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Using WordPress for our Library Blogs

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We are likely nearing the point where asking someone if they have a blog is like asking if they have ever used email. Even if a Web user has never contributed to a blog, they have certainly come across any number of blogs – even if they aren't aware they have done so. Assuming that we all understand the basic merits of blogs and why we need them (e.g., they offer an effective mechanism to organize, communicate, promote, and archive information, etc.), the main task is deciding which technology to use to create one.

There is no shortage of options out there: a "start a blog" Google search retrieves enough information and ideas to keep you reading for weeks. Information geared to all levels of users is easily available, and with a little patience most Web users should be able to have a functioning blog within a short time. Since there are so many possible solutions available, it is helpful to address key questions to narrow down the choice. One of the first questions you might ask is whether you want to use a free Web-accessible blog that is hosted by another company, or if you want to install a blog on your own server space.

Of the variety of hosted blogs available, two of the most popular are blogger.com (owned by Google) and wordpress.com. Each of these sites allows you to create an identity, and to set up any number of blogs. The catch, as with many free Web 2.0 solutions, is that there are functionality and storage limits. Despite these limitations, a hosted blog is a great way to get started, and you may find that it offers all the functionality you will ever need to communicate yourself or your organization.

If you already have access to a server, either at your institution or through your personal or organization Internet Service Provider (ISP), you may wish to install your own blog. Depending on your needs, the level of potential customization may be worth the amount of time and energy needed to install and modify a locally installed blog. Installed blog software can be divided further into two categories: commercial and open source. Many ISPs offer the ability to install either commercial or open source blog software at no additional cost above your monthly fees; however, if you install the software on your own institutional server the commercial software needs to be purchased.

Understanding the basics as described above, we here at the Laurier Library began investigating possibilities to better communicate with our users through a blog. With server space and programming expertise on hand, the options were easily narrowed down with a decision to install a blog instead of creating a hosted blog. The next question – whether to use commercial or open source

software – was also easily answered since we had no budget to purchase any software, thereby reducing our options even further. Answering these and a few other questions, the only option left was for us to use WordPress (see <http://library.wlu.ca/blogs/lib/>)

Having worked with it for the past year, it is hard to imagine that WordPress wouldn't have been our choice even if we had a budget for commercial software. After installing WordPress on our server, we quickly adjusted a few colours, images, and fonts, and started to add entries using the Web-based administration dashboard. "Author" accounts were created for a few library staff, who could login and immediately create a post consisting of a title and text. With the category function of WordPress, each entry was labeled as "Spotlight," "What's New," and "Library News." Using the blog's RSS feature (all blog software has the ability to display entries as RSS), we pushed the last three entries of each category into the appropriate sections on our library Web pages.

When a user clicked on a "What's New" item displayed on the library Web site, the link took them to the full entry within the blog, a visibly different site. To make this linkage more seamless, we set about to change the display of the blog so that it looked like any other library Web page, complete with header, footer, and left side navigation. The open source WordPress community has created thousands of themes that, with a click of the mouse, can be applied to a WordPress blog (<http://themes.wordpress.net/>). Each theme is created with page files using a combination of html, css, and php, and is editable from within the dashboard. The integration of our blog within the library Web site was mostly accomplished by duplicating the contents of our Web site's style sheet (.css file) onto the theme's style sheet, with a few other changes made on other theme pages.

WordPress software comes with a certain amount of built-in functionality, but there are many plugins that can be, well, plugged in to allow more options. As with themes, there are thousands of plugins created by the community that can be downloaded and turned on with just a click. The types of plugins available include spam guards, integration with other web 2.0 tools such as Flickr or del.icio.us, and statistical tools (<http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/>). Although we took advantage of a few plugins to allow us to slightly alter the display of our items, it was not necessary to the functioning of our WordPress blog.

The Laurier Library has installed several blogs in addition to the one multi-category blog mentioned above. These include a blog that displays new items added to our catalogue listed by subject (<http://library.wlu.ca/blogs/newitems/>), and a blog advertising our Professional Development sessions (<http://library.wlu.ca/blogs/pd/>). With an almost legendary open source community, WordPress has allowed us to do whatever we have thought up for it to do, and we continue to imagine different uses for WordPress to help us communicate with our users.