

TechMatters: Here a Widget, There a Widget, Everywhere a Web Widget

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Have you always wanted to include a chat feature on your library instruction web page? Are you interested in creating course specific resource guides that include automatically updated content from web sites other than your own? Would you like to embed a search box for a particularly relevant database or search tool into one of these custom research guides? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, but don’t think you have the technical skills to provide these types of tools for your students, think again! By using freely available, easy to install web widgets you can simply and quickly enhance your existing web pages with these types of interactive elements.

What is a web widget?

Essentially, a widget is a small piece of reusable code that can be shared and embedded into a variety of web pages. The purpose of a widget is to allow a web developer to include dynamic content on a site. In addition to regular web pages, widgets can be used to embed content on social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace, blogging platforms such as Blogger or WordPress, personalized portals like iGoogle and My Yahoo, and even onto the computer desktop itself.

Widgets for the library instruction web site – A few examples

1) meebo me

<http://www.meebo.com/meebome/>

Figure 1: Copy and paste code to include widget in web page



The meebo me widget allows you to embed a chat box on your web page which will allow you to participate in a real time conversation with your site visitors. To use the widget, you must be permitted to edit the HTML for your page, and your users need to have a Flash Player (version 7.0 and above) installed on their computers.

In order to create a meebo me widget, you first need to setup a free meebo account. Signup is easy - simply follow the “join now!” link on the meebo me homepage and follow the prompts. Once you are logged on to your new account, select “meebo me widgets” from the “Preferences” menu to begin the process of creating your custom widget. To do so, all that you need to do is provide a name for your widget and select from one of three size options for your chat box (small, regular, or super-size). Once your widget is created, you may choose “Modify” to customize your display name and change the color scheme of your chat box.

The final step in the process is to copy and paste the widget code (see Figure 1) into the web page(s) on which you want to host the chat box. Once your widget is embedded, you will be able to monitor your chat widget from within your meebo account and talk with students or faculty who visit your instruction web page(s).

2) Today’s Newspaper – Front Pages by Map

<http://www.widgetbox.com/widget/todays-newspaper-frontpages-by-map>

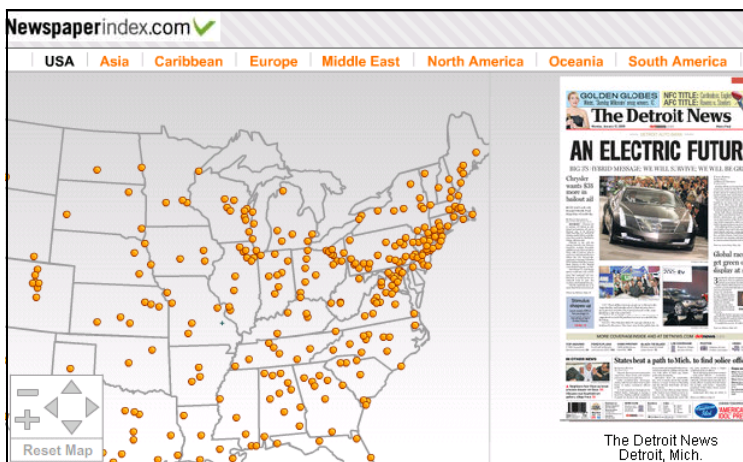
Created by newspaperindex.com, and hosted on widgetbox.com, this little tool will allow students to access the front pages of global newspapers to get a quick sense of what is considered important “front page news” across different states or countries. Using a map interface (see Figure 2), users first select their continent of choice. Then, by scrolling over marked cities, they can access full images of the day’s front page from their major newspapers.

In order to use this widget, users will need to have either JavaScript or Flash enabled in their browser. Grabbing the code necessary to embed this widget in your web

page is even simpler than using the meebo me widget. Starting from the address listed above, simply click the “Get Widget” button, copy the resulting code, and insert it into your web page.

As an instruction librarian, when might you find a use for such a tool? Well, imagine a situation where you have been asked to create an assignment specific library guide for a course where students are required to monitor current news events. Such assignments are typical in a variety of disciplines including history, political science, and even general composition courses. Using this widget, you can provide students with a simple way to quickly check, as well as compare and contrast, major news stories as they are reported around the world.

Figure 2: Today’s Newspaper widget



3) PubMed Search Box

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query/static/link.html#searchboxes>

Like many other research database providers, the National Library of Medicine has created a widget to allow librarians to include a search box for their research tool (in this case PubMed) directly into a local web page. By simply copying and pasting the code snippet provided, you can save your users a step by allowing them to search the PubMed database directly from within a page you have created. For example, you might embed such a tool on a course specific research guide to support nursing students working on a research paper.

Although many other database vendors provide similar search widgets, finding them can be a bit tricky since there is no centralized list of such tools. To find them,

you will need to check individual web sites or try using your favorite search engine. In order to successfully locate these types of tools you may need to try a variety of search queries using terms such as search “widget”, “search tool”, and “search application” combined with a specific database name.

