Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Using Evidence in Practice

Building a User Blog with Evidence: The Health Information Skills Academic Library Blog

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Setting

The College of Health and Social Care within the University of Salford is supported by a team of Academic Support Librarians who deliver training, support and advice to staff and student users of library resources and services. The team continually seeks ways to educate, inform and assist users. In 2010, staff began a blog to provide a new support format, with the aim of building a repository of training and information. This article sets a year of blog experience in the context of a literature review and content analysis.

Problem

Students often study from a distance or spend time away from campus in clinical settings. Previous attempts by the library team to support those away from university included provision of a Blackboard site within the institution's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). However users needed to log in to access the resource, and the formal structure of VLE sites made delivering and accessing support content difficult. Users quickly lost interest.

Many users request librarian help with library resources and with wider information literacy skills. Often these arrive as email requests, some of which can be answered immediately. Others require an appointment to meet with the librarian. Queries that can be answered quickly are received frequently by three librarians, who send individual responses. They felt that providing that same information online would significantly reduce the time spent responding to simpler queries.

From March to August, 2010, the team developed the Salford Health Information Skills

blog to begin the process of building a repository of information. The aim was creating what Godwin (2007) describes as "an additional weapon in our armoury" of existing support (p. 105).

More complex questions are still most frequently and effectively dealt with by means of an appointment with the librarian. However, as the blog developed, librarians wrote blog posts on some of the topics discussed in individual appointments. Librarians refer students to these posts as an initial response, or as a refresher for those who have attended a session.

From September 2010, library staff has promoted the blog to students and college staff. Promotional approaches included: using the blog address in email signatures; mentioning the blog in library training sessions and in the team's newsletters; and presenting a poster at a University good practice day which provided the opportunity to both promote to and gain feedback from academic staff.

Evidence

A literature review revealed that the accessibility of blog software, coupled with the flexibility of use, means that blogs are still one of the best ways for libraries to communicate with their users (Johnson, 2008). The blog aims to provide a repository of information, as content is built and accumulated over time leading to a 'stock' of information and guidance to which users can refer. The library team anticipated that as this repository grew it would assist them in responding to user enquiries (Godwin, 2007). By referring users to blog posts in answer to a query the team could not only reduce the time spent responding but also effectively promotes the blog as a useful resource that user might visit again in the future.

The blog functions as an online information source, much like the library's official website, and has not moved forward to take on the role of a communication or interaction tool. The opportunity to engage directly with blog content through a comments tool is a key benefit that blogs have over traditional websites. Much of the literature refers to a lack of success regarding blog comments within the academic library environment (Toth, 2010).

This has certainly been the case with the Salford Health Information Skills blog, where users do not comment on posts.

The Health Information Skills blog primarily targets students within the college, although it is also of use to academic staff. Determining our primary audience allowed us to identify the type of information that would be most useful (often taken from the queries received from users). Knowing the audience also helps set the conversational tone and level of detail most appropriate for the blog (Stover, 2006).

Blogs are easy to create and are generally free to use so represent a good opportunity to reach users. The main issue with blogs is that they require regular updates and maintenance. When a blog is provided by a team, as is the case with the Health Information Skills blog, the team shares the workload of creating new content and maintaining the site. If the blog reduces existing workloads around user enquiries, then time saved reproducing standard responses can instead be spent creating blog posts for wider audiences.

Even blogs with regular updates require evaluation of their use, readership and impact. User statistics are a useful tool (Chan & Cmor, 2009), as blog content is only valuable if it has an audience. The team made use of the StatCounter tool to see which posts are popular, the number of new users, how many users make return visits, the length of time people spend viewing blog content, and the path they take coming into and leaving the site.

The team performed content analysis in April 2011, analysing 30 blogs from UK academic

institutions where content had been updated in 2011 (see Appendix A). We compared the structure, content, and use of the blog with others in the sector.

At least 50% of examined blogs employ five key features and it is reassuring to note that the Health Information Skills blog uses all of these features. The five features are a search option, archives, tag or category list to help users navigate to related content, links to the library website to set the blog content in context, and provision of RSS feeds to connect users with new content as it develops. A full list of features identified can be seen in Figure 1.

One key feature of blogs is the use of tags or category lists. The majority of blogs employed tags in either cloud or list form, so reviewing the tags in depth presented a snapshot of the content coverage. Where slight differences between terms existed (for example ebook, e-book, ebooks), the team normalized the tags to one option for comparison.

The Health Information Skills blog currently has 14 tags (see Figure 2), some of which overlap with the top 20 tags identified in the content analysis (Figure 3). This suggests coverage in the Health blog is broadly similar to that in other academic library blogs. While some language is specific to Salford University, tags around news, electronic systems and resources, databases, and training appear on both lists.

