A Learning 2.0 Programme: raising library staff awareness of Web 2.0 at Imperial College London

Jenny Evans, Ruth Harrison, Lawrence Jones and Katharine Thompson, Imperial College London Library

Learning 2.0 is a staff development programme, aimed at increasing knowledge of and experience in using web 2.0 technologies. This paper describes and reviews the programme and suggests future developments.

Background

The services and tools associated with web 2.0 are being discussed in many sectors of the information profession, and are the subject of focussed debate by leading information professionals, on their blogs, websites, discussion lists and in the professional press, as well as in the wider media environment. Web 2.0, as a term, is generally perceived to have come from a conference in 2004 (O'Reilly, 2005), and is defined on Wikipedia (an example of web 2.0 technology) as describing:

‘the changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aim to enhance creativity, secure information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web-based communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies.’ (Wikipedia, 2008)

Students are arriving at university with much experience of web 2.0 technologies (JISC, 2007); are familiar with blogs, wikis and social networking as communication tools; and have used products and services similar to our library catalogues and databases, such as Google, Amazon and so on. Web 2.0 related activities in UK higher education libraries range widely however. One example of a leader in the field is Dave Pattern, at the University of Huddersfield, who has been designing web 2.0 tools to enhance the library and information experience for users (Pattern, 2008). External information product providers are also realising web 2.0 potential. Vendors such as Talis are increasingly becoming aware of how web 2.0 can enhance the products they offer to libraries.

Therefore after several months of preparation, in July 2008, a small team of Imperial library staff launched Learning 2.0 @ Imperial College London Library (Imperial College London Library, 2008), the first UK version of the increasingly popular “23 Things” programme (Blowers, 2008a) which originated in the US at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC); the aim of this programme was to support that library’s ‘Learning 2.0 project to encourage staff to experiment and learn about the new and emerging technologies that are reshaping the context of information on the Internet today’ (Blowers, 2008b). The programme itself is based on an article by Stephen Abram published in 2006 (Abram, 2006) and has been widely adopted in libraries across the US and Australia. We were grateful that two of the leading programme directors, Helene Blowers (PLCMC) and Kathryn Greenhill (Murdoch University, Perth), provided advice to us.
Planning the programme

The initiative at Imperial was proposed and designed by staff members of the Faculty Support Services for Teaching and Research Directorate (FSS), and has been delivered within the library’s internal staff development programme.

As part of this programme, library staff had been able to attend an introductory demonstration on web 2.0 technologies, held annually for the past 3 years. Always very popular, feedback reflected the desire for more opportunities to learn about these technologies, and in particular to get more hands-on experience in using them. By summer 2008 a number of our liaison librarians had started to use blogs as a method of communication to staff and students, but any wider use of web 2.0 technologies by library staff has been very limited.

The appeal of the 23 Things/Learning 2.0 programme is that it is designed to be self-paced, thus meaning that staff are not constrained to a set timetable (not convenient with service points requiring continual cover), and can spend as little or as much time learning about the individual technologies as is possible. A further one-off workshop would not have provided the time nor space for people to adequately explore and consider the use and implications of each technology. In addition, Imperial Library consists of several campus and department libraries, as well as its Central Library, and training is usually held at the main campus; further appeal of the Learning 2.0 programme is that being online, this enables maximum participation regardless of staff location.

The 23 Things/Learning 2.0 programme also has considerable implications for information literacy, as it’s essential for libraries to not only be aware of these technologies but to actively engage with them from several angles: the promotion of library services, how technologies can enhance communication with users, how users are communicating outside the library using these technologies, and understanding how information is disseminated using these technologies. It is also imperative that we should take the opportunities offered by web 2.0 technologies and incorporate these within our learning development activities, and to consider how library staff can develop their teaching activities using web 2.0. With this in mind, the organisers of Imperial’s programme involved the library’s Learning Development team during the initial planning and proposal of the course, to ensure that all relevant staff development angles were considered.

The programme’s aims & objectives

In all, 32 library staff registered for the programme. It was felt important by the programme leaders that all library staff be exposed to and understand web 2.0 technologies so as to be able to:

- use and apply web 2.0 technologies where relevant to their library role, and
- understand how web 2.0 technologies can be applied to the services we offer our users.

To provide structure to the programme and tailor it to Imperial’s needs, we identified the key technologies to focus on, and developed a set of learning outcomes. This would demonstrate the benefits to staff taking part, and ensure that the programme was presented as a learning experience, not simply an opportunity to ‘play’. Therefore it was expected that at the end of the programme, participants would:
• be able to identify a range of web 2.0 tools and technologies, including blogs, RSS [generally agreed as Really Simple Syndication] and wikis,
• be able to demonstrate how to set up a blog, and create a blog post,
• know how blogs and RSS feeds are used at College [Imperial], and be able to demonstrate to library users how to subscribe to RSS feeds,
• be able to explain the difference between a podcast and a webcast,
• understand how library users interact with web 2.0 technologies,
• be able to discuss the use of web 2.0 technologies in a library setting, providing at least three reasons why web 2.0 can enhance our services,
• be confident in using web 2.0 technologies on a regular basis, and
• be able to demonstrate the relevance of appropriate web 2.0 technologies to their daily work activities.

