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Cataloguing with LibraryThing: as easy as 1,2,3!

Journal Article

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Autobiographical Note

Anna Hvass, Scottish CILT (Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research). annhvass@gmail.com. I was travelling in Australia last year and before that I was Senior Information Officer in the Library & Information Services at the University of Teesside, where I completed my chartered librarian status. I have an MSc in Information Studies from Leeds Metropolitan University, having worked also as a Graduate Trainee in the Open University Library. My research interests include Web 2.0, academic reference work, communication, library anxiety, emerging technology, library perceptions, electronic libraries, and IM. I am very interested in how the use of Web 2.0 enables us to have more of a virtual presence, to collaborate and form online learning communities. Social Networking Software and web-based applications are all very interesting ways of encouraging collaborative and customisable education.

Cataloguing with LibraryThing : As Easy As 1,2,3!

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a case study about using LibraryThing as the online catalogue for the Scottish CILT Library.
Design/methodology/approach – During November 2008, LibraryThing was used to catalogue the book collection at Scottish CILT. A review of the literature informed the introduction of the new service, and an overview of how the service was set up is outlined.
Findings – The paper finds that it is possible to set up an online catalogue using LibraryThing with very little cost, very little time and very easily.
Practical implications – The author believes that the Scottish CILT has introduced a quick, cheap and easy way to catalogue a small book collection and recommend that other small libraries consider social cataloguing tools.
Originality/value – There is a shortage of publications that report the results of using social cataloguing tools in libraries.

Keywords LibraryThing, Cataloguing, Web 2.0, Social Networking

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (Scottish CILT) is a government-funded body, which provides information about languages for students and teachers, opinion formers and policy makers. We promote the learning and use of all languages of relevance to Scotland; and conduct research in support of the work of language teachers and other language professionals.

The Scottish CILT Resource Centre holds approximately 2,000 academic texts on topics relating to languages education, including linguistics, assessment, motivation and ICT. It also houses a large collection of official statistics and policy documents; the latest 5-14 teaching resources for French, German, Spanish and Italian including audio-visual materials and flashcards; language dictionaries for over fifteen languages; promotional materials for languages; professional teaching and academic journals and self access course books. Qualified teachers and trainee teachers at every level of their degree use the Centre extensively.

We had a static list of our resources on our website, which was pulled through from an excel spreadsheet; I wanted to find a way of making the catalogue available and searchable online, and updating it to make it more interactive and social. This needed to be easy, quick, inexpensive and something that I could do on my own as the only Information Officer.

Review of Catalogues

I started looking at free open source catalogues, there are plenty of options; for example, Koha; Openbiblio; Evergreen; PhpMyLibrary; Python; Weblis and I am sure that there are more.

Open source refers to software that is free and that includes the original source code used to create it so that users can modify it to make it better for them. There are many advantages, including the ability to change it to fit your needs, low cost and no restriction on using it (Boss, 2008). Open source web catalogues tend to look a lot like search engines that people who work online are already used to. They allow you to be able to refine the user-interface to make it more user-friendly, making the

research process as easy as possible (Guess, 2008). Koha Zoom, which is one of the more popular open source catalogues, offers advanced searching features like relevancy ranking, faceted searching, spell check, and RSS feeds for searches, as well as allowing you to integrate content from external web services to expand and improve on the information provided (Dalziel, 2008).

However, there are also disadvantages in using open source cataloguing software, which include, any unanticipated costs, for example for administration and maintenance, inadequate training and technical support, lack of participation, lack of remedies, and problems with scalability and speed (Boss, 2008). Therefore while these web resources are great, they involve a lot of work, are very technical, and require a lot of time and effort to get your catalogue complete.

Our collection has never been catalogued in any way and so we would have to start from the beginning. Work in the library has to keep going and we do not have the staff, the technical expertise or access to it to be able to use any of these open source resources.

While researching open source catalogues I came across information about web 2.0 cataloguing applications. For example, Gurulib, LibraryThing and Shelfari, which are the top three competitors.

Web 2.0 cataloguing applications are web based social networking sites, where people can catalogue their own collection from home. I started comparing these sites to decide which one would be best for our library. Advantages of social networking catalogues are that they are visible on the web, use a format that is known and created by the users, and also allow user input.

In general all of the sites offer similar services, however, after researching it I decided to go with LibraryThing. For non-profit and not-for-profit organisations you can pay $15 a year (£9.98) to increase your book limit from 200 to 5000 books. The other social cataloguing sites are free and you can have unlimited numbers of books catalogued, however, LibraryThing has no adverts, you can use it in different languages and it collects its data from a wide range of library catalogues, and is therefore able to support books from a wide range of countries which was very important for our collection. This along with the interface made it the best option for us to use, see Figure (1).

Figure 1 : The LibraryThing interface.

