TechMatters: Going Where the College Students Are: Facebook and the Library

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"Go where your users are" is the mantra I keep hearing at conferences, on discussion lists, and in the professional literature. I work in a university library and there is no doubt in my mind that Facebook is "where my users are" currently. According to their statistics, Facebook maintains an "85% market share among 4-year U.S. universities" (http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php? statistics). Given the popularity of this particular social networking site amongst students, it is certainly worth exploring if, and how, it might be possible to leverage it as an instructional tool.

Join the Facebook Community

If you haven't done so already, the first step in getting to "where your users are" involves setting up a Facebook profile. Fortunately, this is a very simple process. From the Facebook home page (http://www.facebook.com), click the green "Sign Up" button and supply the required information which includes your name, e-mail address, a password, and your date of birth.

Once you have a new account, you may begin customizing your profile by adding as much, or as little, personal information as you are comfortable sharing. You also have the option of changing your privacy settings in order to control access to that information. Obviously, if you are planning to use your Facebook profile to interact with your students, you will want to keep it professional. Personally, I've opted to make my Facebook profile accessible to anyone in my network (i.e., Central Michigan University) so that my students can view the information that I post and interact with me without necessarily becoming my "friend."

Connect with Students in Facebook

Having established a profile on Facebook, you will need to go further if you really want to engage with your students in this forum. A "build it and they will come" approach won't work well in Facebook. Remember, this is a "social networking" tool, so the key to success is to be "social" and to "network." But, what does this mean in practice?

First, you need to begin building a network of "friends." This is essential due to the viral nature of Facebook relationships. The more people you befriend, the more opportunities their friends will have to discover that you are participating in the network. I found that a good way to start was by befriending the students that I work with at the reference desk. In general, I found these students to be receptive to my overtures although some did not choose to accept my invitation. Once you have a few student friends, others will begin discovering your profile and you will start to receive friend requests. Almost immediately, I began to receive unsolicited invitations from other students (typically those that I had taught in the past), although admittedly in modest numbers. In addition, you might consider letting the students in the classes that you teach know that you have a profile and that you are open to communicating with them in this manner.

Once you begin to establish a network of friends, you need to start being "social." In Facebook, this means that you need to have an active profile. Consider updating your status on a regular basis to let students know that you are available to talk to them. The "status" feature allows you to provide a short sentence to let your friends know what you are doing, thinking, or feeling at a given point in time. For example, my status could be general such as "Krista is in her office" or "Krista is at the reference desk," or more specific such as "Krista is eager to help ECO 201 students find articles for their term paper" immediately following a targeted instructional session. Also, you might want to post notes with research tips or interesting library news. The goal is to demonstrate that you are an active participant in the space (i.e., not just logging-in once every week or two) so that they will keep returning to your profile and hopefully feel comfortable contacting you when they need help.

Connect with Colleagues in Facebook

Because so many of our students have adopted Facebook as a "place to be," many librarians have also established their own profiles and are using this tool to interact with colleagues and discuss issues of professional interest. In fact, a search for "librarians" in Facebook brings up over 500 different groups for and/or about librarians. If you are interested in discovering ways to use Facebook as an instructional tool, two of these groups may prove particularly useful.

1. Librarians and Facebook

http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2210901334

Discussion in this group concerns ways librarians can and are using Facebook to communicate and engage with students in this social space. Interesting and useful topics of discussion posted to the group wall have included stories about successful student/librarian Facebook interactions, notifications of relevant continuing education opportunities, as well as announcements of new Facebook features relevant to librarians. As an example, this is where I first learned about the new "Facebook Pages" option that allows organizations, including libraries, to develop institutional profiles to promote their services.

2. FacebookAppsForLibraries

http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2469777131

Recently, Facebook released a platform to allow developers to create their own applications. Several libraries have already begun to develop applications to integrate library tools into Facebook (see below). This group provides a forum for announcing such applications, as well as sharing ideas and code. This is a great group to join if you want to learn how other librarians are experimenting and extending the library's presence within the Facebook platform.

Explore and Develop Library Applications in Facebook

This recent platform change has caused an almost immediate explosion in the creation of all sorts of applications for Facebook and greatly increased Facebook's numbers of users. Here are just two of my favorite library applications that have been developed and deployed recently.

1. Penn State University Libraries Search

http://apps.facebook.com/psulibrary/

This application allows users to search and view results from the Penn State catalog directly within the Facebook interface. The application also includes a "Find Articles" tab that allows valid Penn State users to search a ProQuest database and a "Quick Links" tab with external links to hours, course reserves, and the Ask a Librarian

service on the library's home page.

2. Facebook Librarian

http://apps.facebook.com/fblibrarian/

Developed by Brad Czerniak, an LIS student at Wayne State University, Facebook Librarian directs users to quality free online tools to help students locate books, scholarly sources, and facts. In addition, this application allows librarians to volunteer to answer reference questions for students. Once you register, your name will automatically appear for students in your network who want to "Ask a Librarian" a question.

If you want to find other library applications, head to the Application Directory at http://www.facebook.com/apps/ and search for "library." Each application page includes a discussion board where you may provide feedback and ask questions, as well as a link to the developer's profile. Of course, it should be acknowledged that student adoption of these early library tools has not been overwhelming and convincing users to embrace these tools may require some promotional effort by libraries. Nonetheless, exploring this area may inspire you to develop new ideas and ways to interact with your students "where they are"!