

Learning New Applications*

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Have you ever felt that just as you've mastered one application or upgrade, another one appears to take its place? Ms. Whisner discusses when and why librarians might want to take on the challenge of learning new applications, and also considers why librarians seem to be more adept than average at adjusting to new technology.

¶1 Taking advantage of a promotion from Apple, a colleague received an iPod when she bought a new laptop for her son who was headed off to law school. The son said derisively (or perhaps he was teasing affectionately) that she could join the twenty-first century by having an iPod, but she wouldn't be able to figure it out. Since I knew how many software and hardware systems she had learned—and taught—in her career, his derision struck me as funny and oddly out of sync with her aptitude. Was he thinking of the same woman I've worked with for years?

¶2 This anecdote illustrates generational clash, of course, and the common family dynamic of a twenty-something man who doesn't think of his *mother* as competent with his electronic playthings. But it also shows how easy it is to overlook librarians as experts in technology. We may not design it, develop it, or program it, but we can sure use it. We are especially good at learning new systems. My colleague had not used iTunes before, but she had learned to use any number of databases, catalogs, and other applications over the years—keeping up with enhancements,¹ upgrades, and changing interfaces. I had no question that she could learn to use iTunes.

¶3 Sometimes technological transitions have been bumpy. Early on in my library, we used Word 4.0 for word processing. When we decided to switch to WordPerfect—I think it was WordPerfect 5.1—some people were confused and a little cranky. I know I was. Later, the university computing center stopped offering classes in WordPerfect and supported only Word, so we switched back to Word—only by now it wasn't recognizable, because it was a couple of releases past the last one we'd used. Again some people were confused and a little cranky. I think I was again among the confused and cranky. With every subsequent release, though, we have adjusted and learned what we needed to learn to get our work done.

¶4 In the meantime, we've also gotten used to different hardware—for instance, over the years we've stored our files on 5¼-inch floppies, 3½-inch floppies (that

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1. Opinions differ as to whether any given “enhancement” actually enhances the product.

weren't floppy), thumb drives, CDs, and network drives. We've moved from overhead projectors to smart podiums and document cameras. Our printers have changed (remember dot matrix?), our copiers have changed, our microfiche readers have changed. Even our telephone systems have changed, and we have relearned how to transfer, put callers on hold, and record and retrieve voice mail.

¶5 These technological changes have affected many people, of course, not just librarians. Lots of office workers have had to learn new word-processing software and new photocopier features. But there are some ways in which the pressure of changing technology is greater for us. First, there's a difference in scale: we often are using more systems than others—we use all of the regular office software and hardware *plus* the library catalog, Westlaw, LexisNexis, OCLC WorldCat, databases from fields outside law, course management packages (such as TWEN and Blackboard), feed readers, and software for publishing web pages, blogs, and wikis. Second, we are often called on to troubleshoot technology problems, to teach different applications, or to advise our patrons on which application will work best for a given project. We need to be able to do more than flounder around in a database and come up with a result—we need to be able to demonstrate it to a class or show it to an individual patron, ideally without much bumbling. In fact, we even try out databases or services we don't think we'll use much in order to see what they're like, just in case we're asked.

¶6 All of our work learning to use new systems has made us pretty good at it. When patrons ask for help figuring out a database or web site we have never used, we can often figure it out on the fly. Recently a patron wanted to send an article from HeinOnline using his e-mail and was very confused about how to do it. I didn't know anything about his e-mail system, but it seemed likely that his provider would have a way for him to sign on even when he wasn't at home, so I got him to the provider's web site. Sure enough, there was a link for web access to his e-mail account. Once he signed on, I figured there would be a way to attach a document and there was. My assistance wasn't brilliant—but it was what this patron needed.

¶7 It seems to me that it used to be more disruptive for us to learn a new application than it is now. This is in part because developers have made it easier. For example, back when we first attached documents to e-mail, we had to go through an elaborate routine—typing a series of UNIX commands, logging into an FTP server, and so on. It was fussy and unforgiving and, frankly, a pain. Now sending a document is often just a matter of browsing a menu of files and clicking on the one to attach or maybe clicking and dragging the file into the e-mail window. And at the other end, opening the file just takes a click. So it's not a big deal to look at an unfamiliar e-mail system and see what to do.