The literature review highlighted the issue of user reluctance to engage with blog content through comments. This issue also appeared in the content analysis. Two blogs did not provide the option for comments. Of the remaining blogs, there was a 50/50 split between those with no comments and those with some. Further examination of blogs with comments showed that while a few had regular comments, half of the blogs examined received fewer than five comments in a year. This finding suggests that many academic library blogs struggle to engage users through comments. Blogs with regular comments appeared in online learning
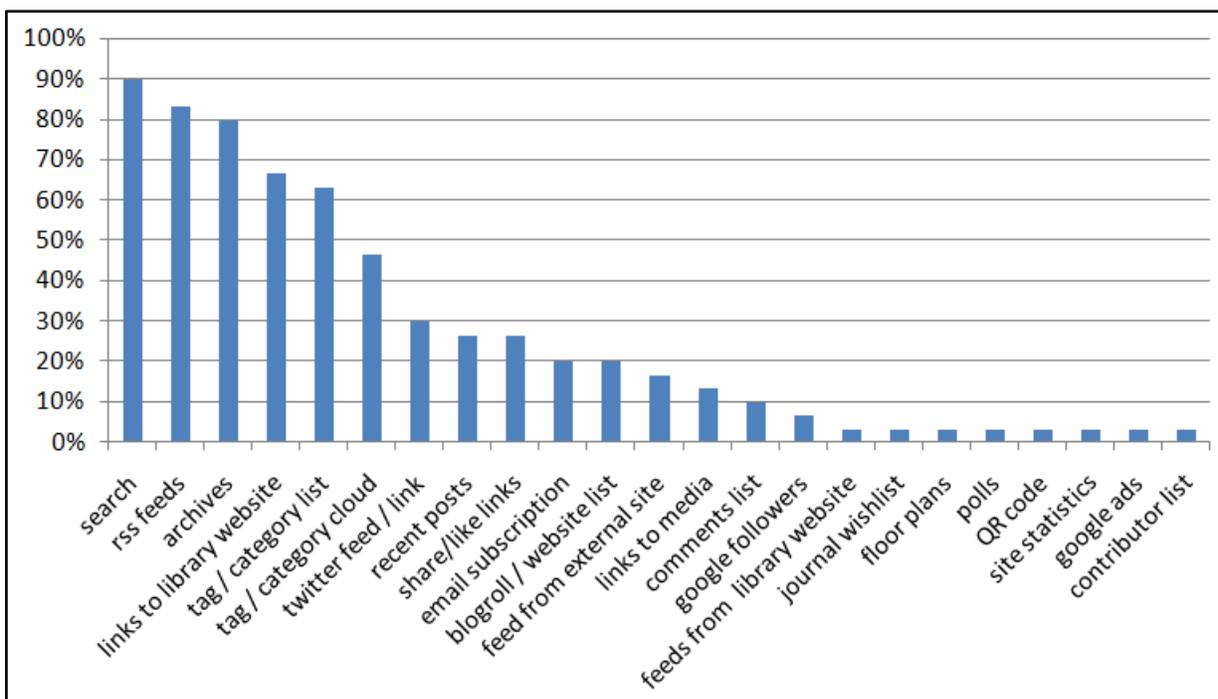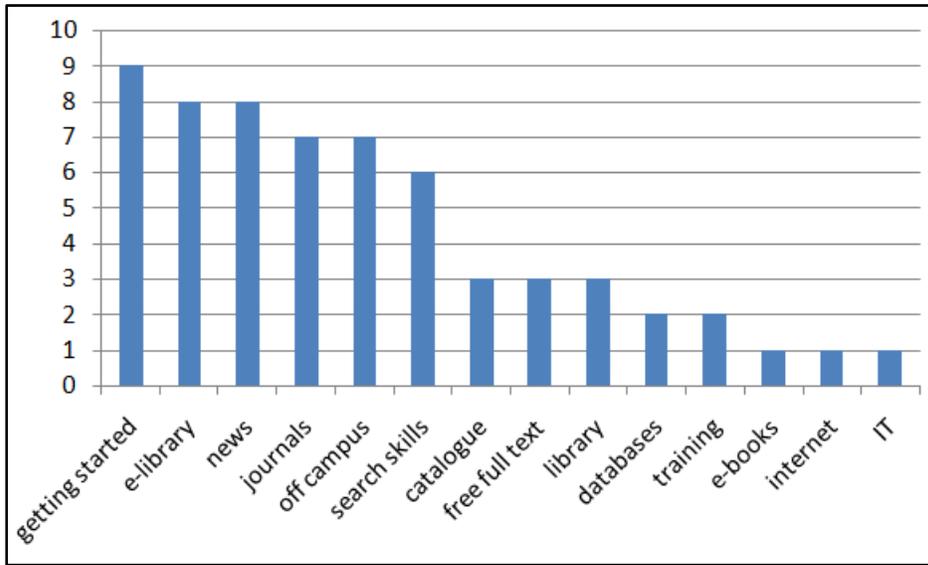

