23 Things @ UL: a web 2.0 learning experience for faculty and staff at the University of Limerick

Ciara McCaffrey
Head of Administration, Glucksman Library, University of Limerick
Tel: +353 61 202168
E-mail: ciara.mccaffrey@ul.ie

Peter Reilly
Librarian, Kemmy Business School, Glucksman Library, University of Limerick
Tel: +353 61 234380
Email: peter.reilly@ul.ie

Helena Feighan
Administrative Assistant, Staff Development Unit, Glucksman Library, University of Limerick
Tel: +353 61 213030
Email: helena.feighan@ul.ie

In 2009 the Glucksman Library at the University of Limerick in the Republic of Ireland customised the '23 Things' programme for library staff and we became, we believe, the first university in Ireland to adapt the programme. Following the initial success with library staff, we extended the programme outside the library, to all university staff. Offering the course beyond the library to UL faculty and staff had many advantages. The primary goal was to raise awareness of web 2.0 technologies amongst the university community, so they could potentially use these tools in their teaching and learning activities. In addition to this, the programme gave us an opportunity to raise the profile of the library and its information-literacy activities within the university. This article will outline our experience of running the '23 Things' programme for university staff: what worked well, the challenges we encountered, what we learned and our future plans.

The '23 Things' programme

The '23 Things' programme is a 12-week, online, interactive, self-directed learning programme that allows participants to explore web 2.0 tools at their own pace. Participants set up blogs and RSS feeds, work with YouTube, podcasts and e-books and experiment with social networking, wikis and other collaborative tools. The programme has been adopted and modified by libraries and organisations worldwide as a means of fostering a culture of lifelong learning among employees. It was designed by Helene Blowers, technology director at Public Library Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (PLCMC), North Carolina, USA, as a structured method to introduce staff to the world of web 2.0 devices. It is loosely based upon Stephen Abram's 2006 article '43 Things I (or you) might want to do this year' and the website www.43things.com. Since this technology is constantly evolving, the programme operates under a creative commons licence, which permits adopters to expand the content, provided they acknowledge the original creator and adhere to the programme format.

How we got started

Our library director, Gobnait O'Riordan, originally identified the '23 Things' programme as one which had great potential as a mechanism to raise the awareness and skill sets of library staff in web 2.0 applications, having heard about the programme running in McMaster University, Ontario, Canada. She asked staff in the training and development unit to investigate further. Other than staff time, the programme had no associated costs and could easily be customised and adapted without requiring advanced IT expertise. A part-time administrator, Karen Sainsbury, completed the initial set-up, customisation and delivery of the course within the library. A number of our web-2.0-savvy librarians assisted with customising the content and delivering supplementary presentations on web 2.0 tools. A large number of library staff from all grades and departments signed up for the programme. Overall, both participants and library management found the programme to be a positive training and development activity for our staff.

Having participated in the programme within the library, we immediately recognised the potential opportunities for delivering a similar course to the university community. The initial work was done, making the content easily integrated into mainstream library activities. The '23 Things @

UL' team was established and consisted of the faculty librarian for business, who took over the orchestration of the programme; the head of administration, who directed the project and was part of library management; and an administrator from the library's training and development function. We piloted the programme in two specific departments – the Kemmy business school and the careers office. Faculty and staff from both departments had heard about the programme and expressed interest in participating. Following this trial run, we opened the programme to the whole university and had participants from across the faculties and divisions of the institution. The range of participants was diverse, from heads of departments to lecturers to administrators and a few researchers. We are now planning to rerun the programme in the university for the third time.

THE '23 THINGS @ UL' PROGRAMME

The most recent programme run in UL can be viewed at http://ul23things.blogspot.com/. Over 12 weeks this site highlights '23 things' (small discovery exercises) to help participants become familiar with tools like blogging, RSS news feeds, tagging, wikis, podcasting and video and image hosting sites. All of these tools are freely available through the web and include Blogger, YouTube, Flickr, Delicious, Google Docs, Library Thing, Facebook, Twitter, Skype and many more.

