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Libraries, social software and distance learners: blog it, tag it, share it!

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ABSTRACT

Describes a recent project funded by the University of London to explore how social software or web 2.0 technologies can enhance the use of libraries by distance learners. LASSIE (Libraries And Social Software In Education) involves a team of librarians, learning technologists and archivists. The project first conducted an extensive literature review, which is available online. (Secker, 2007) The literature review provides an overview of key social software and explores the current implementation of these tools by libraries. It also considers the key issues in supporting distance learners' use of libraries and whether social software might provide solutions. The literature review was followed by several case studies to explore specific types of social software in practice. These included the use of social bookmarking for sharing resources, social software and online reading lists, blogging in the library community, the use of social networking sites and podcasting for information literacy support. LASSIE will be completed in December 2007 and a final report with results from the case studies and an updated literature review will be made available from the project website. One of the successes of the project has been to establish a project blog, which provides the project team with an opportunity to reflect on progress, but also to gather opinions from others in the field.

Libraries, Social Software and Distance Learners: blog it, tag it, share it!

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INTRODUCTION

LASSIE (Libraries and Social Software in Education) is funded by the Centre for

Distance Education, University of London and is a nine month project due to

complete in December 2007. The project is led by London School of Economics and

Political Science (LSE) and the Institute of Education. Other partners include London

School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the University of London Research

Library Services and the Open University Library. Colleagues at LSE represent the

Library, the Centre for Learning Technology and LSE Archives.

LASSIE was a small scale project launched in March 2007 to explore how 'social

software' (or web 2.0, see definitions below) might enhance the use of library services

by distance learners. The project addressed concerns in the University of London that

the External Programme students (who are distance learners based around the world)

don't make full use of the electronic library resources. The reasons for this were thought to be varied, including a low awareness about accessing library resources and information literacy issues. However LASSIE also provided an opportunity for a group of librarians to explore how social software is affecting libraries and their services, by gathering empirical evidence. This evidence would hopefully demonstrate which social software tools might enhance the experience of students, specifically distance learners, and those which were less valuable. In this respect the project would also provide valuable advice for the wider library community.

The LASSIE team also recognised that physical libraries have changed considerably over the last ten years, to reflect changes in the nature of education. The project was therefore keen to examine the role of libraries as a social space. The importance of collaboration, group work and communication in teaching and learning are widely recognised and libraries as key learning spaces, are being built to reflect this shift. LASSIE is therefore interested in how virtual libraries might become more social. This paper is largely based on the literature review completed in July 2007 however some indicative evidence from the case studies is also included.

THE PROJECT OVERVIEW

The research for LASSIE was initially gathered through a review of the literature focusing on three key areas:

- Libraries and social software: to provide definitions and explore key developments in this field
- Libraries and distance learners: to explore the current issues in supporting distance learners and consider how might social software address these?

- Libraries as a social space: to explore how are libraries developing as a physical and virtual social space

The draft literature review report is available on the LASSIE website (Secker, 2007). However, because of the fast pace of change in this field, it will be updated in late 2007. The work was produced at a time when many UK libraries were actively exploring social software, therefore, it was hoped that its value would extend beyond the project. The review enabled the project team to identify key initiatives to date, and informed the second phase of the project: the case studies. The case studies are being undertaken from July until November 2007, and some include small scale pilot use of selected technology with distance learning students. Social software such as blogs, social bookmarking tools, podcasts and online reading lists are being used to enhance a library service. Feedback about the potential value is being collected from librarians, students, course tutors and administrators,. The case studies are briefly reported in this paper, but work is still on-going. LASSIE will produce a final report in December 2007.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The process of undertaking a literature review at the outset of the LASSIE project was in itself a valuable research exercise, demonstrating the challenges faced when doing research in the web 2.0 world. These challenges have been highlighted by Gilster (in Martin & Madigan, 2007) who suggested that tools such as news readers (e.g. Google Reader) and internet search engines, could be used to supplement the references found in traditional bibliographic databases. In undertaking this literature review on social software, the project team did indeed develop new research skills and use new tools,

specifically social software tools, to facilitate the research. For example a news reader proved an invaluable way of keeping up to date with blog postings in the field.

