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Infodoodads – Building a New Blog as a Team

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Another blog?

In December 2006, our friend and librarian colleague, Laurie Bridges, asked us if we wanted to start a blog with her and a couple of other librarian friends. We said “sure,” but Laurie is always full of ideas, and we almost always say “sure” and then think about it a little longer to see if the idea really pans out. At that time there were already well over 50 million existing blogs with millions of new ones being created every month; plus, there were already hundreds of library blogs out there. We kept up with several library and technology blogs regularly, but hadn’t really thought about adding our voices to the crowd. Fast forward a year and a half and we’ve become regular *infodoodads* bloggers, and over 800 people subscribe (as of mid-January 2008) to our blog, *infodoodads*, according to FeedBurner. How did our motley crew of hesitant library blog readers make the transition to successful and dedicated bloggers? Several elements were pivotal for us, including setting up a collaborative blogging model, successful promotion of the blog, and choosing a topic that interests all six bloggers.

Getting Started

So back to the beginning – how did we start writing *infodoodads* and perhaps more importantly, why did we start writing *infodoodads*? After Laurie’s initial request to start a

blogging group, we began to discuss what we wanted to write about. Besides being librarians, a common element that already tied the six of us together was our desire to learn more about technology, especially free web-based technology. Because all of us were already reading technology blogs to try and keep up with what is happening in the ever-shifting landscape of technology and Web 2.0, we decided this was a topic that we were both interested in and could manage to easily research. We also all happen to work for an institution that highly values innovation, so focusing on new and innovative Web 2.0 practices and tools would be a natural tie-in with our professional lives as well.

Once we settled on the larger framework for our blog - exciting new tools on the internet - we had to work through some more of the specifics of our topic selection. Would our blog focus just on library tools? Should we limit the tools we discussed to freely available ones? We quickly decided that we wanted our scope to be as broad as possible. Although our interests might naturally tend to librarian-oriented tools, we also wanted to be able to discuss innovations in shopping, maps, hobbies, and travel on the web. In retrospect this was a great decision, primarily because we do not live in a library-only vacuum, and our knowledge about information seeking and organization has been enriched by learning how people in these other areas create Web 2.0 tools. We also thought that by not narrowing our focus to just library sites, we could attract a wider audience, so we emphasized the new technologies part of our mission over the librarian aspect of our backgrounds.

We decided to focus on freely available tools. This was an easy decision on many levels. We don't have a budget to experiment with costly subscription-only services and we assumed many of our readers don't either. Also, people are often most willing to experiment

with new technologies when cost is not an issue. This decision has had a minimal effect on the number of sites we have been able to review because many developers rely on advertising for funding rather than a subscription model.

At this point in our brainstorming, we also tried to determine what the purpose of writing this blog would be for us, the writers. It turns out that we have as many motivations for writing *infodoodads* as we have writers (maybe even twice as many reasons!). Some of us simply wanted to learn more about blogs, both how to write them and how to use them. Some of us really wanted to stay ahead of the technological curve and felt that this would be a great motivator to make sure we kept at it. Others of us wanted more writing practice in general and felt that this would help us become better professional writers. Finally, writing a blog had the potential to provide us with a forum at the national level.

Once we had our philosophical underpinnings in place, it was time to get down to the nitty gritty of choosing blog publishing software. We decided to go with WordPress, because it was free, had an easy-to-use interface, we could customize it to include our logo and page design, and one of our writers had used it for another blog. We also purchased a domain name and found a server to host our site. These subscription costs are rotated and shared among the bloggers.

Our initial planning had taken place mostly via email and in a couple of informal chats. However, when it came to what has turned out to be one of the most important aspects of *infodoodads* - the collaborative nature of our blog - we needed to make a more concerted effort to guarantee we were all on the same page. Writing with other people can be tricky, and not all of us had had experience with collaborative writing. For this part of the blogging process, we

needed to create clear expectations and methods of taking care of the business of writing. We started by determining how often we would each blog. Because there were six of us, we decided the simplest approach would be for each of us to take a day of the week and blog once per week. We had begun our trial blogging period in a much more haphazard fashion, so it was a relief to not feel as if we were posting over each other's blogs or wondering when we should blog again.

