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Innovations Affecting Us — Enhancing the OPAC through LibraryThing

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Column Editor's Note: *Social Networking and social Websites have been prominent in library technology discussions recently. Libraries have worked to integrate popular social sites such as Facebook and MySpace into the library's presence in patrons lives. LibraryThing (www.librarything.com) is one social site with a more library oriented purpose that may add value to library services for users. This month, Innovations Affecting Us is fortunate to be guest edited by Elaine Robbins, Reference and Interlibrary Loan Librarian at the College of Charleston <robbinse@cofc.edu>. In this column Elaine discusses the ins and outs of using LibraryThing to catalog book collections online and delves into how such a site can enhance library services.*

Libraries' most central goal in this digital era is to provide ways to make the library relevant and more functional for its users. Just as academic libraries try innovative programs such as roving reference librarians to reach their patrons, most effective information centers try to predict what users want and tailor their resources and services to meet them. If librarians can forecast the trends of library use and research, then perhaps the library can continue to achieve its goal. In the same vein as MySpace (www.myspace.com), Facebook (www.facebook.com) and other social networking sites, patrons are altering the methods they use to retrieve information: an interactive OPAC that uses techniques from other Websites to engage the user is perhaps just the trend that libraries need to borrow today.

Tim Spalding, the founder of **LibraryThing** (www.librarything.com), has tuned into this trend by creating a site dedicated to the user. Members can upload their personal library and catalog their selections using tags they supply. For example, **Mark Twain's The Gilded Age** is tagged with the following: 19th century, American Literature, **Mark Twain**, satire, fiction, and classics — just to name a few of about 85 in the tag cloud. A tag cloud is a visual representation of the tags supplied for an item — they are often alphabetized and show their "weight" (or frequency) with font size or color (see *The Gilded Age* tag cloud <http://www.librarything.com/work/37462>). Items added to a user's personal library can be viewed in various display styles including one which features the LC

subject headings and classification. Users may also link to other members' libraries to discover similarly cataloged/tagged books and to discuss recommendations; individual book pages feature links to booksellers' sites for purchasing information as well as the book description. Just as more popular social networking sites draw on the appeal of interaction and personalization, **LibraryThing** has also tapped into this phenomenon — not only with the millennial generation, but with any user interested in learning more about literature and connecting with people. But how does this relate to public and academic libraries? If we examine the popularity of this site (over 306,000 members in a little over two years) we can identify the needs of our current and future patrons.

LibraryThing for Libraries offers the incorporation of a few lines of HTML to participating libraries' OPACs for free for a 60 day trial, and then afterwards for a fee; the widgets available include user tagging, reviews, and user ratings. **Spalding** has capitalized on his ideas of how to make the OPAC fun; specifically, he recommends allowing the patron to get lost in the collection — to explore the online catalog through self-assigned tags and recommendation links that also point to outside sources on the Internet. More of **Spalding's** suggestions can be found at <http://www.librarything.com/thingology/2006/12/is-your-opac-fun-manifesto-of-sorts.php>. This allows for a participatory experience in which the user has more control over their searching; just as in the personal library that one creates through **LibraryThing**, the OPAC version for institutions can make the patron want to revisit the OPAC to learn more about what their fellow readers are recommending, tagging, and discussing. This exploration taps into the "MySpace generation"...and those patrons that want to explore and have fun when searching an OPAC. For reference librarians (who also want to have fun with the OPAC) it makes our job of instructing patrons on how to search the catalog easier and more engaging. Instead of the linear approach of simply retrieving titles that match the search, it provides interactive, in-depth techniques. Of course, there are many ILS vendors which offer similar features such as tagging and user comments; integrating **LibraryThing for Libraries** into an OPAC is simply one method of OPAC enhancement.

Danbury Public Library in Connecticut (<http://www.danburylibrary.org/>) was the initial beta testing library of **LibraryThing for Libraries**. In **Kate Sheehan's** article *LibraryThing for Libraries* (*Library Journal*, Summer 2007, p. 3), she describes a search performed for a patron using **LibraryThing**. The patron needed a novel about Ellis Island; because it can be difficult for a patron (and sometimes a librarian) to determine the most effective LC subject headings to search (in this case Immigrants — United States — Fiction), time and patience are needed for both patron and librarian. As reference librarians know, the accuracy and efficiency of your catalog search

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dictates patron satisfaction or frustration. As **Sheehan** notes, the book would have probably been found eventually through the traditional catalog search, but perhaps at the cost of the patron's time or patience. With **LibraryThing**, the user-supplied tag Ellis Island pointed to novels as well as non-fiction sources about the subject; the tag clouds are indicative of the way the users categorize books, so searching them adds a human element to the OPAC.

To build on the usability of the OPAC, the **Similar Books** feature suggests further reading and will link you to a specific title's corresponding catalog record. Perhaps an added feature in the future could include a link to the **Interlibrary Loan** request form interface wherein the information is imported into a request form. Successful OPACs must anticipate, forecast, and then model the library's OPAC after user trends — these trends are nowhere more apparent than in the social networking success story of **Spalding's LibraryThing**. To stay relevant in our digital society and to remain a player in our patrons' research, we must pay attention to what the user is showing us through their use of related Websites like **Spalding's** creation. I recommend that everyone tour **LibraryThing** and upload a few books to a personal library. It is quickly apparent how easily the interface functions and how users would want to revisit the site to discover new titles being added as well as new tags, recommendations, and reviews. 🌱

