

The Collaborative Web

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When we think of collaboration we think of two or more people working on a project together, but I think that you can be part of a collaborative project without even realizing it. The web today is an ever-growing organism. We've heard it referred to as the "Read-Write Web" and even the "Collaborative Web." But how can a bunch of people all creating content for themselves be "collaborative"?

Collaborating in the Web 2.0 World

I am often asked to speak to librarians about new technologies, usually web-based technologies, and how they can use them in their libraries to improve services. One thing I like to point out early in my talks is that sometimes the tools on the web can be used to further our knowledge and understanding of topics and as a byproduct of that education help us provide better services to our patrons. Not every tool we look into has to have us interacting directly with the patrons; in fact most of what I learn on a day-to-day basis comes from keeping an eye out for what my colleagues (and by "colleagues" I mean library and information professionals worldwide) are finding worth reading, watching or listening to. That, in turn, helps me better educate fellow librarians and information professionals.

Twitter as a Collaborative Learning Tool

The key is finding where your colleagues are sharing the most valuable information. One tool that has become indispensable for me is Twitter (<http://twitter.com>). I know that many people look at Twitter and think it's just a waste of time and space, but in reality, if used properly, it can make you look like the most knowledgeable person in the room. For those who don't know much about Twitter, it's a social networking tool

where members post short updates of 140 characters or less for their friends, family, patrons, customers, colleagues, etc. Like all social networking sites, you need to filter through the information to find what's most useful to you, but Twitter provides you with tools such as lists and saved searches to do just that.

I have twitter set up so that I follow librarians from all areas of study. I then keep up with companies and technology experts who often share information related to my field. And finally I find organizations and associations that post news related to both libraries and technology. Add to that list a few personal accounts (those that talk about Shelties or belong to family members) and this produces a very wide reaching group of sources (<http://twitter.com/nengard/following>) to keep up with, but I use the aforementioned tools from Twitter to sort these into lists (<http://twitter.com/nengard/lists>) such as 'open source,' 'librarians,' 'library groups,' and so on.

Facebook as a Collaborative Learning Tool

Twitter is not the only tool out there to help you keep up with news about your field; Facebook (<http://facebook.com>) can be used in a similar fashion. I decided a long time ago that Facebook was going to predominately be a tool for me to keep up with my colleagues. In making that decision I promised to always accept "friend" requests from anyone who mentioned being a library or information professional in their profile. So now I have over 700 "friends" and over 150 pages/products I "like." I don't tell you this to brag, but to show you how easy it is to end up with a bit of information overload. I now get updates from people on a minute-by-minute basis (I can't say "daily basis"



because things are constantly being updated on Facebook).

Keeping Up

That of course brings up another question. "How do you keep up with it all?" There are many aggregators out there that pull in information from multiple sources so that you can view it all at once. One tool that I have started using recently is called "Seesmic" (<http://seesmic.com>). Seesmic is a web-based, mobile-based and desktop-based application that allows you to log into multiple social networks at once to see all updates in one place, side by side.

I have set up Seesmic not only to log me into Facebook and Twitter, but also to LinkedIn and Google Buzz. Between these four services I'm able to see what new tools librarians and businesses are using to improve their services. I'm able to keep up with new research articles in my various areas of study, and I'm able to do it all without having to visit a series of sites.¹

If Seesmic isn't the tool for you, then you can try any number of social network aggregators. Other popular ones among librarians include "HootSuite" (<http://hootsuite.com>) and "NetVibes" (<http://tour.netvibes.com/overview.php>). Try them out and make sure to pick a tool that you can see yourself using on a daily basis.

Collaborative Sharing

Once you've found a group of professionals that you trust to provide you with information, you need to start sharing as well. Learning from others is all well and good, but it's not very collaborative. As you find articles that you think would be of interest to your colleagues, share them on Facebook and Twitter and other networks as well, if you want. Tools like the social aggregators listed above will let you post to multiple sites as once. I also use "Retweet" and "Share on Facebook" links that many sites provide on their pages to share with a single

click (or sometimes two). I also re-share things that others have brought to my attention because not everyone who follows what I'm saying follows what others are saying. It could be argued that this leads to even more information overload, but I find that people appreciate the sharing and the repeats because they bring things to their attention that they would have otherwise missed.

Going Forward

I've given you a lot to look at this time and a lot to think about. As always I encourage you to play with the tools mentioned here and see if they meet your needs. Not all of them will, but if at least one tool mentioned in the column this issue helps you provide better services to your patrons then I've done by job.

References

¹ I have written a review, complete with images, of Seesmic on my site, if you would like to see how information can be organized efficiently. See: <http://www.web2learning.net/archives/4101>