Experiments and Experiences in Liaison Activities: Lessons from New Librarians in Integrating Technology, Face-to-Face, and Follow-Up

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As is the case in many university libraries, Albertsons Library at Boise State University, has hired many new librarians to replace retiring librarians. These newer librarians, typically with less than 3 years’ academic library experience, are actively engaged in meeting the opportunities and challenges of subject liaison responsibilities using innovative Web-based tools. This article addresses liaison experiences with faculty-directed blogs, personalized faculty research pages, a wiki-based liaison manual, and the use of LibraryThing as a collection development tool. An overview of these efforts confirms that new technologies are only as good as the face-to-face communication and the follow-up that accompany their implementation. Much of the content in this article was presented at the 2007 and 2008 Acquisitions Institute conferences at Timberline Lodge at Mt. Hood, Oregon.

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INTRODUCTION

Being a new library liaison in an academic environment can be overwhelming. As new employees, librarians try to get their arms around new jobs and understand the library environment in which they find themselves.¹

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While contending with academia and university culture, including fulfilling service expectations, building a research and publication portfolio, deciphering promotion and tenure guidelines, and often developing teaching expertise, librarians also try to comprehend the academic department(s) to which they liaise. Balancing these obligations is a tall order for newer librarians.

Library subject liaisons play a critical role as they are both the advocate and the communication conduit between the library and its stakeholders. The American Library Association’s Reference and User Services (RUSA) Guideline 3.1 defines liaison work as “the process by which librarians involve the library’s clientele in the assessment and satisfaction of collection needs.” Further, libraries, both public and academic, should “involve their clientele in collection management as much as possible” (Guideline 6.3.1) in order to meet user needs and promote collections and services to stakeholders. It should come as no surprise to anyone working in a contemporary college or university library that today’s successful liaison requires an increasingly diverse, expansive skill set to fulfill RUSA’s guidelines. Gone are the days of liaison/bibliographers focusing only on library collection management that was limited to the backrooms of the library where collection development was in large part hidden from public view. Indeed, today’s liaisons interact directly, and often, with faculty and students.

In regards to reaching out to academic faculty, the liaison paradigm has morphed from the traditional one-way communication model of librarian to faculty member to a more dynamic, interactive, responsive, service-oriented design. Library liaisons are still required to provide traditional collection-oriented and library news outreach, but more importantly they are now expected to have different competencies and technical expertise. A good liaison is a jack-of-all-trades incorporating people skills, designing Web pages, aiding faculty research, writing department or course-specific resource guides, providing face-to-face consultation, and informing and facilitating faculty in learning about new and emerging information technologies, such as those associated with Library/Web 2.0.

Newer librarians tend to bring a customer service-oriented mindset and energy to their liaison duties. These “freshly minted” librarians are willing to try new ideas, challenge traditional assumptions (both in the library and in the university), and embrace technology to fulfill information and resource needs. Johnson underscores this reality: “A new class of librarians is emerging: forward-thinking men and women, attuned to the revolutionary trends affecting academic libraries, are leading the charge for change” (Johnson 2007, 10).

Albertsons Library at Boise State University makes an effort to support experimentation in the hope of discovering what methods of outreach connect best with each liaison’s faculty. This article will describe the experiences, roadblocks, successes, and failures of some newer librarians at Boise State
University to enhance their liaison work to faculty in their subject areas. It also focuses on the experimentation with, and implementation of, online tools in liaison outreach activities and collection development.

One of these tools included a spirited outreach effort to increase communication with faculty stakeholders through faculty-directed blogs. Another supported faculty research efforts by facilitating access to library resources through personalized research Web sites. Others involved library efforts to increase the liaison knowledge base through a wiki-based liaison manual and to help manage faculty purchase requests by using an online cataloging/social networking tool, LibraryThing. The lessons learned from these endeavors will be shared so that both library liaisons and library administrators may glean ideas as to how to best consider integrating cutting-edge Web applications and experimentation in liaison activities.

**BLOGS DIRECTED TO FACULTY**

To increase the exchange and interaction of library-related communication, one of Boise State’s library liaisons developed three faculty-specific blogs in the subject areas of communication, criminal justice, and sociology. Blogs are more dynamic than traditional Web sites and allow readers to make comments in an interactive way with the content. The blogs provided easy, multiple built-in access points where faculty could subscribe to blog content through RSS feeds or through E-mail alerts, whichever they preferred.

