

Adapting the 23Things programme for health librarian professional education

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Abstract

In the UK, as elsewhere, continuing professional development is seen to be a necessary professional activity. However resourcing is problematic and funding varies between employing agencies. The 23Things programme has evolved to address these constraints. In particular it reduces the time for staff to be absent from core functions and makes maximum use of peer support. Within a common structure the programme delivers development to personnel at all professional levels. Activities are learner defined and relevant to their personal context. The pace of progress is learner determined. Cambridge University Medical Library (CUML) has designed its own 23Things programme. While conforming to the general model of 23Things, CUML adapted the programme in three ways. 1. to meet the specific learning needs of the library staff 2. to select topics and tasks related to the subject focus of the library 3. to include a new strand of professional development called Follow That.. Follow That... was designed to foster better understanding of each team members role in delivering core services in the library, and to improve the integration and awareness of expertise within a relatively large team This paper will describe the way in which the programme was set up, the selection of tasks and activities, and the pitfalls encountered. Also included will be an overall evaluation of the programme from the perspective of the participants and the programme designers.

Keywords: 23 Things, continuing professional development, medical library,

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that change is the only constant in life. Librarians generally embrace change as a good thing which creates new opportunities. Adapting and changing services to support an ever evolving customer base is standard practice for medical and health librarians in particular. But there are two other constant changes in the library world which are harder to put a positive spin on: rising costs and shrinking budgets. The current economic climate makes it imperative that libraries achieve more for less - less money, fewer staff, less time.

In the UK, libraries are experiencing falling staffing levels, fewer qualified staff, while at the same time expectations of the service are rising. (1) It is widely forecast that the use of ICT skills will increase significantly over the next 10 years. (1) The need for continuing professional development and for active learning to keep pace with technological developments is more important than ever if libraries want to remain relevant for their users. Time available to release staff from their routine duties is shrinking.

Staff training needs to be based in the light of established knowledge, in relation to learning:

- play and experimentation are an effective way of learning;

- peer support and collaboration helps reinforce learning (2)
- reflection is important;
- “one size” training sessions generally do not fit all.

The nature of staff teams will also influence the training that is delivered:

- there is often a wide spectrum of receptiveness to, or awareness of new technologies;
- learning about new technologies is important for all staff;
- learning has to be relevant to local resources and situation.

When looking to support continuing professional development and deliver staff training there are opportunities for innovation and creativity, and perhaps some home-made solutions.

Local solutions can be cheaper and allow for greater responsiveness to local circumstances.

The 23 Things is an example of one such programme. It evolved to minimise the time staff are required to be absent from core functions while attending external training, and makes maximum use of peer support.

History and overview of 23 Things

23 Things is not actually the correct name of the online self-paced learning programme developed by Helene Bowers in 2006 for the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in the USA. (3) Bowers’ programme, which has been copied hundreds of times by libraries around the world, is entitled Learning 2.0, but the strapline of “*a discovery learning program designed to encourage staff to explore new technologies and reward them for doing 23 Things*” and specifically “*23 Things*” has caught the imagination.(4)

The programme was based loosely on Stephen Abram’s article *43 Things I (or You) might want to do this year* (5) which talked about a site <http://www.43things.com/> established by a Seattle based cooperative. The *43 Things* site was set up to encourage list-making as a way of goal setting. It encourages sharing of these goals with other users. Helene Bowers used the *43 Things* format to create a continuing professional development programme aimed at introducing library staff to web 2.0 technologies.

“*Over a nine-week period the programme guides participants through 23 small discovery exercises (ie “things”) around various Web applications*” (4) The programme actively encourages reflective learning through the use of a blog, and creation of a social network between participants as they comment on each other's blog posts. All the resources explored through the programme are freely available, and no specialised IT knowledge beyond familiarity with the resources included is required by the organizer. The original programme is available from <http://plcmlearning.blogspot.com> and is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: 23 Learning 2.0 Things

Week 1: Introduction

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 on PLCMC 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.
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.

The principle benefits of the 23 Things style of programme are that it is :

- locally run;
- adaptable to the local circumstances;
- low cost;
- self-paced (ie the learner controls whether exploring each “thing” takes 10 minutes or 2 hours);
- fosters team spirit and collaborative learning;

- supports reflective learning.

Since its creation and availability under a Creative Commons license, the concept of 23 Things has been adopted and adapted by hundreds of libraries around the world: “23 Dingen” in the Netherlands (6) and “13 Dinge” in Germany (7) and “Summer 2.0” by University of the Virgin Islands (8) amongst many others. The programme has also been tailored in other ways: Huddersfield University Library created a programme for researchers: “25 research things”. (9)

The possibility of adapting 23 Things for a medical library setting was raised at the EAHIL council meeting in Dublin June 2009 by Guus van den Brekel, who introduced a Web 2.0 task force with a “*remit to look at web tools to enable members to better communicate, collaborate, and share, and to develop a coherent strategy for EAHIL*” (10) and subsequently at the conference June 2010 by Guus van den Brekel.(11). Also in 2009 a workshop in St Petersburg led by Karen Johanne Buset and Guus van den Brekel (12) and an accompanying blog (13) delivered a programme for medical librarians. Twelve freely-available web 2.0 things were picked to stimulate further exploration by the participants.

