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# *The use of social networking tools for innovative service delivery at the University of Pretoria Library*

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## *Abstract*

*Social networking tools are impacting on the scholarly and research activities of staff and students in the academic environment. The university library has an important part to play in supporting these endeavours and a Web 2.0/Library 2.0 strategy has been in place in the University of Pretoria Library for a number of years. This article discusses the first phase of a collaborative project between the University Library and the Department of Information Science which was initiated with the aim of monitoring the introduction and use of social networking products and services by the reference librarians. Valuable information was obtained on the range of products implemented as well as problems accompanying this; which led to renewed strategies for addressing the shortcomings. The article concludes with recommendations for future implementation of relevant products and services.*

## *Introduction*

Web 2.0, with its focus on the use of tools and technologies that aim to facilitate online collaboration and information sharing, has impacted on the scholarly practices of faculty and students in the university environment in many ways. The concept of social scholarship, that is, the practice of scholarship in which social tools are used for dynamic collaboration and sharing of ideas has, for example, become an integral part of academic research and publishing processes. Social scholarship is evident, *inter alia*, when researchers make their work

available as open access, contribute to conversations about their research by discussing findings on blogs and invite comments, use social bookmarking sites to serve as vehicles for 'soft peer review' (Cohen 2007), and write articles on restricted Wikis that can be reviewed and discussed by a selective audience. Students, well-versed in the social applications of Web 2.0, are also very much aware of this expanding world of scholarly communication where they may co-create learning environments and where teaching as an activity can be undertaken in collaboration between teachers and students as partners in learning (Trigwell and Shale 2004).

The ways in which people communicate, acquire, and share knowledge will inevitably have an impact on the academic library. Its functions, services and staff and therefore its future, can never be considered apart from academe as a whole, and will be influenced by the transformation of scholarship and research at the university (Miller 2006; *No brief candle...* 2008). The university library has traditionally been regarded as the 'heart' of the learning community, providing a place and resources for students and faculty to do their research and advance their knowledge (Simmonds and Syed Saad 2001). In order to stay relevant and meet the needs of their clients, academic libraries therefore need to actively address the many challenges for the design and delivery of innovative resources and services in the socially networked world (ACRL 2008; Breeding 2007; Cohen 2007). Adapting services to fit with the social networking environment where personal interaction occurs between people with common interests, would to a great extent be merely logical extensions of what librarians have been doing all along, as libraries have always been about services and personal relationships with their clients (ACRL 2008; Abram 2008b).

The University of Pretoria Library Services formulated an e-information strategy in 2006 with the aim of making optimum use of the new Web 2.0 technologies to support its basic client-centred approach to service delivery (Pienaar and Smith 2008). Various general products and services such as RSS feeds from the catalogue, book covers sourced from Amazon.com and integrated with the catalogue, and e-mail notification via FeedBlitz when the library page is updated, have been in place for a considerable time. However, it soon became evident that the prevailing social networking tools were not being widely used by the reference (that is, subject) librarians.

Reference work stands at the front line of library services. Meaningful reference work and research support is a team activity between the librarian and the academic/researcher (Abram 2008a) and, within the latest research context, it is

therefore imperative that subject reference workers adapt to the reality of dealing with their socially networked clients. Moving towards reference in the social environment is a development that has been shown to be not only practically viable, but also to benefit the researcher. Using social networking tools for making the reference act a 'participatory' and sharing one means that the client can be served by multiple sources and a variety of authoritative, scholarly perspectives resulting in an enriching wealth of information and experience (Lankes 2008; Miller 2006).

The failure of the reference staff at the University of Pretoria Library to use the Web 2.0/Library 2.0 tools, as was mentioned above, caused concern as the quality of service that the library aims at providing for students and staff depends to a large extent on the quality of services delivered by its reference librarians. Library management consequently decided to embark on a programme to actively encourage the implementation of Web 2.0/Library 2.0 tools in the library, and also to ensure the sustainability of the initiatives. This article discusses the first phase of a collaborative project between the Library and the Department of Information Science which started in 2008 with the aim of monitoring the introduction and the use of these social networking services by the library reference staff, and the use of the tools by their clients.

