

Keep Those Web Skills Current

By Terence K. Huwe

In the spring of 2004, my colleague Lincoln Cushing and I gave a professional development workshop for members of the San Francisco Bay Region chapter of the Special Libraries Association. The topic was—surprise!—blogging. More than 45 people attended, many of them friends, as well as some new members. We addressed blogging from two perspectives: "how to," and "what for." In the latter section, we focused carefully on how to tailor blogging activities to meet the special needs of the organizations participants worked in. But this column really isn't about blogging at all. It's about my surprise at the results of an informal audience poll I took on technical skill levels. More than just that, it's about how we can do a much better job of practicing the kind of continuous learning that we espouse to our users.

Here's what happened. Contrary to what you might think, and considering how pervasive blogging is as a topic in so many library journals these days, our audience really wasn't too conversant with the platform. A couple of people used blogs for personal information management, but not for their core jobs. As we warmed up the audience, I employed that age-old ploy of "getting a show of hands" on a variety of topics, so I could have a sense of the audience's knowledge level. After a few general questions on blogging, I moved on to explore Web skill levels, in this vein: "How many of you are performing HTML markup, using Dreamweaver or a comparable program?" Answer: zero. Oh, I thought, they're using old editors. So I asked, "How many of you are using older-generation editors to manage Web sites?" Again, zero. I was getting a sinking feeling in my stomach. But wait: It's a new era, right, with distributed content management systems ruling the marketplace—that's it. So I asked, "How many of you manage Web pages or sites using an enterprise-level content management system?" Once again I had no takers.

Mind you, this was a pretty sophisticated audience, representing academics, law, science, and other types of special librarians. It also included senior and junior staff, some relatively fresh from library school—hence my surprise. I found myself wondering why so many information professionals were not involved in Web publishing at some level, somewhere. Well, to finish the story, the program

was a big hit, and we were invited to Stanford to do a repeat run in July. Everybody had a good time and learned something.

But I felt like I had the biggest learning curve. In my own experience, and in the experience of many I see around me, staying up-to-date technologically isn't a luxury to be dropped because we're "too busy." Administrators are most guilty of this, and reference providers are a close second. "I don't have time to learn how to contribute to our library Web—our library assistant does it." How many times have I heard this? Worse yet, how many times have I fallen into that same trap? Between reference and cataloging, professional association work, writing, administrative work, dealing with the public, and plain old office politics, does the modern information professional really have time to be a digital content creator?

Your Technology Skills and the Triage Trap

There is an answer to that question, but like everything else it involves tradeoffs and strategic planning. In my opinion, at the present time, we must keep a firm grounding in the technologies that drive digital library development, even though they are changing fast. That means keeping current with HTML, XML, and overall Web site administration.

We're not alone in having a challenge with the "keeping up" game; every knowledge worker in today's workplace has the same challenge. It's easy to lose sight of the best uses of the strategic 20 percent of our time, which is most productive under the "80/20" rule of working life. It seems like we only accrue mandates—to be digital librarians, systems specialists, trainers, authors— and can never afford to relinquish vital historical roles. But the profession, as tracked in these pages over the years, has made a priority of understanding the impact of technology on our core values and services, and how we manage our work patterns. My SLA audience with no deep Web skills is probably fairly representative of the situation: If we *can* find a way to triage new skills and shrug them off, we are sorely tempted.

I have found myself in many discussions with the 120 colleagues I have here at the University of California, Berkeley, and beyond, about how much work there is to do, and how key technical skills, like HTML markup, Web site administration, and XML, just fall off the radar due to other daily triage dilemmas. I agree it's a challenge being digital, but I have never retreated from saying that *we must stay conversant in the technologies that drive Web and digital*

library development. To do so, we need to assess how we spend our time and identify where the return on investment is highest. Moreover, it's best to do that both for the near term (e.g., the next 6 months) and the long term (the next 3 years). Working in a research university as I do, I see Web development as a vital core competency, and being skillful in this area has done more to secure our library's future than other equally important tasks. I emphasize my technical skills to protect our less snazzy services, chiefly the steady growth of our book collection. So in my experience, as I parse all of the challenges my library faces, I find that maintaining Web development skills has held strategic value, protecting other services we have from outside pressure. But this skill requires continuous learning: taking classes, reading up on trends, and spending precious time keeping up with change.