The literature review highlighted the fact that many libraries in the UK are currently grappling with the concept of social software or web 2.0 and exploring what has been called 'Library 2.0' and what it might mean to their services. A lot of experimentation is being undertaken, much of it by enthusiasts, as a sideline to regular activities rather than officially funded research. A key finding from the literature was that developments in the United States appear to be around 18 months ahead of other countries, although Australasia is also active in the field. In the UK, there has been a lot of publicity about social software and librarians clearly feel they should be doing something to address this development, although many are uncertain what exactly it is, and what might be effective or useful. The LASSIE literature review provides some valuable definitions of social software, of Library 2.0 and an overview of the key technologies that libraries might consider using. Feedback to date has suggested that this section of the review was particularly useful for librarians wanting an overview of this topic. Many librarians were feeling slightly overwhelmed by social software and wanted to try to update their knowledge.

Definitions

LASSIE uses the term 'social software' rather than the more abstract, and controversial phrase 'web 2.0' although we recognised these terms mean broadly the same. Providing a clear and simple definition was challenging, however it is clear that the internet has changed recently. Adding content to the web has become easier, communication and collaboration have become increasingly important and more software is now hosted remotely and accessed via the internet, rather than being

installed on a desktop PC. Some overall characteristics of social software were identified as:

- The development of social networks;
- Content created by users rather than created by an organisation;
- The development of user profiles;
- The use of 'folksonomies' or tagging to attach keywords created by users, to items to aid retrieval.

Key technologies

The project felt that social software was best understood by considering some of the tools and technologies that fall into this definition. Many librarians have heard of blogs and wikis and believed this is what social software is all about. Yet by taking this narrow definition, many librarians are struggling to see how these tools might be used in their organisation. Ironically some of the most valuable social software tools, such as utilising RSS to provide information, and social bookmarking sites, are less well known. Our project also found librarians were less clear about how social networking sites could be used to support learning, although many are clearly dabbling out of curiosity. With this in mind one of the case studies, selected fairly late on in the project, is examining the use of Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) by librarians and the library related applications it offers.

The literature review provides an overview of the key technologies which included:

- RSS feeds / Syndication / Atom
- Blogs
- Wikis

- Social bookmarking and resource sharing

- Social networking sites: (MySpace, Facebook, Elgg, LinkedIn, Ning)

- Media Sharing

- Virtual Worlds

- Other social software

Further details about these tools are available in the literature review (Secker, 2007) and constraints on space mean these are not included in this paper. Nevertheless it is worth briefly mentioning a few specific tools in a bit more detail.

RSS, is not social software as such, but a way of communicating information in an XML format that news reader software (and increasingly web browsers) can understand. RSS has become an important way of using social software effectively and 'feeds' of one kind underpin many of the tools. For example, most blogs have RSS feeds, which you can subscribe to, to ensure content is pushed to you, rather than having to visit the blog. Bradley (2007) argues that RSS is fundamental to web 2.0 technologies, and while people don't need to understand it technically, RSS underpins most social software and hence is paramount.

Blogs meanwhile are probably the most popular type of social software and establishing a blog was one of the first activities the LASSIE team undertook. A case study to explore blogging in the library community was selected early on in the project, as so many library blogs now exist. Social bookmarking tools allow users to store their Internet bookmarks or Favourites remotely on a site so they can be accessed from any computer connected to the internet, rather than being stored within

a browser. Sites such as del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us) were particularly useful for storing and sharing any relevant websites for the purposes of the project. LASSIE set up an account which is available at: http://del.icio.us/lse_lassie/ Again a study of social bookmarking forms one of the case studies.

