

InfoTech Column
Due Dec. 20, 2006
Information Outlook, Feb. 2007 Issue

15 Minutes a Day: A Personal Learning Management Strategy

By Stephen Abram

Last year, at this very time, I wrote my column on “43 Things I (or You) Might Want to Do This Year.” (Information Outlook - Feb 2006). I had no idea that column would spark some great and creative initiatives around the world!

Learning 2.0

My new best friend, Helene Blowers of The Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenberg County read the column and a light bulb of megawatt proportions lit up over her head. She thought, “Hey! This is a way to easily increase the learning capacity of a large system like ours to adopt all these new Web/Library 2.0 tools and technologies and to diversify the ways in which we deliver training.” So, she went and got executive guidance and permission to launch a system-wide, voluntary learning program called “Learning 2.0” and loosely based on the website 43Things.com (which allows you to set, share and track personal goals) and my column. She launched the program with a website and offered a manageable 23 Things that people could learn, track and prove in order to earn an MP3 player for successful completion. The aim was to get learning tasks done in about 15 minutes a day and to engage the majority of staff for nine weeks. While it actually continued a little longer, the project was a roaring success. People started to participate from around the world even without the incentive of an MP3 player. Every employee who finished had their name put into a draw for a laptop computer (and the drawing was broadcast through YouTube!). The majority of staff participated and a majority of staff completed the course of tasks. Feedback was universally positive and most staff can’t wait to start again and some have suggested they’d do it without the prizes.

What did the program look like?

Listed below are 23 Things (or small exercises) that you can do on the web to explore and expand your knowledge of the Internet and Web 2.0. Staff were encouraged to complete all 23 items on this list by an assigned date (somewhat longer than 9 weeks in order to allow for some flexibility and to engage as many staff as possible). This is a self-paced exercise and staff were encouraged to go at a rate that fits their work schedule. Nothing about the schedule below was mandatory. The activities were hands-on with a few experiential exercises, short readings and discovery work as well as proofs that the work was done and understood. This list has a slight public library focus but you get the idea:

Week 1: Introduction – Learn to learn this way

1. Read this blog & find out about the program.
2. Discover a few pointers from lifelong learners and learn how to nurture your own learning process.

Week 2: Blogging

3. Set up your own blog & add your first post.
4. Register your blog with 'central' and begin your Learning 2.0 journey.

Week 3: Photos & Images

5. Explore Flickr and learn about this popular image hosting site.
6. Have some Flickr fun and discover some Flickr mashups & 3rd party sites.
7. Create a blog post about anything technology related that interests you this week.

Week 4: RSS & Newsreaders

8. Learn about RSS feeds and setup your own Bloglines newsreader account.
9. Locate a few useful library related blogs and/or news feeds.

Week 5: Play Week

10. Play around with an online image generator or create an avatar.
11. Take a look at LibraryThing and catalog some of your favorite books.
12. Roll your own search tool with Rollyo.

Week 6: Tagging, Folksonomies & Technorati

13. Learn about tagging and discover a Del.icio.us (a social bookmarking site)
14. Explore Technorati and learn how tags work with blog posts.
15. Read a few perspectives on Web 2.0, Library 2.0 and the future of libraries and blog your thoughts.

Week 7: Wikis

16. Learn about wikis and discover some innovative ways that libraries are using them.
17. Add an entry to the Learning 2.0 SandBox wiki.

Week 8: Online Applications & Tools

18. Take a look at some online productivity (word processing, spreadsheet) tools.
19. Explore any site from the Web 2.0 awards list, play with it and write a blog post about your findings.

Week 9: Podcasts, Video & Downloadable audio

20. Discover YouTube and a few sites that allow users to upload and share videos.
21. Discover some useful search tools for locating podcasts.
22. Take a look at the titles available on NetLibrary and learn how to download audiobooks.
23. Summarize your thoughts about this program on your blog.

