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The "Social" Way to Learn Online: Leaning 2.0 @ Multnomah County Library

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### Skills you are looking for in new librarians

An appreciation and understanding of technology is an integral aspect of what we would seek in new librarians, but perhaps more than ever it is the integration of this with a strong sense of information seeking, critical thinking skills, and, perhaps most significant, being able to be flexible with an increasingly dynamic environment.

—JIM KOPP
Director
Watzek Library
Lewis & Clark College

During the first three months of 2008 the wave known as Learning 2.0 swept through the Multnomah County Library (MCL). We weren't among the first, but we were determined to be among the best in applying this innovative, low-cost, high impact concept, which in the last year and a half spread throughout the library community like no other learning trend in recent memory. This article will explore MCL's somewhat unique implementation of Learning 2.0 and the lessons left in its wake.

Inspired in part by Stephen Abrams' February 2006 article, "43 Things I (or You) Might Want to Do This Year," in August of that year Helene Blowers began the first Learning 2.0 program at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) in North Carolina. Since then, over 250 libraries around the world have implemented similar programs. Individual programs differ, but adhere broadly to the model established by Blowers: a series of self-paced learning activities where participants explore Web 2.0 tools and technologies along a guided timeline (usually weekly), and blog about their experiences.

The defining characteristic of 2.0 tools is that they are "social." They allow users to interact with one another in a way that earlier, first generation Web tools did not. Blog readers can add comment to posts, wiki content can be edited by multiple users, etc. At MCL, we found the social aspect was key to participation in our Learning 2.0 Program, and to the use and adoption of 2.0 tools.

Traditional classes possess an element of social interaction that has always been lacking in online learning. In a classroom, you hear the questions your classmates ask, and how the instructor responds; you can ask questions; you can lean over to the person next to you and get hints on little bits of content you may have missed; and during breaks and after class you can exchange comments with friends. All these different types of social interactions assist in the learning process.

The genius of Blowers' original Learning 2.0 idea is that the social features of Web 2.0 technologies are harnessed to create an online training program incorporating many of the important elements of social interaction. Using Web 2.0 technologies you retain the online advantages of cheap universal and instantaneous distribution, and the capability for the learner to complete the lessons at a time and place of their convenience. The online learner is no longer limited to sitting at a computer all alone with the curriculum: 2.0 tools make online learning social. At MCL, we tried to take this central insight, and apply it in as many ways as we could, seeking at every turn to maximize the social opportunities.

I think the program was great fun and very useful as a team-building exercise. Also, good for morale to share learning experiences with co-workers in other job classifications.

—MCL PAGE

To maximize social engagement we incorporated the following features into our Learning 2.0 program:

- We selected a common blogging tool (Roller, an open-source platform) and required all participants to use it for their Learning 2.0 program blogs. Roller generated a tag cloud from participants' tags.

- All participant blogs were visible in a blogroll so that anyone could easily read what their co-workers were writing.

- Comments were enabled for all participant blogs (although participants had the option of turning off comments for their own blog.)

- The blogroll was sorted so that blogs receiving the most page views were listed at the top, thus encouraging a bit of competition to generate posts that would be more frequently read and commented upon.

- We recruited and trained a cadre of Learning 2.0 Guides from as many different work groups and locations within the library as possible, and designated these people as a "go to" easily accessible resource for anyone with questions or technical problems.

- We set up open lab times in various branches, staffed by one of the Learning 2.0 Guides, where participants could work on the learning activities surrounded by co-workers similarly engaged.

- Every week, an e-mail went sent to all employees highlighting one or more employee's work as "Blog of the Week" so that others could read and comment on these examples of the program in action.

- Each member program's governing committee committed to seek out blogs that were receiving few or no comments, and to add comments so that these participants would not be discouraged or feel like no one was paying attention to what they were accomplishing.

- Midway through the program, one of our monthly system-wide "Reference

Forums" was set aside as a Learning 2.0 practice and Q&A session for added networking and support.

