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# Libraries and Learning Innovation and the use of Twitter



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Libraries and Learning Innovation (LLI) at Leeds Metropolitan University launched its Twitter account (@leedsmetlibrary) just over two years ago; as both Twitter and the technology used to access it are rapidly changing we decided that a

review of how we use the site would be timely. This article describes our experiences to date, some of the things we have learnt along the way and plans for the future.

The university has its own Twitter account (@leedsmet) and a number of faculties, departments, services and staff have their own accounts, with a set of social media guidelines published by the university informing the use of the site. Tweets are shared, referred and retweeted between the accounts to disseminate university news and events as widely as possible. This also enables us to ensure that any comments or feedback are directed appropriately as our followers are not aware of what are library or non-library services. Within LLI Helen Loughran, Planning and Marketing Manager, manages the account via the web, with a number of other staff monitoring and posting tweets, mainly during core staffed hours.

Initially Twitter was used as a broadcast medium, with a feed on the home page of the library website and Virtual Learning Environment (meaning that people do not need to be on Twitter to receive updates). While students are our main target audience we also view the Twitter feed as a way of communicating to the sector and profession,

highlighting service developments and events. We have a feed from our repository Twitter account, and when new articles are added to this a message appears on our account. While these are useful in directing followers to new resources – and often receive retweets – we wondered whether it causes confusion for some of our students; we have addressed this by adding an explanatory tweet, which also helps to promote open educational resources.

The immediacy of the medium means that it is particularly useful for urgent news items; for example, if there is a problem with printing, a tweet will be sent out. However, we realise that this can give a negative impression and for 2012–13 a list of ‘positive’ messages is being drawn up to provide prompts for tweets. This is also being aligned to the way the service is used across the academic year to promote key services at point of need. Because our use of Twitter has been fairly informal we have also experienced confusion about which members of staff are responsible for tweeting and on at least two occasions our account responded twice to the same tweet. A rota of staff to both broadcast and monitor tweets should alleviate this.

Over the last academic year we have noted that our students have been increasingly using the medium to comment on their library experiences or to ask questions. Examples of such comments and questions are

- need to get some fans or air con in the silent study room
- is AV Loans open over the summer?
- free pens kindly donated by @leedsmetlibrary for #libcampus

We had initial discussions about using direct messages to respond (though this depends on the tweeter being one of our followers, which is not always the case), but felt that to do so might suggest that we are trying to hide criticism. Because we are keen to engage with our students we decided to respond in public, while of course being mindful of sensitivity and confidentiality, and without getting into ‘debate’. If we are unable to respond within the constraints of a couple of tweets or if the question/comment is particularly sensitive we direct the tweeter to our Email Us service so we can deal with the matter fully. Software currently being investigated for a new ‘chat’ service may enable us to direct Twitter enquiries straight to this team in the future, and as a university-wide comments and suggestions scheme develops, feedback received via Twit-

ter may become more centralised. Currently such feedback is collated as part of our annual Customer Consultation and Feedback Review; this recently provided evidence of student views on the study environment, which was fed into a project with the university’s estates department to revamp one of our study floors.

As with the development of any of our services, we follow what is happening elsewhere in the profession, for example the work of people like Ned Potter (Potter, 2012), as well as sharing experiences with university colleagues from areas such as Skills for Learning, and Jobs and Careers. We also follow our benchmark universities on Twitter as well as those in different sectors from which we believe we can learn. We noted that some organisations send an automatic message to welcome their followers and we considered doing likewise. However, after conducting a ‘quick and dirty’ Twitter survey of personal followers, who intimated that this wouldn’t be welcome, we decided not to add this to LLI’s procedures.

We also looked to the literature for guidance on some of the Twitter etiquette issues we were experiencing. However, the research is not clear as to whether we should be replying only to comments that are directly addressed to the library, with Stuart (2010) saying we should respond to comments via @, or any reference to the service, or how to deal with comments that contain abusive language. This last is something we are seeking guidance on at university level.

We have recently discovered two fake library accounts and, again, how we respond to these (and the comments meant for them that are accidentally directed at us) is an issue, as comments from these accounts may damage our reputation. These accounts also respond to tweets sent to us. Simple things such as branding the background on the homepage may combat this (Rodzvilla, 2010). It also needs to be noted that a lot of people access Twitter through their mobile phone and so if we are linking to a website we need to consider how this will look on a phone (Mintel, 2011; Starr, 2010).

We have service standards for our response times and need to consider whether one needs to be established for our Twitter responses. A further complication here would be if we used the ‘Tweet you later’ service: while this can be helpful in posting information when we do not staff the service, it may mean that our followers think we are available to respond to them, particularly because the library is open 24x7 and we have a 24x7 IT Helpline.

In conclusion, it is clear that we, probably along with many others, began our use of Twitter in a very informal manner. Although we feel it has proved a useful addition to our communication and feedback mechanisms (with over 2000 followers by the end of June 2012), it is clear that we need to formalise our usage in order to make the most effective use of it. As a result we have created a list of actions to take us forward into the new academic year:

- identify weekend staff and members of the Academic Support Team to join the team of tweeters and create a rota for monitoring
- draw up our own set of guidelines for responding to comments and queries and train staff to follow them
- create a list of topics for tweets to ensure that at least once a day we are saying something positive
- update our Twitter page with background images and review our biography
- incorporate more retweets, hashtags and photos into our posts
- set up a shared bit.ly account and customise URLs where possible for more efficient linking to web pages

We shall continue to follow the experiences of others within the profession and are happy to share both on and off Twitter! Please contact Helen Loughran ([h.loughran@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:h.loughran@leedsmet.ac.uk)) or Carly Miller ([c.miller@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:c.miller@leedsmet.ac.uk)).

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