SHUSH! The University of Northampton's Library Blog

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Introduction

SHUSH! is the Information Services Library Blog at the University of Northampton (http://library.northampton.ac.uk/blog/). Whilst the title is deliberately tongue-in-cheek, the content of the blog fills an educational role by providing a platform for information professionals at the University to share their knowledge and skills. This article describes how SHUSH was implemented at the library, how it is being used by librarians with particular focus on the 'current assignments' feature and some of the issues that have been encountered to date.

The development of the blog

Library staff at the University of Northampton were keen to exploit the new wave of Web 2.0 technologies that were quickly becoming available a couple of years ago. With the availability of free software (we used WordPress) and someone keen and capable to develop a blog in the library, this seemed to be a simple and logical starting point.

As soon as it was launched in 2006, librarians were encouraged to populate SHUSH with absolutely anything that could be construed as information worth knowing about. With such a broad remit, there has rarely been a time when such information has dried up, although the blog itself has been neglected at times as other work has taken priority. For ease of navigation, each blog entry is assigned a category and these headings have been kept to a minimum. The categories currently available are: current assignments, web discoveries, library updated, news and views, out and about, subject support, tools and tricks and general.

How librarians use the blog

In a surprisingly short space of time, staff found their comfort zones in terms of writing content for SHUSH. While some people prefer writing lengthy opinion pieces, others opt for practical search tips that consist of no more than a few sentences. SHUSH even seems to have brought out the creative and imaginative side in some librarians: 'Who actually opens their junk mail', 'Librarians mugged', 'Calling all shoe fetishists', 'Smoke and letters' and 'A kick in the credibles' are just some of the attention-grabbing headlines that have made an appearance.

Support for assignments

For many years the library has provided support for assignments through the Virtual Librarian web tool (http://library.northampton.ac.uk/help/index.php?view=vl). Virtual Librarian offers students a remote way of contacting staff in the library and accessing a set of interactive assignment guides. Although enquiries will only be responded to

during regular opening times, queries may be posted at the point of need and the guides may be accessed anytime, without the need for a login.

It was decided to integrate Virtual Librarian with the blog to make adding entries more intuitive than the old system, which was not being fully utilised as a resource. Any entries now added to the blog under 'current assignments' automatically appear in Virtual Librarian as well.

Benefits of the 'current assignments' feature

The current assignments feature serves a number of purposes. One of the key benefits for the library is that Academic Librarians can be seen to be proactive in terms of the support they provide for students.

Many of the online guides have been prepared from an assignment brief and, wherever possible, these are obtained from tutors in advance if the need for library support is anticipated. In the days before the blog, Virtual Librarian was promoted to academics within Boards of Studies and, as a consequence, there are a few tutors who place regular requests for guides that will help their students with forthcoming assessments or examinations. If the tutor does not provide the details, the assignment brief can usually be obtained from the university's Virtual Learning Environment. A copy of the assignment may even be directly taken from a student at the enquiry desk if the librarian perceives it to be a good idea to extend support to other students.

The *current assignments* feature is especially helpful at times when there are high volumes of enquiries from students undertaking the same assignment. The availability of an interactive guide to show to students can alleviate pressure at the enquiry desk, especially if the librarian on duty does not specialise in the subject. Even if the librarian does have expertise in the subject, it saves a good deal of repetition. A recent example of this is when students used the enquiry desk, during welcome week at the start of the autumn term, to find out about the various library systems available. It transpired that a large cohort of students undertaking an Information Sciences module were set a task requiring them, as users of the library, to familiarise themselves with the systems. The object of the task was for students to actually experience using the systems, although they seem to have misunderstood what was being asked of them. Using input from the library's Systems Manager it was possible to put together a guide to the various systems that would give the students a starting point rather than an answer. The guide encouraged the students to test out the different systems, including the self-service machines and the library catalogue.

The online assignment guides can also be a suitable accompaniment to information skills workshops or lectures. It is often more sensible to direct students to the blog or Virtual Librarian in the session rather than giving out endless handouts. Students may access these handouts after the session, which can be beneficial to those who missed the workshop for whatever reason. The guides can be adapted for almost any purpose, contain as much or as little information as is required and provide hyperlinks to relevant online resources.

Issues to date

One of the main issues with the blog is in keeping the content interesting and up to date. Whilst it is important to maintain the currency of any information

service, one of the problems we have found is that unless information is being continually added, a 'current assignments' entry often ends up at the top of the page. Although the assignment guides are useful, there are only relevant to a particular group of students. The system does not allow you to pick and choose which items are listed first and new posts are automatically dropped at the top of the page. Therefore, it is necessary to keep adding new content to refresh the blog as often as possible.

It is important that librarians do not simply reiterate what is in the news or on the BBC Website. The starting point for any blog entry may well be a news article or something heard on the radio, but putting it all together in a package that makes it relevant and accessible to individuals in higher education requires deeper consideration.

Feedback about the information resources and services is another important area for librarians. Although only Information Services staff can add content to SHUSH, there is a facility for readers to add comments to individual entries. To date there have been 116 posts and 97 comments contained within 8 of the categories. Some of the posts have received one-off comments while others have evidently sparked discussion amongst their readers. Aside from the specific comments from users, feedback from information professionals at other institutions has been positive, which is encouraging for librarians who have contributed to the blog. As far as blogs go, SHUSH is beginning to be recognised as an invaluable tool for sharing knowledge and skills. It therefore comes as no surprise that one of its main user groups are, in fact, librarians.