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Article

Using Blogs in the Library to Reach Diverse and Non-Traditional Student Groups

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Abstract

While there is no dearth of information about the uses of a blog as a Web 2.0 tool in the library, there is very little information about the ways in which a blog can be used to reach diverse and non-traditional groups. This paper explores blog topics and strategies that will help to engage users from diverse populations. It also explains ways in which librarians might frame their library blogs to be more inclusive of their entire community. Blogs can serve as excellent marketing tools for communicating resources, services, and events, but in featuring posts that include various populations, more users might become readers of the blog and may even develop an appreciation for the diversity surrounding them. The blog can then serve as a solid model for communicating and appreciating diversity. If their true power is harnessed, library blogs can reach larger groups and promote a more inclusive environment for all.

The library can position itself to be a connection broker and conversation starter via the use of blogs. Academic librarians have embraced the Web 2.0 environment out of necessity and as a way of reaching the students that they support in the campus community. In addition to offering current technologies, academic librarians have redoubled their efforts to keep their institutions relevant in the eyes of students. One method that has worked well in many instances is communicating with students through the use of a library blog. Library blogs can and do provide information about general operations (library hours, etc.), upcoming events, new collections, new technologies, new programs, etc.

It is important to consider participation rates and reader engagement when strategizing blogging practice. The proliferation of library blogs is marked and notable, resulting in nearly four in ten people having the ability to receive information through blogs on library websites (Lietzau, 2009, p. 9). While the number of people who have access to the Internet and digital library resources may continue to increase, the libraries that use blogs need to retain awareness of the fact that engagement with readers may not yield high numbers aligned with the increase in Internet usage. Blogs need to be designed and posts need to be crafted with the intent that readers can respond with input, but with the understanding that engagement may not happen quickly, if at all.

Blogs are useful because they allow for a more timely response to changing and developing student needs. Unlike printed posters or flyers, posting to a blog to update readers on a rapidly developing situation becomes as easy as composing a blog post and clicking the “publish” button. As digital media, blogs also have a smaller footprint and do not require the physical space that print collections do, making them appealing in an age of reduced budgets and, frequently, reduced library building space. A library blog can teach everybody: the librarian, the student, the faculty member, and the public.

However, there is more power to harness in a library blog that is seldom discussed; a library blog can be used effectively to reach diverse and non-traditional populations. The authors, who are employed by a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) consortium library, hosted a roundtable discussion on this topic at the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in Indianapolis in April 2013. Further consideration and research into this topic helped us develop methods for using an academic library blog to reach diverse and non-traditional audiences.

Literature Review

An advantage to using a library blog is that it does not require a login or a subscription of any kind from the reader. Content is freely available for consumption and readers may remain completely anonymous while reading. Unlike Facebook, where membership is required to read content, anyone with access to the Internet may read the library’s blog, provided it is set up free of restrictions so that anyone may read it (Horn, 2011, p. 26). A blog does not require a “virtual” personal commitment; it may enjoy the readership of those individuals otherwise disinterested in putting their virtual selves forward in this way.

A library blog in an academic setting also communicates to students that the library is aware of, and participating in, social media trends that are important in their daily lives (Brookover, 2007, p. 29). Academic librarians must continually promote the library as being technologically up-to-date knowledge hubs and, by using a medium that is already familiar to the student body, the library's larger marketing campaign is furthered. It is also possible that an academic library's social media presence could reach those students who self-identify as or consider themselves to be tech-savvy and might not otherwise enter the library (Brookover, 2007, p. 30). A project framework that includes having clear strategies, objectives, and plans for the blog's oversight would be most useful in ensuring that the blog does not fail due to "topic atrophy" (Bardyn, 2009, p. 16).

In addition to marketing the library's resources, services, and events, a blog can also introduce readers to aspects of the collection about which they had no prior knowledge (King, 2012, p.13). Potential readers cannot be expected to search the Internet for their library blog, but if a link to the blog is prominently displayed on another webpage they are sure to use, chances of acquiring a new blog reader increase. A blog post can depict images or videos about a new section of the collection, a featured event in the archives, or any number of new library attractions. A library blog can also act as an "explainer," using library resources and services as context providers to provide clarity on topics of interest to readers. Blog content acts as a discovery method for readers; librarians can use their posts to help readers discover the answers to questions they didn't know they had (Dankowski, 2013, p. 38). It is absolutely essential, however, that the blog not go fallow (Lietzau, 2009, p. 9). While there is no magic formula for the number of posts necessary per month to maintain readership, posting too infrequently causes readers to lose interest quickly. Therefore, it is the task of the library blogger to keep posting to the blog regularly and to keep posts varied and interesting. While not every aspect of the library operations may be blog worthy, it is the job of the librarian blogger to develop a voice for the blog and post content that shows an awareness of the interests of the student readership.

