

InfoSoup Development Plan

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Background

In February of this year, OWLSnet libraries began using a new integrated library system (ILS). Moving to Millennium software from Innovative has created a totally new environment for OWLSnet libraries, requiring many changes in operating procedures. Circulation, cataloging, reports, and all other functions are very different than they were with our old ILS. In addition, the switch to Millennium gave us an opportunity to launch a new, more powerful online public access catalog, i.e., InfoSoup.

InfoSoup is a vast improvement over the online catalogs that we've used in the past. Besides offering us more features "out of the box," the Millennium software provides us with a much greater ability to control our online catalog. While the current version of InfoSoup is already greatly improved over the "out of the box" version, we have a tremendous opportunity to continue enhancing, improving, and customizing it.

The OWLS staff believes that we have an obligation to continue developing InfoSoup to make it the best possible experience for library patrons. OWLSnet has already made a significant investment of time, energy, and money in developing InfoSoup. We feel a responsibility to protect that investment by continuing to develop it. Also, to discontinue developing the online catalog would waste a tremendous opportunity for enhancing it.

It may be helpful to clarify what is meant by InfoSoup development. In this proposal, developing InfoSoup means adding features or access to content not currently included that would enhance patron experiences with the online catalog. It should be noted that this proposal does not specifically address cataloging practices or suggesting software enhancements to the Millennium product. While our cataloging practices and the features available in the Innovative software play a very significant role in making InfoSoup a rich experience for users, developments in these areas are not addressed by this plan. We currently have other mechanisms in place for making decisions about cataloging practices and requesting enhancements from Innovative. This proposal is intended to address development, within our control, involving the look and feel of InfoSoup and how it interacts with resources.

The purpose of this development plan is to articulate a vision for InfoSoup, to introduce some preliminary ideas for enhancing it, and to create a common understanding of an acceptable development process that provides opportunities for member library input and collaboration. An agreed upon plan will allow OWLSnet to continue developing InfoSoup in a timely manner and ensure that member libraries are involved in the process.

Vision

Our vision for InfoSoup is of a dynamic state-of-the-art online catalog and resource-finding tool, one where continual development keeps it vital, interesting, and encourages patrons to return to repeat their experiences. It is also important that the current functionalities included in InfoSoup remain and do not become more difficult to use. We understand that some users only want an easy to use catalog that allows them to determine what their local library owns and whether it's available.

In our vision:

- InfoSoup enables even the smallest libraries to have a strong online presence, one that is equal to that of larger libraries around the country. It provides lots of information in one place where the library is central, and development helps continue to keep libraries visible to patrons and Internet users.
- InfoSoup includes, highlights, and promotes a wide variety of library resources. Network-wide subscriptions to electronic resources, unique local library holdings, and content developed by local libraries are all included and promoted, giving appropriate acknowledgment and credit to contributors.
- InfoSoup allows more patron interaction, in the spirit of Web 2.0 and social software trends, creating an online community of users. For example, patron reviews and staff and/or patron blogs are available to those desiring to use them.
- InfoSoup is a tool that is in sync with how most people actually use the Internet. It's not limited to how librarians might prefer that people seek information or use the Internet.
- OWLSnet libraries build upon InfoSoup's unique branding to keep our community of libraries visible and important members of the information-providing community.

Development Environment

We would like to create a positive environment for the timely development of InfoSoup. The ideal environment would be one where it's okay to explore many possibilities and where experimentation and creativity are encouraged. It is possible that an enhancement could be added to InfoSoup that wasn't successful. We believe that it should be okay to fail occasionally, especially if we all learn from the experience. We don't want fear of failure or fear of change to keep OWLSnet from making enhancements to InfoSoup.

We'd also like to create a development environment where participation of staff of all OWLSnet libraries is encouraged and welcomed. We believe that all OWLSnet libraries are trying to achieve many of the same objectives, and, when it comes to InfoSoup, we believe that all of us want to provide a great product to our patrons. Of course, we don't want to create a process where design is done by committee or an environment where every idea has to be approved by everyone with an opinion. Different people will place different values on every proposed change to InfoSoup. While we value all informed opinions, there will be times when we'll need to be able to implement changes without complete agreement on them.

We also want to make sure that we create an environment where any OWLSnet library feels free to develop its own website and to incorporate InfoSoup into its site as it chooses. We view InfoSoup as complementary to OWLSnet library websites, not competitive with them.