Social software in libraries and Library 2.0

"Library 2.0" was a phrase coined by Michael Casey in 2005. Casey sees Library 2.0 as being about "user-centred change" (Casey, 2006) and the term encapsulates the idea that we can enhance library provision using social software. Library 2.0 is a somewhat controversial term with Crawford (2006) finding 62 different views and seven distinct definitions. He argues that librarians should focus on the phenomena made possible by social software rather than the technology. The key phenomena made possible are user participation and the facilitation of conversations. Miller (2005), meanwhile argues that web 2.0 offers libraries opportunities to better meet the needs of their users and reach out beyond the walls of their institutions. Michael Habib (2006), who undertook his master's dissertation on Library 2.0 sees it as occupying the virtual space between academic (VLEs and course management systems) and social spaces (Facebook, MySpace etc.) This very much reflects his view of the physical library as being both a social and academic physical space.
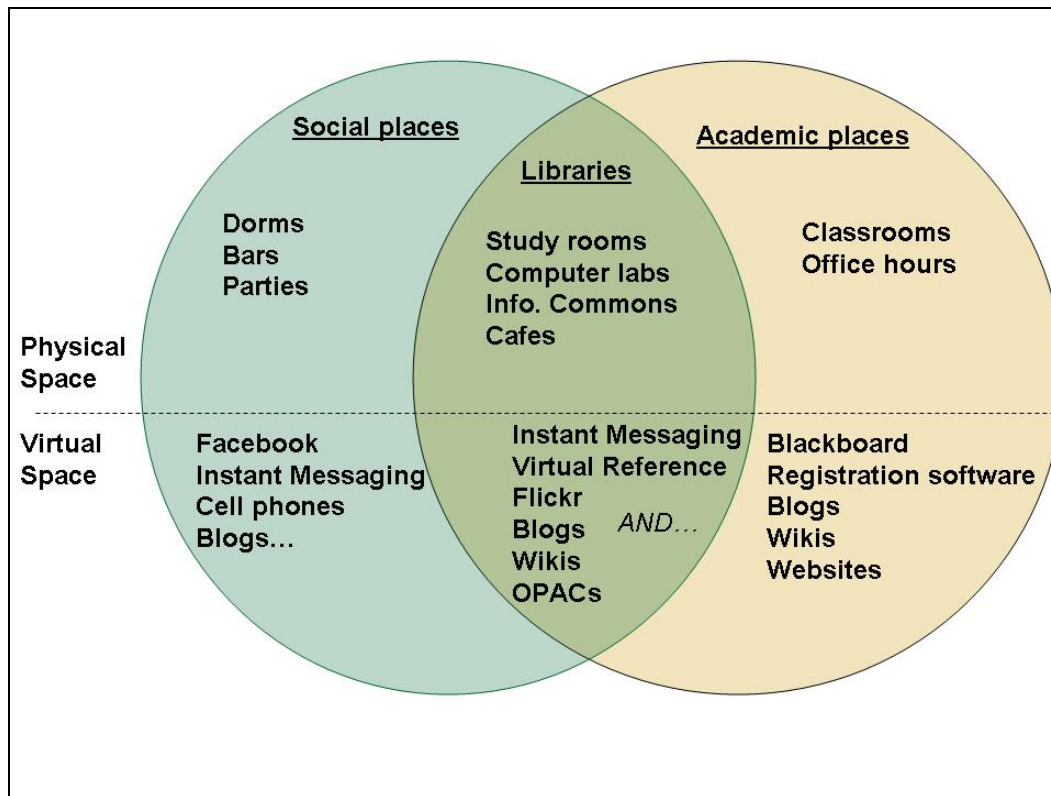
Figure 1: Library 2.0 by Michael Habib's (Licensed under Creative Commons):

http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=222296001&size=o

Social software in libraries

The project found many examples of libraries which are experimenting with social

software to enhance their services. Libraries in the United States have been exploring

social software for a few years now and lessons can be learnt from their early

experimentation. Librarians in other countries outside the US are also starting to

explore using social software, for example O'Connell (2007) who works in school

libraries in Australia. Ideas are becoming more formalised in the published literature

with a few useful monographs published recently, notably by Farkas (2007) who also

developed an online course called 'Five weeks to a Social Library'. Bradley (2007)

meanwhile provides a useful overview of web 2.0 technologies and how they can be

used by librarians both personally, and to enhance library services. Other notable books on the subject include: Casey & Savastinuk (2007) and Sauers (2006) which looks specifically at blogs and RSS.

