Chapter L
The Use of CMC Technologies in Academic Libraries

Courtney D. Crummett
National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, USA

Anna H. Perrault
University of South Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

Computer mediated communication technologies such as instant messaging, blogs, wikis, and podcasts provide new avenues to foster communication and collaboration in the academic library environment. These tools provide innovative ways to reach new technologically savvy academic library users, highlight library services, and allow the library to remain the intellectual center of the academic community. Additionally, these tools also provide mechanisms for internal staff development and collaboration, saving time and building a more technologically expert staff. This chapter highlights various ways that the academic library community can incorporate CMC technologies by providing current examples of instant messaging, blog, wiki, and podcast implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The field of computer mediated communication (CMC) investigates the process of human communication through computer technology by examining the expression of self, the development of relationships, and the establishment of communities (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Computer software, applications, and networks aid in fostering human communication by diminishing geographical barriers and narrowing the digital divide for users.

Many CMC tools incorporate and implement activities long associated with libraries and librarians: collecting, categorizing and disseminating information. It is only natural that libraries incorporate new CMC technologies to reinforce fundamental information resource management and retrieval practices.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss specific CMC tools and their applications in the academic library environment for facilitation of communication and improved access to information. CMC tools to be discussed include: instant

messaging, blogs, wikis, and podcasts. The chapter presents the viewpoint that academic libraries must employ CMC technology tools to meet the needs of their staff and users. The utilization of each tool and the different uses internally, among academic library staff, and externally, for library users will be explored. Issues such as security, training, and maintenance will be discussed in addition to their benefits and disadvantages. Specific libraries incorporating these tools and their experiences will be presented. Characteristics and behaviors of the new academic library user will be discussed. Current trends and future predictions of how academic libraries will implement CMC tools will also be discussed.

BACKGROUND

Advances in technology are creating a dynamic environment for the academic library which is considered the last bastion of organized and authoritative information. Within the academic setting, the library has always been a focal point for faculty, researchers, and students, but changes in technology and its effects on society are diminishing the library's role as an academic focal point. The ubiquitous presence of the Internet and our society's reliance on technology are changing information seeking behaviors of academic library users. Students are less frequently entering the library. Instead, they are turning to alternative information sources. Faculty are conducting their own research and decreasing their dependence on the library. An increase in distance education curricula has reinforced geographic barriers between new students and the library. Academic library circulation service began to decline in 1996 and in 1998 reference transactions began to fall. In 2000, both reference and circulation statistics dropped below numbers observed in 1991 (Kyrillidou & Young, 2004). Traditional brick and mortar institutions are transitioning into the digital sphere by incorporating technol-

ogy and electronic applications to reach users and facilitate staff development.

Some of the top issues facing academic libraries include the education of librarians, maintaining a role in the academic environment, and supporting the new academic library user (Hisle, 2002). Updating the skills and knowledge of current librarians is a challenge that many library administrators now face. Information retrieval practices are evolving with the increased use of digital informational resources. Increases in the availability of electronic resources require librarians to rethink traditional information delivery techniques. Further, library staff communication practices must remain consistent with those of the academic community and users. While the intellectual community turns to the Internet for information, the academic library must attempt to remain the focal point by offering services that support and coincide with the electronic environment. Compared to 5 years ago, modern academic library users have different demands, different information seeking behaviors, and different expectations of accessibility. Most users have a dependence on Google-type search engines for information retrieval resources and find traditional library Web pages and databases unattractive (Lippincott, 2005). Current users are surrounded by technology and depend on the digital sphere for information.

The current generation of college student and academic library users had access to computers growing up and never experienced life without cell phones. This generation, referred to as the Net Generation, the Digital Generation, or Millennials (Gardener & Eng, 2005), has experienced their education outside of traditional libraries. This generation embraces technology, feels it is part of daily life, making learning and teaching more effective, and facilitating social connections. In general, they prefer group work, wish to achieve academic success, and have developed a unique learning style focused on multimedia delivery and self-education (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

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