What was the result of all these strategies and measures to encourage and support participation? Ours was a voluntary program, and 78 percent of all library staff chose to participate. In a post-program survey, 82 percent of staff answered affirmatively that they had received the help they needed.
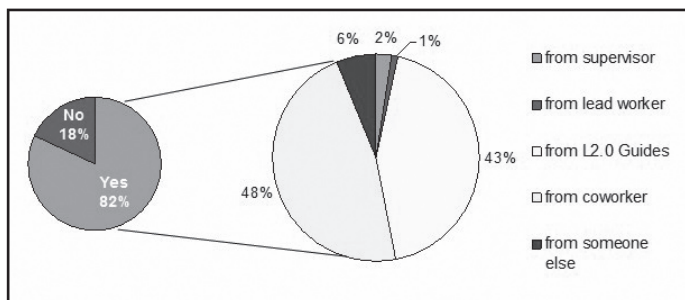
Participant feedback on support:
Did you get the help you needed?

MCL's Lessons Learned

The MCL staff is nearly as diverse as the metro area population they serve. Many have worked for the Library since the days of card catalogs and ink-stamped due dates. Others are new graduates in their 20s or even younger. Their levels of familiarity with digital technology are equally diverse. The primary goal was participation: to get as many employees to participate as possible. One of the biggest challenges we faced was how to structure program content and delivery in such a way that we could keep the tech-savvy interested, without alienating the technophobes.

To attack this problem, in addition to building in maximum opportunities for peer and technical support, we included both basic, and optional advanced activities for each week's theme. For example, in our program's first week, our learning theme was blogging. As a basic activity, every participant set up

The future of librarianship and how to keep up

Read everything. Read about higher ed, not just librarianship.

Find professional assoc. activities that broaden your experience. Don't confine yourself to academic venues. Lots of great stuff happening in public libraries.

Know your community—not librarianship for librarianship's sake, not one size fits all.

Take an online course, or do something that gives you the experience you are designing for others.

Be judicious about listservs, blogs, etc. and how much of your time they consume.

—VICKIE HANAWALT
Library Director,
Reed College Library

their own personal Learning 2.0 project blog using Roller. As an optional advanced activity, those who felt comfortable were encouraged to explore Twitter, Pownce, or another microblogging service.

Despite our best efforts to encourage them, some chose not to participate in our Learning 2.0 program. Our project evaluation survey identified that many of the employees who chose not to participate didn't see how the skills they could learn might apply to the work they do every day.

I still question the utility of much more than a general knowledge of some of these toys that have little or no library applicability … Maybe that's it: more explanation and/or demonstration to staff that this stuff is useful.

—MCL SUPERVISOR

In explaining the program, we, like most libraries with Learning 2.0 programs, trusted that the tools would sell themselves. We then compounded our error by not sequencing the learning activities so that the most obviously useful tools, such as online docs (Google Docs, Zoho, etc.), came early in the program. We introduced online docs ten weeks in; by then it was too late for someone who had become discouraged and dropped out.

While I appreciate that all members of the library were allowed to participate, it's relevancy to our current set-up is not so clear.

—MCL PAGE

Relevancy was a key point for many participants. Many discovered the utility of the Web 2.0 tools for themselves, but others didn't bother to explore unless they knew that the time they spent was going to be useful. It's a basic tenet of adult learning

theory: people want to know what's in it for them. We should have done a better job of pointing out, for example, that by using a wiki, a work group can collaborate on a set of work rules or plan a special event without worrying about e-mailing updates or saving the latest version. Outreach workers can use LibraryThing or Shelfari to organize materials for their specific target groups. Librarians can use RSS feeds to keep up on the latest developments of professional or personal interest. Social bookmarking tools like del.icio.us can help anyone assemble lists of resources, improved and expanded by the wisdom of their friends and co-workers, to help when they need to call up that information in the future.

The one thing I would suggest about this was maybe the ability to skip one or two sessions. Because our office does not deal with direct patron contact a couple of the lessons did not seem very relevant.

—MCL SUPERVISOR

I think that, although the content of Learning 2.0 was in most cases quite good, not all of it was applicable to all Library employees. I think it would be more appropriate if in the future the various lessons were optional, so that the people who would use the skills could take them.

—MCL PAGE

One of the main suggestions from our evaluation survey as to how we could improve the program was to give participants the ability to skip lessons that seemed less relevant to them based on their particular job duties or interests. In effect, our participants told us the way to improve the Web 2.0 learning program is to make it more 2.0—more open to user participation, choice, and selection for relevance and applicability.