Philosophically, within the library, the faculty blogs were framed more as dynamic Web sites that contained RSS feeds, media plug-ins, changing content, feedback comments, etc., in contrast to the traditional mindset of a blog as a frequently updated online “Web log” of news items. The blogs were only intended to be updated once every two weeks, which differs slightly from typical blog practices that generate readership by weekly, daily, or up-to-the-minute content. These faculty blogs were designed to both promote resources and library information to faculty and allow feedback from faculty without overwhelming them with content. The blogs offered a place that faculty could visit at their convenience to catch up on library and collection-related information specific to their departments, as well as providing an online communications hub for faculty feedback.

One advantage of using a blog, as opposed to simply creating a Web site, is that it takes very little time to get something published live on the Web. In most cases, the inner workings of Web design do not need to be known to make a blog functional. Many blogs can be up and running in a matter of minutes, and blogs often allow Web tools from other Web sites to be imported directly into their Web spaces. Thus, blogs can be easily manipulated to allow added functionality such as using RSS feeds to
display journal table of contents, database search boxes, or video/picture imports. Using these features, the blogs were populated with entries on new books in the library, information on new library research tools, as well as news and events of specific interest to each faculty subject area. Third-party utilities were selected based on ease of use, added value to the blog, and the liaison’s personal preferences. Another online tool that was incorporated into the Boise State faculty blogs was the free Analytics application from Google (http://www.google.com/analytics/). This Web tool provided statistics that tracked the “comings and goings” on the blog.

After one year, a review of the blogs was undertaken to assess their effectiveness as an outreach tool to faculty. Using the Google Analytics tool, it was determined that faculty readership of the blogs was minimal to nonexistent. Because the blog’s intended audience was ten to twenty faculty members per department, and the blog was considered to be an internal tool not a public one, fairly low use was to be expected. However, results indicated that virtually no faculty members were visiting these blogs.

It is possible that promotion of the department blogs may have played a role in impacting faculty readership. Promotion was mainly limited to word-of-mouth with faculty departments, executed via direct links to the blog in E-mails with faculty, and achieved through fliers distributed in campus mail. That there were no direct links from official library Web pages to the blogs was another factor that may have limited their visibility. These blogs were viewed as experimental by the library and not officially hosted by library or university servers, so direct links were not made available from library Web sites.

In order to ascertain the reasons the blogs were not visited, meetings were set up with faculty representatives. Faculty across all disciplines had very positive reactions to the blogs. In fact, overall, faculty saw the blogs as potentially useful resources for staying abreast of library information and communicating with the library. One faculty member mentioned that it looked like a lot of effort was put into maintaining these Web sites. This could be interpreted as a way of saying that the liaison might be wasting time developing and maintaining these resources. In truth, only an hour or two, every two weeks, was dedicated to maintaining these blogs. However, this faculty member’s reaction was deemed a positive one in that the library was working hard to reach out to faculty.

Other faculty feedback indicated the blogs should include content for very specific research areas within their disciplines. This news was surprising because the thought was that blogs of a more general nature would generate more traffic and be more useful. It is unknown whether adding even more subject-specific content might reduce interest by faculty members not concerned about those areas. The faculty further noted that promotion of the blogs was lacking despite the E-mails, announcements made by the liaison in their department meetings, and campus mail fliers. Suggestions for
advertising included continuing adding direct links to the blogs in E-mails, incorporating direct links from official library Web sites, and better publicizing through department representatives to the rest of the department’s faculty.

Although initial faculty reaction to department blogs could best be described as lukewarm, as demonstrated by the limited faculty visits to these Web sites, more department-specific blogs are in development within the library. Blogs as faculty outreach tools are still a work in progress, and, as demonstrated by this experience, it is still unknown how worthwhile these tools really are to faculty. Perhaps targeting departments or key faculty who are often early adopters of new technology will convince peers of the value of these department specific blogs.6

PERSONALIZED FACULTY RESEARCH PAGES

Librarians are trained to discern where researchers stumble in the library research process. With this in mind, liaisons may visit with faculty to discuss strategies for making access to library resources as easy and stress-free as possible. One such discussion with a faculty member, specializing in cancer research, resulted in the development of a custom-designed, personalized faculty Web page specific to her needs. Though the faculty blogs were geared toward a whole academic department, the personalized faculty research page was developed with the individual researcher in mind. This Web page was designed to offer links to specifically chosen research databases hand-picked by the researcher. The Web site also contained direct electronic access to particular journals utilized most often by the faculty member, as well as other pertinent library information. Only a single click was required by the researcher to access any of the resources on this personalized Web page. Like one-stop shopping, the library hoped that the faculty member would expend less time and effort, utilizing only the needed library resources at the point of need.