The programme is based on self-learning, where each participant is asked to track their learning journey online through their own blog. Each week participants are e-mailed by the '23 Things @ UL' team with that week's exercises. We adapt the programme each time it is run, sometimes removing obsolete tools and adding newer ones. We encourage participants to adopt pseudonyms for their blogs, to inject an element of fun and make the learning experience more enjoyable. This tactic works quite well since many individuals enjoy the freedom that anonymity provides and their blogs reflect their true personality. In essence there are really only 10 weeks of discovery exercises, since the first week introduces participants to the programme and the final week encourages them to reflect on their learning experiences. Generally, the 12-week programme covers the following:

Week 1:   Getting started
Week 2:   Blogging
Week 3:   RSS feeds and newsreaders
Week 4:   Downloadable videos and podcasts
Week 5:   Online photos and images
Week 6:   Tagging, Delicious and Technorati

Week 7:   Office 2.0
Week 8:   Your own digital library
Week 9:   Wikis
Week 10:   Social networking
Week 11:   Personalised homepages and Google maps
Week 12:   Your final thoughts on '23 Things @ UL'.

In addition to the online programme, the team felt that some face-to-face support would help participants in their understanding of the content and would maintain motivation levels. With that in mind, over the course of the 12 weeks we run a number of lunchtime talks for participants and the wider university community. We invite presenters by identifying particular faculty and staff who we know use web 2.0 tools in their teaching and research or who are well-known champions of collaborative devices.

Typical lunchtime talks included titles such as:

Realise your blog's potential
Using podcasts in language teaching
How to make a podcast
Managing images and creating Rypples
Harnessing the power of wikis for collaboration
The joys of tagging
Using social networking in the classroom
'23 Things @ UL' on the crest of Google Wave.

WHAT WORKS WELL

Each time the programme has been run, the evaluation of the participants is overwhelmingly positive. For those who feel their web skills are limited, the programme demystifies what seemed previously to be the sole territory of our students, such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs or YouTube. Participants who were more web-skilled had an opportunity to advance their knowledge of hundreds of web 2.0 tools and to experiment and make connections between tools. Ultimately, the majority of participants find that the programme is fun. The impact on individuals can be seen by reading the participants' blogs, as they reflect on their learning journey, on what they enjoy, find easy or difficult and so on. These are just a flavour of comments from four individuals who successfully completed the programme and are still blogging:

'Overall the whole experience was informative, enjoyable and at times challenging.' ('Talktime' blog)

'It got me blogging, it opened my eyes to potential uses of web 2.0 technology.' ('Gaelic Skier' blog)

'Even when things went wrong, I searched online for help and was always able to figure it out.' ('She 2.0' blog)

'It was very worthwhile and I learned a lot from it.' ('Seascapes' blog)

From the perspective of the '23 Things @ UL' team, the programme is not overly demanding or time-consuming. The biggest demand is in the initial setting up of the programme blog. After that the team meets for about an hour once a month. The weekly delivery of the course and the provision of assistance to participants is largely done by e-mail and may take five or six hours per week of the business librarian's time. The other administrative tasks are to organise the lunchtime talks, book venues and advertise the presentations.

From a strategic perspective, the programme gives the library an opportunity to raise its profile within the university and to develop an understanding amongst faculty about some of the library's information-literacy activities. The content of the programme helps us to further establish the library as a pioneering, experimental division that is open to exploring, embracing and sharing new technologies that can be used to develop cutting-edge teaching and learning methods.

THE CHALLENGES

At the end of each programme the team evaluates what went well and what may need to be changed. We get feedback from participants through their blogs and through a survey at the end of the course. We encounter many challenges along the way, such as how to ensure that participants remain motivated for the duration of the course and do not feel isolated. Common to the '23 Things' programme in general, our greatest challenge is encouraging participants past the finish line. The programme is based on self-directed learning where participants have to motivate themselves to spend time on each 'thing', exploring and learning at their own pace. Our experience has suggested that the participants from the library found this easier to do than faculty. Many people sign up for the course but the completion rate is low. This in itself is not an accurate indicator of the success of the course, since participants tend to be selective in their learning. However, it seems that there is a difficulty with

drop-outs at the very beginning of the course, some of whom become frustrated with the basics – such as registering a Google account or setting up their blog – and may give up at the first hurdle. We have come to accept that some participants need more face-to-face help than others, particularly in the early stages.

