Let's meet at @ library junction

By S. L. Faisal

When we removed the 'Keep Silence' board from our school library, students didn't ask 'why?'. Many of them only realised at that moment that such a board of caution had been there. They normally come, read, refer, browse, mail, chat and frequently send friend requests to someone with a zombie face. Many have a not so bookish profile. They appear serious about their academic curriculum but also want to announce their 'likes' and post comments on anything under the sun with a status message that might look like this, "n d lib bt tlkg" *(in the library but talking)*. Our library became a hot place when the users were able to meet and share anything including their current *status.*

Suddenly the library has something to tell to its users 'LOUDLY'. It may be about a new book, an exhibition on *Gandhi and non-violence* or about a funny website. How did our library became a meeting place, and a talking zone, for this new generation of users?

In the beginning, there was a Blog

When our library launched its first blog in September 2007, there was no library blog in India to follow as a model. The trial and error method of library blogging consumed a lot of time and energy. But it also proved what a school library can do with such a dynamic web 2.0 tool. The blog became a huge hit and reached 1.4 million hits by its fourth year of existence with an average of nearly 2500 hits per day (Figure 1). This blog was loaded with many interactive components like, RSS, chat, email and SMS updates, videos, plug ins and widgets.

Now there are more than fifty Indian schools who have their own library blogs and the trend towards usage of web 2.0 tools has escalated.

Figure.1: Home page of the Library Blog

The success triggered many other collaborative initiatives using blogs like an e-magazine, *LibZine,* edited by a team of teachers, *My Dear Book,* an on line publishing platform for book reviews written by students, and a site for sharing class home works and assignments online, *Homework and Assignments online..* All these experiments were based on

harnessing the inherent features of a blog like hassle free installation and maintenance, interactivity and the provision for sharing and collaboration between people.

Then came the social networks

An informal survey conducted among the students showed that more than 90% of them have accounts on one of a number of online social networks, and mostly on Facebook. This is a fun filled virtual world that students do not like to miss for a single day. When the library opened an account on Facebook, within a short period, it gained more than one thousand fans. The library now promotes its resources and activities in an environment where everything is 'like'-able and sharable. It sends birthday wishes to its users and gets tagged by them in a variety of different ways.

When we tried to capitalise on the power of an online social network such as Facebook, to reach out to the net generation, we had to bear the burden of its monopolistic attitudes on content flow and privacy. The control of the content over a public social network was not what we really wanted, anything different seemed beyond the imagination of a school library. So the next natural development was to create the library's own social network.

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Library Junction: Where minds meet and ideas are created!

Library Junction (LJ) was initially conceived as a meeting place of young minds who love books and reading. The site was designed with the basic social networking principles as support - communication, interaction and sharing. It provided the members the ability to create their own profile, post status updates, add comments and tags, send friend requests and express their 'likes' and 'dislikes. The template and hosting were provided by Grou.ps Inc.

To develop students' reading habit and communication skills, book and author based sub groups (Harry Potter, Hardy Boys, Twilight, Dan Brown, etc) were created. Here the members can join and share blogs, images, videos and links. They can start discussions on a particular book, character or event. (Figure 2).The site was an attempt to harness the power and popularity of Facebook like networks and use this ability and interest as a library reach out tool.

Figure 2

Later Library Junction was developed into a fully moderated, academic, social network supported by a team of teachers selected from different subject backgrounds. The Principal and the Librarian became the team leader and coordinator

respectively.

The objectives were redefined as,

1. to create an easily accessible and user friendly online learning platform which connects the library, teachers and students.
2. to support student-teacher collaborative learning practices.
3. to facilitate information sharing and knowledge creation.
4. to cultivate the reading habit and a love of books, reading and libraries.
5. to develop information and media literacy skills.
6. to encourage critical thinking, innovation and creativity.
7. to reach out to the new generation of library users in their own space and time.

