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Blogging in the UK and Ireland

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Last year I started writing a blog aimed at one of the departments I liaised with in my role as a subject librarian. Its purpose was simple – to keep students and staff informed about the new books that arrived in the library. As such, it was really just a modern version of the printed lists that librarians have always circulated, but the blog proved popular and generated some extremely enthusiastic feedback from academics.

I knew I couldn't be the only person doing this, but when I looked around it wasn't immediately apparent how widespread this use of blogs actually was. There were blogs written by librarians about librarianship, certainly, and research into the impact of Web 2.0 applications on our profession (for example the Libraries and Social Software in Education (LASSIE) investigation into the use of social software in education¹, reported on elsewhere in this issue of *SCONUL Focus*), but actual examples of blogs used to communicate with library users seemed thin on the ground.

So earlier this year I posted a message on the *lis-infoliteracy* discussion list, asking for librarian bloggers to get in touch, and the response was striking. I received over forty replies and some of the respondents have contributed the short pieces that follow this introduction.

What was immediately clear is that British and Irish librarians are blogging a lot and have been doing so for some time. I wasn't a pioneer; indeed, the most common use of blogs is by subject librarians. But they are also being used to reach specific groups of library users (such as distance learners), to provide support for particular applications (EndNote or RefWorks) and to keep members informed about library projects (for example refurbishment, institutional repositories). Additionally they are a channel for the dissemination

of general library news although (as I write) they haven't yet supplanted the more conventional web page news sections. And, perhaps most interestingly, they are being used as a means of internal communication within libraries.

A number of common considerations were evident in the replies. A strong motive for setting up blogs is the belief that e-mail circulars tend to be ignored these days: blogs allow us to communicate directly with those library users who are interested in what we are doing. Blogs also give authors an autonomy and speed that traditional web pages (managed by the institution) cannot give; they also easily organise and archive information. There were comments about the tone of posts (informal or formal?), design and content, marketing and where blogs are hosted. Evidence that blogs are being read is also an important issue, with many bloggers tracking usage in various ways. All of these themes are explored in the case studies below.

What follows is not a scientific survey (probably impossible in such a fast-moving environment) but rather a snapshot of the sort of things that librarians are doing with blogs in 2008. It will be interesting to repeat this exercise in a couple of years to see how they have evolved or whether they've been replaced by some new form of communication we haven't yet thought of.

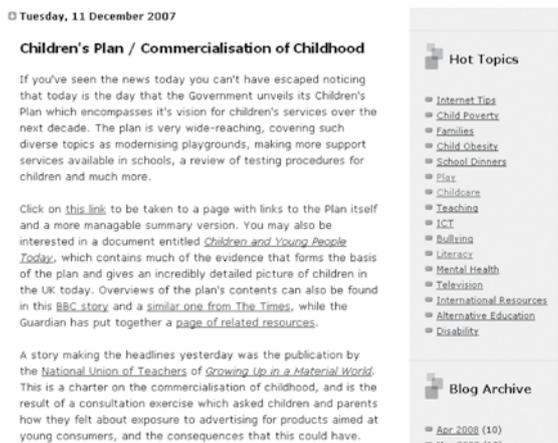
A SUBJECT LIBRARIAN BLOG AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE BIRMINGHAM

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What's in a blog? That was the question the subject librarians at University College Birmingham asked themselves early last year, when a member of academic staff approached us to ask if we could set up some blogs for the benefit of lecturers and students throughout the institution. We wanted to explore how this method of communication could be utilised for our users, but were not entirely sure exactly what sort of information we should be looking to include.

This question appears to be ongoing, as each of us appears to have taken a slightly different approach to the sort of material that we cover. I am the subject librarian for the School of Child-

hood and Education at University College Birmingham, and my blog – <http://bcftcschildhoodeducation.blogspot.com> – contains details of newly published research and reports which are relevant to this area. It is updated on most weekdays, as the government’s focus on schemes such as Sure Start and the Children’s Plan means that there is currently a phenomenal amount of literature appearing in this sector.



