ASK THIS LIBRARIAN: INTEGRATING LIBRARY TOOLS INTO THE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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BACKGROUND

In 2007 two librarians at Columbia College Chicago, Sue Peacock (Web Services Librarian) and Celia Ross (Library Instructional Design Coordinator), designed the first phase of a project to embed the library in the Learning Management Systems (LMS) offered at the college. The project was launched in 2007, some work was completed, but then the project languished in the intervening two years. Our goal, for the Ask-A-Librarian project, was to build on this existing foundation with a focus on updating and enhancing the functionality of the existing widget for the Library Research Guides, and create a more broadly promoted service for faculty. Our project aimed to reach learners where they already are to achieve a more user-centered service to access the library’s resources.

The Ask-A-Librarian Project is in keeping with the teaching mission of the Columbia College Chicago Library which is “committed to preparing our users to be lifelong learners in an information rich society” (Library Mission & Vision Statement).

The inclusion of library resources in a Course Management System (CMS) or other means of electronic classroom support has received endorsement from the higher education community:

“What are some of the major disconnects between many of today’s academic libraries and Net Gen students?”

One disconnect is that digital library resources often reside outside the environment that is frequently the digital home of students’ coursework, namely, the course management system, or CMS. Library services are often presented in the library organization context rather than in a user-centered mode” (Chapter 13). (http://www.educause.edu/NetGenerationStudentsandLibraries/6067)

Educating the Net Generation also suggests “taking library resources to where students want to find them” (Chapter 13).

THE PROJECT

We combined several components to create the widget and house the content. Allowing flexibility for use in the two Learning Management Systems used on our campus – Moodle and Jenzabar’s Internet Campus Solution (JICS) platform – was also a factor in the project. The JICS widget is simpler, by necessity, and only includes the Ask-A-Librarian logo and the php-generated custom links to the subject-specific research guides. Moodle allows for additional customization of the widget which allowed us to include:

• Our Ask-A-Librarian logo,
• A chat widget – using Library H3lp, javascript code embedded in the widget,
• Custom links to the Research Guide pages – HTML links generated by a PHP library,
• Search box for the local catalog, and
• Search box for a selection of databases.

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We used LibGuides to migrate our existing subject guide content to a platform that would allow for easier updating by reference/instruction librarians and department liaisons. We also used LibGuides to create a Faculty Resource Center to deliver the improved Ask-A-Librarian form and additional resources aimed at faculty. ([http://libguides.colum.edu/faculty](http://libguides.colum.edu/faculty))

In order to revitalize the project and get faculty using the widget, we also marketed the Ask-A-Librarian widget to faculty using a variety of methods, including the library home page, faculty orientations, library instruction outreach, and course partnerships.

We used course partnerships to create Course Guides as a pilot program using select classes that fit the following criteria:

- An existing relationship with the library and the instruction program,
- Courses possessing a strong research component,
- Courses offered frequently,
- And courses having more than one section taught per semester.

By working with a pool of course partners we were able to evaluate and assess the process for developing the Course Guides the impact of the library widget in the LMS.

**COURSE PARTNERS**

We identified course partners with research-intensive projects and collaborated with four courses with substantial research components. For each of these courses we created a Course Guide, similar to the Research Guides, but with additional content tailored to the research assignments given to the students. The courses were:

- Television – Learning Community Hub  
  [http://libguides.colum.edu/LChub](http://libguides.colum.edu/LChub)
- Music – Introduction to Black Music  
  [http://libguides.colum.edu/introtoblackmusic](http://libguides.colum.edu/introtoblackmusic)
- Art History – Art Since 1945  
  [http://libguides.colum.edu/artsince1945](http://libguides.colum.edu/artsince1945)
- Theater – Theater History & Inquiry  
  [http://libguides.colum.edu/theaterhistoryinquiry](http://libguides.colum.edu/theaterhistoryinquiry)

Two of our course partners used Moodle for their course management system, while the other two used JICS. This allowed us to create widgets for each LMS and to understand the advantages and limitations of each. JICS, for example, does not allow the JavaScript code necessary to run the Library Chat Widget or the Book or Article search boxes. Thus, the options available to faculty using JICS would have to be different – and more limited, than those for Moodle users.

