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Cool Tools and Toys for Play and Work

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OCLC's 2005 report, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources,* highlighted the phrase 'keep keeping up' to call attention to the need for libraries and the people who work in them to keep current with changes in information technology, the Internet, and the devices we use (De Rosa, et al., 2005). What a challenge! We are all acutely aware of the need to track changes and we all devise our own strategies to do so. Like many, I employ several strategies for keeping up with technological innovations and for adopting innovations. My strategies include: subscribing to listservs and rss feeds, contributing to a group blog, using wiki software for group projects, and generally being open to incorporating new ways of doing my day-to-day work.

My prevailing strategy is to divide technological innovations I want to watch and learn about into hardware and software. Thinking about technology like this makes me feel less overwhelmed and helps me better track changes. I offer this as just one approach, knowing that everyone will do what works best for them when deciding what to watch and how deeply they will explore new trends.

Practice with Hardware

In the early 1990s, I set the intention to learn about computers and took an introductory computer class at a local community college. The instructor gave advice that I still find useful. He suggested reviewing ads for computers to maintain awareness of developments in hardware. At the time he meant ads directed at people who build their own computers. Now I browse ads showing the breadth of consumer electronics and imagine how libraries might use these "toys." For example, will library users want to check out book readers, laptops, video cameras, game consoles, or other devices? Or, what new services might library staff create and what new skills might be gained when using these tools?

My short list of possible electronics to play with is below. What would yours include? Examples of possible uses are included, though there are certainly many additional inspired uses.

Digital cameras can be used for taking photos of your library events, for use in written or oral presentations or to post on Web pages, and many other reasons. Many libraries offer cameras for check out and some, like Ann Arbor District Library, give classes on how to use them.

Cell phones and other hand-held devices such as smartphones and PDAs are being used by libraries for text messaging reference services. LibrarianInBlack blogged about South Eastern Louisiana University's early experience with their text message reference service using Altarama's Reference by SMS. In February 2008, Joe Murphy from Yale University's Kline Science Library guest posted on Tame The Web. He described Yale's use of an Apple iPhone for their Txt a Librarian service and for posting to their Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Small laptops are increasing in numbers and options. You may be familiar with the Asus Eee PC or the XO Laptop from the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) Project. Many Web sites describing the OLPC Project and laptop can be found on the Internet. I especially enjoyed the YouTube review, "A Librarian Reviews the XO Laptop" by YouTuber rashford of Portland, OR (rashford also writes the blog "Librarian by Design"). Several other small laptops are listed at the site Laptoping. Recently small laptops have become popular for use at conferences because of their portability, novelty, and lower cost.

Microphones, webcams, and headphones are common accessories for computers and laptops. Yet, using these for services such as video chat reference is still new territory for many libraries. Two leading the way with a Skype a Librarian service are The Ohio University Libraries and University of Waterloo Library. Skype requires use of a microphone and a webcam. Char Booth was recognized as a Mover and Shaker for her role in developing OU's Skype a Librarian service.

E-book readers' merits are still debated even though many libraries have provided lending services for several years. With the release of the Amazon Kindle, libraries once again can evaluate if and how they will incorporate readers into their services.

Video cameras offer libraries numerous creative options. A quick search for 'library' or 'libraries' on YouTube or blip.tv returns numerous instructional and promotional videos. Other uses for cameras are making them available for check out and creating video contests where library users submit their videos.

Game consoles and games are very popular with our users and many libraries are mulling if they should or how they will incorporate games and gaming into their collections and services. Others provide the usual range of services such as game and game console checkout and game nights. Libraries also incorporate games into their instruction and orientation programs. The Ubiquitous Librarian's post "CeLIBration 2007—recap (Diddy ain't got nothin' on us)" describes Georgia Tech's successful orientation program featuring games.

This isn't meant to be a definitive list and like any list, arguments can be made to remove or include items. The list is intended to give libraries and library staff something to react to (a starting point) when thinking about what skills they want to gain or services they want to consider developing. As I compiled this list, I discovered similar lists from Stephen Abram and David Lee King. You can see what they chose in their blog posts titled Technology Petting Zoos from February 5, 2008 and Topeka's Techie Toybox from October 23, 2007 respectively.

Exploring Social Software

After deciding which hardware or "toys" you want to learn more about, dive into the mix of social software and social networking sites. You probably have heard of and used many of these or similar Web hosted services. Flickr and YouTube are just two obvious matches to the electronics listed above because of their photo and video

hosting services. Common to all of these is the ability to connect with others whether creating a document together, commenting on a post, or friending someone.

Web hosted productivity software such as Google Docs and Zoho foster collaboration. Participants use the Web-based software to create documents online and can collaborate with anyone who is given permission to access the online document. (You may recognize Google Docs from its former incarnation as Writely.) Because Google Docs and Zoho are Internet-based, working with colleagues, regardless of their location, is a snap. New to Zoho is their redesign for the iPhone. In their blog post "Zoho for iPhone Redesigned" from June 6, 2008, commenters note that mobile versions for other phones are in development.