I try to vary the content of the blog by introducing occasional ‘fun’ items on slow news days. The blog also contains a handful of simple internet / computing tips which users may find helpful. These are mainly written for the benefit of our large number of mature students, many of whom admit to having fairly basic IT skills, and are usually drawn from my own experience of the



difficulties that they encounter when using online information.

Fitting the blog into my workflow has been relatively seamless; much of the material that is highlighted comes to me from various e-mail alerts and RSS feeds that I’ve set up, or there are specialist news sources that I can skim quickly to get ideas. Most of the posts are relatively succinct, so it’s usually only a question of spending 15–20 minutes a day on updating the site.

All of our library blogs are hosted on Blogger, primarily because we wanted to set them up quickly, and our VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) had no blogging capability at that time. Links to the blogs are posted in various locations in our VLE and library catalogue, to maximise the chances that they will be looked at. We also get occasional hits from outsiders who have stumbled across the pages from a Web search.

A free plug-in piece of software called Statcounter gives us figures on how many hits our blogs are receiving, breakdowns on the numbers of new and returning users and much more; we chose Statcounter because it doesn’t require us to carry any advertising on the site. The number of hits the blogs receive tends to be at its highest during the early weeks of each semester, possibly as a result of the students being made aware of them during induction sessions.

Users are encouraged to leave comments, although they very rarely do, which is a little disappointing in terms of getting feedback. All comments also have to be moderated before they appear on the blog, to avoid publishing any material that might be deemed offensive. Anecdotal evidence from talking with users suggests that they are very happy with the service, but it would be useful to have something a little more formal in this area – something for the future perhaps?

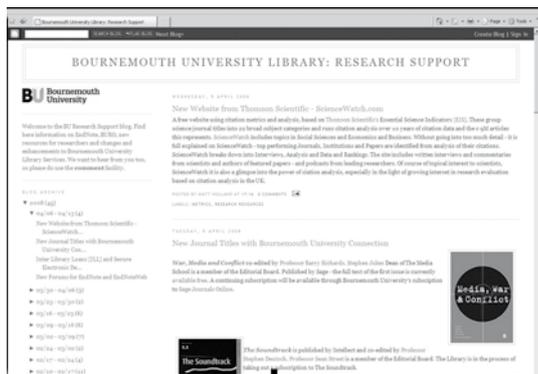
**BLOGGING IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AT
BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY**

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Blogging at Bournemouth University Library has a relatively short but interesting history. The phased implementation in 2006/07 of BlackBoard as the platform for the university-wide VLE – myBU – provided the opportunity to use blogs as that facility was provided within BlackBoard.

Blogging on myBU got off to a tricky start because until some authentication issues had been sorted neither staff nor students could get access to it. However, since the technical issues underlying this problem were resolved, library staff – along with academics in the Schools – have been experimenting with different approaches.

Firstly, we wanted to make blogs personal as well as School-focused, so each blog is attributed – by first name – to the relevant subject librarian rather than just to the School or broad subject area. We have tried a range of writing styles: from the formal (such as ‘Changes to Westlaw’) and the reminder (‘Forgotten your Athens password?’) to the (hopefully) eye-catching (‘Remember, remember the end of November’ [for expiry of a database subscription] or ‘What’s your Verdict?’ [news of the Verdict Research market research source]). As with all blogs, the perennial problem is adding new material. The best output is 22 entries over 6 months; 5 is the lowest. Do the students read them? Access to date has been promising, with

at least 100 views of each page over the last 6 months.

We have also since recognised that, while hosting a blog within a VLE has some advantages, especially for the majority of students who increasingly view myBU as their first point of contact – just a click from other pages on the VLE – it does have the disadvantages of (at present) limited management information and the need for an additional login. Also, because the VLE is necessarily password-protected, the blogs are not accessible to non-myBU users. So we are currently experimenting with using Blogger to provide a different access route, to allow for the different perspectives on how users connect with our resources. For example, blogs have been set up on Blogger to focus on those cross-disciplinary themes that are not easily accommodated within a School-based framework, including doctoral research, e-resource news and business and company information.

