

# Expanding Library Instruction to the Web Portal

Christopher V. Hollister, University at Buffalo  
Hugh W. Jarvis, University at Buffalo

*Hollister is an Information Literacy Librarian for the University at Buffalo's Arts & Sciences Libraries. Jarvis is the Cybrarian for the University at Buffalo's Office of Creative Services*

## Abstract

Teaching information literacy skills is a major initiative for today's instruction librarians. The advent of web portals on the college campus provides a unique teaching opportunity. This paper describes how the University at Buffalo Libraries and the University's Office of Creative Services collaborate to offer My Library, which is a channel built into MyUB, the University's web portal. My Library provides a new opportunity for instruction that addresses the needs, expectations, and changing learning styles of today's technology savvy students.

## Introduction

Academic libraries continue to evolve from their former, somewhat passive presence on campus to be more active participants in the educational process. This change is primarily driven by two decades of rapid advances in information technologies, and the recognition that libraries must adapt to a new paradigm of student needs and expectations and a new model of providing relevant and meaningful services. As a result, teaching information literacy skills, and outreach activities to promote the educational role of the library have become major initiatives for librarians.

Advances in information technologies have resulted in something of an information glut. Although the width and breadth of information has expanded exponentially, the depth of it is decidedly lacking (Cochrane, 2003). This poses a significant challenge for libraries. Despite having an abundance of information at their fingertips, students lack the basic information literacy skills to find, critically evaluate, synthesize, and apply good information in a meaningful way (Fitzgerald, 2004). The challenge for libraries is to continue to push information literacy as a major initiative, and to find new ways of teaching information literacy skills.

Advances in information technologies also provide unique teaching opportunities for librarians. The University at Buffalo's Office of Creative Services, in conjunction with the Office of Administrative Computing Services, oversees the campus web portal MyUB (2004, University at Buffalo). Initiated in 1999 as a simple web site for undergraduate students, MyUB now provides customized and personalized online services to all campus constituents. As users logon, the portal displays fine-grained content that corresponds to their academic status, area of study, and departmental affiliation. Topical areas, or "channels," within the portal are developed and maintained in conjunction with appropriate stakeholders from applicable units on campus. For example, the My Library page is the result of a partnership that includes key members of the University Libraries. The Libraries leverage this partnership to promote the resources and services necessary to achieve their instructional objectives.

## Literature Review

Expanding the scope of library instruction by using Internet technologies is well represented in the literature. Davis and Applin (2002) and Kelsey and Lenares (2002) discuss the use of e-mail for instructional purposes. In a survey of instruction librarians, 78% of the respondents indicated that they view web tutorials as effective instructional

tools, and 55% of the respondents noted that their libraries currently use them as teaching tools (Hollister & Coe, 2003). Costello, Lenholt, and Stryker discuss the use of course management software to address the evolving learning styles of today's students (2004). Following this, Peele and Phipps write of their instructional collaboration using the chat feature of Blackboard. The authors suggest that "Targeted library instruction is perhaps even more vital for today's students who are often overwhelmed by the sheer amount and type of resources available to them," and they conclude: "Clearly, library instruction can be adapted for the online classroom using chat services" (2004).

Hackenberry and Taddeo discuss the benefits and limitations of using an instant messaging service to teach information literacy skills. The authors acknowledge that the lack of facial expressions and body language can be something of a barrier when using instant messaging for instruction. Still, Hackenberry and Taddeo insist that the service is not meant to replace traditional teaching methods, but rather to complement them (n.d.). Deitering and Huston discuss the use of weblogs, or "blogs," as a "middle space" for instruction that exists between virtual and traditional classrooms. Their experience suggests that "social and communicative technologies like blogs may play a significant role in changing the dynamics of higher education course" (2004).

The implementation of web portals, like other initiatives to personalize the Internet, is not a new phenomenon. The literature provides numerous examples of web portals that are created and maintained by libraries (Gibbons, 2003; Morgan, 2003; Ghaphery, 2002; Pace, 2001; Goodvin & Smith, 2000). But until recently, little has been written about collaborative activities to create and maintain library channels on campus web portals. Olsen (2002) writes of emerging ways that campus web portals can be useful to students and faculty. Zemon suggests the importance of librarians in the development of portals for providing "credible content that has been selected for a specific learning community" (2001, p. 701). Research conducted by Pearce (2003) bolsters this assertion. Pearce's study showed that "Library and Quality Internet Resource Alerts" were consistently among the top ten most visited links on institutional portal sites.

Cunningham and Stoffel (2004) made the logical next step by suggesting the need for a library channel on institutional web portals. The authors write: "It is important that librarians educate campus portal planners on services that their libraries provide to the campus community and the value of including the library in the campus portal and in portal planning and design" (p. 28). The authors of this paper demonstrate the application and the value of this type of collaboration in delivering My Library as a new method of providing library instruction.

### **What is MyLibrary?**

My Library is a page built into MyUB, the University at Buffalo campus web portal. The page displays a suite of select library resources and services. These resources and services are chosen by librarians for their high usage and for their instructional value. Examples include recommended databases for the user's area of study, select course-related subject guides, and timely instructional announcements. For instance, a freshman undergraduate student with a declared major in English Literature would find direct access to the MLA International Bibliography database, prominent links to their course-specific subject guides, and timely alerts to upcoming workshops on library research for English majors. Other instructional elements within My Library include research tutorials and writing guides. For additional assistance, contact information for

the user's library subject specialist, and a direct link to the Libraries' instant messaging service are provided.

### **Collaboration: Development & Maintenance**

The authors are responsible for the ongoing development and maintenance of My Library. This activity involves almost daily interaction as well as periodic, more extensive, vetting of page elements. This process proactively and reactively addresses user needs and expectations.