The LASSIE project highlighted some examples of libraries using social software. Further details are presented in the literature review. (Secker, 2007) but a few key examples are listed below.

University of Pennsylvania Social Bookmarking Tool: http://tags.library.upenn.edu/
PennTags is a social bookmarking tool developed by librarians at the University of Pennsylvania for locating, organizing and sharing online resources. Users can collect and maintain URLs, links to journal articles and records in the library catalogue. They can develop bibliographies and reading lists which can be shared with the community. Users download a specialised toolbar or use a something called a 'bookmarklet' which allows content to be added to PennTags.

User generated content in the catalogue : University of Huddersfield
http://webcat.hud.ac.uk/
Increasing numbers of libraries are experimenting with allowing user content to be added to the library catalogue, including users book reviews or other comments. The University of Huddersfield have used social software to enhance their catalogue, adding functions such as user reviews, ratings and pulling content from Amazon into the catalogue. They have also added features such as making recommendations based on borrower records, providing users with a link saying 'people who borrowed this book also borrowed…'

User generated content in the catalogue : University of Bath

The University of Bath have recently undertaken a small scale project (Robinson and Jones, 2007) to add user generated content to their library catalogue. Rather than add this type of content to academic texts, a new collection of books was purchased for the project. Known as 'Around the World in 80+ books' it was based on suggestions from international students of books to provide a 'taster' of their home country. Comments are added to the catalogue on a wiki, rather than directly into the catalogue.

RSS feeds at MIT Libraries http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/barton/

MIT Libraries are using RSS feeds to highlight new books on the library catalogue. Select a feed according to subject interest and this can be added to any web page. This functionality could be particularly useful for adding feeds to subject web pages or directly into courses in the VLE. MIT Libraries also have a Library News feed and a feed for new theses added to their repository. They also maintain a useful link of RSS feeds for research which includes information about which publishers offer RSS feeds: http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/feeds.html

Librarian and Library Blogs

The project found that librarians are often keen bloggers and there are several personal blogs listed below which consider social software and libraries:

Information Wants to be Free: http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/index.php

The Shifted Librarian http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/

Phil Bradley's Web 2.0 blog http://philbradley.typepad.com/i_want_to/

Are you 2.0 Yet? http://briangray.alablog.org/blog

Library Crunch http://www.librarycrunch.com/

Libraries in the US are also using organisational blogs for posting library news and some examples include:

Madison-Jefferson County Public library: http://mjcpl.org/

Ohio University Library Business Blog

http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/businessblog/

Kansas State University library blogs http://ksulib.typepad.com/

University of Bath Library Subject Blogs

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

Library Success Wiki http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Main_Page

This wiki was developed by Meredith Farkas, who is the Distance Learning Librarian at Vermont. The wiki is a best practice tool, which was created to be a one-stop shop for ideas and information for all types of librarians.

Libraries and Social Networking

Talis the library management supplier have funded Cybrary, which is their headquarters in Second Life and anecdotal evidence suggests that several libraries are experimenting with offering services in Second Life. A valuable report on Second Life developments in the UK further and higher education sector was published in July 2007 (Kirriemuir, 2007).

Some libraries have also set up MySpace accounts, however social networking sites have had varying attitudes towards whether they officially allow this use . For example see Brooklyn College Library which has over 3000 'friends' and is using MySpace to publicise library activities:

http://www.myspace.com/brooklyncollegelibrary.

Groups for librarians are flourishing in several social networking sites. Facebook has several groups for librarians, such as the Library 2.0 Interest Group which also maintains a website: and the group 'Librarians and Facebook' which has over 1000 members). Facebook also has a number of library related applications that can be added to a personal profile to allow users to share reading lists, social bookmarks and other resources they are interested in. The social networking site Ning has a useful Library 2.0 group (see: http://library20.ning.com/).

