

Web 2.0

Being creative with Web 2.0 in academic liaison

Using Ning, Delicious and Netvibes, **Sarah Oxford** is finding new ways to support academics and students. Each of her websites has a clear purpose – and growing numbers of users.



MANY OF YOU, like me, will have been inspired by some excellent workshops, courses and conferences demonstrating the benefits of social bookmarking, networking and blogging for libraries. But how many of us have implemented these ideas? After a period of playing with the ‘toys’ available, I thought it was time to use these technologies to enhance my role as Academic Liaison Librarian for the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester.

Initially I developed an Education Network (using the Ning social network platform) and Delicious sites for students and staff. I thought it would be useful to bring together all the important, free, information available: government documents, the national strategies, and research and evidence websites such as the UK Educational Evidence Portal, CERUK and the Teacher Training Resource Bank.

That was in August 2008; today, the sites have expanded to become an integral part of my teaching, liaison and collections work. I also maintain a third site, on Netvibes, which brings together the key websites for students and staff in a visually appealing way.

These three sites¹ have become tools for empowering users with an interest in the fields of education and early childhood. They have helped to establish direct links between students, staff and their librarian, and demonstrate to academic staff how their librarian is able to support their teaching and research needs in innovative ways.

The Ning platform is free (though you can pay a fee to remove adverts) and is easy to set up. You can customise your site to include RSS feeds, a notes area, a blog, chat forums, videos and more. I promote it as the ‘first stop’ for information; from here, users can link to the Delicious and Netvibes sites, I can provide news and advice through my blog, and the notes area offers important information and guidance on library resources, study skills and tutorials. The notes

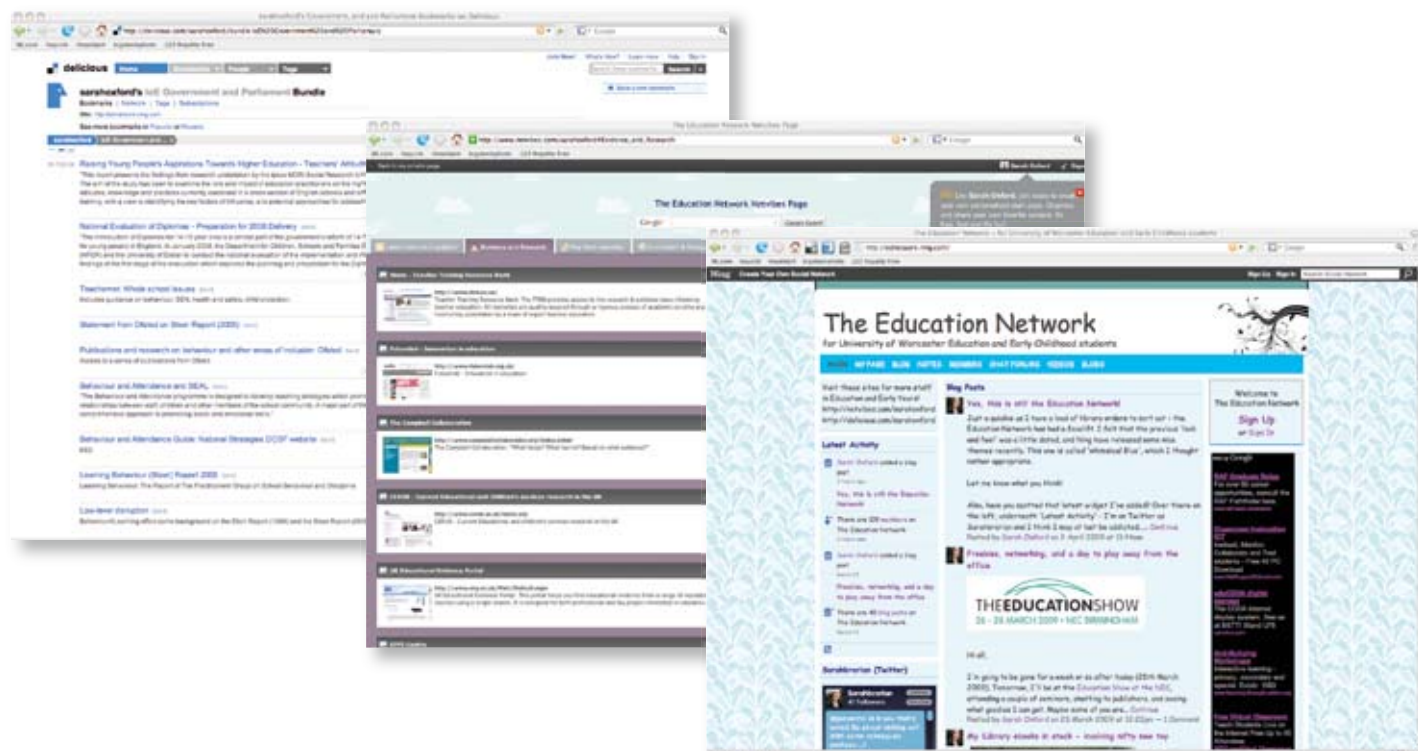
have proved invaluable for answering user enquiries, particularly from those off-campus, as I can refer them to the appropriate note to answer their question. The notes and blog are also useful for responding to issues raised in course committees by staff and course representatives; all students have the opportunity to read my response directly. Recently I have started to email academic staff when I have put up a note or blog post which I feel would be useful for students and staff to read. For example, one of the most popular blog posts is ‘Have you read an e-book?’ which promotes our growing collection of e-books. Academic staff are clearly passing this information to students as the number of ‘hits’ for the promoted web page shoots up immediately afterwards. I use Google Analytics to monitor usage, visitors, top content and other statistics for the Education Network.²

