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Innovations Affecting Us — Enhancing the OPAC through LibraryThing

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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 Web sites 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.

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In the same vein as MySpace, Facebook and other social networking sites, patrons are altering the methods they use to retrieve information: an interactive OPAC that uses techniques from other Web sites to engage the user is perhaps just the trend that libraries need to borrow today.

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; her search was aided by the Interlibrary Loan (ILO) service (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