



Considering the ILS

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Background

The College of St. Benedict / St. John's University (CSU/SJU) libraries created an "ILS Alternatives Task Force" to advise the director of libraries on possible future directions for their local integrated library system. As part of this work, the task force wanted to meet with staff from a few other private colleges in Minnesota to share an environmental scan and consider whether some of the frustrations CSU/SJU has with its ILS are similar to what staff encounter in other libraries. Such a meeting, it was hoped, could also define helpful next steps all the institutions might take together toward the future of library systems.

This meeting took place with participants from Macalester College, Concordia College, Gustavus Adolphus College, and CSU/SJU on 10 March 2008. This report is a brief summary of the proceedings.

Executive Summary

After a discussion of the trends and examples that excited participants and the frustrations they had to deal with in their systems, the group identified two main opportunities for action.

1. The back-end systems of the libraries, the ILS itself, could be replaced by a new system that was developed through an open source methodology. This could improve institutional ability to impact the development cycle of the ILS and possibly result in better functionality. This would require significant migration and staff planning costs.
2. The public facing services of the ILS could be better melded with worldwide searching solutions that library users are already utilizing, such as Google and WorldCat. This could provide access to library resources in the venues that already feel familiar and attractive to library users. This would require some ability to hook into the back-end library systems by external systems.

In the immediate future CSB/SJU will investigate the first issue and Macalester will investigate the second. CSB/SJU will also create a blog to share alerts in areas of interest and serve as a venue for continuing the conversation that began on 3/10. A target was set to call another face-to-face meeting, likely with more institutions represented, within two months or so.

The Participants

The meeting included 19 representatives from four institutions as well as Eric Celeste to facilitate.

College of St. Benedict / St. John's University (CSB/SJU)

Tess Kasling, Miranda Novak, Kathy Parker (Director), Jim Parsons, Diane Scheierl, Dave Woulu

Concordia College

Theresa Borchert, Sharon Hoverson (Director), Amy Soma, Linda Swanson

Gustavus Adolphus College

Lynn Burg, Julie Gilbert, Jessie Twaddle

Macalester College

Dave Collins, Angi Faiks, Terri Fishel (Director), Katy Gabrio, Ron Joslin, Barron Koralesky

The Discussion

Our discussion was structured into four phases: considering the possibilities arising around us, considering the frustrations we live with, considering the opportunities that some of what is arising around us could address our frustrations, and thinking together about next steps.

Considering possibilities

Macalester had recently hosted a visit from OCLC staff to show off [WorldCat Local \(WCL\)](#), so they shared some of what they learned about this system. While not a silver bullet, they felt that WCL, which provides a discovery layer that marries your local data to all of OCLC's data, could clearly meet some public needs. The search tools and results are attractive, displaying results with Google-like clarity. One staff member said it would make it fun to teach research methods again, since it would let them bypass a problematic local interface issues. It does provide a faceted browse along with direct visibility of actual holdings from the library's local system. It was noted, though, that OCLC does not appear to have linked WCL to an Aleph system as yet. The group looked at the [University of Washington Libraries](#) implementation of WCL. The main benefit of WCL over the current WorldCat on the web is that WCL displays your holding information alongside the bibliographic information, rather than requiring the user to click thorough to your local library and then find the same item via SFX or another resolution tool.

[Google](#) was cited as a tool that set the bar for user expectations. The “did you mean” feature, for example, was singled out for its simplicity and value. Executing calculations and tracking packages also demonstrate the expanded notion of “search” at Google. Most around the table admitted to visiting Google first even with our own questions. The question arose: are libraries an alternative to Google or should we think about hooking our data into Google.

Social networking platforms such as [Facebook](#) were discussed. These are less a discreet product than they are an environment in which people use tools and meet friends and colleagues. They demonstrate the degree to which people want to take a hand in the construction of their online environment. Some social networking information management techniques, such as [tagging](#), are only successful at rather large scales. The [DVD collection online at CSB/SJU](#), for example, allows students to tag entries, but has seen very little of this activity. Some organizations like the [Library of](#)

[Congress](#) and [National Library of Australia](#) are exploring the potential of Flickr to be a greater magnet for public participation in description and tagging.

[LibraryThing](#) was offered as an example of a bibliographic search tool that has prioritized its interface for users in a very different way from OPACs. LibraryThing depends on much more input from users, from tagging titles to determining which set of titles represent a single work.

Visual concept maps such as [AquaBrowser](#) appear to be attractive to some, though we don't know much about how attractive they are to users yet. [Credo Reference](#) was cited as an alternative way of linking together information across sources for those with other learning styles.

Users are also getting comfortable with recommender engines. [Amazon](#), [Netflix](#), and [Movielink](#) were all cited as drivers of user expectation in this regard. Even simpler recommendations, like suggestions for spelling alternatives, were mentioned as very helpful.

