

Free Stuff is Good! It's Quick and Simple to Enhance your LibGuides with Free Web 2.0 Applications

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While many studies have been published to show how LibGuides is used for subject guides in academic settings, the aim of this article is to suggest criteria for evaluating free online Web 2.0 applications for chat, discussion forum, and video and to demonstrate the tips and tricks to easily embed them into any LibGuide, in this case a course specific music LibGuides in Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU)¹. In this way, LibGuides can be made more dynamic and interactive for students than solely providing relevant links and lists.

Background

HKBU started using LibGuides to provide a browsable list of databases by subjects in January 2009. Trying to explore how it can be adopted for course-based use, I had two days to create an online subject guide for a postgraduate music education research method course (MUS7260). Given the straightforwardness of the LibGuides platform, I converted my paper guide to a LibGuide with six tabs of resources in about one day and faced no particular difficulty.

Once the basics were done, my next task was to provide subject specific services to these part-time postgraduate music students, who were hard to reach face-to-face due to their full-time teaching jobs in primary/secondary schools, via tools such as chat reference, a discussion forum and video tutorials. Since this was an ad-hoc project and the commercial software needed was not already purchased and owned by HKBU, I began to look for free alternatives on the Internet.

Free Online Applications: Evaluation & Selection

Chat reference

Though our library is now considering the possibility of a full-fledged chat reference service, I was eager to do a small-scale pilot test. Not being sure of which chat platform to use, I knew I wanted a solution that did not require users to download software, create a personal account, or to become "friends" with me in order to chat. I did a search in LibGuides's FAQs. Three suggestions (Library h3lp, Meebo, Plugoo) came up. With no budget, Library h3lp, which charges either a flat fee or by usage, was out of the question. I therefore evaluated Meebo (www.meebo.com) and Plugoo (www.plugoo.com) which are available for free on the Web.

One major advantage of these two products is that they allow you to integrate your instant messaging (IM) accounts

such as Google, MSN, Yahoo, etc. into one application. You can also embed the chat widget on your webpage and users can simply type in their questions in the chat box and have live communication with you. Between Meebo and Plugoo, evidence suggests that the latter is less used by libraries² and the free version only allows for a one-to-one chat in each session (as opposed to Meebo's simultaneous multiple chats). Nevertheless, for a course specific LibGuides with only one subject specialist assigned to the course, a one-to-one chat is actually more manageable.

Having further examined the two products, I eventually chose Plugoo over Meebo due to Plugoo's ability to save chat history (anonymously, since no login was required to chat) in the registered email account. In my situation, my Gmail account, one of the IM services Plugoo supports, is connected to my Plugoo account, so every chat conducted in the chat widget of my MUS7260 guide would be saved in my Gmail. Yet, for Meebo, a chat can only be saved when it is made with someone on your buddy list. Thus, when a non-buddy library user enters his/her questions in the chat widget, the transcription is not automatically recorded (e.g., I would have to copy and paste it into a Word document). For me, the chat history function of Plugoo is extremely important as it could provide data for a future service analysis.

Another advantage of Plugoo is its capability to customize online status text. While the common descriptions for online status like "online", "offline", etc. are sufficient for social networking, the status "away" may give a false impression that the librarian is temporarily unavailable even if he/she is right in front of the computer ready to give real-time service. Therefore, with Plugoo's value-added feature, I was able to change generic status wordings into something more inviting or meaningful (see Table 1). Hence, when my IM becomes inactive because I am working on something else on the computer, Plugoo will display my customized message "Don't be fooled. I am still here. Please ask me questions!" (see Figure 1) and this can alert users that I did not step away and am still available for chat. Also, when I am offline, the text for offline status will inform users what the regular chat hours are and they will then know when to come back.

At the time of implementation in fall 2010, Plugoo was free of advertisements. Recently however, a small advertisement is shown when connecting to the server, but it goes away once the chat widget is fully loaded.

Table 1: Customized text for online chat status

Original Status	Customized Text
Online	Hi, how can I help you today?
Away	Don't be fooled. I'm still here. Please ask me questions!
Busy	I'm with a user right now. Please wait for a moment. Thanks!
Offline	Chat is available Mon-Fri 10am-noon.

Discussion forum

In the guide, I also added a discussion forum to let library users ask questions during non-chat hours and allow those answers to be available for any student to view at any time. Originally, I thought about creating a forum on Google Groups. However, the embedding code of Google Groups is not automatically generated on the forum site and would require too much investigation to make it work on my LibGuides. So, I did a web search for embeddable forums and Nabble (www.nabble.com) appeared to be quite good because of its ease of use. For example, Nabble's embedding code is readily available for copying and pasting once the forum is created. It allows for anonymous posting without any user login. There is also unlimited upload of photos and files. A large variety of customizations can be done, such as the skin (i.e., its appearance), the text size, and the display structure of forum posts. Other useful functions include the availability of permalinks, an editable cascading style sheet, and simple and advanced search functions within the forum.

Embedding the forum onto LibGuides was a bit tricky at first. It was not immediately apparent how to embed the widget as none of the content boxes seemed to accept the code and display the forum properly. Nonetheless, after some trial and error, pasting Nabble's Javascript code into the "Rich Text/Dynamic Content/Scripts" box was the perfect solution.