Supporting the distance learner in the library

The second part of the literature review provided an overview of current issues for libraries supporting distance learners. One notable finding is the lack of targeted library services for distance learners in the UK, in contrast to library services in Canada, Australia and the United States. The Open University is the clear exception in the UK and is leading the way with developments to support its students. However, CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), the UK's professional body for librarians does not have a distance learning librarians group. Despite the growth in distance education in the UK, very few academic institutions have a Distance Learning Librarian post, whereas in the US and Canada this is fairly common.

A plausible explanation for this apparent lack of support seems to be the convergence of library support for distance learners with support for e-learning and off-campus users more generally. The number of distance learners in UK higher education has increased significantly recently. However, distance learners in UK higher education institutions have benefited from the provision of off-campus access to library resources. Similarly librarians in many UK institutions are increasingly making resources available from the virtual learning environment and not expecting their on-campus students to visit the library as frequently.

It is clear that in the US and Canada, where support for distance learners is most developed, information literacy and providing training and support for users is a key issue. The literature review provided a useful overview of the University of London's External Programme, which while long established, has historically provided little library support for students. Library provision still varies depending on the course, but increasingly services are being centralised through the University of London Research Library Services. The Library is however still grappling with ensuring distance learners know about the resources available and can get access to them at a more basic level. The literature review concluded that social software tools that improve access to library resources, focus on developing information literacy skills and allow students to interact with each other to motivate them in their studies, could all be of enormous benefit to improving learning.

Libraries as a social space

Section three of the literature review looked primarily at the literature considering changes to physical library buildings. This work suggests that libraries increasingly

serve an important role as a social space, reflecting the changing nature of teaching, where group work and social interaction is more important. The building of new learning spaces known as 'Information Commons' in the US, Canada and Australasia was an important development. However two related ideas about library space were also evident in the literature: "The Library As Place" and the library as the "third place". Librarians sometimes call the library a "third place," a reference to Oldenburg's book The Great Good Place. Oldenburg (1999), a sociologist lamented the disappearance of good public places, arguing that society desperately needs third places - that are neither home nor work. These spaces allow people from different parts of a community to come together and engage with one another. Many public libraries in the US and more recently in the UK, are recognising that they play an important role as a 'third place'. The funding to put in place the IT infrastructure in UK public libraries (The People's Network) means that all public libraries have internet access. Many are also extending their opening hours, providing drinking and eating facilities and trying to shake off their image of being simply places of books.

Libraries also form a social space by bringing together learners from different parts of an institution and LASSIE was partly inspired by an observation from one of our team at the enquiry desk. A student having problems with library passwords was waiting at the desk one day and encountered another student carrying a stack of books. Noticing the books were on a similar topic to her own interests, they struck up a conversation. They subsequently left the enquiry desk together realising, that while on different courses, they were interested in broadly the same topic. Social software book sharing tools such as LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com) allow these connections to be made far more easily. However whether students want to visit a virtual library for

social interactions is unclear. For example, evidence suggests that students want virtual social spaces to be purely social, rather than having input from faculty or library staff. Recent media reports in the UK suggested students were alarmed to find academic staff on Facebook. Some librarians also find adding personal details to a user profile that colleagues might read difficult. The case study on Facebook should provide further evidence in this area but the literature to date is unclear about whether libraries can and should provide a virtual social space.

THE CASE STUDIES

As mentioned previously, this project is undertaking a number of small case studies, which allow the team to experiment using different types of social software and gain feedback on their value to distance learners. Case studies were chosen to explore particular tools and the issues they present not just students, but librarians, tutors and administrators. Five case studies are currently being undertaken which include:

- the use social bookmarking for sharing resources

- social software and online reading lists

- blogging in the library community

- the use of social networking sites

- podcasting for information literacy support.