#### *Background to the monitoring project*

The project was planned as a longitudinal study to be conducted in various stages over a period of two years. A major advantage of a longitudinal approach is the fact that it allows for changes and innovation over time – a flexibility that extends to both sampling and methods (Struwig and Stead 2001), and which was regarded as ideal for this particular project. Phase one (covered in this article) consisted of a qualitative study in the form of interviews with library staff and academics, as well as informally keeping track of further Library 2.0 product implementation during the year. Phase two (in the process of being implemented at the time of writing) will comprise a quantitative survey by means of online questionnaires to all reference staff in the Library as well as their identified academic clients. Further phases/specific focused endeavours will be developed as the project and research situation demands.

Before any monitoring could take place, it was necessary to firstly ensure that all relevant staff had the required knowledge of the products that were to be implemented. A transition to the Library 2.0 environment can only be accomplished successfully if the skills of staff evolve in response to the changing

needs of the clients they serve (Abram 2008a). Practical training workshops for the reference librarians in the use of various social networking tools such as FaceBook, Flickr, YouTube and Blogger were therefore held in February and March 2008. The training sessions were voluntary and were based on the assumption that some of the products and tools would be introduced by those who attended the workshops.

The monitoring project itself started four months after the training sessions to provide enough time for staff to experiment and get acquainted with the use and practical implementation of these tools.

#### *Interviews with library staff*

The first step in the monitoring exercise was to find out what the opinions were of the reference staff with regard to the above-mentioned training sessions and the subsequent implementation (or not) of the social networking tools as was expected from them. Even though people may feel positive about the introduction of new tools and approaches to services, demands on time and the need to acquire new skills and knowledge will impact on their attitudes (ACRL 2008). Qualitative semi-structured face-to-face interviews, acknowledged as an extremely versatile and powerful way in which the 'hows' and 'whats' of people and their lives can be studied (Berg 1998; Fontana and Frey 2005), were conducted as a follow-up with all the staff who attended the training sessions to ascertain which, if any, of the tools were implemented.

The initial part of the interview schedule with reference staff consisted of a set of questions regarding their clients, which included questions on the information seeking and searching behaviour of their users, whether they had any idea of who and how many of their users were using Web 2.0 tools, and also whether they had undertaken any formal information needs studies/analyses of their users. This was followed by questions concerning the interviewees' personal feelings and opinions on the workshops and the tools demonstrated at the workshops: for example, whether workshops changed their way of thinking, were meaningful and so forth. Interviewees were also asked whether they had implemented any of the tools after the training sessions and the reasons for/for not doing so. Interviewees' opinions on social networking tools in general were solicited as well as on the specific individual tools covered in the training workshops.

#### *Interviews with academics*

A survey of the attitudes and opinions of academics, preferably clients of the library staff interviewed above, regarding social networking tools and services, was planned as a second step in the monitoring process. Whenever a new service is introduced in the library, clients needs and interests have to be taken into account as their perceptions about the newly introduced services will have positive or negative influences on their motivation to make use of the products and their willingness to do further business with the service provider (Horovitz 2000).

None of the librarians interviewed were at this stage able to identify specific clients for use in a survey of academic staff. The researcher conducting the monitoring project is a lecturer at the Department of Information Science, and the School of Information Technology (SIT), which comprises the Departments of Information Science, Informatics, and Computer Science, was thus identified as a practical (alternative) population pool from which participants could be selected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a random sample of academic staff during November and December 2008. Questions were asked on their general use of social networking as a tool for research, their use of the products for teaching, and their views on the role of the reference staff as partners and support in these endeavours.

#### *Outcomes of interviews*

The data obtained from the above was documented in the form of written accounts of the interviews. Although the interview sessions comprised some pre-determined questions, the flexibility of the interview structure allowed for additional issues to be presented. Open-ended questions were also introduced where necessary. These responses were grouped together into themes/categories using formal coding principles.

The results of the interviews with the library staff showed that overall reactions to the training workshops were positive. A large number of individuals created personal profiles on FaceBook, but were not necessarily active participants as the majority felt that it was more of a social tool than an academic one. Both Flickr and YouTube were seen by the respondents as good marketing or general information and training tools. Respondents were very positive when it came to blogging which was seen as a valuable tool especially for communication with post-graduate and long-distance clients. Respondents also reported on the introduction of tools such as Wikis that were not covered in the training sessions.

