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Tweets, Texts & Trees

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Tweets, Texts & Trees.

Within Computing and Library Services at the University of Huddersfield we've been enthusiastic adopters and experimenters with web 2.0, social learning technologies and mobile learning opportunities over recent years. These have often found their way into our teaching, directly into our face to face inductions and information skills sessions and more generally into our online information literacy materials.

Let's start with the basics...

We spend a great deal of time carrying out face to face inductions for our new students and we try and see as many as possible for inductions, but could never hope to see everyone. We also accept they may well forget a large part of the information we give them, however much we try to make it interesting. So, in 2008, we produced a separate mini-site within our web pages called "The Basics", incorporating much of the basic information we impart in inductions, but including many more web 2.0 ideas than appeared our standard web pages at that time. These web pages pulled a lot of our early ideas about using web 2.0 for our online teaching materials into one place.




The pages had one simple idea that underpins a lot of the design – we wanted to move away from static, text heavy pages to ones that looked fresh and encouraged exploration and interaction with the content. Though we had a core of basic content as text, this was enriched with podcasts, videos and interactive tutorials. Each page included the ability to leave a star rating, or comments, embedded in it.

Making "The Basics" look as though the content was regularly changed was difficult. We wanted to achieve this without us dedicating much time to actually changing the content. We knew that although time was available to spend on setting up the pages initially, realistically speaking it would be difficult to find this time to repeatedly update existing content. Instead of planning to change the main content, we used another web 2.0 tool to cheat! On each page we embedded a twitter feed, setting up a library Twitter account (@hudlib). This meant we could spend small amounts of time tweeting and re-use this content in many places. As long as we regularly tweet, the pages have new content and look as though they are constantly changing.

We've taken the lessons learnt from The Basics onto our main pages, with similar features now cropping up regularly on the "normal" Computing and Library Services the (CLS) web pages. We've embedded the ratings and comments feature onto many pages, allowing interaction to be embedded into these pages for the first time. The best web 2.0 feature, in my opinion, that we've moved from The Basics to our normal pages has been our short cut to make the pages look more dynamic. We've embedded our tweets into every CLS pages and our blog feeds into various subject

pages. We still update the pages occasionally rather than regularly, but by re-using content our users would never know that!

Education Subject Resources



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Top items in our repository

We thought we'd slow this down to once a quarter from now on, so here are the most downloaded items (deposited by school authors) from the repository



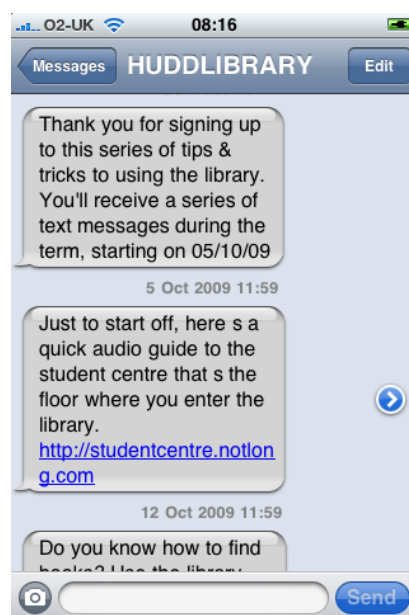
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Now we get mobile...

As more of our staff and students buy and use internet enabled handheld devices, such as smartphones, we've seen opportunities to move on from user involvement and user generated content online, to user involvement via mobile phone. We've brought mobile learning into our teaching practice, starting with some basic technology that practically all our users can take advantage of using their mobile phones – text messaging.

It seems strange that up until recently people could talk to us face to face, phone us on various numbers, fax us, email any number of addresses, post us a letter, or fill in a web form to ask questions. However, they couldn't send us a text message (SMS), even though many of our users seemed permanently attached to their mobile phones. We brought in a Text a Librarian service (text LIBRARY plus their question to 81025) to remedy this, which has expanded to various functions including a popular text NOISE service, where people can report inappropriate behaviour in the library and have a library warden come straight to that area.

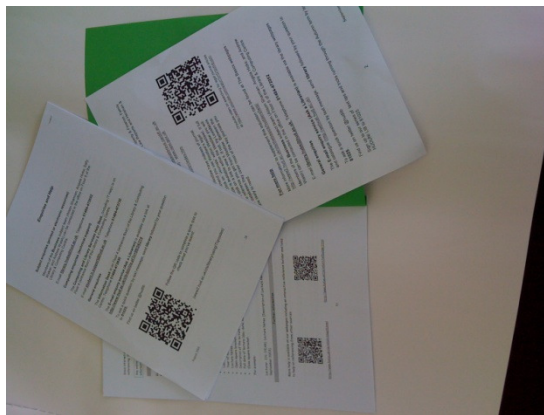


Once we introduced this basic service we've been able to use the same underlying text messaging portal to experiment with teaching via SMS. We asked first year students to sign up to a pilot project where we sent out a series of text messages in the Autumn term. These messages covered the same basic material we talk about in inductions. The big difference was, we could deliver the text messages closer to the point of need instead of in the first week when students were bombarded with more information than they could hope to assimilate. So, in the first week of term we provided information on borrowing books from the library. Our normal loan period is two weeks, so this was followed in week three by information on renewing, or extending the loan period, of these books. We didn't mention electronic resources until towards the end of the first term, when we expect them to need to start using these resources.