The Cambridge University Medical Library (CUML) faces the same challenges as many libraries in relation to budgets, service delivery and continuing professional development, hence the need to look for innovative ways of encouraging and maintaining continuing professional development. The Cambridge University Medical Library (CUML) 23 Things programme, which started in April 2010, was planned locally and set a specifically localised and subject-specific agenda.

Case Study: 23 things for Cambridge University Medical Library
<http://23things-cammedlib.blogspot.com> (14)

The concept of 23 Things was adapted for the specific circumstances of CUML. The key features of CUML are that:

- it is a university medical library, and as such supports research and education at both undergraduate and postgraduate level;
- it delivers a service to local National Health Service (NHS) staff in local hospitals and primary care, and so supports clinical care;
- there are 11 members of staff spread across 8 full-time equivalent posts, and 4 members of staff working evening shifts only.

While conforming to the traditional model of 23 Things, CUML adapted the programme and it is outlined in Table 2:

1. to meet the specific learning needs of the library staff;
2. to select topics and tasks related to the subject focus of the library;
3. to include a new professional development activities.

Table 2: Cambridge University Medical Library 23Things programme

Week 1 - Personalised Homepage

- Thing 1 – iGoogle ID

- Thing 2 – gadgets/ widgets

Week 2 - Blogging

- Thing 3 – Blog
- Thing 4 – register your blog and find other peoples' blogs to read

Week 3 - RSS

- Thing 5 – Browser based RSS Reader
- Thing 6 – Web based RSS reader
- Thing 7 – NHS MyLibrary RSS reader

Week 4 – catch up & Follow that.... BOOK!

Week 5 – Bookmarking

- Thing 8 – Browser based bookmarks
- Thing 9 - NHS MyLibrary
- Thing 10 – Delicious

Week 6 – Office 2.0

- Thing 11 – Google docs
- Thing 12 - wiki

Week 7 – Mobile technologies

- Thing 13 – Wireless access to the internet
- Thing 14 – Mobile access to the internet

Week 8 – catch up & Follow that.... READER!

Week 9 – Video

- Thing 15 - YouTube & YouTube Channels

Week 10 – Maps

- Thing 16 - Maps

Week 11 – Podcasts

- Thing 17 – podcasts

Week 12 - Google Scholar

- Thing 18 - Google scholar

Week 13 – catch up & Follow that.... JOURNAL!

Week 14– e-books (a)

- Thing 19 – Cambridge e-books

Week 15– e-books(b)

- Thing 20 – NHS e-books

Week 16– e-books (c)

- Thing 21 – Google Books & Gutenberg Project

Week 17 – catch up & Follow that..... ILL!

Week 18 – Institutional repositories

- Thing 22 – DSpace

Week 19 - Follow that..... ENQUIRY! and Last Thing!

- Thing 23 – relax!

Meeting the specific learning needs of the library staff

The CUML team, like many others, is made up of individuals at every point along a sliding scale of interest in new technologies. Some are eager to explore new online tools, and already do so in their own time. Some are interested and eager to learn, but are unsure where to start. Others are less adventurous and less interested, rarely straying from the resources familiar through their every day work. When introducing new technology via a 23 Things programme the whole team must be catered for, so two dimensions were introduced:

1. some of the Web 2.0 resources included in the course were already familiar to most staff members, and so reflective blog posts were relatively easily achieved - a “quick win”. To add a more challenging dimension some comparable resources were introduced which were unfamiliar (for example bookmarking via the browser is familiar compared with using the social bookmarking tool Delicious which may be less familiar)
2. The tasks around each “thing” were also set at two levels – basic tasks and an “optional extra” for those who wanted to explore further.

Staff attended a workshop which introduced the programme and some of the Web 2.0 tools which would be used during the programme. In contrast with the original 23 Things the CUML programme wanted to compare different examples of tools doing the same thing (particularly if some of the resources were available to the NHS). A disadvantage of this approach is that the number of usernames and passwords can become overwhelming, so the CUML programme tried to keep this to a minimum by focusing, where possible, on versions of tools which could be accessed using an NHS ATHENS password, a Google account or a Yahoo password.

The programme was useful as a way of reinforcing knowledge about existing resources that

might only be asked about occasionally as well as raising awareness about new technologies. For example: staff are all aware that the library has wireless internet access, but few had used a laptop to login themselves. Since readers often come asking for help with logging into the wifi, the 23 Things programme was a convenient way of ensuring all staff work through the login process to access the wifi in the library. Staff were invited to borrow a laptop and access a public wifi network in the nearby hospital. The concept was further extended by making an iPod Touch available for logging into wifi and accessing information resources. Touch screen devices were new to many of the staff. Since library users are increasingly using smart phones and iPads, increasing familiarity with these devices is important.