Our next step is first to enable access, from both the myBU (VLE) environment and the external-facing library web pages, to all the blogs. Secondly we will begin to actively promote their presence.

Using Blogger has allowed us to experiment with Google Analytics to monitor traffic on the Blogger-hosted offerings. This provides detailed usage analysis, for example of non-university users. Perhaps predictably, the external blogs over the period for which we have been measuring usage (25 February – 6 March 2008) have accrued 110+ hits from 92 visitors, with the average visit lasting just under 2 minutes.

While we cannot tell which access is good, bad or indifferent, we can at least measure the impact over time of various promotional activities through spikes in the usage data.

See <http://bulib4research.blogspot.com/>; <http://bulib4resources.blogspot.com/>; <http://bulib4businfo.blogspot.com/>.

A NEW SUBJECT LIBRARIAN WRITES AT CITY UNIVERSITY!

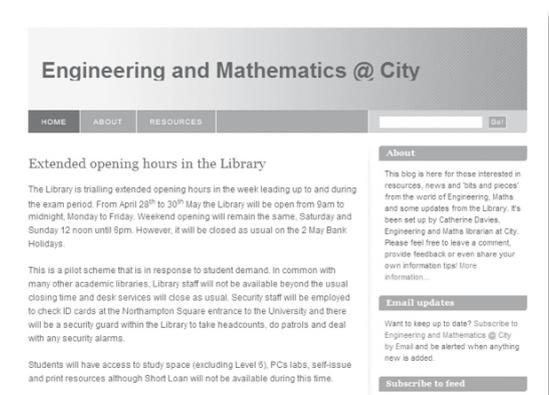
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Since August 2007 I have been maintaining a blog for the staff and students of City University's School of Engineering and Mathematics, available at <http://engineeringandmaths.wordpress.com>. There were so many reasons for setting up the blog that they far out-weighed my initial apprehension about blogging. As a brand new subject librarian in a brand new post, dealing with an unfamiliar subject in a new and untried format, it felt like it would be the equivalent of standing on a chair in a crowded room delivering a lecture about non-Euclidian geometry in Dutch. However, the need to establish a three-dimensional presence to staff and students was far greater than my fears.

I use my blog to communicate 'bits and pieces' of information to the School. At first, it was about library developments and new initiatives within the university, but very quickly it became a good way to record little nuggets of information I stumbled across: a relevant news story on engineering or maths, or an interesting resource I found about teaching. I didn't have a way to communicate these effectively through e-mail, as at the time I didn't have an e-mail list other than 'all engineering staff' and 'all maths staff'. Also, I was very aware that some people would not welcome the extra intrusion into their inbox, but that asking people to 'opt-out' of an e-mail list would be pointless – no-one would respond to that anyway! I also really wanted to get the message across about new technologies and new ways of using information – using the medium to deliver this information seemed to me quite a good method, as well as a way of becoming visible in the School.

I use a free blogging tool called Wordpress. My blog was started 'unofficially'. Call me cynical, but there didn't appear to be any blogs in the university as a whole when I set mine up and I decided that I would do it and see what happened, rather than ask permission of a faceless marketing department and have it turned down outright because it was the easier option. I advertise it in my e-mail signature, and recently took the momentous step of advertising it on the library website under my contact details. I also use it as the example of a blog in sessions I take with students looking at referencing and citing.

Overall I've had really positive feedback from other liaison librarians and others within the library; no-one else has started one yet, though this could be changing in the near future with increasing interest in Web 2.0 technologies amongst library staff. This could be down to the fact that it's not in the 'established repertoire' of our roles, or perhaps to uncertainty about the technology. I think one of the easiest excuses is that people don't have time; however, I don't really buy that – it is a very good use of time for a liaison librarian, in my opinion! Once the blog is set up, updating is as quick as writing an e-mail (with a bit more thought, obviously, as the world is reading, potentially!): a quick scan of feeds I've signed up to, most days, and if something catches my eye – in it goes. The work really was in setting it up, getting the right 'look' and applications and over time adding the sources I wanted to keep an eye on in my own reader.