Figure 1
Blog features analysed

Figure 2

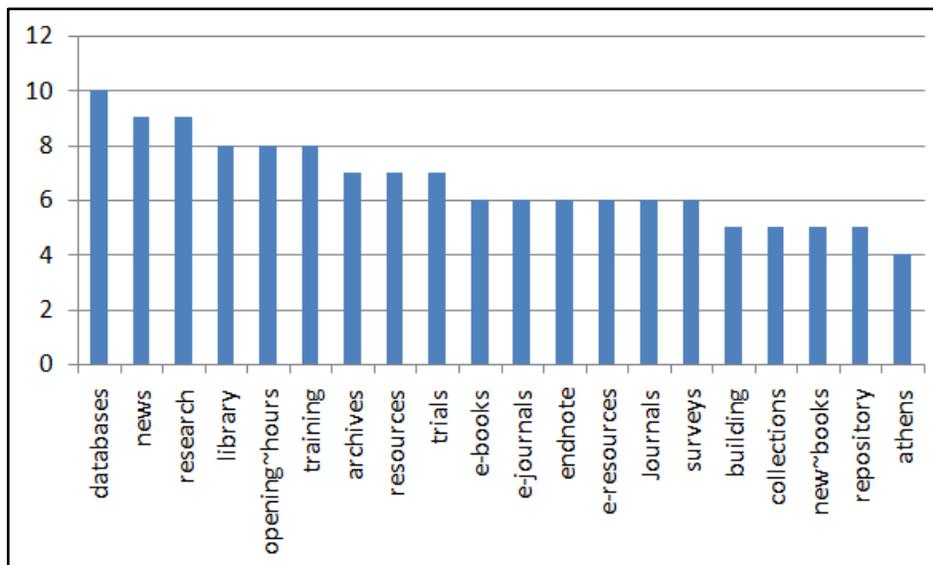Tags used in the Health Information Skills blog

Figure 3

Top 20 tags idenfied in the content analysis of UK academic blogs

environments (Open University) or were provided by an individual rather than a service where blogger and reader may feel more personally connected.

Implementation

As a result of the literature review and content analysis, the team identified some key amendments and additions for the Health Information Skills blog. First, further promotion is needed. The literature suggests that promoting the benefit to the user encourages people to engage with yet another information source. Posters around the library and flyers for enquiry desk staff to hand out are one promotional option. The team will also consider delivering an existing newsletter directly through the blog.

The blog already has an RSS feed; however, there is evidence that users are unsure how RSS works so an additional 'subscribe via email' option using Feedburner is now being added. This may encourage more users to sign up, and also compiles blog statistics. The team may post a brief explanation of how to use the RSS tool, perhaps near the start of the new academic year, to encourage new readers to make use of that option.

Over the past academic year librarians posted irregularly. We created a more formalised agreement regarding the frequency of posting and the division among team members to ensure the blog is regularly updated.

The blog does allow comments and the team would welcome the use of this feature by users. Increasing both the overall audience and the number and frequency of return visits might encourage users to interact using this feature. It may be useful to add a brief post encouraging users to engage in this way.

Outcome

The evidence within the literature and our analysis of blog activity in academic libraries indicates that there is a place for a resource such as the Health Information Skills blog. The blog sits well within the context of both literature review and a comparison with other, similar blogs.

The team will modify the blog throughout the following academic year, focusing primarily on promotion to increase the audience, and will re-evaluate the time needed to maintain such a resource in terms of audience statistics and feedback.

Reflection

Although blogging is not without its issues it would appear to be a worthwhile tool (Johnson, 2008). The health team implemented the blog as an additional method of easily accessible

support to provide information, training, news, and advice to the users we already support.

The initial aim of the blog was to create a repository of information to refer users and this is being achieved over time. As the blog develops the team feels positive about its potential, and now has a plan for further development. The team is now turning its attention to increasing the blog's audience and its impact with the hope of creating an engaging and valuable information source.

This research led us to the conclusion that continuing the blog is worthwhile. We discovered that our experience is similar to that of others, and we can learn from others who are perhaps further ahead in their blog development or use. Without this research evidence the team would have no context within which to reflect on its experience, and no external input to take this endeavour into the future.

References

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