It is imperative that an academic library blog be visible to students. In order to increase reader traffic, an academic library's website, college or university's websites and/or student orientation pages, learning management software for course websites, and other campus digital venues should link to the blog (Bartlett, 2013, p. 2). Word-of-mouth advertising can prove fruitful, too. Library orientation events, instruction classes, and special events can serve as venues wherein librarians can make students aware of the library blog. Ultimately, the blog must reach readers where they are within the digital media resources milieu (Bell, 2005, p. 9).

Sensitivity to the readership is another key element essential to success. For the purposes of this article, sensitivity refers to the conscious act of considering the audience in order to avoid alienating sections of the readership. Content needs to appeal to a diverse community. Focusing too much of the blog on one discipline over another will alienate readers from other fields (Bell, 2005, p. 12). For example, academic blog posts that are focused on highlighting an expansion of the nineteenth

century British literature section, for example, are not necessarily going to appeal widely to the incoming freshman STEM students. Likewise, focusing the blog on topics that interest one ethnic group or promote the activities of one ethnic group over another will alienate some readers. Re-entry students or students who are older than many of their classmates could be isolated if all of the information on the blog is targeted to young twenty-something students. The needs of differently-abled groups have to be on the minds of librarian bloggers so that the content is accessible and relevant to them as well. In the sections that follow, consideration is given to the potential needs and interests of specific populations and how a library blog can feature posts that will appeal to, and include, all members of the population.

Blogging for Diverse Populations

Students bring with them diverse cultural backgrounds when they move to college and university campuses. In the United States, these campuses honor American holidays and events. Many of these holidays may not resonate with students who are coming to campuses from foreign countries or who are first-generation students who do not necessarily observe American holidays in their homes. For these students, different holidays, dates, and events may be more significant. An academic library blog could feature posts that describe upcoming holidays and events that are specific to one population of students on campus but may be relatively unknown, and even less understood, by other students on campus. As an example, February is Black History Month, and during the month of February, a series of blog posts could help illuminate the historical contributions of Black leaders. Students may be familiar with the holidays Kwanzaa (December 26th-January 1st) or Juneteenth (celebrated on June 19th), but a post during Black History month could further illuminate the customs and traditions central to these holidays celebrated by members of the African-American diaspora.

The blog may highlight significant authors and books available to students. Notable publications, figures, and achievements of diverse cultures should be highlighted as well. College students look to role models, and featuring leaders from their own cultural backgrounds on the library blog may function to enhance students' connections to the leaders and their contributions, potentially encouraging them to pursue an achievement in a similar vein. For example, the Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Archives Research Center houses significant artifacts and writings of slain rap musician, poet, and actor Tupac Amaru Shakur. It also houses documents and personal effects from African American luminaries such as the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Maynard Jackson (Atlanta's first Black mayor), and John Henrik Clarke (an influential force in the field of African American studies). Each year, students flock to the archives to engage one-on-one with these collections. Sadly, some students will graduate every year from the four campuses the Robert W. Woodruff Library supports without having ever paid a physical visit to the archives. Blogging about the collection would heighten student awareness of the archives. Posting images of selected items, writings, and other ephemera about the life and work of Shakur to the blog, for example, might bring more students into the archives, while emphasizing the poetic work of a member of their cultural population. Not every academic library has these types of iconic archival

collections but they do all have resources in which students would be interested. It is then the role of the academic library blogger to identify resources within the library with which diverse student populations will connect and heighten the awareness of these objects by blogging about them.

A librarian blogger can create new sections within the blog that highlight special interest information such as archival collections. For example, a bold-outlined box on the right or left of the current blog entry can alert students to a new database that features Hispanic literature; or, perhaps there is a museum or archival collection with which the library is strongly allied that features a Native American collection. Not only can a blog draw attention to these diverse collections, it can also work to include library users who celebrate these backgrounds as part of their heritage. Users from these backgrounds can chime in and participate by posting in the comments section of the blog.