Results of the interviews with academic staff indicated that the majority of the persons who were interviewed are active in social networking in some way or another through, for example, profiles on FaceBook and LinkedIn, personal blogs and Wikis. On the whole they were positive with regard to the theoretical advantages of social networking for potential academic and scholarly exposure on national and international level, the possibility of acknowledgement by fellow-researchers, and common ground for scholarly discussions in their respective disciplines through publishing on restricted Wikis, subject-specific blogs, and so forth. There was, however, a definite hesitancy when it came to actually using the tools personally as the open sharing environment created a feeling of vulnerability and they were also uncertain whether their work is of sufficiently high standard to “compete” on this level. The majority of the interviewees had also already introduced the application of social tools into the curriculum.

Of interest for this specific project was the fact that the lecturers were generally unsure whether and how library reference staff could assist them in their personal research endeavours by means of social networking tools and activities. This had to be brought to the attention of library staff and needed to be attended to in the future.

#### *Implementation of products and services*

As an extension of this first phase of the monitoring project, library staff and their activities were informally observed with the aim of keeping track of any further Web 2.0/Library 2.0 product implementation. By September/October 2008 they were actively involved in a variety of social networking practices:

- Apart from the abovementioned personal FaceBook profiles, three members of staff created a Facebook Business page in July which can be used by other library staff members as well as students and teaching staff at the university. They envisage adding the library catalogue as soon as that application becomes available;
- The library’s “Book of the Month” blog undertaken by the Special Collections Section has been exceptionally well received by clients;
- Various staff members at the Veterinary Library have active Wikis;
- A dedicated Library 2.0 Wiki was created as an initiative of the e-Service Steering Committee of the Library;
- Various videos of Library activities were placed on YouTube thus serving as a vehicle for marketing and creating awareness;

- Gaming has been developed as a tool for information literacy training at the Main Campus Library as well as at the Medical Library;
- Skype has been introduced as a basic facility on all library computers – students and help-desk staff are expected to actively use this facility; and
- In the second half of 2008 a strategy map for a social software strategy for the library was developed. The objective of the strategy map is to facilitate the operational implementation of the Library 2.0 strategy by library staff members.

In spite of the optimism that the above-mentioned initiatives generated, it was clear that they did not reflect enough services dedicated specifically to subject reference work. Most of what was being implemented was done by technical staff and management, and further action thus became necessary.

One way in which this problem was addressed was by holding a number of Library 2.0 road shows for Library staff during November 2008. The aim of the road shows was to reach a larger number of Library staff, including those who may not have been interested in attending the initial training sessions, and to demonstrate best practice for the use and implementation of Web 2.0/Library 2.0 tools. Most of the applications listed above were shown at the road shows together with a new Library webpage incorporating a variety of Library 2.0 products and services (which was then in the process of being developed and has in the meantime become active). Additional demonstrations more in the realm of reference work, namely an education blog run by the head of the Education Library, and the University of Pretoria Wiki of virtual buildings done by the Department of Architecture under the auspices of their subject reference librarian, were two areas that were felt to be of much value. It was foreseen that the demonstrations would not only show that social tools can easily and successfully be applied for a variety of purposes, but also encourage reference staff to actively implement these tools for their specific clients with their individual scholarly requirements.

#### *Further observations and recommendations*

Social networking is about how we think about the library and its role as a (scholarly) partner in exploring new pathways to knowledge and acting upon this (Anderson, as quoted in Gelfand 2007; Ogburn 2008). A critical factor for successfully implementing social networking tools and services in support of scholarship at the university is collaboration with all stakeholders in the

academic scholarly environment. Clients have to recognise the importance of and the factors that contribute to the function of scholarly communication and research (Ogburn 2008), and they must be made aware of the important supporting role that the library reference staff can play in their research and teaching activities in the social networking environment. Furthermore, for library staff to form meaningful and successful relationships with academic partners, it is imperative to make sure that the tool used is the right one for the job (Mallery 2008).