One of the most valuable features of this specialized Web page was the use of an embedded widget that provided direct links to current and relevant articles. We chose a Spring RSS widget (http://www.springwidgets.com/widgets/view/23/) because it interfaced easily with both the ScienceDirect and PubMed databases. Preconstructed searches on topics of interest deemed critical by the researcher were set up in each database and captured utilizing the databases’ RSS feeds. The widget would then display these relevant citations directly on the personal research page. A single click retrieves the full text to any widget article from the researcher’s lab. Off-campus access requires the additional step of authentication through the library proxy server, but the widget still streamlines the researcher’s search process.
Obviously, creating personalized Web pages for every faculty member would be beyond the scope and resources of most libraries. In this particular case, a Web page was developed for a faculty member who is an accomplished researcher in a research area that brings prestige and expanded grant funding to the university. Focusing on this specific researcher was a strategic decision to marshal library resources not only to support her research but to support the university in its effort to recruit quality researchers. Developing the personalized research page was an experiment by the library to ascertain whether such an effort was sustainable and worthwhile to university and campus research as a whole.

Although tools such as North Carolina State’s customizable MyLibrary template (http://infomotions.com/musings/sigir-99/) already exist, in our efforts it was not feasible to implement. Our intention was to be quick and experimental. Further, the faculty member we worked with would probably not have taken the time nor had the inclination to customize her own page. In the end, we were pleased with the simple and elegant design our efforts yielded with limited resources.

After one year, usage statistics for the personalized Web page were reviewed. To the surprise of the library liaison, the page had garnered very little use. Taking this as a learning opportunity, a meeting with the faculty member and her research assistants was convened to discover why the page was underused. The faculty member reported that she had never quite understood the utility of the page and as a result had even neglected to inform her research team about this resource. However, the student assistants who accompanied the researcher to this meeting were excited about the existence of such a Web page and conveyed the usefulness of such a resource to the researcher. As a result of this meeting, a Web page redesign was undertaken. Input was solicited from the faculty member, the graduate assistants, and library colleagues to more closely mirror the research team’s specific needs.

The second iteration of this personalized library research page is viewed as both a very useful resource for the researcher and a successful project by the library. In fact, due simply to word-of-mouth between this faculty researcher and departmental colleagues, similar customized Web sites have been requested from a small number of other campus researchers. At present, the project is limited to faculty with a significant impact on campus research. Therefore, this outreach project is still considered a scalable endeavor for our library. Once created, the upkeep on these personalized Web sites is minimal. Researchers can contact the library liaison at anytime to make changes to their personalized pages for further customization to their needs. These personalized Web pages definitely make access to needed library resources easier for faculty. These custom-designed Web spaces create a win-win scenario for library outreach to faculty as well as enhancing campus research as a whole.
WIKI-BASED LIAISON MANUAL

The influx of new librarians at Boise State University necessitated a reexamination of the library liaison manual. Policies needed to be updated, clarified, and reframed in light of new workflow procedures and a change in library administration. In its previous incarnation, the liaison manual existed as a static Web page that librarians could reference for information about liaison expectations, library policies, and collection development responsibilities. It was little used and, regrettably, not often consulted. In considering options to make this manual more relevant to rookie liaisons, it was suggested by new librarians that an online wiki might be an effective way to accomplish the task. Migrating the liaison manual to a wiki would allow the content to be more dynamic and timely, therefore proving more directly useful to liaisons in their day-to-day activities. Because reference librarians were beginning to use wikis for instruction and other projects, having a liaison manual wiki seemed like an obvious choice to make a more valuable, more flexible document.

Typically, wikis are easy to use and require little or no technical background in order to immediately become a contributor. A wiki would allow for multiple authors, permitting experts from across library units to contribute content when changes occur in their work areas. In essence, a wiki has the potential to tap into the collective institutional intelligence and expertise of multiple library staff to produce a more vibrant and timely document.

In order to understand how the wiki would appear, the existing liaison manual content was imported into one of many free wiki tools available on the Web as a test. This test wiki was shared with impacted library departments. These library units discussed the value of the wiki format for the subject liaison manual. Concerns about using the wiki primarily revolved around security to a perceived internal library resource (the Liaison Manual), the reliability of the content once it was posted, and the advertising associated with a free wiki. A committee, set up to explore these issues, determined that internal hosting of a wiki on a library server would potentially eliminate these concerns. After testing different wiki platforms, the committee did recommend a freely available wiki platform for implementation in the library. However, due to other more pressing priorities within the library the creation of a wiki-based subject liaison manual was postponed indefinitely. Hopefully, our library collection development and acquisitions departments will be able revisit wikis in the near future as other libraries have had successful experiences with these Web spaces.