A blog is an excellent place to communicate upcoming events to the population. A significant event in Chinese history may be approaching, for example, and the library could be hosting an afternoon celebration, complete with a short video, a guest speaker, and traditional Chinese snacks. The blog may reach individuals from diverse populations and encourage them to join in the fun and learning. The blog could even feature a tab for special interest collections. Under this tab, information about permanent library collections, database subscriptions, and events that pertain to diverse student populations could be placed for students to find and access these features. Having a special section of the blog devoted to this type of information further demonstrates the library's commitment to including people from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Beyond the promotion of multicultural awareness and events, using a blog can help librarians address the interests of traditionally underrepresented groups. In an academic library, when a student or group of students feels that they are different from their peers and isolated from the student body at large, they may begin to disengage from their campus environment. It may be difficult to reach these students in their courses as this kind of isolation may masquerade as disinterest in the course subject matter as opposed to disconnection from their campus community at large (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993, p. 435). However, the library—which in many cases acts as a campus social hub—can redouble its efforts to reach out to these students and include them (Gayton, 2008, p. 60). Blog topics about celebrating diversity and individuality may help reach these students. Posts about navigating the procedures for obtaining a student loan, visa requirements, and student living within the campus vicinity are real issues that students may benefit from having addressed on the library's blog. While blogging about these issues is not a cure-all for the culture shock students from diverse backgrounds may feel, it is a way to reach out to them and bring them into the campus community. It is important that the library state that the blog is pointing to these resources and not offering legal advice. The academic library is a place where students can seek information specific to their needs, even when their needs are somewhat different from the majority of the student body.

It is important to encourage engagement with their library blog by inviting stakeholders from within the diverse population to contribute posts to the blog or make recommendations about posts or blog series topics. A guest post written by a member of a diverse population demonstrates the library's commitment to featuring all people, their contributions, and making an attempt to respond to their needs. It also provides a method of including people from diverse populations that does not rely on specific research or second-hand accounts. When a member of a diverse population authors a post on the library's blog, it is a direct way of connecting others from their diverse population with the library. Also, inviting a guest author may turn into more calls for guest posts. In addition, other members of the same population may hold different beliefs from the initial guest poster and the blog now makes possible a safe, open forum wherein individuals of a diverse population can discuss their similarities and differences. Differences in experience, rather than differences between people, should be highlighted via the blog. A library blog has the potential to activate a connection or initiate conversations between members of a small population in a larger community.

Bloggng for Non-Traditional Populations

Today's students vary significantly from one another in terms of age; an entering freshman class of students typically consists primarily of 18 to 19 year old students who have recently graduated from high school, but may also include students who are returning from college after having careers, families, and the like. For the purpose of this article, "re-entry students," "adult students," or "non-traditional students" describes students who have some previous college experience but are returning to classes after a period of time. How can an academic library blog within a campus environment aimed at traditional aged students meet the needs and expectations of the school's older student population?

Bloggng platforms have built-in features for taking simple surveys, assessments, and polls. A library blog is an excellent tool for collecting anonymous feedback from users. Reader engagement on blogs, however, is often scant, with the average blog receiving no comments on a regular basis (Bardyn, 2009, p. 12). However, the variety of engagement features offered by the different bloggng platforms can be used in a strategic, inviting way to encourage engagement in diverse populations. In the case of non-traditional populations, it may be worthwhile to set up a blog poll to collect information about interest in various library events. If attendance at library events, workshops, instruction sessions and similar venues among non-traditional groups is poor, a blog poll will help ascertain best days and times for these events, thereby potentially increasing attendance from members of this population. Using a blog poll to collect this data assists in better targeting specific populations and scheduling events that will fit their availabilities.

A blog can also promote and support non-traditional students with young families at home. Blog posts that contain study tips for parents, for example, not only provide useful information to these students, but such posts also work to include them by featuring this aspect of their lives. A blog post such as this read by other members of

the university's community can help draw attention to the fact that the student experience is not limited to single, recent high school graduates with part-time jobs, and helps readers become more aware of the diversity surrounding them on campus. While individual students are focused on their courses and their progress towards a degree, it is helpful to highlight the experiences of students who are not only juggling the demands of school, but also potentially the demands of family. Non-traditional students at most institutions likely represent a relatively small population and may find, as a result, that they do not have many non-traditional colleagues in their courses. Using the library blog to highlight and draw positive attention to this student population can inspire and support these students.

Some non-traditional students do not live near campus and commute to classes. Commuting can absorb any time these students would otherwise have to socialize, work on assignments, and engage with campus or library activities if they lived near or on campus. The library blog can help promote access to information and, given the timeliness of a blog, it can prove relevant to commuter students reading the blog. Frequent blog posts and updated information can help these students feel connected to the academic library. Commuter students often struggle to meet their student colleagues, but blog posts and blog conversations can help integrate them into the community even when physical location can be a barrier. The library blog can serve as a nexus to better connect commuter students to their library and tailor library programming to better fit the needs of non-traditional students (Blair, 2010, p. 33).