In the day-to-day administration of the earlier programmes there were communication issues since some individuals misinterpreted messages and were reluctant to post comments on the '23 Things @ UL' blog. We grappled with production technology while recording podcasts and videos. There was an expectation among some participants that '23 Things @ UL' team members could resolve any IT issues they encountered. Although the programme is based on self-directed learning, a small minority of participants hoped for greater levels of one-to-one support whenever they encountered obstacles.

To overcome some of these challenges the team had to be resourceful, particularly in relation to answering IT queries. One of the hardest tasks for many individuals was trying to link RSS feeds and YouTube videos to their blog. To save time and effort we navigated them towards other blogs which contained these instructions. The lunchtime talks provided a forum where individuals could meet to discuss these types of problems and share advice.

A misconception amongst participants was that the programme was sequential, so that if they fell behind they had no option but to drop out instead of slotting in and catching up at a later stage. Other difficulties that our faculty participants reported were their not having enough time to spend on the programme during different weeks of the semester and not being free to attend the lunchtime sessions because of their timetables. A further challenge with delivering the course to faculty was in creating a sense of community among participants who are from such a diversity of departments and divisions across the university. Library and careers staff had a sense of community and shared learning because they were already cohesive units and had opportunities to discuss the programme at coffee or during their working day. This was not the case with staff across many different departments.

THE FUTURE

We intend to offer the programme to faculty and staff in the university for a third time. Before the

next programme begins we plan to make some changes to the '23 Things @ UL' programme that we hope will address some of the difficulties participants have encountered. We plan to replace the lunchtime presentations with hands-on discovery sessions, to give people more direct help on particular 'things'. These workshops will be constructed around specific themes identified within the programme. Although this will require a greater investment of library staff time, it will, we hope, increase the completion rate for many participants. It should also give participants an opportunity to meet with each other, swap experiences and develop a face-to-face social network. We also plan on changing some elements of the content to reflect changes in technologies but will continue to use the '23 Things' brand so as not to lose the richness and potency of the concept. There are some library-related tools which we as librarians hate to lose from the programme but which we have to accept may not be as interesting to non-library participants. 'Things' that could be removed include e-books, Google books, Library Thing, tagging and Technorati. As we cannot possibly hope to cover all that is out there; the objective is to give participants the confidence to start exploring and thereby demystify the technologies.

At the beginning of the project there was much discussion within the team on whether or not to incentivise the programme with a prize raffled amongst the finishers or for the first past the post. We chose not to do this in previous programmes as we felt the learning opportunity was a sufficient incentive but, based on the poor completion rate, we are revisiting the idea of introducing some form of reward system in the next programme.

Conclusion

We have been running this programme for just over a year now in its current format and it has been a learning experience for all involved, both the participants and library team. Some aspects work well and some continue to challenge us. Ultimately, as long as we are achieving the primary goal of raising awareness of web 2.0 technologies amongst faculty and staff, while at the same time raising the profile of the library in the university, the '23 Things @ UL' programme will remain a very worthwhile activity for the library and the University of Limerick.

Bibliography

Abram, S., '43 things I (or you) might want to do this year', *Information outlook*, 10 (2), 2006

Blowers, H., 'PLCMC Learning 2.0' [online], 2006, available at http://plcmcl2-about.blogspot.com/

Gross, J. and Lyn, L., 'Twenty-three steps to learning Web 2.0 technologies in an academic library', *The electronic library*, 26 (6), 2008, pp 790–802

Titangos, H-L.H. and Mason, G.L., 'Learning library 2.0 – 23 things@SCPL', *Library management*, 30 (1/2), 2009, pp 44–56

Imperial College London Library, 'Learning 2.0 @ Imperial College London Library' [online], 2008, available at http://learning20atimperial.wordpress.com/

Minnesota State Public Libraries, '23 Things on a stick: a library learning 2.0 programme' [online], (2007), available at http://23thingsonastick.blogspot.com/2007/12/what-are-23-things-on-stick.html

Trzeciak, J.G., 'McMaster University Libraries 2.0: transforming traditional organisations', *Sconul Focus*, 44, 2008, pp 4–10

University of Limerick Library, '23 Things@ UL' [online], 2009, available at http://ul23things.blogspot.com/