We've sometimes used interactive handsets (often called clickers) in our teaching, but finding them awkward to set up, especially if teaching outside our own library teaching rooms, so they perhaps haven't been used as often as we'd like. However, we've turned mobile phones into clickers using web 2.0 systems. After experimenting with various ways to do this, we've found Poll Everywhere (www.polleverywhere.com) to work well with smaller classes (it is currently free for groups up to thirty). We can ask questions to the class and have them respond using their own mobile phones (or computers) via Twitter, text message or the web. The results are displayed straight into PowerPoint, making it a really viable and free web 2.0 alternative to normal clickers.

Though we've taken advantage of some quite basic functionality of mobile phones, such as text messaging, we've also experimented with things that work best with higher end phones, with the expectation that the high end phones of today will turn into the low end phones of tomorrow and the same functionality become easily accessible to the majority of our users. This has included using QR (Quick Response) codes to deliver information skills materials and help to people at their point of need. QR codes can work with practically any camera phone, but work best on smartphones with a decent data connection through wifi or 3G.

QR codes are matrix codes that encode data in two dimensions rather than the one dimension used by standard barcodes. They use a freely available international standard, meaning there are many free applications available to download onto mobile phones, together with free services and applications to create the codes available online. Originally created for stock control by Denso Wave, a manufacturer of car parts, in this context they are read by an application on a mobile phone which is then prompted to carry out a specific action. They can be used to display text, to automatically phone a number or send a text message, or most flexibly, link to a mobile friendly web page.



For information literacy, we've used them around the library to connect to useful materials such as mobile friendly videos from the places students may need them. So, for instance, on our print credit machine we link to a video hosted on YouTube (which is sophisticated enough to deliver content in a

mobile friendly format to a mobile phone) showing how to use the machine. From our print law collection we link to material on how to search for legal information online. So library users can find the information where and when they need it rather than just hidden away on our main web pages.

We've also used free online web 2.0 services to create mobile friendly quizzes and link to quizzes, videos and further help from many printed helpsheets, turning them from flat pieces of paper into interactive, enriched content - creating "paper 2.0" through small, free to produce codes and peoples own mobile phones.

Gaming in the library...

We like to bring an element of fun and games into our information literacy teaching when we can, whether that is using crosswords, treasure hunts, or light hearted videos, but we haven't really brought games, along with the technology and social nature of web 2.0, into the core of the library. We're currently changing this, working with a creative outfit called Running in the Halls (www.rith.co.uk) to create a social, online game based around using the library resources. Called Lemon Tree, it brings ideas of gamification right into the centre of library activities.

There are many applications, often available as applications for smartphones, which turn everyday tasks into chances to win points, badges and other virtual rewards, and share them with your social networks. Location based networks typify this idea and have exploded in popularity recently, with networks such as Foursquare (<http://foursquare.com>) and Gowalla (<http://gowalla.com>) allowing you to "check in" to various locations, to share that activity with friends, become "Mayor" of a location or win badges for different types of activity. A more extreme version of this gamification of everyday activity is Epic Win (<http://www.rexbox.co.uk/epicwin/>), which allows you to create a "to do" list and play that list as though it is a game, gaining rewards for completing each task.

Lemon Tree takes these ideas of virtual rewards and inbuilt social networks and turns common interactions with the library into a game. Users are able to link Lemon Tree to their library record, winning points and badges by activities such as taking books out, leaving comments on books, and borrowing a range of items. They build their own social network within Lemon Tree, but the system also links to existing networks such as Twitter and Facebook.



Lemon Tree feeds back into our systems as well, so comments left on a book left by a student will appear on our library catalogue for everyone to see, regardless as to whether they choose to play and interact with Lemon Tree.

We're bringing our existing online information skills materials into this social game as well, offering Lemon Tree rewards for watching certain materials, or completing an online tutorial, adding a layer of fun on top of our "normal" material. We hope people will interact with the information skills materials because they want to and need the information. If, however, they choose to watch a video or complete a tutorial just to gain a badge their friend has, or beat them in the leader board, then as long as they are learning the skills we are happy!

The rewards users can gain through Lemon tree are developing as we see what works and what our users enjoy, with a massive range of options possible. We are particularly interested though in engaging those people who we know come into our library, but borrow very few books and rarely access our electronic resources. If we can make it fun for them to use the information resources we have and increase their usage then Lemon Tree will have succeeded for us.

Where we are now...

After early pilots, trials and experiments, web 2.0 is no longer seen as cutting edge in our library service. Instead it is incorporated in most of our activities, old and new. When introducing new services, such as new reading list software we are currently developing, we don't consider "should we" allow user generated content, we consider "how will we" enable that content.

Feeds from our twitter account and team blogs now feed into our standard web pages and comment boxes appear on many of the same pages. Instead of telling our users to turn their mobiles off, we say "switch them to silent", encourage them to text us with questions or to complain about noise, and use them in our information literacy teaching. We're encouraging people to contribute their own content, surely the essence of web 2.0, and get rewarded (virtually) for it through Lemon Tree. Whether it is tweets, texts or (lemon) trees, web 2.0 services and ideas are embedded in how we now operate. We just couldn't imagine going back...

Note:

For more information on some of our web 2.0 and mobile learning developments outlined above, see:

QR Codes - Walsh, Andrew (2010) [QR Codes – using mobile phones to deliver library instruction and help at the point of need](http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7759/). Journal of information literacy, 3 (1). pp. 55-65. Available at: <<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7759/>>

Inductions by text message - Walsh, Andrew (2010) [Supplementing inductions with text messages, an SMS "tips and tricks" service](http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7393/). ALISS Quarterly, 5 (3). pp. 23-25. Available at: <<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7393/>>