Continuous Learning Is Still Necessary for All of Us

Management specialists have successfully argued that the modern organization must constantly learn from mistakes, the environment it operates in, and its competitors. In Japan, this is famously known as "kaizen," and Japan's long-term success has hinged on this kind of thinking. Closer to home, career specialists argue that individual Americans, with an average of seven careers in a lifetime, must also practice continuous learning. Our profession balances the "old" labor of preserving the legacy of library collections with the rapidly evolving "new" labor of digital life in its many forms.

Yet many of us are actively trying to get out of the HTML markup trap. "It's scutwork," we say. If we're lucky, we work in organizations that are large enough to allow several specializations, including digital publishing. There is no clearer test of how you manage and what your career prospects are than how you deal with the question of HTML (and XML) markup skills. Are you skirting these skills or embracing them? Take a look at your personal response, and you can begin to assess whether it will help or hinder you, in the next 6 months, or in the next 3 years.

The fact remains that the Web is a unique medium with no direct predecessor. Because of this, those who know how to work with it have options at their disposal that the ignorant do not. One new colleague of mine here, who came from another very large institution, was surprised at how the local culture didn't emphasize universal uploading and editing of pages on the Web—there was a more centralized approach. In her previous job, everyone contributed to the library Web site, sometimes daily. While a centralized Web strategy still leaves

room for a large cohort of developers, Web publishing isn't ubiquitous among the academic staff. In actual practice, this means that lots of people go to friends and support staff to handle uploads—even when they are mission-critical. The good news locally is that content management systems are in development, but until they appear, I'm keeping my UNIX and Dreamweaver skills current.

"It's Not Library Work"

As a columnist, I am interested in the points of intersection between technology and people, and whether that interaction brings success or failure to the task at hand. In my opinion, by practicing continuous learning, the profession has managed to stay alive, and no better example exists than the ascendance of library Web services. But to continue to evolve with the times, I believe the profession must begin to incorporate an expanded perception of library work. In a world where anyone can be a digital publisher using blogs or running full-service Web sites, the fundamentals of Web administration are crucial for us to stay relevant and to keep growing. I want to discuss three areas of activity that I believe open new opportunities. All definitely require good technical skills. A mind-set of continuous learning, applied to any of these, might yield new funding, new organizational clout, and new staff.

Portal Management: At many colleges and universities, nonlibrary information managers now run portals that combine interviews, Webcasts, and archives of newsletters. Since libraries are "academic," we don't have to worry about this, right? Wrong. Our portals, given sufficient investment, are always better. We should be advancing our organizational clout by becoming the teachers of best practices.

Pre-Print and Post-Print Collections: The ubiquity of high-quality Web development has generated lots of new niche roles in organizations, with substantial missions in information management. Yet our repository strategies are extremely sophisticated and user-friendly—not to mention user-focused. Once again, we need to be the consultants that help others avoid reinventing the wheel.

Administrative Information: The nuts-and-bolts documents of the working world often fall into cracks and fissures in the information infrastructure. Yet archivists know that in 50 years, these data will reveal much more than history books. How can digital librarians create a platform that extracts and preserves these data for a later time? We're pretty good at "archiving the Internet," and the

Library of Congress puts out requests for proposals on this issue, but a systematic approach to preserving administrative information is nowhere in sight.

So, Is This a Full Circle or Simply a Straight Line?

As digital experts with a grounding in history as well as an eye on the future, we often find ourselves straddling more than one trend that has an impact on our work. In all of the examples I've given, a firm grounding in the fundamentals of HTML and XML yields a strong advantage. Moreover, being conversant in technology and uploading pilot projects that speak to new opportunities reveals that we are change agents, rather than the victims of change. Even as the Semantic Web draws closer, and the pace of development accelerates, understanding the basics remains a core skill for us, and continuous learning is the key. It is up to us, though, to stop fooling ourselves by saying we're "too busy" to stay current with Web development skills, and get to work.