

A Perspective on Resource List Management

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How has the management of academic resource list changed, what are library management systems vendors offering and how are resource lists being handled in a social media environment?

Integrating library services more closely with the student's learning environment has long been a goal. A recent report on course reading¹ from a Canadian university probably sums up the attitude of most UK academic libraries. 'The Library has long placed a strong

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emphasis on working directly with faculty to tailor its services and resources to academic programs and integrate them at the point of need'. For more than a decade the library/learning system space has been contested by a variety of approaches. It remains imperfectly resolved.

Library systems in the last century, like most other systems in HE and beyond, were 'silos'. Indeed we happily talked about 'stand-alone' library systems. The focus was less on interoperability and more on developing 'vertical' capability within the specific business domain. Library

Management Systems (LMS –or ILS- Integrated Library System in the US) were automating more and more of the functions of the library. By the late 90s, UK-based vendors such as SLS (later taken over by Innovative) and BLCMP (later morphed into Talis) had added 'Reading List' modules to their systems. Non-UK vendors such as Geac (now Infor), Dynix, Sirsi (now SirsiDynix) and Innovative Interfaces offered 'Course Reserves' modules. Both approaches enable students to search for their course in the library catalogue, locate material and check its availability. Any 'integration' with the work processes of academics was manual. Leicester University in the late 90s was probably not untypical: 'Reading list request letters are currently sent out once for both semesters in June. Academics are asked to return reading lists for both semesters by early July and a fairly good response rate is received.'² Most of the material on reading lists was books and many resided in 'Short Loan' or '(US

¹ Queen's University [Canada] Library. Course Readings Working Group Report. May 2009 <http://library.queensu.ca/files/course readings report 10 June 09.pdf>

² Reported in 'Assessment of the portability of ACORN Internal Library Procedures to Leicester University Library. Loughborough University Library. 1998 <http://acorn.lboro.ac.uk/ACORN/reports/leics.htm>

terminology) 'Reserve' collections. Some libraries were beginning to extend the scope to include electronic material.

The rise of the VLE, the web and the promise of interoperability

The 90s and early 21st century saw the rise of systems to manage the learning environment, and VLEs (virtual learning environments) are now ubiquitous in UK higher and further education. Academics were encouraged to populate the VLE with their reading lists. The library management system was being marginalised. Even the acronym LMS is more widely understood as 'learning management system'. At the 2004 ALA Conference it was noted that: 'With librarians poised between information and knowledge, libraries have begun to question how they can integrate learning management systems (a.k.a. e-learning)—software that delivers and manages online courses—into their daily operations. Moreover, the inadequacies of integrated course reserves modules—similar to the inadequacies of MARC for digital assets or serials modules for ERM—have shown that the traditional ILS is (yet again) unable to support the management of learning resources'.³

LMS vendors missed the opportunity to more fully develop services based around the course perspective and the VLE came to dominate that that space. Reviewing a trial of a Reading List solution at one university a report stated: 'The Library feels that greater improvements to the functionality and management of reading lists ... will now be achieved by developing the current use of Moodle [the VLE].'⁴ However LMS vendors and others didn't give up. This was the period when there was much Jisc (Joint

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Information System Committee)-sponsored work on integrating library resources with VLEs.⁵ The web seemed to offer two key advantages over the normal client-server based systems of the time. Firstly there was the possibility that libraries could provide an easy-to-access

³ 'Hot Conference Cool technology'. By Andrew K. Pace American Libraries. August 2004
<http://www.ala.org/ala/online/techspeaking/techspeak2004/Aug2004Conference.cfm>

⁴ 'Reading List Management System'. TDF Evaluation Report (2004/05). Bath University Library and Learning Centre.
http://www.bath.ac.uk/learningandteaching/recognition/tdf/case_studies/TDF%20Eval%20Report%200405%20-%20South.doc

⁵ For example: the JISC 4I project -Linking Library and VLE systems. 'The aim of this project is to further develop and implement a working model upon which to fully integrate VLE and library systems
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/divle/4i.aspx>

and simple-to-use (browser based) client that would be amenable to academics. Secondly, linking systems together using straightforward and standard web protocols promised to be more flexible and, potentially at least, easier.

