

Report to the MnObe Directors

Introduction

MnObe librarians met to explore the idea of a next generation discovery tool (colloquially called a “catalog” until we learn of a better word) that would fit the needs of liberal arts college libraries. We quickly abandoned the idea of creating a comprehensive list of ideal features and functions for two reasons: features are evolving at such a fast rate that any list we compiled would be out of date within the space of a few months, and we thought it more important to distill our needs to a few key principles against which to measure applications as a whole as well as individual features and functions. To this end, we have identified three interrelated and foundational principles as well as recommendations for moving forward toward a next generation library research tool.

Key Principles

Principle One: Flexible Data Feeding Flexible Tools

We do not believe the library catalog is or should be the single best place for researchers to access library content. Instead, a next generation discovery tool should be based on flexible, open, standards-based data. This would allow us to exploit the metadata created by catalogers in ways that are currently impossible, and it would also open the door for discovery tools to knit together information from a variety of other sources to create a powerful and flexible discovery environment. The data traditionally held in a library’s ILS will comprise only a portion of the possible information about available resources. In fact, this data will comprise only a portion of the possible information about any individual resource.

Because of this, we believe that libraries should not attempt to provide any single “best” discovery tool. We recommend providing *a* discovery tool which is clearly identified as such and which provides an Application Programming Interface (API) so that users can assimilate library data to their own “best” discovery tools. Currently, researchers are usually confined basic and advanced searches, but we envision a time when these two sizes need not fit all.

Principle Two: Intellectual Connectivity between Resources

Even though library data will be used by other systems which may or may not be created by or even known to the library, any discovery tool that the library does provide should guide users through the intellectual connections that exist between resources. This includes FRBRizing sources, faceted search, linking between sources based on citations, and other recommender systems as they are developed.

Principle Three: Interactivity

Again remembering that any library-provided discovery tool will only be one of a variety of tools available to our communities, library-provided tools should allow flexible and robust interactivity between users and the system and between the system and other systems. Among other things, users should be able to tag, review, rate, create sets, save, send, and pull information from the system. And user interaction should be able to teach the system about the intellectual connections between resources.

Such a system should also be able to interact with other systems, pulling information from other library and non-library sources, and feeding information to other tools and applications (including everything from right-click menus to Facebook to desktop applications).

Recommendations

We recommend that the MnObe directors act on the following strategies:

- Begin and continue to study faculty, student, and librarian uses of information so that we understand their research needs and behaviors. Too often we study how people use the systems we provide without stepping back to see if our communities even need the types of systems we provide.
- In the next 3-5 years, adopt either an Open Source (OS) tool or a tool provided by OCLC as our library-provided discovery option. If OS appears to be the best choice, we recommend that the directors hire a programmer to be shared between the MnObe libraries to provide support, debug, and develop new features.
 - Over the course of the next year, we should insert ourselves into the user communities of OS discovery systems (such as Koha) both to develop a better understanding of those communities and to learn what resources we would require if we were to go the OS route.
 - Over the course of the next year, work with OCLC more closely to track the development of its new discovery tools.
 - As soon as possible, schedule Josh Ferraro from Liblime to talk about Koha. This talk could occur in tandem with the MnObe directors' meeting in October, or as a separate meeting in November.
 - As soon as possible, schedule someone from OCLC to talk about WorldCat Local. This talk could occur in tandem with the MnObe directors' meeting in October, or as a separate meeting in November.
- Explore funding options in preparation for more concrete planning of discovery tool implementation and data migration.