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# LASSIE (Libraries and Social Software in Education): project overview and key findings



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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The LASSIE (Libraries and Social Software in Education) project was led by the Centre for Learning Technology at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the University of London Institute of Education. This nine-month project (funded by University of London Centre for Distance Education Teaching and Research Awards) ran from March 2007 to December 2007 and explored how social software might enhance the distance learner's experience of libraries. The project was extremely timely and gained a lot of publicity in the library community. Members of the steering group were invited to speak at numerous conferences and events and their experiences have gone on to inform developments in the partner institutions. This short paper provides an overview of the project and the key findings.

The project's steering group was chaired by Gwyneth Price from the Institute of Education and included staff at from the University of London Research Library Services, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Open University and colleagues from the Library and Archives at LSE.

LASSIE publications and reports were completed in February 2008 and made available on the project website (<http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE.php>) and via the project blog (<http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/>). The

case-study reports attracted wide interest from the library community because they explore practical applications of social software. The extensive literature review was published as a draft in July 2007 and updated in January 2008. Feedback has suggested that its value goes beyond the project team and it is scheduled for publication in the journal *Program* later in 2008.

## THE LITERATURE REVIEW

At the outset of the project it was agreed to undertake a detailed literature review to gain a snapshot of social software initiatives in the library community, to review current issues in distance learning librarianship and to examine the literature on libraries as social spaces. Our research found that the phenomenon known sometimes as 'Web 2.0' has received a lot of publicity in the mainstream media recently. In addition the library world is full of people exploring how social software might be used to enhance their services. However, at the outset of the project the team felt it was important to provide some definitions for the library community. Terms such as 'Web 2.0' and 'Library 2.0' are being used with increased frequency and definitions were considered helpful. For this reason the literature review also examined different types of social software (such as blogs, wikis, RSS feeds and social bookmarking tools) and provided definitions and examples of how libraries are using these tools and services. The draft literature review (Secker, 2007) and the updated literature review (Secker, 2008) are both available on the project website.

To briefly summarise some of the work in the literature review, LASSIE found that librarians have become keen bloggers and in the USA (and to a lesser extent in the UK) libraries are using blogs for news information and to reach out to their users; see for example Kansas State University library blogs (<http://ksulib.typepad.com/>). An example of a UK university using blogs is the University of Worcester, where they launched ILS Matters (<http://www2.worc.ac.uk/wordpress/>) to raise the profile of their library services to students. Worcester is also using blogs to reach out to the academic staff and for internal communication purposes amongst library staff. We felt that blogging was of particular interest and decided to focus one of the case studies on the role of blogging in libraries. This was partly based on our own experiences of running a blog for the duration of the project. The LASSIE project blog (<http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/>) proved to be a valuable way of document-

ing the progress of the project, of reflecting on what the team were doing and also of publicising the project. The blog developed a solid readership throughout the project and it continues to be maintained.

Another important technology that was explored as part of the LASSIE project was RSS feeds (sometimes called Really Simple Syndication). RSS underpins many Web 2.0 technologies and is a dialect of XML (Extensible Markup Language). Put simply, it is a machine-readable language, much like HTML, designed to provide a framework in which information can be contained. News information is particularly useful when provided in RSS format because, rather than having to visit a website to see what's new, a reader can be continuously kept updated by subscribing to a feed. Libraries in the USA, in particular, are encouraging their users to subscribe to a variety of RSS feeds to keep up to date with library news, the latest acquisitions to the library catalogue and new electronic resources. For example, MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) Libraries maintain a list of RSS feeds (<http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/feeds.html>) that is available from their site. Meanwhile, closer to home, London School of Economics and Political Science has developed a training portal (<http://www.training.lse.ac.uk/>) that uses RSS technology to pull together training events from around the institution. The RSS feed has also been incorporated into the VLE, Moodle and the institutional portal to provide a list of upcoming training events for staff and students. The Open University is another example of a library using RSS feeds to keep people up to date with library developments (<http://library.open.ac.uk/services/lib20servs/rssfeed/index.cfm>).

The inclusion of 'user generated content' (such as ratings, book reviews and user comments) into the catalogue has been implemented in several libraries. For some this is seen as challenging or revolutionary since many librarians view the library catalogue as an authoritative source that should be maintained. For some examples of libraries including user generated content in the catalogue, see Hennepin County Library (<http://catalog.hclib.org/>) and the University of Huddersfield (<http://webcat.hud.ac.uk/>), which are now allowing students to rate books. Huddersfield also uses features similar to those employed by Amazon, which suggests titles to borrowers based on the user data. So, for example, the catalogue now includes the feature 'users who borrowed this book, also borrowed ...'. Arguably, this initiative gives the user a better experience when

using the catalogue, making it more similar to the online shopping experience they are invariably more familiar with.