The LibraryThing interface is clear, simple and easy to use; the data comes in from Amazon, and from libraries that make their catalogues available through z39.50 protocol, for example, the Library of Congress, The British Library, and over 680 other world libraries, as well as from its users, who supplement this data by providing reviews, cataloguing information and adding tags.

What we did

We were able to use the excel spreadsheets that we have listing all of our resources, and upload them to LibraryThing, using the Universal Import function.

It was as simple as that! LibraryThing used the ISBNs to pull all the information through about each book, which meant that within a day we had a useable online catalogue, which is fully searchable, and aesthetically pleasing, with the book jackets provided. We also have a huge amount of additional information about our collection through the online reviews, and recommendations for other books we may like. Therefore LibraryThing gives more information, collaboration and communication along with the more basic information that you would get from a traditional library catalogue.

We were able to tag the books according to how they are shelved in the library making it easy to find on the shelf, the books are shelved under broad subject headings. You are also able to see if the book you are interested in is available as a partial or a full view from Google books. This is handy to see if the book is what you want before coming to the library to find it. I have also added our library to the local information area of LibraryThing (Figure 2) giving us another way of advertising and marketing our services.

Figure 2: LibraryThing local for Scottish CILT.

LibraryThing also provides you with the coding required to be able to add a Catalogue search box widget to your website (Figure 3). Which means that our users can search the catalogue directly from our site, but also have the option to click through and search from the LibraryThing interface, or browse through the resources that we have.
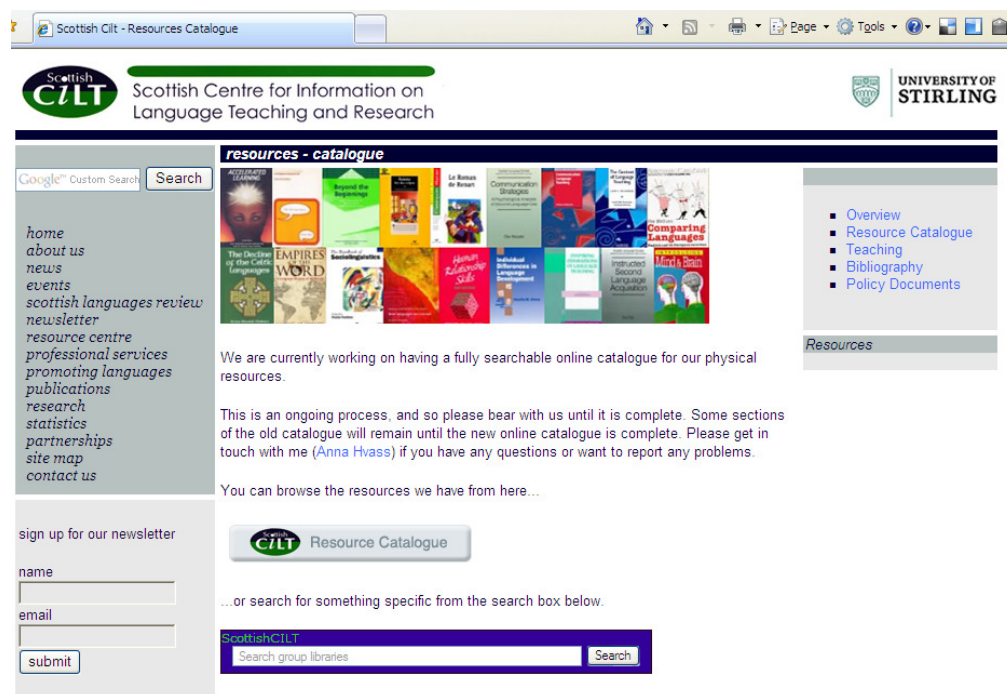

Figure 3 : Scottish CILT LibraryThing search box widget, which is embedded into our website.

Social networking Web applications and Internet technologies allow you to harness the wisdom of the crowd. LibraryThing now allows libraries to use its collective wisdom to their own library catalogues. By adding LibraryThing widgets to their OPACs, libraries can use LibraryThing tags to generate links between related books in their own collections (Wenzler, 2007) as well as have other social aspects such as book jacket images, reviews, user-generated tags, and other book recommendations. (DeZelar- Tiedman, 2008).

LibraryThing also functions as a social space, connecting people with similar libraries. Users can swap reading suggestions; it also makes book recommendations based on the collective intelligence of the other libraries. No software is required, it is user friendly and efficient, and you can access the catalogue from anywhere (Smith, 2007).

Conclusion

The catalogue looks great – I am very happy with how it looks and its functionality. There have been lots of comments, and it is great to be able to direct our users to a web-based resource that is available from anywhere and is simple to use.

I very quickly realised that traditional open source library management systems were not going to be the answer for our library. Once I had found LibraryThing and done some research into how we were going to be able to use it, we very quickly had our catalogue up and running and on the website. We have not looked back, it is a very quick, easy and cheap way of getting a great online resource which includes a lot more information than we would have the resources to be able to do on out own. I would recommend having a look and seeing whether it would be the answer for your library too.

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