Before adding the code for the embedded library widgets to the course pages or introducing the Course Guides to the students, we administered a survey/quiz to the students in each course. Where possible, we also administered the survey to control group sections of similar courses (taught by different instructors). In three of the four courses a librarian also gave an instruction session to the class that included an overview of the Course Guide and the embedded widget.

**CUSTOM WIDGETS**

A simple menu using drop-down options was created to manage the process for generating the custom widget and adding the code to the LMS. The example below shows the options available for Moodle users.

A preview of the widget is also displayed below the code.
The burden for adding the widget to the course page lies with the faculty member, therefore it was important to make the process as simple as possible. The code output page, for example, includes step-by-step directions for how to add the code to the LMS.

Live forms for both Moodle and JICS are available for preview here: http://www.lib.colum.edu/services/faculty/embed.php.

A stripped-down version of the code is available for anyone interested. The URL is: http://www.lib.colum.edu/services/faculty/embed/share/widgetForm.php.

**Faculty & Student Feedback and Use**

Responses from students and faculty participating in the pilot project were overwhelmingly positive. The faculty members we worked with for the pilot course guides loved everything about the project: the widget, the Course Guides, the Chat widget, the instruction session, etc.

**Faculty Responses:**

“I finally sat down to take a look at this and embed it in the page, now that my very crazy first week of classes is over and all I can say is, WOW. This is so great and so much more than I expected. I’m going to ask all of the instructors to take a look at what you’ve done here and provide any feedback they might have at this point. Mostly, I just want to make sure that they look at what you’ve done and are aware of all the good resources in there. Thank you!!!!”

“This is the GREATEST THING EVER! Thanks!”

“Holy smacknoly this is excellent. I was going to walk them through the Library site on Wednesday and do the ‘here’s how you go hunting’ show. Now all I have to do is have them link to this site and the whole shebang is set up for them. And they can chat too. Crazy. Thanks. A lot.”

“I think you’ve put together a very high quality course/research guide for this class. Thanks so much.”

**Student Responses to the Course Guides:**

Students loved the Chat option especially, but also found the Course Guides to be useful.

Example from a Theater History & Inquiry Chat Transcript (emphasis added)

10:04 Guest: my precious librarian do you have the book THE FIGARO TRILOGY by beaumarchais?

10:05 Librarian: I can take a look, hang on please.

10:06 Guest: thank you dear

10:07 Guest: i love this cool system...

10:07 Librarian: it is lovely, isn’t it...

10:08 Guest: im so excited to use this system this year

10:08 Guest: it is going to help me find so much wonderful information in seconds!

10:09 Librarian: glad you like it, I’ll let my boss know!

10:09 Librarian: We do have the Marriage of Figaro - a few copies actually.
10:09 Librarian: The call number is: 842.5 B378m - that will be on the 5th floor of the library
10:09 Librarian: anything else I can help with?
10:10 Guest: i think thats all
10:10 Guest: thank you very much
10:10 Guest: have a good day librarian!
10:10 Librarian: you too! bye.

Comments left on the Course Guides or given during a chat session (regarding the Course Guides):

“Thank you so much!”
“Thank you for your awesome work!”
“Great, this is going to be really helpful. Thank you!”
“Thank you so much this helped a ton”

Usage of Course Guides

The total usage of the course guides far exceeded the total number of students in each class. The average class size was 22 students. The months with the highest usage correlate with the time at which the guide was made available to students in the LMS – either by their instructor in class or by a librarian in an instruction session.

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<th>Nov</th>
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<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theater History &amp; Inquiry</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>67</td>
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<td>20</td>
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</tbody>
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Interestingly, the Theater History & Inquiry guide pages also resulted in many Chat Reference questions throughout the semester; this class was the only of our course partners that did not receive an instruction session. In the future, an introductory instruction session will be encouraged for courses using Course Guides.