The group was also excited about the progress of open source systems for libraries. Many had seen the [LibLime](#) presentation at the MnLINK user group meeting last year and have been impressed with [Koha](#) and [Evergreen](#). The idea that institutions might have more direct control over the enhancement process for open source systems is particularly attractive.

Some of the institutions seen as making progress on these fronts: [NCSU](#), [Georgia Pines](#), [WALDO Consortium](#), and [Rochester](#).

Considering frustrations

Our resources are spread among many sources that our users must know about and search separately to be thorough. Students are interested in material beyond "the book" and we have it: thousands of images, guides, and electronic resources. However, our systems are disparate enough that it is difficult for anyone to get a complete picture of the resources available to them. Students could use more guidance to the resources available. Students even need help getting from the call number to the shelf.

Some of our data gets polluted by results of differing levels of granularity. For example, catalogs can be overwhelmed by government documents entries. Our spell checkers can be polluted with suggestions that do not appear in the underlying bibliographical record.

Our systems provide reports that do not meet many of the needs expressed by staff. Especially financial reports can be difficult to work with and in some cases of questionable accuracy.

No one is satisfied with the rate at which enhancements come from current ILS vendors. Institutions of the small college scale just don't seem to have a voice in how these issues are prioritized for vendors by our current consortiums, much less a say in the dispatch with which

vendors address these issues. Even fixes to known bugs are slow to be deployed. It seems as though there is no good software available for libraries.

Library systems are vastly complex with many interdependencies. This makes them very hard to integrate with other campus solutions. It is hard to share data with other campus units, much less to meet campus business expectations of interoperability.

Considering opportunities for action

The group tried to map the possibilities in the environment to the frustrations felt by staff and users in order to identify potential opportunities for action. Two major opportunities emerged: the back-end of the ILS could be improved by adopting new software and the front-end of the ILS could be improved by replacing it with something like WCL.

The group spent a good bit of time discussing open source library systems and the promise they offer for improving the back-end of library systems. Open source systems seem well matched to the frustrations our current commercial system present to us. While open source systems would not necessarily be enhanced or fixed more quickly than closed systems, at least the development schedule is visible to all and work done for one customer is available to all. While there are still costs involved in migrating to and maintaining open systems, those costs appear significantly lower than the costs of commercial systems. There is some danger in believing that open source systems will be a better fit for a given institution's needs. These systems are still very "young" and their feature set quite thin (missing ILL, for example, is common). While it is true that these systems can be customized even by a given institution itself, such customization requires significant skill and enormous upkeep if it is not folded into the "core" product. Institutions that have performed such customization on systems like [Moodle](#) have learned to tread very lightly. Still, acknowledging the additional responsibility that comes with the flexibility of open source systems, they do appear to be a reasonable option for libraries seeking new back-end systems.

Even without changing our back-end systems, there is a significant opportunity to improve the front-end experience of our users. Systems like WorldCat Local operate on top of our existing back-ends, masking those systems from the public and offering the users an experience much closer to their expectation. This does require some modification of our back-end systems to expose the information required to Google and WCL, but the scale of the effort to accomplish this exposure is considerably less than what would be required to migrate to a new back-end. Even success in this effort bears some risk: users will want what they can now find and this can increase demand for material (a problem not unlike what institutions have felt from the accessibility of the [MnLINK Gateway](#)). Making sure users can get their hands on what they find online becomes imperative. These alternative front ends are also not as closely tied to the library making it more difficult to brand them or ensure that users even know they have benefited from a library service.

The group also recognized an opportunity to take advantage of recommender systems to improve the user experience of our tools. While this would be very beneficial to users, and some degree of recommendation is built into some alternative front-end systems, much of this is still in the realm of research. The group did not imagine pursuing this as an immediate opportunity.

In general the group felt that continuing to share information together would be very valuable. Opportunities may exist to pioneer some efforts with [MnPALS](#) and to bring other private colleges (maybe the [Private College Council](#)) to the table. An “alert service” or blog that pulls together notifications of what’s happening with regard to new approaches to library systems would also be valuable.

Next Steps

Some members of the group took away assignments for further work.

Staff of Macalester College will continue to investigate Worldcat Local and share what they learn about this service, its costs, and what it can do.

Staff of CSB/SJU will dig more deeply into the Koha open source library system and try to determine what kind of promise it offers as a fresh back-end for library services.

Miranda Novak (CSB/SJU) will set up a blog to serve as a communications vehicle for further discussion and sharing of opportunities in this area.

The group thought another meeting in a (roughly) two month timeframe with a broader array of participants would be worthwhile. No specifics were set out for such a meeting yet.