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Library 2.0: Creating a Borderless Library

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Introduction

Library 2.0 is one of those concepts that mean different things to different people. Originally coined by Michael Casey on his blog Library Crunch and further expanded in his book *Library 2.0: A Guide to Participatory Library Service* co-authored by Laura Savastinuk, the central theme is that a library needs to become more open to the input of its users; to become a more *participatory* environment.

By embracing and implementing the themes of Library 2.0 (as I see them, which I'll be presenting in this article,) a library can easily become borderless. But before I can give you specifics, let me explain what I envision as a “borderless library”. To most, when they hear the word borderless, they think of national or geographical borders. Although these definitions do have a little to do with what I'm talking about, I don't want to be so literal.

There are many borders when it comes to traditional library service. Whether that border is caused by forcing the user to come into a building in order to have their question answered, or if it's that large piece of wood we call a reference desk creating a barrier between the librarian and the user, borders are all around us. Through Library 2.0 principles, some technological, some not, we can break down these barriers; think outside these borders, and create a better environment for both.

Some feel that Library 2.0 is what they've been looking for. To others it's just a new buzzword that needs to go away. Others feel that we've been doing what Library 2.0 promotes all along and this is nothing new. Some feel that this is less a revolution, and more an evolution in library service. In some ways, they're all right. Whatever you think of the term, the principles are solid and those that embrace them are viewed as leaders in the field today.

So, what are the overall principles of Library 2.0? As I see them they are: beware perfection, be social, and the end of the culture of “no”. Let's take a look at what each of these mean and a few examples of how libraries are implementing them.

Beware perfection

Take a look at many of the online services you're using today, I bet many of them have a little "beta" next to their name and/or logo. Google Docs, which I'm using to write this article, is just one example. Even without an official "beta" designation, many online services today are in a constant state of change. Many services now launch while still in an incomplete state. In other words, software is released more often and updated on the fly more than it used to be. The days of "here's the new version" are practically over. As more and more people use services that are constantly changing, they're going to start to expect that constant change in other services such as libraries.

Here's another way to look at it: instead of waiting for some new service or idea to be considered "perfect" or "ready" by everyone that's involved, how about getting to the "functional" stage and then releasing it to the wild. Sometimes, when you give the power to your users, they'll discover things about your product and ways to use that product that you

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never would have thought of. For example, the photo sharing site Flickr was originally started in 2003 as a social gaming platform. They soon discovered that one particular feature was so popular (photo sharing) that they redesigned the service and the mission to focus on that one smaller feature. The rest, as they say, is history.

So, let's say you've got a great idea for how to better connect with your users. (I'll be giving you a few later on in this article.) Of course, you'll want to include a few others in the approval and implementation process for this idea but instead of planning for perfect, plan for function. Once you've got the basics up and running, let it fly. See where it goes. Let it grow organically. It may soar, it may fall flat. Either way, learn from the experience and take those lessons with you on to the next idea.

Go where your users are

In the introduction to this article I talked about borders and barriers to service. One of my examples was the fact that traditionally we expect our users to come to us in order to avail themselves of our resources. In the past, this has slowly changed with the advent of telephone service, fax service, and more recently e-mail and Instant Messaging (IM) service. However, in each of those cases, we still depended on our users to approach us. Instead, how about we consider going to them.

Going where the users are can be as simple as getting out from behind the reference desk and wandering the stacks asking your users if they need any assistance. The Ivanhoe library in Melbourne Australia has gone further and invested in tablet-based UMPCs (Ultra-Mobile PCs) to provide on-the-spot reference service. I've heard stories of other librarians setting up shop in campus student unions and in local lunch-time restaurants and offering on-site reference services.

Looking into the more technology-based areas, many libraries are setting up pages in popular social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Beebo. Here libraries are posting information about what's going on in the library, new items in the collection, and even providing reference services. A recent study has said that most college students wouldn't

think of looking for a librarian in these services but they definitely won't find us there if we're not there.

Be Social

In the past the Web was very much based on a broadcast model similar to television though on an admittedly larger scale. A few would learn how to write code (typically HTML) and create Web pages which they hoped others would view and act upon the information provided. Today, the Web is much more social in nature.