Video Tutorials

Using screencasts to stretch the library session beyond the class time allotted by leaving the comparatively tedious how-to instructions on interlibrary loan, online renewal, etc. to non-class hours was a goal of this course guide. Therefore, based on a journal article's recommendations on free screen capture tools³, I tried Wink (<http://www.debugmode.com/wink>) & Jing (www.jingproject.com).

Wink captures screenshots or generates videos. It allows you to do frame-by-frame editing, record narration on-the-fly or a voice-over afterwards. Inserting text and callouts are also possible, and the final product can be in the format of an image, SWF, HTML, PDF or PostScript.



Figure 1:
Chat widget, with status being "away"

Jing is another similar freeware to Wink. It also captures screenshots or creates short videos (with a maximum length of five minutes, quite sufficient for most library tutorials in my opinion). Callouts and text can be added in screen captures (but not videos). Voice narration can be recorded as you create your movie. Outputs from Jing can also be sent to Camtasia Studio or Snagit for further editing.

In my first use, Wink looked more promising, as it permits more post-recording modifications than Jing. However, Wink's predesigned control bar contains only the play/pause button and there is no option for volume control or full screen like that of YouTube or other video players. Moreover, the lack of a time counter which shows how long the video is and at which point the movie is currently playing are further points against it. In contrast, the preset control bar of Jing provides all the functions that Wink omits, making it much easier for library users to view and navigate through the movies.

After creating the videos, one issue that I encountered immediately was I lacked a place to host them online as LibGuides does not support direct video uploading. Also, since the tutorials created by Wink and Jing were in Flash (.swf) and I did not have the software on hand to convert them into other file types such as .flv or .wmv, I could not upload them to YouTube either due to format incompatibility. One of my workarounds potentially would be to ask designated colleagues to upload the files for me to the library server. However, that would mean bothering others when it is time to update or delete videos. Fortunately, the collaboration between Jing and Screencast.com offers a solution. With Jing, I can effortlessly upload my videos to Screencast.com, which provides dedicated URLs to share my videos, as well as an embed code to insert a video widget on a website.

(Free Stuff...Continued from page 9)

Since LibGuides allows embedding, this solved my issue. Thus, not only does Jing solve my virtual storage and access problem, but it also gives me all the embedding codes I need.

Conclusion

Free online applications are useful if your budget is limited, or if you need to create something quickly without budget approval. While many people may be concerned about the quality and long-term support of web applications, these freebies often reflect the most current trends and behavior of online communities. If evaluated thoroughly, they can help encourage involvement of distance users and give more Web presence to your subject guide.

(Interview...Continued from page 11)

solve real problems. Also, the work we do is often international, which can help broaden the curriculum for students.

As far as money, we really have dedicated students - they pay for themselves. They are doing this on top of their school work, out of love of the idea and commitment for the mission. In future years we would like to be able to offset some of those costs through grants or scholarships.

If a student or librarian wants to get involved with LWB, how do they get involved? Can they be from outside Canada?

It's always initiated by the person – they contact us. A student will say: "I'm really excited about this, how do we go about setting up a committee ourselves?" Right now we are not able to do that with schools in the United States, but we are starting to look into how to set ourselves legally up in the U.S. As far as timing, I'd love to tell you "We'll be in the U.S. in two years," but really we need to be able to have the

(QR Codes...Continued from page 7)

1 <http://net.lib.byu.edu/~mjw243/audiotourhandout.pdf>

2 <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7250/>

3 <http://catalogue.library.ryerson.ca/record=b1966691~S0>

4 <http://iii.sonoma.edu:2082/record=b2007214~S12>

5 <http://www.saclibrary.org/?pageId=59>

6 <http://infoguides.sdsu.edu/people/ppl.php?id=3>

Footnotes

1 Research Methods in Music MUS7260
<http://hkbu.libguides.com/MUS7260>

2 A search in the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database for Meebo yielded 23 results, but a search for Plugoo only retrieved one short article with a brief mentioning of it. A quick glance on the guides in Springshare's LibGuide Community also showed that the free IM used by most librarians was Meebo and only very few used Plugoo.

3 Griffis, Patrick. "Building Pathfinders with Free Screen Capture Tools." *Information Technology and Libraries* (December 2009): 189-190.

resources to support that. A focus this year is really looking to raising money for the organization. In the past we've done that through private individual donations, but we are starting to look at grants through our partner institutions as well as corporate sponsorship that can allow us to keep doing the good work that we've been doing and to take on additional institutions.

To learn more about and support the work of Librarians Without Borders, including about their trip to Guatemala, please see: <http://www.librarianswithoutborders.org>
twitter: lwb_online

7 <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7250/>

8 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/25095603@N07/5021688103/in/set-72157625028207818/lightbox>

9 <http://wvutoday.wvu.edu/n/2011/2/16/qr-codes-connect-wvu-students-with-library-resources>

10 <http://lib.byu.edu/sites/qrcodes/group-study-room-reservation/>

11 <http://independentrockstar.com/2040/qr-codes-posters-matt-moran-band/>

12 <http://designnotes.info/?p=2568>

13 <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/deborahm/QuranposterACRL2011>