Development Process

The process for developing InfoSoup must be one that includes the participation of interested OWLSnet library staff and allows timely progress to be made. It is essential for this process to provide library staff with opportunities for informed input and collaboration including the ability to make suggestions, to respond to ideas and proposals, and to contribute content. It is equally important that the process be as efficient and as economical of time as possible so that priorities can be set, decisions can be made, and enhancements can be added to InfoSoup at a reasonable pace without getting bogged down in the process.

The following process is proposed in order to accomplish the objectives of sufficient participation and timely progress:

- OWLS staff will create an InfoSoup development blog.
- OWLSnet library directors will be asked to submit the names of staff members, who they believe can make an informed contribution, to participate in the InfoSoup development blog.
- In addition to the participation of library staff members, online surveys may be conducted to solicit input from InfoSoup users. User surveys may be especially important for assessing the needs and opinions of remote users who have little interaction with library staff. Survey results will be posted to the development blog, and access to raw data will be made available whenever possible.
- OWLS staff and library staff will use the InfoSoup development blog to make suggestions, discuss ideas, share and discuss relevant information, and solicit and provide feedback to specific enhancement proposals.
- Discussion on the InfoSoup development blog will be used to arrive at conclusions regarding development priorities, criteria or guidelines for content inclusion, and specific enhancement proposals. A library director may be asked to speak for a library on a specific proposal if there is no consensus among the library's participating staff members.
- While consensus on any particular issue or proposal is desirable, it's not likely that we will always achieve consensus. When there is no consensus among OWLSnet libraries, OWLS will consider all points of view and make a decision on how to proceed. Any such decisions will be communicated via the blog before proceeding.

Preliminary Development Ideas

The OWLS staff has been working on additional enhancements for InfoSoup since it was initially introduced in February, and Appleton Public Library staff has contributed several booklists. A number of other development projects are already underway or are currently being investigated.

- Purchasing and implementing Innovative's spell check feature in InfoSoup
- Developing criteria, guidelines, or standards for the inclusion of locally produced indices, databases, bibliographies, or pathfinders in InfoSoup
- Creating various browser software tools for accessing information from InfoSoup
- Adding additional book lists and pathfinders developed by OWLSnet libraries
- Adding enhanced content to the guided search pages that focuses on materials and information available in InfoSoup
- Subscribing to Bookletters in order to provide booklists with catalog links that don't have to be created from scratch by library staff

Additional ideas for developing InfoSoup include:

- Exploring options for additional InfoSoup enhancements that are available in WebPac Pro software from Innovative
- Adding access to local library resources, either library created or purchased, that are not currently included in InfoSoup
- Purchasing and implementing the new patron reviews and ratings module available from Innovative
- Making sure that InfoSoup is included in WorldCat and provides access to WorldCat
- Providing information about new materials to patrons via RSS feeds
- Exploring options for adding E-commerce to InfoSoup so that patrons could pay bills or make contributions online
- Adding enhanced content to the guided search pages that extends the focus of the pages to include resources not included in InfoSoup, i.e., related resources available on the Internet
- Exploring the addition of blogs for staff and/or patron interaction

The list of preliminary development ideas presented here is intended to provide examples of the kinds of changes, activities, or enhancements that we consider to be part of the InfoSoup development process. The list is by no means comprehensive or complete, and details for most of the ideas included in the list would be determined using the proposed development process.

InfoSoup Promotion

An InfoSoup Public Relations Committee has been in place since January 2006. Current committee members are Colleen Rortvedt, APL; Michael Kenney, APL; Penny Habeck, SHA; Mark Merrifield, NFLS; Elizabeth Timmins, SEY; Beth Carpenter, OWLS; and Rick Krumwiede, OWLS. The initial task of the committee was to make sure that sufficient informational and promotional items were available to inform library patrons of the switch to InfoSoup. The ongoing role of the committee is to plan and carryout selected activities to promote InfoSoup. Promotional activities for InfoSoup are designed to compliment, not compete with, local library promotional activities.

It is recommended that the InfoSoup PR Committee handle any special promotion of an InfoSoup enhancement, i.e., any promotion beyond highlighting the enhancement in InfoSoup.

Summary

The intent of this proposal is to have a plan and process for developing InfoSoup that is generally agreed upon by OWLSnet libraries. Consequently, we are interested in receiving your comments about this proposed plan. Please direct any comments to Rick Krumwiede. Your comments will be considered, and modifications will be made to the plan as appropriate.

However, unless we hear serious objections we'd like to create the InfoSoup development blog as soon as possible so that we can begin discussing development projects that are currently on hold pending the establishment of a process for soliciting library input and feedback. We expect that we may need to tweak the process along the way to make sure it's working as effectively as possible.