Assessment

We assessed the Ask-A-Librarian project through a variety of tools:

- Directed student survey/quiz with identified course partners
  - Pre-test survey/quiz for students before adding widget to course page
  - Post-test survey/quiz for students at the end of the pilot semester
- Directed student survey/quiz with control group courses
  - Pre-test survey/quiz for students at the beginning of the pilot semester
  - Post-test survey/quiz for students at the end of the semester
- Directed faculty surveys with identified course partners administered at the end of the pilot semester

Data & Analysis

One of the student survey/quiz questions asked students to indicate their own level of competency in completing research. The vast majority of students indicated Strong ("Excellent" (78%) or "Fairly Good" (11%)) research skills, with the minority indicating Weak ("Fairly Bad" (10%) or "Terrible"(1%)) research skills. We use this question to illustrate several aspects of the data collected from the survey/quiz.

Self-Reported Research Skills & Library Skills

An area of interest from the data was the number and type of questions missed by the groups that identified themselves as having either stronger or weaker research skills. The questions we asked were related to specific library skills. It was evident from the data that the majority of students did not have significantly stronger Library Skills regardless of whether they self-reported as having strong Research Skills. These findings support much of the literature published on the research and library skills of undergraduate students, namely that:

1. students overestimate their research abilities, and
2. facility with online research does not equate knowledge of, or facility with, library research.

Problems with Data & Data Collection

The first round of student surveys were completed early in the semester when the partner courses came to the library for in-person library instruction sessions. However, the end of session follow-up surveys were not administered onsite. Instead, we contacted faculty partners during the final weeks of the semester and asked them to have students retake the survey at that time. Due to the casual nature of the second round of surveys and the fact that it was not formally structured into course timelines, the response rate was very low, making it impossible to draw meaningful comparisons between the two sets of data.

In future studies, we suggest the following changes to the student survey structure:

1. Gear the survey questions more specifically to course assignments – i.e. rather than asking generic research
questions, ask questions that mimic research strategies the instructor will be asking them to accomplish in class.

2. Formally schedule each survey session so that it does not fall in the last few weeks of class when both instructors and students are short on time.

3. Arrange with instructors to provide incentives for students to take the surveys, or to require it as a course assignment so that students will feel compelled to take it on their own time.

MARKETING PLAN

We employed a rotating image banner on the library homepage to market the embedded librarian widget. The image below is one of several image banners that randomly load on the site. The clickable image links the user to the Ask-A-Librarian widget web form.

Postcards using this image and additional images were made and distributed to the faculty via subject liaisons, campus mail, faculty orientations and workshops, and by instruction librarians. The Faculty Resource Center URL was included on the reverse of the postcard.

In addition, we conducted two training sessions for Library subject liaisons to introduce them to the new Faculty Resource Center page, as well as to the Build a Widget and Course Guide Request forms. Liaisons were asked to educate their department faculty about this new service.

We believe that word of mouth marketing by faculty partners will be crucial to the success of these services. Faculty partners from the pilot session have started to spread the word about Ask-A-Librarian services to other instructors in their departments. One of our course partners commented:

“I think this is a great idea. I was very pleased with the compilation of materials put together for my course. I shared it with the music history instructor in the department because I think something like this would be useful for that class as well. I am happy to share this experience and idea with other departmental faculty who also include a research component in their courses. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of the project.”

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE USE

Several of the issues faced by our predecessors are still problematic. With the burden on the faculty to generate the widget code and add it to their course pages in the LMS, we realize that marketing and promotion of the service are vital and need to be ongoing. In addition, we do not know who is using the widget in their course page, nor do we have the ability to track that information currently. We are investigating options to resolve this issue.

There is the possibility of adding a “sticky box” to all Moodle courses. The drawback to this option is that it would force us to use the General Research links for all courses, which defeats the purpose of having subject specific and course specific options. If we could allow faculty to turn off or hide the general widget and add one of their choosing, we would be more inclined to implement the “sticky box.” The benefit would be that every course in Moodle would have direct links to library resources. We are still weighing this option.

Since launching the service campus-wide, we discovered that most effective way of recruiting faculty was through the instruction program. In several instances librarians created a course guide and then asked the faculty if they would like to add the widget to the LMS. Understandably, placing as little burden on the faculty as possible proved to be the best way to gain a following.