I found it was difficult to find the time to participate like I intended and once I got behind it was hard to catch up.
—MCL SUPERVISOR

Although we tried to anticipate time crunches by incorporating a "catch up week" into our project plan, for many one week was not enough. People are busy. When they take traditional training classes, simply having a scheduled class meeting time once or twice a week helps to keep people on track. Without the requirement for physical presence, online learning becomes too easy to put off. We had more success and higher participation rates with work groups that scheduled time together to work on the program, and then, in keeping with the program guidelines that it be optional, let them opt out if they didn't want to participate. This worked better than opening a lab time and allowing people to opt in and show up.

Despite those who chose not to participate, and the grind that some employees felt from having to contend with learning a new activity each week, by almost any measure, our Learning 2.0 program would be termed a success. 96 percent of library supervisors feel the program was worth the time and effort expended. And our delivery model was successful too. 96 percent of supervisors also would support a future training program delivered using the same model (self-paced online learning activities, coupled with planned features to encourage social engagement and a network of peer support).

Better than feelings, MCL employees are putting their new found skill and familiarity with Web 2.0 tools into action. 75 percent of library supervisors either have already implemented, or have plans to implement, Web 2.0 tools for their workgroups. Over 50 percent are either using

blogs or plan to use them, with slightly less using or with plans to use photo sharing sites such as Flickr. Bookmarking sites and wikis were each named as helpful by more than 30 percent of MCL supervisors.

This was a great learning opportunity even for those of us who are already on the Web all the time. So far I'm using things like RSS feeds, twitter, and blogs for gathering information related to my work much more than I did before. I also think that I'll be able to recommend a lot of the sites and tools to patrons as time goes on, even if I haven't had a chance so far.
—MCL LIBRARY ASSISTANT

Web 2.0 tools can be used to help patrons. The fact that patrons were already using these tools was one of the main drivers for the Learning 2.0 program. But we found that Web 2.0 tools can help staff even more. Every single group of tools/activities we introduced in our program has seen greater usage by staff in the non-public side of their jobs than in directly assisting patrons.
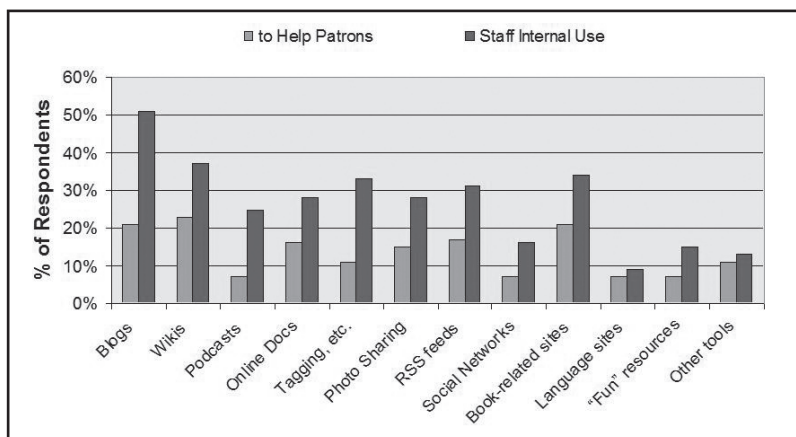
Use of 2.0 tools greater internally than for patrons

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What Else Can I Do

managers" because I emphasize needs and processes over rules and procedures.

Since "information" permeates all aspects of our world, the applications for an MLS are boundless. An important element to remember if we expand our job hunting outside of the traditional library world is to detail our skills in the "lingo" of the field we wish to enter. With creativity and a little entrepreneurship, we can direct our skills to a limitless array of job possibilities. ❧

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The "Social" Way to Learn

In the six weeks following the conclusion of our program, fully 75 percent of staff used at least one Web 2.0 tool in some facet of their work other than helping patrons. Blogging was the most popular tool, but wikis, social bookmarking sites book-related sites weren't far behind.

The highlight of my work year and this will make me much more effective in my work.
—MCL CLERK

Learning 2.0 worked for us. If your library hasn't tried it, we recommend that you do. You are almost certain not to regret it. If you do go ahead, I hope we've shared some lessons we learned that you might find helpful. If you've already been down this road, then perhaps this article will cause you to think about your unique experience just a little bit differently.

As library professionals, we need to be as current as possible on the latest technology trends and tools. This project was an excellent use of resources. My staff are now more knowledgeable and confident in these areas and contribute to the overall knowledge base of the library and are better equipped to serve customers.
—MCL SUPERVISOR

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References
MCL's Learning 2.0 Program can be found at http://www2.co.multnomah.or.us/learning/.