¶8 But I think the fact of change being less disruptive is about more than the systems becoming easier. We now have confidence that we can figure out the next application we encounter because we've learned and used so many. For example, having blogged with Blogger² and WordPress³ and used MediaWiki⁴ for our department wiki, I knew that I could figure out the basics of Facebook.

2. Blogger (www.blogger.com) is free blogging software from Google. Blogger, The Story of Blogger, <http://www.blogger.com/about> (last visited Oct. 23, 2008).

3. WordPress also provides free blogging software. WordPress.org, <http://wordpress.org> (last visited Oct. 23, 2008).

4. MediaWiki, <http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki> (last visited Nov. 7, 2008).

¶9 Moreover, using so many systems over the years has given us a sense of the typical ways that applications can work. For instance, I've used databases that use ! as a truncation symbol, and some that use * or ? or #. I don't gripe that they're inconsistent (although it might be nice if they weren't)—I just know that when I begin using an unfamiliar database I need to look around for the search tips page that will tell me which symbol this one uses. Sometimes something in a new application will seem familiar from way back: I haven't used WordPerfect for many years, but when I blog or edit a web page, I recognize the HTML interface as being similar to what I used to see when I used the "reveal codes" command.⁵

¶10 Maybe changes used to make us cranky because we had the illusion that we would one day be "done": we'd learn a word-processing system (or online search system or whatever) and simply use it. Change after change after change later, I think I've finally let go of that illusion.⁶ I've also let go of the idea that an application or a piece of hardware should be the same across all the platforms I use. The PC keyboard in my office is curved for ergonomic benefit, but the two keyboards in the reference office are not. My Apple laptop has a different keyboard yet. But I can touch-type on any of them. At work we had a short training session to help us through the transition from Word 2003 to Word 2007, and I've been able to get my work done (although I still have some gaps in my facility with the new system). The Word 2008 for Mac on my laptop isn't like the Word 2007 on the PCs at work. I'm a little surprised that having three versions of Word in my head doesn't throw me off, but it's okay.

¶11 For years, some people have observed a cultural divide between librarians and information technology specialists.⁷ In my experience, librarians wanted a

5. Sometimes I still miss that WordPerfect feature, which Word lacks.

6. Paul de Palma, a professor of mathematics and computer science, likens changes in software to changes in fashion, which keep up demand for new products because the old ones are made obsolete. Even if car styles didn't change though, cars would wear out, so consumers would need new ones—but software doesn't "wear out," so the changes are more important for keeping up demand. Moreover, software tends to become more complex because hardware with more processing speed becomes available, and then software companies compete to take advantage of it. Paul de Palma, *The Software Wars: Why You Can't Understand Your Computer*, AM. SCHOLAR, Winter 2005, at 69, 78–79.

Implementing new technology "can be destabilizing, even for large organizations with copious resources," JOHN SEELY BROWN & PAUL DUGUID, *THE SOCIAL LIFE OF INFORMATION* 75 (2000). Some businesses choose not to acquire upgrades, but that choice has risks—that the old software is vulnerable to attack, that it won't work properly with other products, or that the vendor will stop supporting it. John Edwards, *Version Therapy*, CFO MAG., June 2005, at 27.

You could tell Microsoft to keep its next Windows upgrade, your machine is working very nicely right now, thank you. But your impertinence will cost you. Before long, your computer will be an island where the natives speak a language cut off from the great linguistic communities. In a word, you will be isolated. You won't be able to buy new software, edit a report you wrote at work on your home computer, or send pictures of the kids to Grandma over the Internet. Further, a decision to upgrade later will be harder, perhaps impossible, without losing everything your trusted but obsolete computer has stored.

De Palma, *supra*, at 81.

The technology we use *will* continue to change. We won't ever be "done."

7. See, e.g., Marc Eichen, *Oil and Water? Can IT and Library Staffs Work as One?*, in *THE FUTURE OF LAW LIBRARIES: SELECTED ARTICLES FROM A SYMPOSIUM ON THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON LAW LIBRARIES AND LAW CLASSROOMS OF THE FUTURE*, March 10–11, 2005, Amelia Island, Florida 58 (2005), available at http://west.thomson.com/pdf/librarian/Future_Law_Libraries_White_Paper.pdf.

project to be polished, proofread, and tidy before it was made public, while IT people seemed happy to throw something up and see what happened, saying it could always be changed later. That divide might still be there, but it has diminished. I don't speak for all librarians, but I know I've learned to be more flexible. I still have high standards and can be annoying about spelling and usage,⁸ but I now know that we can put up a web guide and rearrange it later. When our library decided to try out a federated search service, we thought carefully about what databases to include and how to set the defaults, but we were aware throughout the setup process that we could later change things (or, indeed, cancel our subscription to the service).