In terms of the impact in the intended audience, I've had good anecdotal feedback. Wordpress does provide some basic stats, so I can see that I've had around 1,000 hits since August 2007, although my mother is very proud of me and apparently always has a look every few days, so I can take a few off for that! Wordpress doesn't give you information on those subscribed to your RSS feed, which is a bit of a shame, since that might give a more realistic picture of its use in the School. I hope that it will continue to be read and grow its audience slowly, but if nothing else it has been a very worthwhile personal exercise in getting to grips with new technologies and also in my own professional development, keeping myself up to date and learning more about the subjects I support. If others find it of use as well, then that's even better!

BLOGGING TO PROMOTE SITE LIBRARIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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Blogs in Oxford are still very much in their infancy, but over the last few months a lot of interest has taken off here about Web 2.0 tools and how they could be useful in libraries. I set up a blog for the Vere Harmsworth Library (Rothermere American Institute) in October 2007 (<http://vereharmsworthlibrary.blogspot.com/>), as part of a wider experiment into Web 2.0 tools (we have also been trying out del.icio.us, Facebook, LibraryThing, Instant Messaging and wikis). My aim in doing so was to find a better way of managing publishing and distribution of library news. I had been finding our old news page on our website cumbersome to maintain (manual archiving, no feeds) and having to publish news multiple times in multiple places was time-consuming. Replacing this page with a blog simplified the whole process as everything is done automatically – feeds, archiving, searching and labelling features for browsing, ability to get feedback through comments. It also allows for the same piece of news to be published in multiple locations – the feed is routed onto our library website on the front page (using the ‘shared items’ feature in Google Reader) and onto our Facebook page (via an RSS application), and of course goes directly to anyone who subscribes. Statistics are being monitored with Site Meter and FeedBurner, both showing healthy usage, and we have received quite a few positive comments from readers. Our blog is externally hosted, using Blogger; initially I was concerned that having it separate from our website might mean news would be lost, but unfortunately our current CMS (Content Management System) didn’t allow closer integration. However, routing the feed through to the front page has negated this and means it has become a very effective way of distributing information.

Since I began the VHL blog, a couple of other librarians have been inspired to try them out. Despite being a self-confessed ‘Web 2.0 sceptic’, Sue Pemberton at the Continuing Education library set up a blog to try and improve communication with readers, particularly distance learners. She has found it easy to set up and maintain, also finding that the ease of doing so encourages her to update it more frequently than she would have the website. An additional benefit has been the

way the blog has raised the profile of the library within the department, as news items of interest from the feed are picked up on the department’s news page as well. Gillian Beattie at St Stephen’s House library has also started a library blog, both as a means of distributing news and also to give the library a web presence of its own, as it previously didn’t have a website. She was attracted by the flexibility of blogs over websites, particularly by the ease with which she could embed extra items such as widgets from del.icio.us and LibraryThing (which I have also done with the VHL blog). Like Sue, Gillian has found blogging a very easy way to communicate with readers and to raise the profile of the library within the institution. Both Sue and Gillian are also using Blogger for their blogs.

Interest in Web 2.0 is really taking off in Oxford, and on 27 March 2008 a study day was held for library staff from all over the university. This included presentations and case studies, but also hands-on sessions where librarians could try out some tools for themselves. As part of this everyone was encouraged to create blogs, both to demonstrate how easy it is and also to have some way of recording people’s impressions and thoughts throughout the day. It will be interesting to see whether, following this, more librarians here are inspired to start blogs for their libraries or subject areas.

A BLOG FOR LIBRARY STAFF AT KINGSTON UNIVERSITY: THE HELPDESK BLOG

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We run an active blog for all staff working on helpdesks. Although it is not aimed directly at students, the blog is still intended to improve our communication with them by being better

informed ourselves about current issues affecting service.

Kingston University has four libraries on different sites, offering a range of reception desks and general and subject helpdesks at each. These are staffed by a mixture of subject specialists, customer services assistants and other information advisors. Staff may be rostered at different times each day/week according to other commitments; some staff are part-time and only work on certain days.