Programme structure

The original programme consisted of a number of self-paced learning modules, and in many other organisations it is usually supplemented with hands-on workshops. We decided to use both these types of activity in our programme running over a period of 12 weeks. Once the programme was launched and the learning activities posted, participants would not have to be restricted to the 12 weeks; indeed, they now have a resource available to them for the duration of the Learning 2.0 blog’s lifetime, but an initial structure was necessary. Weekly activities were designed to take approximately an hour to complete. Extra optional activities were available for some parts of the programme to allow participants to explore technologies in more depth.

The 12 weeks included:

• an introductory workshop,
• optional timetabled self-paced learning sessions supported by the Learning 2.0 programme leaders (holding self-paced sessions at campuses so as to assist staff in a face-to-face environment),
• optional workshops featuring guest speakers on podcasting, and Second Life,
• a reflection week, and
• a catch-up week.

The aim was to use the technology wherever possible. Therefore tools such as IM, blogs, wikis, screencasting, RSS and social bookmarking were all utilised as methods of communicating and sharing resources with participants throughout the programme. This allowed participants to use a range of technologies throughout the programme, not just focus on each for one week.

The technologies introduced on a week-by-week basis included:

• instant messaging (IM),
• blogs,
• RSS,
• wikis,
• social bookmarking and tagging,
• podcasting/webcasting/online videos,
• online tools, such as Google documents and Slideshare,
• online social networks, and
• gaming and virtual worlds (in particular, Second Life).

A condition of taking part was that each participant was expected to set up a blog, edit and add content to a wiki, and would use both for the duration of the 12 weeks; after the programme was officially completed, they would still be able to use these tools if they wanted to do so. It was also expected that each participant would use the blog as a reflective tool, recording their experiences of the programme, and enabling them to comment on how useful they found each new tool or technology in relation to their role within the library, and in relation to the library service as a whole. Participants were actively encouraged to debate and discuss the programme and the various technologies they were discovering with the rest of the group by commenting on blogs, setting up discussion threads in the wiki or IMing one another. This cross group communication was particularly important given the multi-site nature of the library service, as participants were able to provide support and encouragement despite being geographically remote from one another.

Guest speakers were invited to demonstrate how web 2.0 technologies are already being used in the College to enhance the student learning experience. The first guest speaker was the Learning Technologist from the Faculty of Physical Sciences who collaborated with lecturers in physics and chemistry to record a series of lectures and technical demonstrations, either as podcasts, screencasts or short films. These are then used by students as a learning or revision tool and have proved extremely popular.

The Faculty of Medicine have created a virtual Imperial College campus and hospital wards in Second Life. Although the Learning Technologist for the Faculty was not able to appear in person at the workshop, participants were able to watch a YouTube video featuring footage of the Second Life hospital and then create their own avatar and explore this virtual world for themselves.

Programme evaluation

Feedback from participants so far has been overwhelmingly positive, as can be seen below:

“I’m really glad I’m doing this Learning 2.0 course as it’s encouraging me to try out a few things I’ve wondered about for a while. RSS is one of them. I had a rough idea what it is but never actually investigated any further, not to mention set some feeds up.”

“I’m beginning to see how it could be useful to share the editing of content in a work environment, let’s say for example a FAQ page for staff working at the enquiry desk.”

“[I subscribed] to The Library Channel podcasts from ASU Libraries. This kind of content was much better and actually worth spending a bit of time to sort through. I am also looking at the language and history podcasts from various universities. This could be good!”
“It’s fun looking at colleagues’ pages and also very instructive navigating my way around the packages.”

“I can see that being able to share bookmarks is immensely valuable and a great way for liaison librarians to provide useful links for students.”

“I can see enormous potential for introducing multimedia into our IL [information literacy] teaching programmes and I’m sure this is something that the students will expect . . . Instead of asking for ‘the handout’ I expect students will soon start asking for ‘the podcast’. ”

“My hope is that the Learning 2.0 Programme will cure me of some of my technological reticence and that I will learn to embrace the future with enthusiasm! “

“I have been looking forward to this for some time - I have really felt my lack of practical knowledge of these sorts of technologies. I do need to be in a position to be aware of what they can do so I can decide what I can apply in my role and also I need to actually be able to do it!”

Future developments to consider include:
• asking participants to feedback on each others blog entries to help promote dialogue,
• asking all participants work on one wiki to create, for example, instructions on how to set up & use delicious, or how to use the library catalogue to find material,
• encouraging participants to share some of the sites on their delicious accounts with others to promote social bookmarking, and
• placing the weekly content on a wiki instead of a blog.

The first programme has now finished, so will be further evaluated taking into consideration the content and activities, the levels of participation, the reflective blogs, and general feedback from the participants. The programme team would be happy to be contacted by anyone seeking more information.

Jenny Evans, Lawrence Jones and Katharine Thompson are Liaison Librarians in the Natural Sciences and Engineering FSS Teams, and Ruth Harrison is Team Leader: Learning Development, at Imperial College London Library.


Imperial College London Library (2008), ‘Learning 2.0 @ Imperial College London Library’, Available from http://learning20atimperial.wordpress.com/ [Accessed 28 October 2008]