¶12 So we can learn new applications and we do so often, but how do we decide which new applications to learn and when? Learning does take time and effort—time and effort that could be spent on other aspects of our jobs—so we can't learn every application out there.

¶13 Sometimes a new application is forced on us by circumstances. One of our professors, for instance, kept using his Lexis 4.0 software for over a dozen years. Then his computer was replaced and there wasn't a copy of the software to load onto the new computer. Unwilling though he was, he did learn to use lexis.com. Unlike the professor, we reference librarians typically can't stick with an old version of LexisNexis or Westlaw, because we want to be able to train students on whatever they use. So we had to learn new features more often, but we moved from Lexis 4.0 to lexis.com in smaller increments than he had to—a changed directory here, a new way to save searches there.

¶14 A decision to learn a new system can also be made institutionally as, for example, when our library decided to have all the staff use an online calendaring system. Or when the university decided to stop offering classes in WordPerfect and to focus on Word.

¶15 Sometimes we decide to learn a new application not because it's new, but because it will enable us to do something we want to do. I didn't have a particular desire to have a blog for its own sake, but I wanted a way to give regular updates to a large number of people in a format that was easy to read and navigate—and the tool for that turned out to be a blog.⁹ We chose to learn how to use a wiki because we wanted to improve on our binders of reference tips, making the entries searchable, accessible from different offices, and easy to update. It turned out that the

8. I try to observe some social sensitivity, but I sometimes let out my inner SNOOT. See David Foster Wallace, *Tense Present*, HARPER'S MAG., Apr. 1, 2001, at 39, 41 n.3:

SNOOT (n) (*highly colloq*) is this reviewer's nuclear family's nickname à clef for a really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to look for mistakes in Safire's column's prose itself. This reviewer's family is roughly 70 percent SNOOT, which term itself derives from an acronym, with the big historical family joke being that whether S.N.O.O.T. stood for "Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendance" or "Syntax Nudniks of Our Time" depended on whether or not you were one.

Bryan Garner has promoted SNOOTiness in the legal profession. See Bryan A. Garner, *If You Care About Language, Consider Yourself a SNOOT*, STUDENT LAW., Nov. 2006, at 11, 11 (citing Wallace's essay as reprinted and expanded in DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, *CONSIDER THE LOBSTER* (2005)).

9. See Mary Whisner, *A Blog's Life*, 98 LAW LIBR. J. 559, 561, 2006 LAW LIBR. J. 32, ¶ 10.

application was also well suited to class projects that called for collaboration and sharing of information.¹⁰

¶16 We may choose to learn new applications because we want to have a sense of what our patrons are using. More than 80% of our incoming students have Facebook accounts, and we heard about university and law school libraries that were starting Facebook pages of their own in order to reach students via this incredibly popular medium. So it seemed worthwhile at least to play around with the system enough to see what it was. Maybe we won't do much with it—there are students who say they want to keep Facebook for their social lives, not law school business—but at least now we have some familiarity with it (and a modest library page, too).¹¹

¶17 It can be useful to have at least a little exposure to a variety of services, even if that means setting up accounts that won't be used much. I have an account on PSLawNet (www.pslawnet.org), a web site for students interested in public interest work, not because I'm in that job market myself, but because once or twice a year I give a talk sponsored by our career services office, and I want to be able to say what the students can find there. I set up an Avvo.com¹² account to see how it worked. I only need one RSS feed reader, but I set up accounts on both Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) and Google Reader (reader.google.com) so I could demonstrate them both. There can also be an element of fun. I don't know if the LibraryThing account I set up for our library¹³ will be useful in promoting our collection, but I've enjoyed playing around with it.¹⁴

¶18 There are also times when any one of us can choose *not* to learn a new application and, if necessary, use others' expertise. For years, I relied on my colleagues Cheryl Nyberg and Ann Hemmens to post documents to the web for me—I could create a guide in Microsoft Word and leave the rest to them. I had plenty on my plate, and this worked. But the time came when I was ready to learn to do it myself. It turned out that my experience blogging made it easier to work with HTML and, with some coaching from Cheryl, I learned to post and update my own documents. In the meantime, I have been the person in our department who knows the most about blogs and feed readers, and I am happy to talk to patrons with questions. None of us has taken up Twitter;¹⁵ so far it just hasn't been a priority.