Our problem was how to communicate new information about service issues fast but only to the staff who needed to know it. The type of information we were thinking of might include news on availability of resources, support for particular groups of students, network and printing problems, machines, site and environmental issues, reminders about surveys and new services. E-mails were unsatisfactory because (a) although they could be sent quickly, it could not be guaranteed that staff on helpdesks were logged into their e-mail and reading the messages straightaway and (b) even a 'helpdesk staff' distribution list would still reach staff who were not timetabled that day, who were on leave or who didn't work that day, thereby clogging up their inboxes with unnecessary and irrelevant mail. Some information might be useful to staff at all sites; some might only be relevant on one particular site.

Keen to embrace Web 2.0 technologies, a blog seemed a possible solution: accessible from any computer and open to all staff to add information, comments and updates or simply to view. We jumped in with a subscription to TypePad and very quickly had our blog designed – http://cathymurr.typepad.co.uk/helpdesk_blog/ – and ready to go. All staff were invited to register to enable them to post to the blog and it was at this point that we encountered most of our teething problems; the idea was new, the technology was unfamiliar, it was another thing to have to learn how to do. However, once the first wave of staff were registered and had begun using the blog actively, interest outweighed fear and more staff took the plunge. Even without registering, though, the blog is still available to all helpdesk staff to read (it is set to open automatically for all users on helpdesk computers).

The blog was launched in January 2007; the fact that it is still going strong is testament to its value as an internal communication tool.

SEVEN BLOGS AT DUBLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY!

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Dublin Institute of Technology library has developed seven blogs since February 2007, using blogger.com software. These can be viewed on the DIT library website at <http://www.dit.ie/DIT/library/az/blogs/>.

Each blog has been developed locally by the respective faculty library and reflects the interests of same. They have evolved into two distinct types which reflect their purpose, although this is subject to review and change. Four are explicitly faculty- and subject-oriented, namely DIT Kevin St's Science blog, DIT Bolton St's Engineering and Built Environment blogs and DIT Cathal Brugha St's Tourism blog. These blogs provide updated subject-news resources as well as information-literacy-related subject links and e-tutorials. The remaining two are site-library-information-oriented (DIT Mountjoy Square, DIT Aungier Street) and the final DIT Library Services blog consists of general cross-library updates.

Some of these blogs have been in operation for awhile (Engineering since February 07 and Science and Aungier St since summer 07) while others are newer (Mountjoy Square and Tourism & Food).

A number of blog-related themes have evolved since their inception, namely currency and content, contributors, evaluation and rationale. Amongst the common operational issues are blog update frequency, audience, the need to moderate comments, being design-aware, maintaining contributor and reader interest, text and image copyright awareness, in addition to general post quality. Some blogs are updated more than twice a week, depending on the subject area, while others are updated less frequently. Contributors are generally the staff of each faculty library, but authoring and contributory rights are confined to their site blog only. In reality it tends to be one or two staff members of each site library who are the primary contributors, each with their own style and expertise. There is currently co-contribution between the Science and Engineering blogs. There is also the issue of up-skilling staff who would like to be involved but who don't have the necessary skills to contribute or author their site blog.

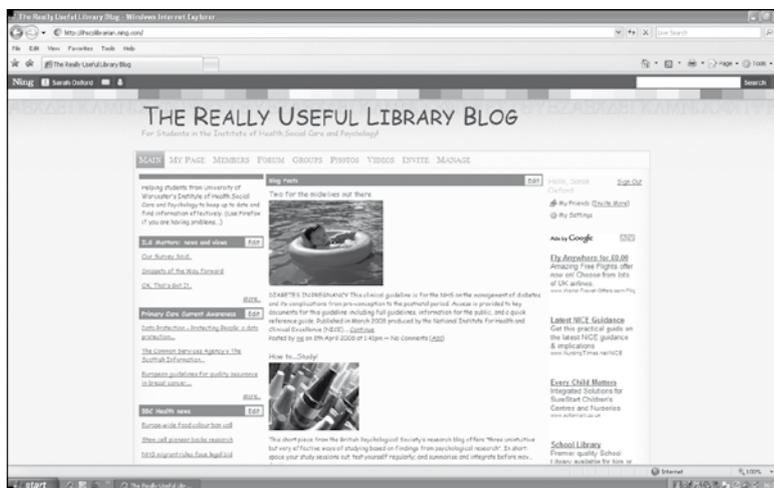
Deciding what constitutes useful information and the right blog-posting 'tone' can be difficult at times, but a mix of formal and informal posts seems to work well and a balance can be achieved with various contributor styles. Design changes and major content changes are usually reached by library-staff site-team consensus. RSS feeds have been found to be useful in terms of current awareness and obtaining potential post material. The links area on the blogs provide another access route to DIT library's e-resources and services for staff and students, which is the common rationale across the seven blogs.