Perhaps librarians would no longer have to re-key reading lists? Perhaps the VLE the LMS and other associated authentication and linking systems could be coupled together by standard web-based services? Talis and ExLibris introduced web-based reading list systems. Later on, Sirsi introduced 'Rooms' to which promised a new approach of 'content in context'. New market entrants such as Sentient Learning saw what they believed was a rich

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opportunity. Meanwhile institutions such as Loughborough University developed their own solutions.⁶ All were keen to ensure interoperability with products such as Blackboard and they eagerly announced partnerships with VLE vendors. Academic bookshops also got involved, and Blackwell's set up their own web-based Reading Lists service.⁷ It enables lecturers to submit their reading list details to 'ensure we have the right books at the right time to benefit you and your students'. Blackwells also offers students a service to look up reading lists (from across UK HE) and buy titles or look them up in the Copac union catalogue.

These approaches were, and continue to be, partially successful. Perhaps the most important lesson was that the value of the library catalogue as a destination site was diminishing. In future, to be effective, library functions would need to be embedded in other services such as the VLE or the institutional portal. The Library would have to come to the user rather than the other way round. It's

perhaps not surprising then that, despite all the efforts of librarians and library systems vendors, academics largely shunned the idea of entering their lists into library-centric systems. Few outputs from the Jisc projects got real traction: Sentient Learning struggled and went under.⁸

⁶ First called Bookworm and known as LORLS. 'The core of a reading list management system that has been developed for use at Loughborough University in England is now available for use by other sites'.

<https://lorls.lboro.ac.uk/distribution.html>

⁷ <http://www.readinglists.co.uk/rsl/index.dfp>

⁸ The resource list product is now being sustained under the LearnBuild 'LibraryLink banner

<http://www.learnbuild.com/Discover.html>

Being social. Web 2.0 and social media

The desire to manage lists of resources is not unique to students and several social web tools have grown up to meet the need. Many will be familiar with Del.icio.us for example. The Lassie project case study on social software and reading lists⁹ explored several different types of social software that can be used to manage a reading list. It compared using this software with library reading list systems. It concluded that, while social software tools have some features in common with reading list management tools, the biggest drawback was the inability to integrate them satisfactorily with library management systems to provide real-time information on the availability of an item for loan. The lack of LMS integration meant that the tools were 'not able to help libraries purchase appropriate stock levels of particular texts, by obtaining information about how many students might need access to a particular resource at a given time'.

A 2009 report from Queens University in Canada¹⁰ commented: 'Given the decentralized academic environment, faculty independence and the abundance of web tools commonly available today, the vision of a single course management system approach is waning. However, there are significant drawbacks to an ad hoc approach: individual faculty course web pages often don't conform to accessibility standards, and students lack a course portal that automatically provides all of their course information through a single sign on'.

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There remains then a perceived need to deliver an institutionally *coherent* approach to students that also feeds into the library back-end processes to ensure appropriate resources have been purchased or licensed and are accessible. Jisc hasn't given up and a recent 'rapid innovation strand' project (List 8D)¹¹ in the Information Environment program has a familiar set of objectives which include:

- help librarians manage their stock levels and serve students better
- be easy for the students to use

⁹ LASSIE: Libraries and Social Software in Education. Case Study 1: social software and reading lists. London School of Economics and Political Science. January 2008. The project was funded by the University of London Centre for Distance Education Teaching and Research Awards. <http://clt.lse.ac.uk/Projects/LASSIE.php>

¹⁰ Queen's University [Canada] Library. Course Readings Working Group Report. May 2009 <http://library.queensu.ca/files/course readings report 10 June 09.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/inf11/jiscrl/list8d.aspx>

- provide accurate information for librarians and library managers, saving time and avoiding unsuitable or inaccurate inputs into the reading list system
- be easy for the academics to use

The 2009 Jisc MOSAIC project ¹² also looked at how course and bibliographic data might be combined to deliver new approaches. In the meantime some library system vendors are shifting their viewpoint and seeing the possibilities in making their new vertical search ('discovery services') applications take on social media attributes and serve a resource list function. For example Encore (Innovative Interfaces) and Primo (ExLibris) enable library staff and end users to tag content with course names and/or identifiers. Going further and combining this with usage-data-driven 'recommender' systems (such as the bX service from ExLibris or the work of Dave Pattern at the University of Huddersfield) might mean that 'resource lists' arise organically from such activity. And what if the capability were available for students to see recommended resources from *other* institutions? Systems are increasingly 'in the cloud' where the aggregation of data creates Google-like opportunities for 'collective intelligence'. User-generated resource lists might arise that compete with the formal institutional lists.

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¹² 'MOSAIC is investigating the technical feasibility, service value and issues around exploiting user activity data, primarily to assist resource discovery and evaluation in Higher Education' <http://www.sero.co.uk/jisc-mosaic.html> The project 'demonstrator is available at <http://mosaic.hedtek.com/>