Many of us read the same technology blogs and had been accustomed to looking in similar places for information, so we were concerned that we might end up stealing each other's ideas. To help prevent this we created a Google Groups page for new blogging ideas and put our name by an idea to indicate that it was claimed. We have also learned to pay attention to drafts stored in our WordPress account to make sure no one else has already started a blog on a topic we are interested in discussing. Occasionally we have stepped on someone else's toes, but we have also learned to search different information sources for our ideas, thereby creating a richer pool of resources to blog about.

Because we had a couple of weeks of blogging practice by this time, we also began discussing the "voice" and look we wanted for *infodoodads*. We agreed that an informal writing style best matched our tastes and the medium we were using. In addition, we acknowledged that each blogger would probably develop his or her own voice and writing style, which was fine and would provide some variety for our readers. All of us agreed that in addition to the style of writing we chose, the way the blog posts looked was an important consideration. We wanted our blog to be visually engaging, so we decided to include images or screen shots of the tools we were blogging about as often as possible.

All these decisions were helping us create our blogging "brand." However, it wasn't enough to have carved out a particular blogging niche. We wanted to make sure people would actually find our blog and read it. This required some promotion, which was where having a blogger with a marketing background really helped. We sent out information about *infodoodads* to several state library association listservs, added our blog to several bloggings, promoted the blog on social networking websites like Facebook and Ning, commented actively on other blog websites, forwarded appropriate blog posts to major library-related website editors, gave readers the option to email posts to their friends, and used good old-fashioned word of mouth communication as much as possible.

Writing: How it Happens

In the beginning some of us were more comfortable than others putting ourselves up for public scrutiny. What if we repeated something someone else already said? What if we said something someone didn't like? What if we said something wrong? After agreeing to once-per-week posts, however, we started to get used to publishing posts that were "good enough." This isn't to say we don't investigate tools carefully. While sometimes we review things we use regularly, often our reviews are of tools we have just discovered (and we don't always continue to use the tools afterwards, either--some stick, many don't.) While we occasionally contact a products' creator(s) with questions, we most often read the "about us" or other documentation closely, then sign up, log in, or otherwise try the tool. We sometimes send invitations to other infodoodaders, if it's a social tool and we need to find some friends quickly. Then we try to figure out who might find the tool useful and under what circumstances (particularly if there is a librarian angle that seems appropriate), and look for any constructive criticism we can offer the

creators since most of the tools we review are fairly new (sometimes still in beta) and they typically welcome user feedback.

As bloggers, we welcome reader feedback. Not long after clicking "publish" on a post, we're usually back at *infodoodads.com* checking to see if anyone has responded. We frequently check one of our statistics-gathering tools (right now we have free accounts at both statcounter and getclicky) to see where our readers are coming from, if they're finding us via search engines, other blogs, or if they're our regular readers, clicking through from their subscription in Bloglines or Google Reader. Some posts live a short life, while others continue to garner hits and comments for days or even weeks afterwards. We also check to see what part of the world readers are coming from. We've had readers from at least six of the seven continents (not sure about Antarctica) and we've had incoming links from blogs written in Danish, Hungarian, Vietnamese, and French, just to name a few. Not only is it fun to see how quickly we've gained a global audience, it's also an important reminder to consider the usefulness and usability of tools for people who live in countries outside of North America and/or people whose most comfortable language is something other than English.