Select topics and tasks related to the subject focus of the library

As well as highlighting a range of freely available Web 2.0 tools, the 23 Things programme included tools provided by both the University and the NHS. The CUMML works on an open academic network. NHS Staff use computers which sit behind a very rigid firewall. The means that it is particularly important that CUMML staff are familiar with the NHS tools since many of the free web 2.0 tools are not accessible on NHS computers because of this firewall. For example, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) readers are freely available as part of a web browser. They are also available via tools like Google Reader or Netvibes. Google Reader is blocked behind NHS firewalls. Luckily the NHS also makes an RSS reader available to those with an NHS ATHENS password. Staff familiarity with all three of these types of tool helps ensure they can offer the most appropriate advice to library users if asked about managing RSS feeds.

The subject focus was important when considering multimedia formats like podcasts and video. The programme challenged any expectation that the content of YouTube would be primarily focused on entertainment or trivia. The tasks set during the programme put an emphasis on health and medical content, and highlighted YouTubeEdu and iTunesU.

Include new professional development activities

Running the CUMML 23 Things programme established a timetable of staff development through the summer of 2010. "Catch-up" weeks were built in to the programme, when participants could either have a week off, or catch up on the previous weeks tasks. Included in these catch-up weeks was a parallel programme called "*Follow that...*". The CUMML team is sufficiently big that each staff member has a designated specialist role, including cataloguing or document delivery or journals processing. This allows for great expertise in performing the duties, but can create silos of knowledge which are rarely, if ever, explained to colleagues. As well as creating a problem when there is prolonged staff absence these silos mean that it can be easy to lose sight of the bigger picture - that any individual task is not an end in itself, but part of a bigger process. "*Follow That..*" was an attempt to remind staff of the connection of their tasks with everyone else's. For example, "*Follow that.. Book*" invited staff to physically follow a book round the library as it moved from selection, checking and finance coding, through to ordering and receipt, cataloguing, processing and shelving. The staff member responsible for each stage talked about their work, and raised awareness about the interconnectedness of other staff members' contribution. "*Follow that .. Reader*" followed the process of new reader registration - as well as hearing about the stages involved, staff were invited to register a reader onto the library management system using details from the hand-written form. One of the aims of this exercise was to remind staff about the consequences of accepting application forms that were difficult to read or which had

information missing.

Participant feedback about the CUML 23 Things Programme

The CUML staff did not all enjoy the 23 Things experience wholeheartedly. Those who were disinclined to investigate new technologies on their own initiative were unconvinced that they needed to learn these new skills, since they might not directly impact on their daily duties. For the part-time staff the time pressure to complete the tasks and the resulting frustration when lagging behind the rest of the group was disheartening. Staff who were “early adopters” of the technologies felt frustrated if the pace slowed down too much. Even though the 23 Things programme was developed in-house, it was still too broad a programme to accommodate all the types of participant, even within a relatively small team.

Every encouragement was given to the staff in terms of a weekly prize awarded to the “best” blog post (a cake was awarded to the winner), and the programme organisers regularly posted comments on participants blog posts. The organisers also adjusted the time frame for the programme in the face of unforeseen circumstances in the library which meant that expectations of what could be reasonably achieved needed to be altered.

As well as introducing new technologies to the staff, reflection was required in the form of a blog post about each thing and the task that had been set. Comment on colleagues’ blog posts was also encouraged. Reflection comes naturally to some, but not to all, and some participants found this the most difficult part of the programme. This was particularly the case if the participant did not like or see value in the Web 2.0 tool they were being asked to comment on. While the organisers encouraged staff to feel free to express dislikes as well as likes not everyone was confident enough to do so.

Reflection in “public” can feel even more uncomfortable. While the participants were able to make their blogs as anonymous as they wished since they would be public and visible on the web, colleagues were able work out whose blog was whose since the CUML is a relatively small team. If the blog posts are minimal, then the opportunity for shared learning is reduced.

Staff were often reluctant to take time away from every day tasks to explore and “play”. They found it difficult to justify the time when they could see their in-tray growing.

Customisation

Customising any education programme is vital to ensure it is relevant for those participating. 23 Things is infinitely customisable, by number of things and what those things are, by subject focus and by target audience. The time frame can extended or intensified to suit the circumstances. In the University of Cambridge alone there are four different versions of the programme:

- a generic one for any member of library staff ((15) is the first incarnation which ran in summer of 2010, and the second is (16) which will run in summer 2011)
- subject specific version for staff of a particular type of library (the Medical Library (14))
- support use of technology in curriculum design (17)
- programme to support a specific group of staff (23 Things for Professional Development (18) due to run in summer 2011)

Conclusions and Recommendations

In terms of recommendations for planning a 23 Things programme, there are some key points of learning from the CUML experience:

- having more than one person posting tasks and monitoring progress of participants in completing the tasks helps spread the work load
- full senior management buy-in is essential - decisions about sanctions on non-completion or rewards for completion should be agreed and adhered to. The legitimacy of using work time to “play” must be made clear.
- if the programme is one where staff choose to sign up, there is still a possibility of drop-out of course, but the personal buy-in and engagement is generally much higher.
- do not underestimate how much time participation in a 23 Things programme take - if there is a large group, reading and commenting on some of the blogs will be very rewarding but time consuming.
- guidelines for participants on writing blog posts and how to write reflectively might be helpful

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