Although a number of the librarians outlined ideas for future implementation of various social networking products such as the development of blogs, the creation of folksonomies by users, for example, for new books, and the definite future use of Wikis during the interviews, none of them had conducted formal user needs surveys and there was also no information on whether or which of their clients were personally using any of these tools and products. To help clients become part of online research communities and thus provide better access to information, the needs and goals of academics have to be known. It is thus strongly recommended that the advantages and drawbacks of the various types of social networking tools are investigated by the reference librarians in collaboration with their academic clients, and then implemented taking into account the scholarly needs and culture of these clients.

Reference staff have the benefit of a well-established Web 2.0/Library 2.0 strategy in the Library, as well as examples of many general social networking products and services already in use. Using these as building blocks they need to develop their own innovative and specialised services. The following are a number of suggestions for areas that can be expanded on and which could lead to successful future endeavours in the subject reference arena:

- **Social networking.** A large number of reference staff have created personal profiles on FaceBook. Those who have not yet done this should do so. Many students and possibly even some of the academic staff may be unaware that there is a subject specialist in their discipline. Initiate contact with clients and experiment with developing a ‘public self’ (*Horizon Report* 2007). The same principles apply for the use of LinkedIn as a more ‘professional’ social space in which communication with academic clients could take place.
- **Blogging.** Various ‘experimentations’ with blogs have been undertaken in libraries elsewhere and studies show that respondents take greater ownership when answering questions within their own blog (Lankes 2008). Reference librarians could develop subject-specific blogs and play



a leading role in advocating the use of blogs for scholarly discussions and commenting on research findings.

- Wikis are regarded as one of the important future scholarly communication tools (Cohen 2007). Reference librarians can approach their knowledge base in a Wikipedia-like manner where the reference questions, for example, serve as a starting point for a collaboratively developed knowledge base (Lankes 2008).
- Second Life has begun offering virtual classrooms for major colleges and universities. It is also increasingly being explored as a library education space. Passing on information literacy is a key focus of reference work (Abram 2008a). Examples have already been set for general information literacy education in the University of Pretoria Library using Second Life - subject specialists could use these programmes or become involved on a subject specific basis. Their personal experiences with this tool can also serve as encouragement and support for academic clients who may want to implement the tool in their teaching.
- Podcasts on how to download previous exam papers have been set up by the library circulation desk. Podcasting has also been used in a current awareness service for the biological sciences in the library (albeit in a limited manner). Reference librarians can learn from their colleagues and experiment with these alternative ways of service provision.
- Connotea, a free online reference management tool where researchers can save and organise links to their references and can share references with their colleagues, is already advocated on the University of Pretoria's Library 2.0 Wiki. Reference workers should take note and familiarise themselves with the tool in order to recommend it to researchers.
- Reference librarians must keep up-to-date with the variety of products developed by Google. Although the Library webpage has a direct link to Google Scholar, the many other available products that scholars and academics are increasingly using should, where possible, be exploited by the subject reference specialists to their own advantage.
- Mobile technologies. The university library has its own version of offline web links accessed through mobile phones, named *Shotcode*. Many academic libraries are designing services around mobile technologies and mobile users (Lippincott 2008) and the reference librarians should investigate the wide range of possibilities for research and other scholarly support that this offers.

## *Conclusion*

Social networking tools offer a wealth of opportunities for the design and delivery of a variety of new resources and services in the academic library. The first phase of the monitoring project reported on in this article can be seen as only the beginning of further developments in this area. The second phase of the project will focus on even more in-depth research on whether and how reference workers make increasing use of social networking to provide value-added services, and also the effect that this has on their clients. The project, whilst serving as a valuable instrument for observing and keeping track of the development of social networking services by reference librarians, has also highlighted some problems associated with the practical implementation of these products. Regular feedback given by the researcher has resulted in library management seeking ways to bridge these gaps which in turn produced an increased application of social networking tools by subject reference librarians.

The University of Pretoria Library has initiated a wide range of Web 2.0/Library 2.0 products that have been shown to be on par with academic libraries worldwide. In addition, the Library has formed strategic alliances with other departments at the university that promote the development of Web 2.0 on campus. Reference workers in the library have to follow these examples. The outcomes of the project discussed in this article show that by advocating and using social networking tools, reference librarians can be successful in meeting the challenge of providing innovative and ongoing quality service in support of research and teaching at the university.

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