Wiki software is well known because of Wikipedia. Libraries and librarians have employed wiki software in numerous ways: for professional conferences and committee work, work projects, subject guides, and more. A well known subject guide using wiki software is Chad Boeninger's Biz Wiki. Other notable wikis are Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki and the Library Instruction Wiki.

WebBlog software is very common among libraries and librarians as a way to promote services, discuss issues affecting librarianship, and more. Many of us are familiar with text blogs which fill the biblioblogosphere. Other types of blogging include mobile blogging or moblogging, and video blogging, also called vlogging or v-blogging. Mobile blogging entails using a mobile device to post entries to a blog. Often photos and videos taken with a cell phone are included. A video blog primarily consists of posted videos regardless of the tools used to create the videos.

Social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Ning enable people to connect with friends and colleagues as well as with organizations, causes, events, and more. Librarians and libraries are exploring these as ways to connect with each other, their users, and to promote their services.

Widgets are increasingly popping up on library Web sites. For example, many libraries use a Meebo widget for their chat service and embed the widget on their library home page or on individual librarian pages. So what exactly is a widget? From Wikipedia's definition, it can be described as a small Web-based application or code that can be placed into a Web site. By embedding widgets featuring video, photo, or more, librarians can spice up static html pages without acquiring expert programming skills. Sites like Sprout make it even easier by enabling you to build, publish, and manage your own widgets.

Social bookmarking sites like del.icio.us, Furl, and Digg let you save your favorite Web sites for later access. Librarians are finding creative ways of incorporating bookmarked sites into their work. Some librarians include a tag cloud—words representing the saved sites shaped in the form of a cloud—on a library course page. Anne-Marie Deitering's WR 222: Everything's an Argument course page is one example.

Media sharing sites like Flickr and Vimeo are great for hosting photos and videos. Many libraries use media sharing sites to store content for use on Web sites, in presentations, and as a way to promote and make visible the library, its events and services. One nice example (ok, maybe I'm biased!) is Oregon State University Library's display of its Northwest Art Collection on Flickr.

Games, massive multiplayer online games and alternate reality games continue to be hot topics of discussion. For some libraries the discussion centers on whether to collect and lend games. Other libraries question how to incorporate games into

bibliographic information services, programming, and library events. Blogs exploring issues of games and gaming may help libraries looking at these issues. Examples include Research Quest, information.games and News about Games and Gaming from the American Library Association's Games and Gaming Member Interest Group.

Now that you've seen this list, what might you add or subtract? Which sites would you choose to focus on? Muddling through the decision of which software will be most impactful for us and our libraries will take time for exploration. Regardless of what is chosen, it's apparent that social software and the devices used with them are no longer a fad.

Reading

One more piece critical to keeping up is learning about others' experiences. We all know about keeping up with journal literature and many of us subscribe to e-mail listservs. Add to this, setting up a RSS reader to follow blogs and other sites which offer feeds including journals and listservs.

With the many choices of feed readers, you are likely to find one matching your preferences. I have stuck with Bloglines, while colleagues swear by NetVibes or Google Reader. Other options include PageFlakes and Yahoo Pipes. After choosing a reader, the next challenge is deciding on which sites to subscribe to and how many. My feed reader quickly ballooned with subscriptions to many more feeds than I realistically could read. So I continually evaluate my feeds and attempt to harness my enthusiasm by focusing on blogs and sites that consistently contribute content over time and that provoke and engage me. Some that have recently caught my eye, as well as some well established sites, are in the sidebar.

Common Craft
http://www.commoncraft.com/

Designing Better Libraries
http://dbl.lishost.org/blog/

Educause Connects Contributed by Educause Learning Initiative
http://connect.educause.edu/Library/ELI/

Info-fetishist
http://info-fetishist.org

Infomational
http://infomational.wordpress.com/

LibrarianInBlack.net
http://librarianinblack.typepad.com/librarianinblack/

Read Write Web
http://www.readwriteweb.com/

Web Social Architecture and the post "A Conceptual Map of the Social Web"
http://www.websocialarchitecture.com

Keeping up has become more complex. However, cultivating a sense of play and adventure will hopefully prevent this from becoming just another chore. Add to that an item posted on the Info-fetishist blog stating, "sometimes even when the social or informational or educational or other payoff is there for the taking, developing new social networks takes work, and energy—and sometimes we have to pick and choose where to spend it," which is also true about keeping up with changes in libraries and technology.

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Digg Inc. Digg. http://digg.com/

Educause. Educause Connects Contributed by EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative. http://connect.educause.edu/Library/ELI/7ThingsYouShouldKnowAbout?time=1212443055.

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Google. Google Docs. http://docs.google.com/.

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