

The Blog as a High-impact Institutional Communication Tool

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Introduction

Participation in conferences is a key aspect of professional development for library staff. The benefits of attending a conference include networking opportunities, engagement with the latest ideas, and seeing products provided by vendors.

However, the considerable cost of sending staff to a conference is often not matched by the benefits that the library gains as a result. The knowledge acquired by the individuals attending is not always effectively shared by conventional tools such as conference reports or post-event presentations. This is particularly true in larger libraries, and in geographically dispersed organisations.

We aimed to maximise the institutional impact of our attendance at Click 06 (the biennial ALIA conference) by providing a blog of the event and encouraging interaction with our colleagues during the conference itself. In this article we will describe the process of establishing, promoting and authoring an 'institution focussed conference blog'. We also evaluate the success of the project and discuss the implications for future development.

The blog is available at <http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/aliaconference/>

Why a blog?

Blogs are now widely regarded as a mainstream technology. The number of personal and organisational blogs has increased dramatically in recent years (Sifry, 2006). The primary reasons for the popularity of blogs can be listed as follows:

- Cheap or free to produce
- Do not require proprietary software to be installed
- Do not require specialist computer skills
- Content can be updated and disseminated easily
- Readers can get instant notification of new posts using RSS
- Comments can be posted by anyone, producing a dialogue between readers and writers.

Most library blogs are primarily outward facing and are used as tools for marketing services or developing the broader library community. For an overview of current library blogs, you can refer to the list at libdex (Libdex: Library Weblogs, n.d.)

Blogs have been used by libraries and library staff in a number of ways.

1) Informational/promotional of library services and activities

Examples include:

Curtin University Library <http://apps.lis.curtin.edu.au/blogs/index.php>
Eastern Regional Libraries, Victoria <http://easternregional.blogspot.com/>
Ann Arbor District Library, Michigan <http://www.aadl.org/services/blog>

2) Personal comment on professional issues

Examples include:

Librarian in Black <http://librarianinblack.typepad.com/librarianinblack/>
Free Range Librarian <http://freerangelibrarian.com/>
David Rothman <http://davidrothman.net/>

3) Conference blogging for general audience or aimed at participants

Examples include:

Blog The Conf (Click06 blog) <http://librariesinteract.info/conference/>
Kentucky Library Association 2006 Conference Blog <http://kla2006.blogspot.com/>
Long Island Library Conference Blog <http://lilc-ny.blogspot.com/>

At the University of Sydney Library staff are required to report back from conferences by writing a traditional conference report. Many times conference reports are written months after the event, are poorly distributed to colleagues, and are often only read by senior managers.

We chose to use blogging technology as an alternative means to deliver our conference report. We envisaged many advantages to this fresh approach over that of a post-conference report. We anticipated that the main benefits would include:

1) Up-to-the-minute reporting

Using a laptop with a wireless internet connection meant we could post to the blog live from the floor of the conference hall.

2) Quick feedback from staff at home

The comment function would enable colleagues to respond to our posts immediately with responses, challenges and questions either for us or for relay to other conference delegates.

3) An informal, chatty medium

The naturally informal nature of blogging would enable us to connect with colleagues effectively and in a way that would attract more frequent visits to the site, thereby communicating events at the conference to the widest audience possible.

Methodology

We defined our target audience as University of Sydney Library staff – a potential readership of about 280 people. Consequently it made sense to choose the in-house blogging platform, known as *Blogs dot usyd* (University of Sydney, n.d.) as this branded our blog as a University of Sydney product, and granted us more authority than a free commercial blogging service, such as Blogger (Blogger, n.d.).

The *Blogs dot usyd* service uses Moveable Type software, which is one of the more commonly used blogging platforms. Other free commercial vendors could be used to create an institutional conference report. (A guide to this is available from <http://www.probblogger.net/archives/2006/02/14/blogging-for-beginners-2/>) Yet another advantage of the *Blogs dot Usyd* service is the fact that the blog is hosted in the *usyd.edu.au* domain enabling high-ranking by Google. At the time of writing, when searching Google for the term “ALIA conference” our blog appears as the fifth site in the first page of results.

We decided to focus tightly on events at the conference rather than discuss broader issues. In this sense, the blog was similar to the conference blogs listed above. However, our institutional perspective allowed us to focus on issues that we knew had a direct relevance to our workplace and our target readership.

We also recognised that the blog would have a limited lifespan running from the date of the first post, created on 26th July 2006, to shortly after the end of the conference. In the event the last post was created on 26th September 2006, giving the blog a “lifespan” of 2 months.

A high level of participation was a prerequisite to the blog’s success. In the weeks leading up to the conference we promoted the blog to colleagues. We wrote some pre-conference posts with our thoughts and feelings about the conference. We also emailed the

entire library staff several times with an introduction to the blog and a link. The web coordinator linked to the blog from the front page of the staff intranet. We also took opportunities to mention the blog in meetings and other staff events.