The LASSIE literature review (Secker, 2008) provides details of many other social software initiatives in libraries, such as the use of media-sharing sites and social bookmarking tools. The review also includes shorter sections on current issues in distance learning librarianship and the role of the library as a social space. The overall sense was that finding and accessing resources still forms one of the greatest challenges for distance learning students and that information literacy initiatives are essential to support students who are studying remotely. In terms of the library as a social space, it was clear that physical libraries are very much becoming social learning spaces. However, the case study on Facebook in particular suggested that students still have some reservations about mixing their social and learning spaces in the online environment.

#### **THE CASE STUDIES**

The LASSIE team undertook five case studies to explore how particular tools might enhance the learning experience of real distance learning students. These are available from the project website: <http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE.php>.

Case study one explored whether traditional reading lists can be improved using social software. The project team explored the use of four online reading-list or book-list systems including: CiteULike (<http://www.citeulike.org/>), H20 Playlists (<http://h20beta.law.harvard.edu/home.do>), LibraryThing (<http://www.librarything.com>) and Bibsonomy (<http://www.bibsonomy.org/>) to present reading-list information to students on a University of London distance learning course. CiteULike and H20 Playlists were clear preferences following feedback from students; however, social software reading lists don't currently integrate with library catalogues, making them useful for presenting information to students but less useful for librarians.

Meanwhile case study two explored the social bookmarking tool del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us/>) to collect useful resources for the project, but also as a way of directing students to web-based resources. Several institutions in the USA and Australia have developed web-based subject guides using del.icio.us. The research concluded that this tool is extremely flexible and can be easily incorporated into institutional or personal

websites. Stanford University has an excellent example of how this can be used by library subject specialists to direct students to relevant resources (see (<https://www.stanford.edu/group/ic/cgi-bin/drupal/delicious>). Members of the project team also used this tool with different groups of students and collected some feedback that suggested it was valuable both as a tool for librarians and also for students.

Case study three focused on information-literacy support for distance learners and produced a citing and referencing screencast. Using the Camtasia software, a training session with audio and screen capture was prepared. A menu system allows students to pick and choose how they access the material. They can view the presentation from start to finish, but are free to jump about using the menu. Feedback was gathered from students on the role of online training, or 'podcasts', in delivering training and in general students concluded they would like more online support but they would also like to be able to attend face-to-face classes for the interaction they provide. The resource is available on the library website at LSE: [http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/inskr/citing\\_referencing.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/inskr/citing_referencing.htm).

The fourth case study explored libraries and blogging and is briefly mentioned in the section above. It provides good-practice guidance for librarian bloggers and discusses the set-up, maintenance and role of several different blogs. The final case study looked at the role of the social networking site Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/>) as a tool for librarians and for library services. This case study was largely literature-based, although it also drew on the experiences of project team members who had joined Facebook. It includes some good-practice guidance for librarians using Facebook, as well as highlighting library-related applications in Facebook. It concluded that social networking tools are clearly hugely popular with the Google generation and many libraries are keen to explore how they might be used to promote their services.

## CONCLUSION

LASSIE's adventures ceased in January 2007 and a final report was submitted to the Centre for Distance Education. The project provided the team with a wealth of valuable experience and knowledge about social software. In addition, the real-life examples of using social software with students and the feedback that we have gathered provides timely evidence for the library

community, as many are considering whether or how to use social software. The project steering group met for a final review of LASSIE in February 2008 and the members hope that what they have learnt can continue to be disseminated through presentations and ideally through some hands-on training events for librarians. The team were clear that distance learners studying at the University of London do need additional support to access and use library resources. Using the virtual learning environment, Moodle and social software initiatives, several members of the team hope to develop appropriate information-literacy resources for students by building on LASSIE's experiences. The project blog will be maintained for the foreseeable future and the team are considering other possible funding opportunities.

## REFERENCES

- Secker, Jane (2007), *Libraries, 'Social software and distance learners: draft literature review'*, July 2007, available at [http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE\\_lit\\_review\\_draft.pdf](http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE_lit_review_draft.pdf)
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