LIBRARYTHING AS A COLLECTION MANAGEMENT TOOL

The free book management Web application LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com) is another tool being used by Boise State University
library liaisons. Some of the new liaisons saw the immediate value of this book selection tool as an application to replace the spreadsheets used to organize individual collection development lists. A LibraryThing demonstration was included in an internal presentation at Albertsons Library about liaison activities using new technologies such as those described in this article. A surprisingly serendipitous outcome resulted from the LibraryThing presentation. The library acquisitions staff was looking to implement an online collection management process for liaisons as part of an internal reorganization to streamline purchasing. Unbeknown to the librarians who were presenting LibraryThing as a useful selection management tool, the liaisons had found a solution that met a need in the acquisitions unit as well. Noting the ease of importing and manipulating titles in the user-friendly and flexible book management system, library acquisitions found a convenient solution for moving to an online method for retrieving, tracking, and purchasing materials selected by the liaisons.

The acquisitions staff was keenly aware that the move to online selection management would be a significant departure from the previous paper-based selection and acquisitions’ methods (Blackwell’s approval forms, Choice cards, etc.). The acquisitions unit offered different online collection management resources (Blackwell’s Collection Manager, LibraryThing, and Choice Online) from which liaisons could chose. Each librarian decided what tool, or combination of tools, worked best for their subject areas and workflows. Despite the many options offered by the acquisitions department, most subject liaisons gravitated toward LibraryThing as the tool they preferred to manage their purchase requests online. Liaisons liked LibraryThing because of its ease of use, simple personalization, tagging functionality, and comments fields, which allow for the creation of easily manipulated book lists.

An institutional LibraryThing account was purchased for each liaison to organize their subject accounts. Liaisons added book and media titles to their accounts, tagged them with collecting codes, and indicated ordering priority. Acquisitions’ staff with access rights to the accounts went in and retrieved orders weekly, according to an order schedule. Online communication between liaisons and acquisitions staff during the ordering process was made via the LibraryThing account. As book orders were processed, acquisitions staff did individual account maintenance to keep subject accounts up-to-date and ready for future ordering.

Clearly, some measure of the success of the collection development print-to-online transition at Boise State University is attributable to new liaisons experimenting with, and presenting, LibraryThing to all our librarians and the acquisitions staff.

COMMON CHALLENGES

Many of the developing technologies employed in the new liaison outreach efforts described above encountered challenges in their implementation.
Being aware of these issues before putting into practice a new outreach idea to library users can save the liaison time and, just as importantly, thwart frustration. The challenges described below are not necessarily universal, as each library and campus has its own environment and concerns to consider.

When selecting and developing these online tools, the library was cognizant about respecting faculty/patron privacy. Unfortunately, these concerns, though legitimate, often limited the potential of many of these social networking tools. For instance, by requiring the highest privacy settings on certain Web tools, RSS feeds were blocked and the creation of widgets was impacted. Specifically, in the use of LibraryThing, many of the value-added features that could provide links to materials for faculty, create alerts of new orders, or allow for online collection development collaboration were compromised.

Outside advertising was also an issue raised. Because most online social networking sites such as blogs and wikis are available as free products, their costs are often defrayed by advertising. Because liaison efforts were often rolled out as pilot projects, initially free products were the only available tools for the liaison to select. This created a potential conflict due to the fact the library was reluctant to associate itself with commercial advertising. This advertising concern required careful selection of which tool to choose, sometimes eliminating more functional products that contained advertising, and more often than not limiting the customization of the product through third-party applications such as widgets.

The internal hosting of these Web services by library or university computer servers might have alleviated some of these concerns, but this was a challenge in itself. As mentioned earlier, because these efforts were often seen as experimental, there was very little priority to make internal Web server hosting a reality. Why expend staff and hardware on something that is only experimental? For example, if an open source or paid version of a wiki or blog were hosted on a library server, advertising would be in most cases a non-issue.

That said, as the value of some of these new technologies has been proven, it is only recently that many of these Web tools are being taken more seriously and finally being hosted on library and campus servers.

**LESSONS LEARNED FOR LIBRARY LIAISONS**

What were the lessons learned using these different tools undertaking library liaison responsibilities? The following are seven pieces of advice distilled from the various experiences new librarians encountered in their liaison efforts.

1. Face-to-face communication remains the standard.
2. Follow-up: Solicit continuous feedback from faculty stakeholders.
3. Customize, personalize, and individualize liaison efforts.
4. Scale your projects to specific faculty and resources.
5. Communicate efforts externally and internally.
6. Be patient and dedicated in liaison efforts.
7. Experiment and don't be afraid to fail.