At the conference

Once we were at the conference we used a variety of locations for writing blog entries. The conference venue provided wifi access during the conference which we used via a laptop provided by work. Individual PCs were also available in the conference venue, but were often inaccessible due to high demand. We also used network access at our hotel, and the facilities of a local internet café. There were no problems connecting to the administrator's interface to the blog and found it easy to write and save entries as we went.

In terms of writing style, we consciously adopted a casual tone for blog entries. We wrote in a "chatty" style about conference events, and included a lot of personal observation and opinion. We also wrote about our informal conference experiences, including social events and people that we'd met. This appeared to be a successful strategy: we heard anecdotally that readers enjoyed our approach and found it more interesting to read than a more "official" tone. Some casual posts were heavily commented on by readers (for example, one of our colleagues meeting Paul Keating on the plane). It also helped that we encouraged regular input by readers. We did this by asking lots of questions ("which session should I attend next?") and responding to questions and comments.

We took photos and added them to our blog using the photo-sharing website Flickr (Flickr: Tom and Sarah's Conference Photos, 2006). The photos were very popular, with some individual photos receiving up to 40 views each. Photos allowed our readers to get a more visual impression of what was going on at the conference, particularly the photos from the library visits.

As anyone writing for the web knows, content has to be "fresh" or regularly updated, in order to keep readers interested. We knew from the outset that we would need to update the blog regularly if we wanted people to read it. Tom and I each posted several times a day. It was very time consuming to write so frequently, but this strategy worked well and we were rewarded with high readership.

Evaluation

The Movable Type software enabled us to produce comprehensive statistics for the use of the blog. Some of these can be found in figure 1. There are a number of conclusions that can be inferred from these statistics.

First, the overall access rates of the blog are very high. In September, the month of the conference, there were 1031 registered hits for the homepage and a total of 5305 hits. Given the target audience of 280 library staff, these figures far exceeded our expectations.

Second, it is evident that the readership of the blog extended well beyond the target audience. Statistics generated by the Movable Type software demonstrate that many people accessed the blog from domains outside the university. There are a number of possible sources of external readership:

- Search engine users whose search terms directed them to the homepage or individual posts
- People on the University of Sydney website who accidentally find the links and click on them
- Librarians we met at the conference with whom we discussed the blog
- Librarians attracted by the mention of the blog at Librariesinteract.info (Goodfellow, 2006)

Third, the blog kept attracting hits well after the end of the conference. Again, this exceeded both our aims and our expectations for the blog. Our stated objective was for the

blog to have a brief lifespan, but due to the fact that the pages are still attracting hits the blog has remained available for viewing. (It is anticipated that the blog will at some point be removed from the website and permanently archived in the University of Sydney's eScholarship repository).

As well as the benefits demonstrated by the quantitative data, there were a number of other benefits derived from the blog.

We found that the interest generated by the blog resulted in us having a number of opportunities to network. The community of library blogs, known colloquially as the "biblioblogosphere", is an increasingly important media for professional networking, as exemplified in Australia by www.librariesinteract.info. We met fellow librarians from other libraries both before and during the conference, and both virtually and in person. These meetings had benefits for ourselves and also led to professional activities that benefited the library but are outside the scope of this article.

The blog also gave us the opportunity to improve our technical and communication skills and those of our colleagues. For us, we were able to learn about a new blogging platform and gain practical experience in the application of blogs for workplace communication. For many colleagues, it provided an introduction to blogs and their features.

Furthermore, the comments facility of the blog led to some useful outcomes. One example is the post entitled "tech-talk-toe" (<http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/aliacconference/2006/09/techheavy.html>) which described a talk about the use of podcasts for libraries. This prompted a comment from a colleague asking for more information, and a reply from Sarah promising to find out more. The end result was a lengthy third comment from one of the presenters of the talk providing the requested data. This exchange has contributed to the podcast project that is currently underway at the University of Sydney library.

Practical implications

We have found the institution focussed conference blog to be a highly effective method of harnessing new technology in an innovative way to maximise the impact of conference attendance. We would recommend that all libraries with large numbers of staff use a blog to communicate conference information throughout the organisation.

In order to optimise the value of the institution focussed conference blog, we suggest that any libraries seeking to use this model should carefully consider the following factors:

- Select the correct platform – this could be in-house or a commercially available service, but it should fit the criteria that you develop in the planning stages of the blog
- Market effectively – every opportunity should be taken to increase awareness and interest in the blog before and during the conference
- Encourage comments - interactivity is a crucial element of blog functionality, and we found that many comments led to valuable discussions
- Tie posts to current library projects and issues – readers will naturally engage more willingly with posts that have direct relevance to their current library work

We anticipate that the future development of wireless blogging technology will increase the viability and usefulness of the institution focussed conference blog. As blogging becomes a more mainstream activity, more innovative applications will arise and further opportunities for improved workplace communication can be explored.

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