Widgets in Action

An example of a library that has made notable use of widgets in order to provide services to users is Penn State (see Figure 3 on pg. 10), where they have created a “Research Jumpstart” page to help students begin their search for information. As you see in Figure 3, they have incorporated both a chat widget (using AOL Instant Messenger) and database search box (for ProQuest databases) into this page. In addition, they have developed their own local widgets to allow users to search their catalog, access their research guides, and link to useful sections of their web site.

In order to make these tools even more useful to their students, each of these widgets has been published to the widgetbox directory (see description below), where their code can be accessed and then embedded into other web pages.

Where to find more widgets?

The tools described in this article represent only a small sample of the many web widgets that individuals and organizations have developed and made freely available in order to allow others to import and reuse their content on local web sites. Although it is possible to find additional widgets using a standard web search engine, doing so is neither practical nor efficient. Instead, try one of the following widget repositories:

a) Widgetbox

<http://www.widgetbox.com/>

Widgetbox is the largest, and perhaps most widely known, repository for web widgets. On this site, you can easily search or browse their extensive gallery of widgets which are organized by category, keyword, developer name, and even by rating. In addition, the widgetbox site provides tools to help you develop and distribute your own widgets.

(Here a Widget...Continued on page 10)

(Letting Go ...Continued from page 9)

Guide, to which I directed him); the number of visitors to the LibGuide rose markedly in the days following the sessions (into the hundreds) and by the end of the semester reached around 1000—presumably most visitors were students in the class though others outside of it could have found their way to it through LibGuides tagging system; and lastly, the course instructor was extremely pleased with the quality of the assignments, which she communicated to me in person. All of this occurred because I let go – the students explored, learned and made mistakes with minimal initial direction from me. Many of the details, which I previously had focused on so carefully in my lectures and demonstrations to students, now came later after they had become more comfortable with the database in their own way.

Next Steps

My next step is to use my successes with Spa200 to demonstrate of the value of library instruction to the faculty in the Department of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese that I serve. With the exception of the instructor for Spa200 and a few others (mostly teaching assistants), the Department’s faculty tend to consider library instruction unimportant. I am optimistic that my positive and tangible results, driven by dive-in, hands-on learning exercises followed by in-class examples and then a supportive Lib-Guide, will change their attitude and lead to more library instruction.

(Here a Widget...Continued from page 7)

b) Widgipedia <http://www.widgipedia.com/>

Like widgetbox, the widgipedia web site is easily searchable and provides access to a wide range of web and desktop widgets. Users may also sign-up to receive an RSS feed to alert them when new widgets are added to the site. Although widgipedia does provide code samples and tutorials to help users develop widgets, these tools are not quite as user-friendly as the ones provided on the widgetbox site.

In summary, both sites provide free access to their searchable databases of widgets, which can be embedded in a wide range of applications including regular web pages, blogs, social networking sites, and in some cases directly onto the computer desktop. In addition, each allows users to create widgets, and publish them to the site to be shared with other users. If you have the in-house technical capability to produce widgets to allow access your library’s content and/or search tools, then publishing your widgets to this site can also be a good way to promote your library’s resources to your users.

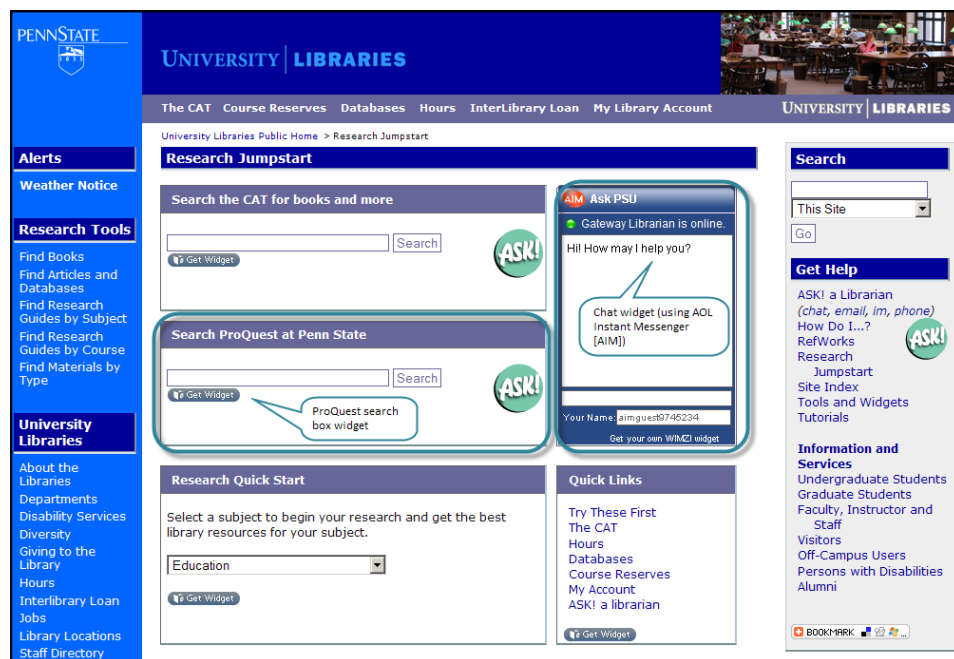


Figure 3: Penn State Libraries use a variety of widgets to create a “Research Jumpstart” page.