According to Glynn and Wu (2003), “direct, personal contact” with faculty remains critically important for clear, purposeful communication. Sometimes, what is old becomes new again, or just a reminder of its value is needed. Technology may provide new tools for outreach, but the quality of a face-to-face encounter with faculty often provides a lasting impression from which a liaison can draw feedback and build on for future encounters. Creating these opportunities is one of the primary responsibilities of a library liaison.

Follow-up is an essential component of liaison activities. Librarians must continually educate and periodically remind faculty of specialized library services and resources. In fact, in their article about what faculty members desire in a librarian, Stahl and Baker report: “[Faculty] need reminding again and again and again” (Stahl and Baker 1997, 134). Make sure to ask for feedback about faculty experience with subject-specific library tools. Tools that are not readily embraced by faculty must be reviewed frequently and continually evaluated for usefulness and usability. The faculty-directed blogs and personalized research Web pages show how soliciting early and continuous feedback may have made those projects more relevant to their users and perhaps more successful in their initial implementation. In the assessment-heavy environment that many libraries now find themselves, formalizing continuous feedback from users at each stage of a project is important.

Library patrons appreciate personalized attention in the library, and faculty are no exception. For example, it was a faculty member who suggested customizing the faculty-directed blogs with more specialized resources. It was the direct faculty research team’s input on how to best customize their personal research Web page to meet their unique research needs that ultimately lead to that project being a success. In order to craft tools that aid faculty interaction with library resources and collections, keep in mind department needs and individual research interests.

Undoubtedly, libraries will continue to offer more personalized services to faculty, often using Web 2.0 technology. Developing tailored faculty tools may not work for every library. Finding a balance between developing scalable and strategic tools and finite library resources is a challenging task for liaisons and libraries. Regardless, this quandary provides an opportunity for liaisons to consult with faculty and students about how to best leverage existing tools and resources. For the time being, Boise State University’s liaisons will continue to utilize blogs and explore new tools like LibGuides (http://www.springshare.com/libguides/) as a possibility for
developing customized and scalable library resources for both faculty and students.

Besides faculty interaction, communication between library units is critical to the success of a liaison. Librarians and library staff should strive to share ideas, suggestions, and innovations across the organization. There is no predicting where the next great solution will come from in altering the usual workflow as evidenced by the serendipitous discovery and use of LibraryThing. Liaisons must recognize that vested stakeholders are not only faculty and students but others within the library organization itself. The impact of technology in library operations and the improvement of internal processes can only positively influence the library’s ability to serve its user community more effectively.10 Quicker turnaround of faculty book requests from order to delivery is an example of such efficiencies through technology.

Additionally, liaisons must be patient in efforts to make projects work. Often Web 2.0 technology can be implemented instantaneously; however, inserting such a project in library and campus tried-and-true processes requires time and dedication. Confusing the development of an online tool with the development of a sustained and successful liaison program can lead to unneeded frustration for the liaison. If a liaison activity does not capture the imagination of university faculty as anticipated, it may take time for such a new information delivery method to gain traction. Be sure to give your liaison activities and projects the needed time to grow and evolve into something useful as they might connect with faculty in ways not thought possible.

Don’t be afraid to fail when trying new ideas for connecting to faculty stakeholders. Carpenter (1996, 36) asserts that “a willingness to experiment” and collaborate in today’s difficult fiscal environment may lead to imaginative ways to develop efficiencies that might help stretch budgets yet still provide customer-centered outreach to users. An element of failure is implied in experimentation; don’t let these setbacks hinder you from trying again and again to make new connections with faculty-stakeholders.

The age-old questions remain: How do librarians connect with faculty? Is it a matter of finding what tools resonate most effectively with the faculty you are trying to reach? Or is it important to connect with faculty by building relationships? We believe it is both, and it is the liaison’s responsibility to find the right balance with each user under their charge.

NOTES

This article discusses the importance of librarian/faculty relationships and asserts that they are key to the continuing viability of academic libraries and librarianship: Wade R. Kotter, “Bridging the Great Divide: Improving Relations between Librarians and Classroom Faculty,” Journal of Academic Librarianship 25, no. 4 (1999): 294–303.


For more information about academic librarians, faculty, and blogs, see David Murray and Steven Bell, “Exploring the Faculty Blogoverse: Where to Start and What’s in It for Academic Librarians,” College and Research Libraries News 68, no. 9 (2007): 576–79.


The benefits of collection development and other types of collaboration with faculty, as well as the challenges of cooperative relationships, are espoused in the article by James Cory Tucker, Jeremy Bullian, and Matthew C. Torrence, “Collaborate or Die! Collection Development in Today’s Academic Library,” The Reference Librarian 83/84 (2003): 219–36.


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