We don't really know when a post is going to prove extra-popular, though perhaps not surprisingly any posts about book-related tools seem to spur discussion. Sometimes a fortunately-worded title attracts a lot of search engine traffic (particularly true of a post titled "Make your own video games from Scratch") and the occasional gratuitous mention of a celebrity (e.g., "HealthMap: Angelia Jolie's Favorite Website?") amused us, even if the resulting search traffic might not have resulted in new long-term readers (or maybe it did, who knows?) Every post doesn't have to be great; some tools are going to have a limited audience and some

are just for fun, but there's always the chance that the next post will be exactly what someone needs.

Why blog?

Every "secret" to becoming a more proficient and prolific writer includes some version of the admonition to just "write more." Even without an established audience, blogging provides a low-pressure yet potentially meaningful platform on which to compose. Posts can be as long (or short) as they need to be, with no word or length requirements. If one post falls flat, there's always the possibility that the next one will strike a chord, stimulating comments and driving traffic. Additionally, while regular posting is critical to building and maintaining readership, a missed day or two (or even a brief announced hiatus, as we had for the two weeks over the Christmas & New Year's holidays) doesn't cause any alarm.

On the other hand, writing collaboratively for a growing audience does create a feeling of obligation that manifests itself in a sort of constant prowling for new tools or services that would be of interest to our readers. Though we all began with a short list of favorite tools to review, it didn't take long to exhaust the list of tools we were already using regularly, and we soon had to begin actively searching for new stuff to share. We read many others' technology-focused blogs, watch for interesting developments in the tools we already use, browse the web incessantly, and sign up for betas, alerts, and tweets that help us keep up with the stream of new doodads that continue to appear. We comment on one another's posts because we're truly interested in what our co-authors have written, and also because our styles and sources are varied enough that we're as likely as the rest of our readers to find a new favorite tool in a colleague's post. While for us blogging collaboratively typically means we each individually author a post a week, we

occasionally compose a post to which we've all contributed. These posts usually start as one author's idea, then generate a small flurry of emails as the rest of us jump in. One of our all-time most popular posts, our "Top 13 Web 2.0 Tools for Librarians" was a group effort written in August 2007, that is still generating traffic.

In addition to the pleasure of finding and reviewing all kinds of fun new tools, hearing or reading praise for *infodoodads* is very motivating. It's hard not to have a little "Sally Field moment" when someone lets us know they enjoy our work or when we see an incoming link from a "big-name" library blog. It's exciting when the creators of the tools we review drop by to thank us for our post or to add some additional information to the conversation. Watching the number of subscribers grow lets us know that we still have an interested audience, even when sometimes it feels like there can't possibly be more useful tools out there.

Also, as pre-tenure librarians we're helping to introduce Web 2.0 technology to the tenure process. While blogging is certainly not a traditional form of scholarship, it does have a measurable impact that in some ways exceeds the impact of more traditional publications. We know there are people out there who have made (small, to be sure) changes in the way they work with information because of a tool they discovered on *infodoodads*. We know in part because they have ways to tell us; they leave comments or link to our posts from their own blogs. Blogging at *infodoodads* has also led to more traditional forms of scholarship; in addition to this article, reviews of WorkHack and Netvibes were re-written for an upcoming issue of Public Services Quarterly, and some infodoodaders will present on collaborative blogging at the Computers in Libraries 2008 Conference as well as at Online Northwest 2008.

So what?

As the numbers above make clear, there are plenty of blogs out there already. That said, if you want to blog, are interested in something, can share it in an accessible way, and are willing to promote your work, you will find readers out there interested in what you have to say. Your audience may be as local as your library, but you might find yourself with a global following. Blogging with partners is a great way to maintain a frequent posting schedule and to keep the content interesting. Free and easily available software makes it easy for us to bring together our varied experiences as well as our individual talents for technology, for marketing, and for writing. It's also work that is fun and low-key, yet appreciated and meaningful. If you've been thinking of starting a blog, round up a few friends and/or colleagues and go for it. We'll know you've taken the plunge when we see *infodoodads* linked from your blogroll!