The simplest way a Library can be social is to blog. Blogs allow the library to easily share what is going on with their public with a simple point-and-click interface (i.e. no code needed) and they allow their readers to respond to what the library has said through comments. This opens a conversation with the library's users that wasn't previously possible. Whether the blog is a separate web site as it is with the Paper Cuts blog of the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Topeka, Kansas, or integrated with the library's Web site as a whole as with the Ann Arbor Library District in Ann Arbor, Michigan blogs are easily implemented and can become quickly popular with your users. Another great example is the Library Suggestion Blog of the Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries. Here the library is posting the content of user-submitted comment cards and replying to them in a very public manner. Not only does this show that the library is taking comments seriously, but this method also allows other users to submit their feelings on both the suggestions of other users and the library's responses to those suggestions.

Another way a library can become social is to use Del.icio.us Web site to collect and organize their online reference resources. Ten years ago, libraries used their browser's bookmarks to organize Web sites. These, however useful, have many problems the least of which is that the resources are generally tied to a particular computer. Since then many libraries have moved these resource lists to a page on the library's Web site. This is an improvement over bookmarking but still can be problematic since someone must know code and have access to the site in order to add or update the resources. Del.icio.us solves all these problems and adds additional features.

By moving your links off the library's Web site and on to Del.icio.us you solve the access problem caused by bookmarks, and you eliminate the need to know code that was required by listing them on a Web page. The additional benefits include the cross-referencing of your bookmarks with the bookmarks of others, the ability to tag your bookmarks making them easier to find within multiple categories, and in combination with RSS technology, the ability for your users to subscribe to your resources. (For example, a user could subscribe to your "business" tag and receive a copy of every new resource you add to the library's account that relates to business.)

Then, with a little copy-and-pasting of code, libraries can easily link their existing Web site with the contents of their Del.icio.us account. The Holdrege Public Library in Holdrege, Nebraska has done just that. Opening their "Links we love" page gives you a tag cloud; the list of all the tags they've used to organize their bookmarks. The larger the tag, the more it's been used. Just click on a tag and you'll receive the list of all the related resources the library has to recommend.

The third social service I encourage libraries to take advantage of is Flickr. If you're someone who likes to take photographs, and you don't have a Flickr account yet, why not? Think of all the events that occur at your library. Get a digital camera, it doesn't have to be an expensive one, and start taking pictures. Children's events, author appearances, book displays, remodeling and construction, you name it, take a photo of it. Once you've got the photos, upload them to your library's Flickr account. Once they're there tell everyone where to find them. Use the "Blog This" button to easily add narrative and publish the photo to the library's blog. Then, allow your users to add notes to and leave comments about your photos. Lastly, encourage your users to subscribe to your photos via RSS and let them use your photos on their blogs. (With proper attribution of course.)

The End of the Culture of No

Lastly, take a look at the impression you give to your users when it comes to the signs in your library. Does every one of them say what your users can't do instead of what they can do? Do your signs use the word "NO" a lot? Try this: perform a sign audit. Walk into your library and try to view it as a patron would. Read your signs out loud. Do they make your library sound friendly and inviting or like a nanny-state in which your patrons are viewed as the enemy; something that needs to be controlled and scolded.

I don't want to pick on any particular library here so if you're not sure what I mean, take a look at the photographs in the Library Signage Flickr pool and read the comments on some of the photos, especially those that have a lot of comments. The pool contains both positive and negative examples of library signage. Spend about 15 minutes looking through these photos and you'll get the picture.

Conclusion

So, what can you do, starting today to get your library moving toward 2.0? Here's a brief list of steps that you can take starting right now.

- Go to a blogger Web site and start a blog. It doesn't have to be one for the library right now. Get used to it yourself first, then take it up to the organizational level.
- Go to the Flickr Web site and sign up for an account. Even if you don't have any photos to upload right now, use it to explore and see how libraries are taking advantage of it. Join the Libraries and Librarians group and join in on the discussion.
- Perform a sign audit on your library. Take down every sign that tells your users what they can't do or contains the word "NO" and recreate the sign in a more positive manner.
- Think about a project you're working on right now. Ask yourself: Is it functional? If the answer is yes, let it go and let others play with it. It may not yet be perfect but you never know what your users may come up with.
- Think of a few places where you might find users. Maybe it's MySpace. Maybe it's the pub across the street. Think about how you might be able to work within those environments to provide library services.