and a range of other project blogs. We've used Netvibes⁶, a startpage application, to ensure that staff can see the most recent posts without visiting a myriad different sites, and this is set up on issue desk PCs as well as individual staff stations. Once more, very quick and easy to configure.

I would say that, on their own, blogs won't solve all of the communication problems in your service. They're time consuming and require regular posting to maintain interest but, given the proper dedication, they can reintroduce the human voice into library publicity, stimulate debate amongst service stakeholders and, perhaps most importantly, dilute some of the alienation experienced by our off-campus users. In conclusion, it's not about the technology, it's about people.

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