10. For a professor's account of how Gallagher Law Library reference librarian Cheryl Nyberg helped his class use a wiki, see Tom Cobb, *Public Interest Research, Collaboration, and the Promise of Wikis*, 16 PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 1 (2007).

11. Facebook, Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Seattle-WA/Marian-Gould-Gallagher-Law-Library/24476615985> (last visited Oct. 23, 2008).

12. Avvo provides lawyer ratings and advice on how to select a lawyer. Avvo, About Us, http://www.avvo.com/about_avvo/overview (last visited Oct. 23, 2008).

13. LibraryThing, Gallagher Law Library, <http://www.librarything.com/profile/gallagherlawlibrary> (last visited Oct. 23, 2008).

14. LibraryThing (www.librarything.com) is an example of new technology (a social networking site) promoting old technology (books). Another example: before I tried LibraryThing, I used Amazon's Listmania to create lists of books to support a talk I was invited to give on summer reading for lawyers. See <http://www.amazon.com/gp/richpub/listmania/byauthor/AB5PRQYEJFM4G> (last visited Oct. 23, 2008).

15. Twitter is a social networking service that allows members to communicate via short message service (SMS) on their phones or computers. Twitter, FAQ, <http://help.twitter.com/index.php?pg=kb.page&id=26> (last visited Oct. 23, 2008).

¶19 A challenge is that learning new applications can be too absorbing. Tinkering with a Facebook page or posting wisecracks on friends' pages teaches us about the service, but too much of that is, well, too much. There's still other work to do. When it comes to exploring new applications, it is often hard to locate the line between useful experimentation and goofing off.¹⁶ Spending hours experimenting can be worthwhile if there's a chance that the application will help us improve services. If so, then we have to remember that the experimentation was worthwhile even if that chance doesn't pan out.

¶20 Many of us did not get into the library business because of a love for gadgets and whiz-bang technology.¹⁷ And yet, we do end up playing around with the technology. Why? At root it's about our commitment to service, and using the technology helps us serve our patrons. Twenty years ago, we served our patrons by acquiring resources (books, journals, Westlaw, LexisNexis), organizing the resources (cataloging and classification), making the resources available and keeping track of them (circulation, shelving), helping people use the resources (reference, instruction, finding aids). Now we perform the same basic functions, but new technology affects how. We acquire more electronic resources. Changes to the catalog (online catalogs, personalization, RSS feeds) affect how we organize the resources. We make resources available in the old way (books on shelves) but also through portals, online guides, IP authentication, federated searching, patron-initiated borrowing from other institutions, and other applications. And we use all sorts of new applications—e-mail, chat, blogs, screencasting, online tutorials, and more—in helping people use resources. We have had to learn a lot of new applications, but it's been for a good reason: to help us provide service.

¶21 We aren't likely to see the end of needing to learn new applications. But we can take comfort in recognizing how good we have become at it. Even if someone assumes we can't figure out an iPod—or anything else—we know that we can. And, more than just learning the application for our own use, we can help others with it.

16. In the early 1990s, playing Solitaire was a good way to develop skill with a mouse, which was new to us. Click, drag, double-click—there was a time when those routine motions were awkward. But I for one kept playing long after I had all the mouse skill I was likely to develop.

It's not just new technology that can lure us away from other work. An old-technology task was clipping newspaper articles about law to put on a bulletin board. Did I ever pause to read more than I needed to in order to clip an article? Of course. Did I ever read an article that wasn't law-related, just because it grabbed me? You bet.

17. Of course, gadgets *can* be mighty attractive. See Richard A. Leiter, *Confessions of a Gadget Addict*, LEGAL INFO. ALERT, June 2007, at 1, 1 (“Human beings are always attracted to bright, shiny objects—especially when they’re new.”).