

## **Engaging in Learning : a social networking experiment that went right!**

**Lynette Lewis**  
**Coordinator Online Services**  
**Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service**

The traditional public library has long gone.

The idea that the public library is purely a building housing a physical collection, providing a point of reference and having a static web presence is changing to a more interactive community place and an equally important virtual space where people participate, interact and create their own content.

A more significant change is the way people are now interacting online and are satisfying their information needs. People don't have time to search for hours and in numerous places for information, they just want to "find" and with access to a world of information via the Internet, libraries need have a visual presence in this virtual space rather than making people have to "think" to log onto the library.

Traditional libraries just aren't going to be enough any more – and we need to ensure that our organization stays relevant to the next generation of possible library users. To do this we need to participate in the Library 2.0 networking phenomenon.

As Michael Stephens explained in a recent article about Library 2.0:

***“The heart of Library 2.0 is user-centered change. It is a model for library service that encourages constant and purposeful change, inviting user participation in the creation of both the physical and the virtual services they want, supported by consistently evaluating services. It also attempts to reach new users and better serve current ones through improved customer-driven offerings.”***

Already the Web 2.0 technologies are becoming ubiquitous, and we need library staff to be aware of such things as Myspace, Flickr, YouTube, etc.. in order to assist enquiries from our patrons. Library staff need to have an understanding of such tools so they can assess whether or not these technologies would be advantageous for the library to use to reach the community. IT departments also need to be aware of tools the community regularly use to access information so networks are set up to enhance access, not restrict it.

### **Preparing staff for web 2.0**

New technologies such as downloadable mp3 files, podcasts, a more interactive web presence, and federated search, just to mention a few, are being introduced as part of the Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service

The other major change Yarra Plenty is undertaking is moving to self service and implementing RFID. Our goal is to implement 100% full self service checkout and we anticipate significant savings in staff time and effort on circulation tasks. This means a different way of working for staff, which will no longer be behind the circulation desk, but out alongside the patrons.

The physical layout of our reference desks in some of our libraries has also changed. One desk has already been replaced and the reference librarian equipped with a small, fully portable tablet loaded with the Library Management System and the Internet. This allows staff to rove library via a wireless connection.

With all these changes it was important to keep our staff informed, but even more important was the need to encourage our staff to learn about new technologies so they feel they are part of this journey.

We ran three road shows at our libraries, highlighting areas such as podcasting, music creation, downloadable audio books and Google things and of course, how these web 2.0 tools fitted into the Yarra Plenty strategic plan, the path we would like our organization to ultimately head.

Response from staff was very positive. The questions, the curiosity and the enthusiasm from the staff who attended, regardless of the position they held in the organization, was overwhelming.

From this response we could see a need to further develop our staff's understanding of Web 2.0 technologies.

At the some time we were running these road shows, we heard about the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) Learning 2.0 program - 23 Things, and we thought it sounded like a great way to engage our staff with some of the new Web 2.0 technologies.

Up until this point Yarra Plenty had only embarked on the more traditional classroom type staff training

### **The PLCMC Program**

The PLCMC Learning 2.0 program is an online self-discovery program developed by Helene Blowers based on "*43 Things You (or I) Might Want to Do This Year,*" an article written by Stephen Abram .

Helen Blowers developed the program with the idea that participants learn best when they're engaged in their own learning and therefore motivated to learn.

The program is set out on a learning blog with links to 23 individual exercises over a nine week period.

Blogging was one of the predominant activities of Learning 2.0 in that participants were required to record thoughts about each discovery exercise through personal blogs. Each exercise involved listening to a podcast, some discovery resources to look at on the web and a discovery exercise to complete.

Many activities also included extra resources to explore if the participant wanted to.

Over a period of nine weeks PLCMC staff were encouraged to explore new technologies, specifically Web 2.0 tools (blogs, wikis, podcasts, online applications, etc.). The main message of the program was not to train people in specific applications, but to encourage exploration and self learning.

Rewards of MP3 players and a major prize draw of a laptop were offered as incentives to staff.

### **Setting up the Yarra Plenty Program**

The PLCMC were about 4 weeks into the program when we heard about it, so after numerous emails and countless questions, Yarra Plenty was about to embark in a completely new learning experience.

We decided to run the program over twelve weeks; this would help ease the pressure on staff taking annual leave over the Christmas period. Incentives of a certificate, USB and lanyard were offered to all staff completing the program, and each person would also go into the draw for a laptop.

At Yarra Plenty we developed our own Online Learning blog to use as the front door to the Learning 2.0 program for our staff. From our Yarra Plenty Online Learning blog we could offer week by week encouragement to our staff as well as extra links and resources and advise people of any changes we thought appropriate for our learning environment. We also set up another Yarra Plenty participant's blog and linked each participant's blog from this central location. We allowed blogs to be anonymous and this created quite a lot of comments with participants trying to work out whose blog belonged to which staff member. Without even realizing it our staff had begun to engage in some social networking skills.