Students and staff can become members of the Education Network although I have made the network public so that anyone can view the different areas of the site without becoming a member. They do have to sign up if they want to comment on blog posts or contribute to chat forums.

In the past I have provided opportunities during teaching sessions for students to sign up, but it is important to bear in mind that not everyone will want to add their details, for reasons including privacy and confidence with technology. I have responded to this by advising students that I will not pass on any information they provide, and that they can change their profile information so that they cannot be identified if they wish. And I encourage those reluctant to use an online tool to try it out – it is not compulsory, just an extra resource. The membership rate is encouraging. Some members are from partner colleges and institutions, including students based in Northern Ireland. These are the students most likely to feel isolated from the activities of the university. It is always a boost when a



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My Delicious site bookmarks all of the key websites, reports and research relevant to students and staff in Education.

References

- 1 <http://ednetwork.ning.com>
- 2 <http://delicious.com/sarahoxford>
- 3 www.netvibes.com/sarahoxford
- 4 www.google.com/analytics

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member of academic staff joins the network. I have received very positive feedback about communication between the Institute of Education and the library overall, and I believe that the Education Network has been a key factor. Most publications on education policy, research and the curriculum are now available online, with many ‘online only’, so it is important to ensure students can find these quickly and easily. I receive emails each week which update me on latest news and publications. I could forward these to academic staff, but would they reach the students? Are students aware of these resources? In response to these issues, I developed my Delicious site to bookmark all of the key websites, reports and research relevant to students and staff in Education. These bookmarks are available for anyone to view, and those with a Delicious account can add me to their network. Delicious has been improved in recent months – a particularly useful feature is the ability to create ‘bundles’ of tags. I have bundles including ‘IoE Early Years’, ‘IoE Government and Parliament and ‘IoE Research and News’. Be warned: it is easy to lose hours of your day finding new arrangements for your bundles and tags. There are now more than 1,000 bookmarks on my Delicious site and it grows daily. It is encouraging that academic staff are starting to add links for the site (and indeed the Education Network site) to their VLE (virtual learning environment) modules and reading lists. My Netvibes public page – otherwise known as the Education Network Netvibes Page – organises the key websites in Education and Early Childhood using tabs. Netvibes allows you to combine applications (or widgets) on your page in any way you like. I’ve chosen a mixture of news feeds, link modules and web pages. The ‘Latest News and Updates’ tab introduces the site, and provides feeds and links for sites including BBC News, Every Child Matters, my

Delicious site and the Education Network. Other tabs include ‘Key Government Websites’, ‘Evidence and Research’, and ‘UW Websites’. It is meant to be a more visually appealing way of quickly accessing generic, key websites. Ultimately, it gives users a choice: they can find any of these sites by searching or browsing Delicious, or they can access a selection of sites directly through Netvibes. You can also create your own private Netvibes page; I find the ‘To Do List’ and bookmarking applications invaluable. It is important to make sure that each of the three websites has a clear purpose. The Education Network is the main website, and creates opportunities for direct communication with staff and students; the Delicious site is an additional online, searchable resource for reports, research and key websites; and the Netvibes site offers a selection of those key websites. Each site links to the others, through news feeds or bookmarks, and all are listed on my own subject page on the University of Worcester’s ILS (Information & Library Services) website. The success of these websites depends mainly on two things: promotion across the university, particularly to academic staff, and my dedication to keeping them up to date. There are many ways to get your website ‘out there’: through the VLE, on the departmental noticeboards, at inductions and course committees, on the library web page, on your email signature. Build it into your teaching plans and enquiries, and mention your website at every opportunity. Each small success – a new member of the network, or a positive email from staff or a student – motivates me to add a new blog post, or bookmark a selection of new sites. Building the reputation of the websites is a slow process but very worthwhile; they have developed even beyond my own expectations. Would a social network or bookmarking site benefit you and your users? Try it and see where it takes you. [U]