The blogs are publicised via the DIT library website, via information-literacy classes and posters and multimedia tools. The libraries keep track of traffic reports for each blog, but would obviously like more feedback in regard to their relevance and use. They are evaluated reasonably regularly and the staff are aware of the need for them to be a consistent and quality presence in the Web 2.0 arena.

Finally there is also a new DIT library information literacy blog for librarian-teachers across the DIT library sites to share learning and teaching news and e-resources: <http://www.dit.ie/DIT/library/az/blogs/>.

BLOGGING USING NING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WORCESTER

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The idea for a subject-specific library blog arose from a desire to create a dialogue between students in University of Worcester's Institute of

Health, Social Care and Psychology (IHSCP), and their liaison librarian. This blog – <http://ihscplibrarian.ning.com/> – is intended not only for students based on campus but also those based at partner institutions. At present, students contact me through the enquiries desk, by telephone or by e-mail, but these methods rely on students coming to me. I wanted to find a way to approach them.



I have used the social network 'Ning', as it includes many features that enable me to offer information and communicate with users. I regularly update a blog to keep students informed on the latest news and resources relevant to them. I have added news (RSS) feeds which update daily, offering reports, guidelines and news from relevant fields. I have created some discussion boards where students can put forward their queries and suggestions. These have not been used yet, but students have contacted me using the personal message facility, to make the odd stock suggestion or query about stock availability. I hope that they will ask their questions in the chat forum so that we can build up a 'bank' of queries, suggestions and responses; however, I realise students may be reluctant to get the ball rolling here.

I am very fortunate to have the support of my colleagues within information and learning services when it comes to promotion. I started off by promoting the blog to academic staff, asking them to mention it to students. I sent e-mails to students where I already had their details from previous communications. I added the link to all handouts and presentations used in my teaching sessions, and it is in my e-mail signature. I also received offers from colleagues to put the web address on the front page of the catalogue, to add it to appropriate modules on Blackboard (the university VLE), and to add a link on the IHSCP departmental web page, which students are known to visit regularly

for information on their course, placements and timetables. I have tried to get students visiting the site and signing up as an activity in my teaching sessions, although I have made this more of an 'optional extra' as students can get overwhelmed with too much information, particularly at the start of their course.

Keeping the site up-to-date does not add significantly to my workload, though it is very important to set aside time for it regularly each week. No one reads a quiet blog! The news feeds update automatically so that there is always something new on there. There have been one or two comments made to me via personal messages where I have had to respond tactfully, perhaps where students are doing things they ought not to be doing or where I have to justify why we can't buy a particular book. I realise that it may be more difficult to respond to similar comments in the public discussion forums!

The blog was up and running in time for new and returning students in January 2008. Since then, only 24 people have signed up, though many more have viewed the site; the content can be viewed without having to sign up. In mid-February 2008, the statistics offered by 'Ning' said that there had been over 1,600 views (not all of these will necessarily be Worcester students), though this feature has now been removed and 'Ning' users are advised to add Google Analytics to their pages. This should give much more detailed information about site usage. There is much more work to be done with the blog, and I do sometimes worry that it is one online resource too far ... but it is important to persevere. You never know until you try!