To accomplish these objectives, different modules were added to the Network. These were,

1. *My Profile*: A profile page of each member with information on all his/her activities on the network.
2. *Blogs*: To facilitate posts by the members on any relevant subject.
3. *Forum*: To support discussions on various topics.
4. *Wikis*: To allow collaborative group projects.
5. *Groups*: Created on subjects, themes and issues (physics, information literacy, environment, etc). The relevant subject teacher is the moderator of the group.
6. *Ask*: The members can ask any curriculum related queries and have it answered by the experts.
7. *Ideas:* Innovative ideas on anything.
8. *Files:* Down-loadable documents/files/ebooks/study materials.
9. *Events*: What is happening in the library and the wider school community.
10. *Links*: Useful web links added by the members.
11. *Photos*: Albums based on different topics.
12. *Videos*: Educational videos from different video streaming sites.
13. *Chat, Music and Games.*

Besides these modules, to make the site more attractive and rich in content, some widgets were added like:

- *Thought for the Day;*
- *This Day in History;*
- *Know India Better;*
- *Universal Digital Library;*
- *Book of the Day;*
- *Graded children's books;*
- *A Google A Day;*
- *Online Quizzes, etc.*

How well did it work?

Library Junction (LJ) was launched as a local academic alternative to Facebook. The information about LJ was publicised through different channels including local media. Although the target group was the students and teachers of the project school, a large number of people joined from outside from a range of different backgrounds and subject areas. This helped to maintain the variety and uniqueness of the content. The coordinator has been acting as the moderator of the content flow on the Network.

Skill development sessions were conducted to familiarize the students with the Network and its functioning. They were trained in different aspects like how to add blogs, links and multimedia, how to begin, or participate, in a discussion and how to do a collaborative group project using wikis. Based on the degree of involvement, activity points were given to the members to encourage their participation.

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Students created curriculum related wiki pages under the supervision of the subject teacher. They shared information in various formats and collaboratively built knowledge based on different topics. The doubts answered through the *Ask* and *Subgroup* modules were also very effective as they removed the air of fear and formality between the students and teachers.

The Library Junction project secured Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan's (KVS) a national innovation and experimentation award in 2010 and won the national competition on innovations in education organized by the National Council of

Education, Research and Training (NCERT), Government of India in April 2011.

What did the library gain?

These experiments with web 2.0 - blogs, social networks and wikis - restored the library's position as the heart of the school where the school's enlightened minds meet and generate new ideas. These were the main outcomes:

- the library became more visible physically and virtually;
- the project created better awareness/promotion of library resources and services;
- users identified the library as a friend and became its advocates;
- real time user feedback improved library functioning;
- the library's role as an active academic partner strengthened through collaborative learning practices;
- the project supported the development of communication and higher order thinking skills of students as they utilised various web 2.0 components;
- the library became a place of happenings and excitement;
- the status of the librarian was rekindled as an information expert and tech-leader in the school and community.

Now the library is open and ready to talk to its stakeholders through the various channels of communication. It invites friends to explore resources and collaborate to create new knowledge.

What next?

The history of school librarianship in India is not so encouraging. Professionally and technologically the country is lagging behind its global counterparts in this field. The absence of a library culture, negligence from the decision makers, lack of standards, and lack of an organised professional structure for librarians hampers the development of a true appreciation of school libraries within the Indian education system. Web 2.0 provides innumerable tools for those libraries and librarians who feel a need for change. These technologies are trendy but cheap and user friendly. The experiment detailed here gives ample evidence that the library can be there where the user is and can reach out in meaningful ways, an aim that must be our prime objective. So, the windows are open, it is up to us to take up the challenge to fly.

S. L. Faisal is a librarian at Kendriya Vidyalaya, Pattom Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India (slfaizal@gmail.com/). He has been Initiating Library 2.0 activities in India for many years. He has published many papers on different aspects of school library management and conducted several skill development programs for librarians. Recently he has been elected as the General Secretary of Kerala Library Association (KLA) (www.keralalibraryassociation.org), a recognised, professional body of more than 1200 librarians working in different sectors in the state. He also administers the Kendriya Vidyalaya Librarians' Network (http://kvlibrarians.grou.ps/), the first online network of school librarians in India with more than 320 active members. He is an active member of IASL and now spearheading the formation of the Indian School Library Association (ISLA).