Bloggng for Differently-Abled Populations

Beyond working toward gaining and maintaining ADA compliance, the library needs to ensure that its digital resources are fully accessible to their differently-abled populations. It is important to note, too, that differently-abled persons do not benefit from being lumped together as one group. For the purposes of this discussion, however, differently-abled persons of all levels of ability are considered in relation to how a library blog would enhance their library experience.

Many physically handicapped students may find it difficult to engage in various on-campus activities. A library blog can help bridge that gap and allow these students to more fully integrate into the campus community, albeit digitally. Research databases and featured collections linked via the blog can also assist these students for whom physical travel to the library can be something of a barrier to their access to information. Tags and word clouds displayed within the blog allow for research quick hits and are presented in a visually pleasing manner, potentially reducing the time it takes to find information. These word clouds can work as a type of keyword search that is displayed visually for quick recognition and potentially easier access.

Accessible multimedia embedded in a blog can prove to be a helpful study assistant for students who have some types of learning disabilities. Instructional videos posted to the blog can be reviewed as many times as necessary for the student to gain comfort with the topic presented. Having videos available online where they can be reviewed at-will

can reduce a person's frustration with trying to grasp a concept that is presented only once as it might be in a live, face-to-face classroom setting. A key consideration when posting instructional videos to a blog is ensuring that the videos are posted in a way in which students unfamiliar with the topic will still be able to locate the material they are seeking. It is essential to use more than one word or descriptor for locating the video within the blog, as well as using key visual cues. This will help reach people who have varying levels of literacy skills. Visual, as well as textual, cues can aid in reducing confusion. Further, videos should be captioned so that students with hearing impairments are able to benefit from the content presented in the videos. The same is true of podcasts posted to the library blog.

Features on the blog should be designed to be as multi-sensory as possible so that students with hearing impairments can benefit from the videos just as readily as students without hearing impairments. Just as with any webpage design, it is important to consider differently-abled people and issues of accessibility. There are apps available that can be used on blogs to test for the functional accessibility of them (e.g., Easy Checks by the Web Accessibility Initiative). These apps can provide analysis about a blog's navigation, text and image interoperability, scripting, styling, and HTML. Ease of navigation may not be the first consideration when an academic librarian blogger is setting up a blog. However, as the blog grows, the orientation of content will be one of the main factors in determining the blog's usability. When blogging for differently-abled people, the navigation, or the way in which items are found within the blog, will be significant to the student's successful retrieval of information. Headers, titles, menu bars, word clouds, images, and all other elements of the blog's structure should be given due consideration.

Not only are images important as a way of clarifying textual descriptions, so too are textual descriptions of image content. Text and images should always work in tandem on a blog in order to enhance clarity of concept. For some differently-abled people, this use of text and image together will make the difference in them finding the material on the blog that they seek. Scripting, styling, and color choices are also important to consider when creating a blog that will be accessible to most students. Some fonts are easier to read than others, and larger font sizes are easier to read than small font sizes. Color choice is important, too. If the background of a section of the library blog is white, yellow cursive font is going to be difficult for even people with perfect vision to read. Institutional colors aside, darker texts on lighter backgrounds tend to be the easiest-to-read combinations for most people. While a blog cannot assist people with all types of disabilities, a librarian can remain cognizant of these design and organization considerations when setting up a blog so that it has the greatest chance of reaching the largest number of differently-abled people.

Conclusion

Using a library blog as a tool to reach diverse and non-traditional populations can help librarians open conversations about differences in people's experiences. It may promote open-mindedness for blog readers to routinely read posts about traditions, issues, or

experiences quite different from their own. A blog can also be a safe place wherein teachable moments are created and awareness enhanced. The library experience should be an opportunity for people to explore and grow, not only as individuals, but also as members of a diverse community. Inviting members of diverse populations to publish guest blog posts allows for their voices to be heard and for enhanced representation, regardless as to the population with which the individual personally identifies. It is key for readers to have a stake in the blog, so that they have a greater sense that the blog is written for, and about, them.

This paper covers diverse ethnic populations, non-traditional populations, and differently-abled populations. However, we are confident that the strategies and methods presented here would also help a librarian blogger to become more aware of and inclusive of members of the LGBT community, people from various social and financial backgrounds, and other unique populations. From the librarian's perspective, a library blog can also assist in asserting the library's centrality in people's lives. Blogs can serve as excellent marketing tools for communicating resources, services, and events, but in featuring posts that include various populations, there is a greater likelihood that more people will become readers of the blog and will develop an appreciation for the diversity surrounding them. It can serve as a solid mode of communicating and appreciating diversity and serve as an inclusive tool to better incorporate marginalized people.

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