The LASSIE team have also used social software tools from the outset of the project to share resources and information. So for example a project blog was established in March 2007, and this is used by the principal researcher to keep the team and the wider community informed of developments. It is also a valuable way of documenting progress - the entries are dated, feedback is received from blog readers through

comments and writing the blog provides an opportunity for reflection. As mentioned previously, the team are also using social bookmarking to share resources which is a valuable way of collecting internet resources and allows team members to be alerted to relevant resources that others find. Social networking sites have provided useful contacts for LASSIE, specifically the site Ning which has a Library 2.0 group, but also Facebook and LinkedIn. Finally, a news reader to monitor blogs and news sources by subscribing to RSS feeds has been invaluable. Many of the new tools and publications have been picked up through subscriptions to blogs, rather than having to search the web. Google Alerts were also used with limited success to trawl the web for recent information on distance learning and Web 2.0.

Social software and reading lists

The first case study involving distance learning students considers how social software could be used to present reading lists to students, as an alternative to more traditional paper based or commercial online reading list systems. The researcher has some experience of using an online reading list management system, so a comparison can be made.

Reading lists were set up using four tools, including:

- the reference management tool called CiteULike (http://www.citeulike.org)

- H20 Playlist which was developed for managing reading lists
  (http://h2obeta.law.harvard.edu/)

- Library Thing which allows users to catalogue their books and share lists with
  other users (http://wwwlibrarything.com)

- Bibsonomy which is a social bookmarking and reference management tool
  (http://www.bibsonomy.org/).

The case study is comparing these four systems by adding the same reading list to each system and evaluating the process from the perspective of the list creator. CiteULike is intended as a personal reference manager, but lists can be shared with other users. The reading list was constructed by pulling references from Amazon onto the list. Managing journal references with CiteULike generally seemed easier than book references as it was sometimes problematic finding the correct edition of a book. In fact this problem seemed to be inherent in all four systems. Ideally a librarian might also prefer to pull book records from a library catalogue rather than from Amazon. One of the main drawbacks with CiteULike was the entire list could not be annotated (although individual items on the list could be). It also did not seem possible to put items on the list in a particular order. For an example see, the course reading list at : http://www.citeulike.org/user/seckerj/tag/60introinfsys

Meanwhile, H20 Playlists was developed by Harvard Law School for managing reading lists. Initial impressions suggested that this tool is less easy to use than CiteULike, in terms of adding books or articles. Items needed to be added manually, rather than being able to pull records from Amazon or other catalogues. This slows down the process of creating a reading list. However the software has features such as the ability to add annotations and notes for students. It is also possible to add headings to the list and re-order the list. In contrast adding books to LibraryThing was very easy and a search of Amazon or any library catalogue could be undertaken to retrieve bibliographic data. Books could be rated to indicate their importance, and then re-ordered according to this rating. However it did not appear possible to annotate the list and it is clear this system is not intended to manage reading lists. Early

exploration of Bibsomony reveals this is both a social bookmarking site and a reference manager. A tool to 'bookmark' internet resources or useful books and journals, which scrapes some of the bibliographic data from the page seemed useful. As this work is still ongoing at the time of writing, more details about this case study, including an evaluation of all four systems, will be available in the LASSIE final report.

Social bookmarking / resource sharing

The second case study is exploring social bookmarking as a way of creating a subject guide of internet resources for students. Experiments are currently underway to create a list of resources for distance learners on a distance learning course at LSE. The students are based around the world, visiting LSE briefly but then having remote access to library resources. In the past a traditional library guide has been made available from the virtual learning environment as a word document. An online list of resources has been created using the social bookmarking site del.icio.us (http://del.icio.us) and students will be given access to this. Feedback will be gathered from students where possible, however one of the main challenges to date has been adding library resources to this type of list. Many library systems, such as LSE's Electronic Library, do not allow deep linking to resources, therefore the key databases could not be added to del.icio.us. Access to library databases is often set up so that students enter the site from the link in the Electronic Library, therefore the number of resources that could be added to the list was limited.