SCIENCE AND HEALTH NEWS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BATH

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Background: Various subject librarians have been blogging at the University of Bath since 2005. The trend was initiated by Kara Jones' creation of

'Science News'. Kara's rationale for blogging is presented within the 'About us' section of 'Science News':

The aim is to provide a place for us to disseminate library information to our departments, and to provide an opportunity, usually via comments, for people to feedback to us ... Sometimes we'll share our thoughts on a particular matter and invite responses.

Content: Sarah Hughes has inherited 'Science News' and Peter Bradley writes 'Health News'. Both Sarah and Peter alert readers to resources that are on trial or recently acquired. Sarah also provides reminders about existing resources and seeks recommendations for new books.

Currency: Sarah posts as and when she thinks of something pertinent, while also aiming to blog once per week. Regularity is important; if users repeatedly find nothing new to read, they may stop visiting. However, the 'About us' section seeks to manage their expectations by stating that 'posting occurs intermittently'. On average, Peter blogs at least twice per month, usually adding clusters of stories at a time.

Style: When Sarah began posting to 'Science News', she found it a slightly unnerving means of communication and, therefore, would write a couple of drafts first. Sarah now finds it to be a quick, easy and enjoyable way to promote the library's resources and services. Students have responded positively to her informal style. Peter has started to adopt this approach as he aims to encourage greater two-way communication.

Hosting services: Peter employs Blogspot whereas Sarah uses Wordpress. Both have user-friendly interfaces and blogger-friendly functionality. Tags are employed to enable searching. Peter and Sarah aim to be consistent and intuitive when creating and selecting tags.

Promotion: The blogs are promoted during some library inductions and Peter has added links to them from within subject-specific sections of the library website. Sarah e-mails links to specific stories in the form of 'headlines', enabling the busy academic to discriminate between stories rather than having to scroll laboriously down the screen. Both librarians actively invite comments, though users rarely respond via the blogs, which undermines their full interactive potential. Nonetheless, this approach hopefully encourages the reader to

perceive librarians as approachable and interested in what they have to say.

Usage: In addition to positive anecdotal evidence, usage statistics prove that the blogs are being read. Both blogs experience boosts in numbers of visits after summaries of content are emailed or posted via virtual learning environments. However, these figures do not tell us whether individuals from specific user-groups are less inclined to visit than others. This information could help provide a focus for future promotional activities.

Conclusion: Subject librarians at the University of Bath employ different approaches to blogging but share the same challenges. The most important of these is to realise the full potential of blogs as promotional and social tools through additional means of publicity.

See <http://www.bath.ac.uk/library/subjects/blogs.html>.

REFERENCE

- 1 Available at <http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE.php>

OTHER BLOGS

University of East London: <http://uellibraryava.blogspot.com/>
Imperial College: <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/library/aboutthelibrary/news/blogs>
UCD: <http://www.ucd.ie/library/about/blogs/index.html>
University of Huddersfield: <http://library.hud.ac.uk/blogs/>
Newcastle University: <http://library.hud.ac.uk/blogs/>
Open University: <http://library.open.ac.uk/services/lib20servs/blogs/index.cfm>
Queen's University Belfast: <http://qubrefworks.jiscinvolve.org/>
Glasgow School of Art: http://www2.gsa.ac.uk/library/news/news_index.html
University of Warwick: <http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/busteamenquiries/>
Coventry University: <http://covendnote.blogspot.com/>
Lancashire Care NHS Trust: <http://lancashirecare.wordpress.com/>
Coleg Llandrillo: <http://liberace.wordpress.com/>
University of Loughborough: <http://lborossh.wordpress.com/>

Cardiff University: <http://dlsduthie.wordpress.com/>
Sheffield Hallam University: <http://shu-lits-hwbteam.blogspot.com/>
SUNCAT: <http://suncatblog.blogspot.com/>
UCL: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Library/blog/>
University of Bradford: <http://eresourcesatbradford.wordpress.com/>
University of Bolton: <http://www.bolton.ac.uk/Students/StudyResources/Library/Home.aspx>

[all accessed, April 2008]