A staff tracking log was also set up on an excel spreadsheet which was uploaded to the Yarra Plenty Intranet. This just listed participants names and progress. Staff could track each others progress, without actually identifying each staff member to particular blog. A star was awarded to each person as they completed each of the 23 activities. We had 90 staff sign up for the 3 month program (out of a total staff of 150 / 88 eft) and 50 completed the course within the specified time. Using our tracking log, and tallying each star as a unit of learning; Yarra Plenty achieved over 1,400 units of education during the program. That accounts to 1400 units of self paced and self directed learning through exploration and play.

### **Launching the program**

We were very fortunate, and it was very fitting, to have Stephen Abram from SirsiDynix to launch our Learning 2.0 program in October 2006. Stephen is SirsiDynix's Vice President of Innovation, and one of the Library Journal's "Movers & Shakers top 50 people who are shaping the future of libraries and librarianship." At the launch Stephen spoke about the many ways that libraries could use social networking tools to create online communities and to facilitate the creation of content in libraries. His presence at the launch certainly assisted in enthusing our staff.

### **Getting help**

Back up support was offered to assure staff they were not alone. An introductory presentation was given at an Executive management/Branch managers meeting outlining the online program, and encouraging their participation and a similar presentation was given at the launch. Some of the Branch Managers arranged rosters so staff had some time during work hours to work on their learning 2.0 program. This was not possible for all staff as many of them are part time and casual. Email help was always offered (and often taken up) by staff when they had a problem, as was phone assistance during working hours.

Yarra Plenty offers staff an internal chat service via Novell GroupWise, so staff could see if we were at our desks and chat to us while they were working on their exercises. Peer assistance was encouraged and has certainly been used throughout the program. An email was also sent to all staff on a regular basis with encouragement and support. Even though this was a “web 1.0 method” of communication; staff were more familiar with receiving and asking for help via email.

### **Evaluation of the program**

At the completion of the program a questionnaire was emailed to each participant.

Questions included:

- initial reaction to the program
- most challenging part of the program
- most fun part of the program
- ways you think web 2.0 technology could be used in the library environment.

The questionnaire has enabled us to draw upon the experiences of the participants and assess the success of the online learning program

### **Initial Reaction**

The initial reaction from many staff was the standout excuse “but I don’t have time...”

Part-time and casual members of staff were certainly more “time poor” during working hours as some are only employed for a few hours each week.

Some staff were happy to work on the learning 2.0 program outside working hours, whilst others insisted it should be done in paid time.

Some staff simply don’t have access to the Internet at home

Some staff felt guilty working on the program during paid hours as the program wasn’t part of their usual job, but good support and encouragement from Branch Managers assisted many staff in this situation to complete the program with special rostered time off the desk.

### **Most challenging part of the program**

Other challenges staff faced in addition to the time factor included

- Self doubt – some staff felt apprehensive to tackle something new by themselves
- Online learning – they had to step outside more conventional methods of learning
- Discipline of self paced learning – able to set time aside to complete each task
- Network issues – Yarra Plenty was in the middle of a network redevelopment when the program was on. There were times when connection to the Internet was very slow

The following answer to the question in the questionnaire “What was the best part of Learning 2.0 and why?” is an example of a personal challenge faced by a staff member and the sense of achievement when accomplished:

*“Posting my very first blog – felt that I had joined something and was part of a world I had only heard about but previously knew nothing about! Got a sense of achievement and a feeling that perhaps I could manage the set tasks”*

## **Transforming Web 2.0 technologies into a library 2.0 environment**

The final question on the questionnaire asked staff how they thought they could use these technologies in the library environment.

The response consisted of a myriad of ideas, some staff suggesting using these technologies to outreach to the public, others to assist in the workplace.

The following are just a few of the suggestions put forward

- web 2.0 classes for the public
- community blogs
- community wikis
- staff wikis
- podcasting library events such as story times and author talks
- podcasting introductory library tours in community languages
- library photos of events on flickr

The list goes on and on....

The Learning 2.0 program has had a great impact on staff, who now know they can learn new things and that they can learn through exploring web applications. It has also impacted on those who didn't sign up because everyone is talking about it and even if people haven't done the course, they have been exposed to the technologies.

Staff now have the confidence to run classes in web 2.0 technologies and contribute to the various library blogs and a community wiki we now have.

They are also continuously contributing great new ideas on how to use these new tools can be used to reach the community.

This program has brought the staff to a new skill and a willingness to learn and adapt to change.

As a result of the Learning 2.0 program, and its success, our journey continues with a training plan called Library Worker 2.0 based around 5 themes we think are an important part of Library 2.0:

- Finding information,
- Enabling learning,
- Creating content,
- Celebrating culture and
- Leading the organization

These more specialized modules examine using Web 2.0 technologies in specific areas of the library and how to best use these resources to reach our community.

Thanks to Helene Blowers for her insight in licencing the Learning 2.0 program under a creative commons licence; the program is rapidly spreading across libraries all over the world, and Victorian libraries are no exception.

Currently 1000 public library staff from 45 public libraries across the state are participating in the Learning 2.0 program, as well as the program being undertaken collaboratively at some Victorian Universities. The State Library is also undertaking the program in various departments, and some special libraries have already completed the program.

Marylaine Block summed up the essence of Library 2.0 in a recent paper:

***Library 2.0 can be a scary term for librarians who aren't really into technology, but in fact, it's not primarily about machines and software: it's about using the best tools and ideas to provide the best possible service to our users"***

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