Intuitive Revelations: The Ubiquitous Reference Model

Preliminary Findings

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"One of the best means of making a library popular
is to mingle freely with its users and help them in
every way."

Samuel Swett Green, 1876

Introduction

Libraries are facing an ongoing existential dilemma, questioning their own significance and identity. There is much concern about the future of the profession. However, there is also much enthusiasm and a conscious effort toward developing new roles and altering services to meet patron expectations. This paper presents a new approach toward interacting with users, moving beyond the traditional barriers and seeking to deliver assistance intuitively before the patron recognizes the need.

Moving Beyond the Desk

The Reference Desk is an icon, universally recognized as a primary location for information. However, it is also a great barrier, forcing users not only to visit the library, but also to admit to an information deficiency. While this process has evolved by adding telephone, email, and chat formats, the essence remains the same: a patron, becoming aware of an information need, approaches the library for help. In the Google Era of instant information and immediate gratification, this traditional model is inefficient and undesirable to many users. Studies and statistics suggest that libraries are declining as a place people turn for information. So how can reference service remain relevant in the future?

Blogs: The Next Frontier

The surging discussion of blogs in the library world is focused upon pushing out information. While blogs are a great medium for sharing information, they still require action on behalf of the patron, who must visit a web site or subscribe to an RSS feed. While some blogs enable visitors to post comments, the library is still the

primary generator of content. However, libraries are missing out on the potential of using blogs for providing valuable educational opportunities. Instead of forcing patrons to interact with us, we can enter their domain and seek new ways of providing assistance. By monitoring blogs, librarians can step beyond their traditional role and serve as teachers, mentors, and counselors.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

An ongoing study, following forty student blogs (twenty male and twenty female) seeks to explore the potential value and effort involved in providing appropriate assistance. The sample was selected randomly from members of LiveJournal.com and Xanga.com, who allow public access to their blogs. Participants were drawn from users who had selected the Georgia Institute of Technology as their academic affiliation, were currently enrolled, and who had posted within the past two weeks.

Once the sample was chosen, RSS feeds of each journal were loaded into Bloglines, an RSS aggregator. This software allows for the easy management of multiple blogs, saving time from visiting each one individually. Bloglines also offers keyword alerts for subscribed blogs. This greatly minimizes time spent sifting through multiple postings in search of meaningful content. For this study, the keywords include: article, assignment, book, group, help, journal, library, librarian, paper, project, professor, research, reserve, and test. For demonstration purposes, a screen-cast video is available[1].

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

I created a generic *library account* for both LiveJournal and Xanga, enabling full interaction with the sample. Students were initially surprised when *librarian* postings started appearing on their journals. Through emails and instant messenger conversations, students revealed a perception of the library as authoritative and out of place in their virtual environment. In response, I created a personal account, and included my librarian information in the profile. Students were much more receptive,

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[1] http://hdl.handle.net/1853/8446 (Video Demo)

viewing me as an equal participant, rather than as an intrusive outsider. The following four examples illustrate common interactions:

Example One: Reference

- my final eng1102 group project involves the following:

  Analysis of the portrayal of suburban America in film, television shows, or fiction. Pick a group of texts that we have not discussed in class (and that will not be a part of your Research Proposal) and discuss how the American suburb is presented. What claims about the suburbs does the text make? How are the suburbs portrayed: as a particular place, a particular class, a state of mind, or a combination of these images?

  instead of doing "text" we are doing film. therefore, i'd like it if you would suggest some movies for me to watch/analyze and explain (briefly of course) how they relate to the topic of suburbs.

This reference encounter is typical, yet directed toward the student's peers. I entered the discussion with a movie recommendation and encouragement for additional assistance. The patron responded:

- i'm actually researching another thing right now. could you direct me to some articles on demographics of the suburbs (how they've changed over time, etc.)? or possibly suggest a place for me to search for them besides the general OIT database thing?

I suggested a handful of appropriate statistical resources, for which the patron was grateful. By submersing myself in this environment, I was able to detect and respond intuitively, before the patron considered contacting the library.

Example Two: Marketing Services

- I'm already totally stressed about this semester because of the 20 books I have to read and the huge paper I'm going to have to write... both (classes) have so much on Electronic Reserve that I'm not going to be able to print it all in the library because of my quota.

This posting initially allowed me to address the patron's printing concerns by suggesting the use of free off-site printing services available to all students. Many academic libraries offer special services, such as binding, faxing, scanning, color copying, etc, with which students may not be familiar. By reading blogs, librarians can better understand patron needs and market services accordingly.

Additionally, I was able to address the noted anxiety and offer assistance with the assignment. Rather than waiting until it was too late, I was able to interact with the patron early in the semester and to suggest appropriate resources and research techniques.

Example Three: Marketing Library Classes & Workshops
- *sighs* not everyone uses LaTeX…

LaTeX is a word processing program used by scientists and engineers. The Library co-sponsors workshops on using the software throughout the semester. While we rely upon flyers, a web listing, and professors' announcements, not all students are aware of these sessions. By monitoring this patron's blog, I was able to inform the student of an upcoming LaTeX class. The patron responded enthusiastically, and was grateful for both the workshop and my notification. This forum also allows for follow-up assessment, and for the gathering of suggestions toward marketing future workshops.

Example Four: Criticism
- People don't understand the concept of 'inside voices' in a damn library.
- Don't even get me started on the library catalog.
- On the way I stopped at the library... it was closed.

Blogs provide unfiltered opinions; these examples illustrate frustration with the library. I was able to apologize and to explain the library's perspective, as well as retrieve additional information about their experiences. Reading student blogs enables librarians to better understand user expectations and provides a chance to correct misunderstandings or to sympathize with unfortunate encounters.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this paper is to demonstrate the vast and untapped potential in monitoring student blogs. While these examples highlight library-centric interactions, there are additional opportunities for providing guidance to personal, professional, social and academic needs. Blogs allow us to interact with students in *their* natural environment, and to provide timely, meaningful, and intuitive assistance. Reaching out to students creates a personal connection. It allows them to see us as allies, rather than as part of the academic bureaucracy. Monitoring blogs also gives librarians a sense of ubiquity, empowering us to follow the whims, needs, expectations, and experiences of the population we serve, and perhaps most importantly, the chance to respond and react appropriately.