A Support Area: The Technology Petting Zoo

Part of learning these new things is having the tools to do so. Some libraries with large staffs have set up technology petting zoos. It's not too complicated. You just create a cupboard and stock it with an iPod, MP3 players, camera phones,

digital video, e-books readers, various gaming devices, text messaging tools, digital cameras and firewire, and more. You also ensure you have a PC that can allow folks to post their photos to Flickr or videos to YouTube or whatever. For a cheaper way perhaps people can share their own, friend's or family's e-toys for a day. You encourage brown-baggers where each one teaches one. This method can also allow staff to experience adaptations for ADA compliance personally as well. Everyone gets better skilled, experienced and more talented. The magic sauce is to keep it voluntary. You create an awesome team!

By the end of this first phase of learning new things, my early observations are that there were four positive outcomes:

- Staff was engaged, excited, and motivated. They had fun and used play as a way to learn. Peer support and coaching emerged as a value in the workplace.
- The entire library system's skill and competency base was moved to a new plateau. The entire System was better prepared to adopt new and critical technologies for their success.
- It was all accomplished in an extremely cost-effective and timely manner without disrupting regular service.
- The System was internationally recognized for being innovative, creative and showing leadership. Article and book deals, invites to conferences and webcasts as well as positive interviews in the local press and library press happened.

I had the honour of being at the launch of the Learning 2.0 initiative at the Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service in Melbourne Australia. Just check out their site to see more about the fantastic experience over the length of the program. This Learning 2.0 thing has enormous potential.

Personal and team/group morale increases alone are worth the effort.

Finding the 15 Minutes

Yes, we are all very busy people. In the situations I am aware of there was enormous teamwork involved to ensure that everyone made the time to learn. That in itself is a major accomplishment in cultural change in creating a value system around progress, innovation and learning and having all staff, including management, visibly demonstrate support. People just spelled each other off during working hours to make sure everyone got some time to learn – just 15 minutes. Some professionals made the commitment to do the coursework at home and, obviously, got so engaged that they spent more than 15 minutes but by then it was fun. Some people set aside 15 minutes from every lunch hour. Some people tied it to their morning exercise and scheduled it. Some filled little quiet moments in the day such as reading while photocopying or lulls in service queues on desk duty.

How about it SLA?

I'll bet such a personal learning adventure could be designed for the needs of special library workers with activities focused on specialized research tools, intranet tools, academic tagging, and social networking, among a host of other things and sites! Perhaps learning about free PDF makers, Google Scholar and MS Live Academic could fit in too. Maybe there's stuff to be learning from commercial databases in partnership. Anyway, it would be quite easy to build your own sandbox using 43Things.com. Then again, wouldn't a team be better for many of us. Could we encourage each other? Would a little peer pressure and competition be so bad? Could we spend a few months using micro-amounts of time, 15 minutes a day, elevating ourselves and all of our colleagues to a new plateau? Can we do this virtually with mentors or partners?

Could SLA undertake this sort of self-directed learning initiative? Can we do it on an international scale? Are there niche items to learn in our chapters, divisions and other units? Can we build a collection of learning objects and scenarios? Can this become part of Click University? We certainly have a plethora of tools available to us from our association that we could choose to learn at a deeper level. Perhaps we can do an SLA self-directed learning about the association and our rich website and tool set?

I, for one, would like to try and I am looking for SLA volunteers to pull this together in the SLA, special librarian and information professional context. If you're interested, drop me a line. All it takes is a few energetic members and a yearning for learning.

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Check It Out:

Learning 2.0 (The Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenberg County blog)

<http://plcmcl2-about.blogspot.com/>

YouTube Finale:

<http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com/>

Yarra Plenty Online Learning Blog (Australia)

<http://www.yarraplentyonlinelearning.blogspot.com/>

For more information about the two Learning 2.0 projects mentioned in this article, 60 minute webcasts of January and February 2007 sessions by the leaders of these projects are archived at the SirsiDynix Institute or as MP3 files there or on iTunes.

SirsiDynix Institute (free online learning)

<http://www.sirsidynixinstitute.com>