#### *Development*

The proactive approach to developing My Library involves strategic planning. The authors interact regularly to discuss the Libraries' instructional resources and services, and how they may or may be appropriate for the page. When a suitable item for the page is identified, the authors discuss appropriate audiences for it, timely scheduling of its appearance (e.g., semester, times of the semester, calendar year, etc.), and implications of its placement on the page. Each of these factors requires due deliberation. For instance, the placement of an item in My Library requires consideration of where it fits organizationally, where it is most visible, useful, and appropriate, what the impact of its inclusion has on the rest of the page, and whether or not it contributes to the overall ease of use. Placement also has technical implications for portal administrators who must consider issues of metadata keywording, labeling, and fine-graining.

The following is an example of how the proactive collaboration works. The Geography Librarian informs the authors of the new library resource, GNIS: Geographic Names Information System. The Librarian states the importance of this resource for the discipline. The authors discuss with the subject librarian whether or not the resource would be used heavily enough and broadly enough to warrant inclusion in My Library, and whether or not the target audience would expect it to be there. If so, the authors establish the parameters of the target audience. For instance, would the resource be equally useful to related disciplines, like Geology? Further, will it be suitable for all Geography students, or just for undergraduate upper classmen and graduate students? Regarding placement on the page, this particular resource will fit within the existing channel, "Recommended Databases." The authors work with the subject librarian to determine appropriate keywording, labeling, and descriptive text. Additionally, with a new resource, like GNIS, the authors will place a weeklong promotional announcement in the page's "Check These Out" channel.

The reactive approach to developing My Library involves several layers of assessment. The authors consider solicited and unsolicited user feedback for developing and maintaining the page. Solicited feedback includes surveys, focus groups, and small group user testing. Unsolicited feedback includes server logs of My Library page links, and user e-mail messages. Librarians provide feedback based on their instructional experience. Additionally, the authors use published research from the literature to supplement their decision-making.

The following is an example of how the reactive collaboration works. During a library instruction session for the course, CIE-340: Environmental Engineering, the Engineering Librarian discovers that the students have a strong need for case studies in hazardous waste management. The Librarian alerts the Information Literacy Librarian (one of the authors) to this need, and suggests that the University Archives' Love Canal Collection would be appropriate, since it includes extensive online materials. At this point, negotiations occur that parallel the previous proactive example. The conclusion is reached that this resource should be targeted to all Environmental Engineering students, and placed within another existing channel in My Library, "Special Collections & Exhibits."

#### *Maintenance*

Maintaining My Library involves two processes. The first is regular adjustment to routine changes in web site addresses and nomenclature. The second process is periodic, scheduled vetting of links, organization, appearance, and appropriateness. The latter process involves

assessment of the relative use of individual links, feedback from users and stakeholders, possible follow-up surveys, and the corresponding analysis of the overall page content and layout. The ultimate goal of this process is to determine how successful My Library is in meeting its instructional goals, and what, if any, changes might enhance that success.

For example, after the latest vetting cycle, the authors established that several channels were not being used, nor were they deemed to be critical for continued inclusion in the portal. Accordingly, the authors decided to remove a general information channel with links to library hours, locations, and staff. The assessment had shown that users preferred to access this information directly from the main Libraries' web site. Correspondingly, the authors made the Libraries' homepage link more prominent on the My Library page.

### **Case Study: The World Civilizations Course**

As part of their general education requirement, all University at Buffalo undergraduate students must complete a World Civilizations course. Traditionally, students take this course early in their tenure. For instance, during the 2004 fall semester, 2,686 freshmen took the course. This figure represents 85% of all World Civilizations students, and 84% of the entire freshman class. Given the instructional mandate of the Libraries, a database-driven subject guide was developed with this target audience in mind. The authors collaborated to place a link to the guide on the MyLibrary page, and to make it visible for this freshman cohort. During the 2004 fall semester, freshman students used the MyLibrary page 14,725 times. The traffic included 458 clicks to the World Civilizations subject guide. This makes the guide the eleventh most used of the 150+ resources available to freshmen on the MyLibrary page, and it suggests a measure of the collaboration's success.

### **Discussion**

The authors have collaborated to establish the MyLibrary page as an instructional channel on the University at Buffalo's web portal. Server data shows that students are actively using the page. Server data further suggests that specific resources on the page are being used by their intended audiences. Following up on this initial success, the authors are working to further expand the awareness and increase the use of MyLibrary. This is being done by targeting the freshman class, with the idea that they will continue to use the page as an instructional tool throughout their academic tenure.

There are two shortcomings to the data currently available as it relates to the instructional value of MyLibrary. First, server data reports do not show the precise nature of its use. For instance, it is not known if all World Civilizations students use the page, or if they do, how often. Second, the educational impact of MyLibrary is not known. For instance, it is not known if World Civilizations students benefited from exposure to the subject guide.

To address these shortcomings, the authors are developing a two-phase instrument to assess the precise nature of MyLibrary use, and its educational impact. Phase one will be a survey of freshmen students who have completed the World Civilizations course. This will assess students' awareness and use of the page, and their information literacy competency skills. An added benefit of this survey is more promotion for MyLibrary. To provide longitudinal data, phase two will be a follow-up survey of the same students in three years time, which measures the same elements. Presumably, the follow-up survey will reach students shortly before they graduate.

### **Conclusions**

Theoretically, using the MyLibrary page as an instructional tool should be effective. The authors have taken instructional resources targeted for specific audiences, and placed them directly into the path of that audience in a timely manner. This approach

addresses the learning styles of today's technology savvy students, and it meets their expectations. The authors have established that it is possible to deliver specific resources to targeted audiences. Further research needs to be done to establish whether or not there is a correlative or a causal relationship between the use MyLibrary and desired learning outcomes.

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