

Students as Technology Leaders

by Laura Krier

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Editor's note: Each year ASIS&T student chapters compete for ASIS&T Student Chapter-of-the-Year honors. I ask the winning chapter to recruit a student to serve for a year on the *Bulletin* Advisory Board and to write a column for us. In 2007 the winners were the student chapters at UCLA and Simmons College. Laura Krier is our current student member from Simmons.

Last summer I attended Podcamp Boston, an un-conference dedicated to the myriad uses of social media. As I sat through sessions on marketing, increasing your followers, monetizing your personal brand and the best equipment for podcasting, I tried to uncover the bits and pieces that would be useful for libraries. I wanted to try to answer the question that so many librarians seem unable to answer: Just what is all this social software for, and how are we supposed to be using it in libraries?

I've been reading about social media and libraries since my first day in library school, and most of what I read raises more questions than answers. Librarians are certainly interested in social media, and we know we should be using it, but we're not yet sure how. Libraries are experimenting with Flickr, blogs, wikis and Facebook accounts, but are presented with the same questions with each new Web 2.0 application: What are we doing here? And do our users even want us here? Do college students want to befriend the library in a virtual world? Do people need to see pictures of librarians on Flickr? And what are we supposed to be writing about on all these blogs? Despite the work of forerunners like Meredith Farkas, whose book *Social Software in Libraries* is quickly becoming required reading, a lot of uncertainty remains, and with every blog post and article, the phrase Library 2.0 seems to become more muddled.

I hoped, as I sat through sessions at Podcamp and met new media aficionados, that one of these sessions would help me think of new and effective ways for libraries to get

involved in this online social realm. And finally, near the end of the weekend, someone did.

Kabren Levinson is a remarkably self-possessed 18-year-old, who had just graduated from high school and was at Podcamp to talk about the technology group he'd founded as a senior project (www.kabrenlevinson.com). This group was a consulting group of sorts, made up of students and staff whose task it was to research technologies and figure out the best ways to make use of them in their particular educational environments. The key to this group, and the element that stood out to me, was the integral involvement of students.

We talk about our current generation of students as technology leaders. We discuss these millennials or digital natives or N-genners, whatever name they're going by today, as though they were born in a social media bubble. We consider them the experts, and yet, we rarely involve them in our decisions about software implementation. Kabren Levinson's presentation that July afternoon made me realize that if we want to know where and how our students want us to be in their online social networks, we should ask them.

This isn't a particularly new idea. The focus on user-centered services is prominent in almost everything I read and for every librarian I talk to. We want to put our patrons first, and we want to ensure that we're providing the tools patrons need to work better and more efficiently. But in the year I've worked as a systems assistant in my college's library, I haven't heard anyone ask the students what they want, and I haven't read about too many other libraries asking students about their needs, either. Sure, we test the usability of our

websites with patrons, and we assess students when we provide information literacy training. But we don't talk to them about their ideas for how the library could serve them better.

This kind of research can take place on a small scale or a much larger one, depending on the resources available at your institution and the amount of buy-in there is for social software in the first place. A roving librarian can ask students in the library what tools they think would be useful and how the library could better meet their needs online. A focus group could be convened to introduce various tools and interfaces to find out what students think of them and whether they could be improved or should be forgotten all together. A simple survey could go out asking students what tools they'd like to use.

But I think it would be really interesting to see a library form a student committee dedicated to exploring the role of social software in libraries. Many students are engaged and active on campus, and it might not be as hard as we sometimes think to get them interested in contributing. A group like this could play with new tools, talk about what works and doesn't work for them and get additional input from their friends and classmates. They could beta test any new social media tools the library is planning to implement to determine whether they're worth fully developing. They could provide the information libraries need about how and where they should be on the web. A group like this would provide valuable input for the library and good extra-curricular fodder for students' resumes.

The point, no matter how it's undertaken, is to engage students in conversations. If we are going to continue to call our students technology experts, we should take advantage of their expertise and rely on our students as our technology leaders. Maybe then we can stop asking ourselves what they want us to do. ■

Selected Abstracts from *JASIST*

Authors who choose to do so prepare and submit these summaries to the editor of the *Bulletin*.

From *JASIST* v. 59 (12)

Hartley, J. & Betts, L. (2008). *Revising and polishing a structured abstract: Is it worth the time and effort? (1870-1877)*.

Study and Results. This study tested whether readers can detect tiny changes made to text in order to improve its clarity. Over 200 information scientists and authors of academic articles rated electronically an original and a revised version of a structured abstract. The results showed that the revised aims, results and conclusion sections, and the abstract as a whole, were all rated significantly clearer than were the original texts.

What's New? Few studies address the effectiveness of revising texts despite the fact that authors spend a good deal of time doing it. Here the reasons for making the revisions are discussed in detail and tested. The findings – that changes are detectable and are thus worth doing – have clear relevance for information science and the scientific community.

Limitations. This research is a close study of work with one abstract. Further research is needed with different kinds of text, participants and texts from different cultures. Such quantitative studies also need to be complemented by qualitative ones.