Podcasting and information literacy

The literature review suggested that information literacy and students' familiarity with library resources and how to use them effectively and ethically, is one of the key

challenges for those supporting distance learners. In the US, many libraries have developed online information literacy tutorials to address these problems. Social software through technologies such as podcasting, offers a new way of developing training materials. LSE Library teach classes to full-time students on a range of topics, however an experiment to create an online 'screencast' which included the powerpoint and audio, was developed as part of the LASSIE project. This has been made available to students from the library website. Feedback from students is currently being gathered through an online survey, to establish how this type of tutorial might compliment or, in the case of a distance learner, replace a face to face training session.

The citing and referencing podcast has attracted considerable interest from other libraries and is available at: http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/insktr/citing_referencing.htm
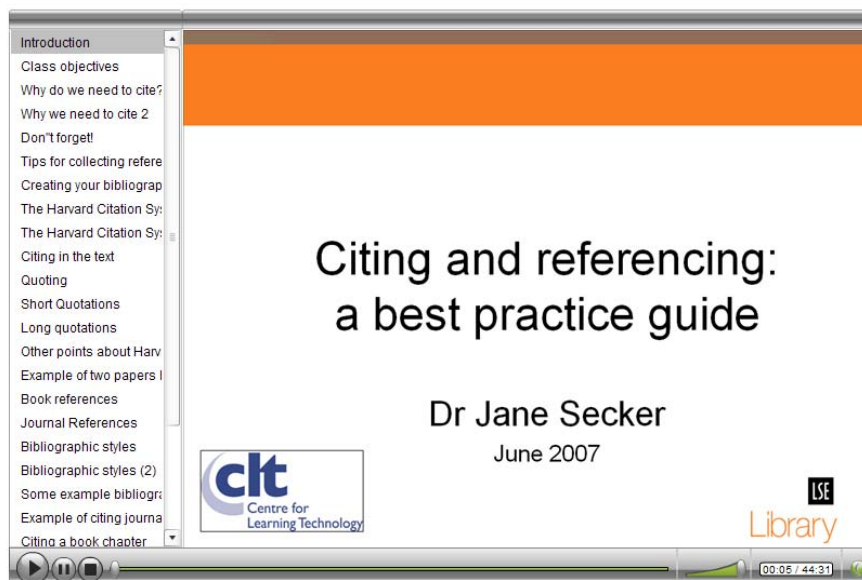

Figure 2: The citing and referencing podcast produced at LSE

OTHER CASE STUDIES

Two further case studies will be written up as part of the project, including a case study on blogs and blogging. This case study will document the use of a blog by LSE Archives, which was set up for a new exhibition. It will consider the advantages of blogging and the associated challenges and issues. It will also draw on the experiences of LASSIE in maintaining a blog, which was set up in March 2007. The blog is available at: http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/

Good practice guidelines and recommendations about when to use blogging in the library community will be produced.

The final case study examines social networking, specifically Facebook and libraries. It will draw on the experiences of the project team using Facebook for professional networking and observations on how students use library related groups and applications. Again good practice guidelines will be produced on the use of Facebook within libraries. These five case studies alongside the literature review should provide valuable evidence for libraries considering social software initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The LASSIE project is not yet complete but the evidence to date is compelling; that social software has the potential to change the provision of library services. It also has the potential to draw in users, provide new ways of communicating with them and enhance our services. Our research suggests that libraries should continue to experiment with social software, even in a small way such as incorporating blogs or RSS feeds into their websites where appropriate. Some social software such as podcasting and resource sharing can also be used in information literacy initiatives.

The project final report will be available in December 2007, and it will include further evidence gathered from the case studies. We hope to make specific recommendations about the types of social software that are usefully employed by libraries; including those which provide valuable support for distance learners, and those that help all learners. One thing that is clear is that libraries and their services have always changed and evolved in response to technological developments. Social software may be regarded by some as a passing fad, but the tools are proving enormously popular and potentially change the way people communicate with each other and interact with information.

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