# Letting Go:
## Steadily Changing and Giving Students More Control to Improve your Instruction
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To say that all librarians value quality library instruction would not be, I believe, an overstatement. What we as librarians hold to constitute good instruction and how best to deliver it, however, is open to discussion. In my own short career as a librarian (I am the librarian for Spanish, Italian and Portuguese at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), my first library job), I have witnessed profound changes in my own beliefs about and approaches to library instruction. In this short essay I will chronicle my road to success with library instruction using one case: instruction for Spanish 200: Readings in Hispanic Texts (Spa200).

For the past two years I have offered instructional sessions to Spa200. A requirement for major and minors in Spanish, the course is offered each semester. During the time that I have worked with Spa200 the number of sections has grown from three to five (up to 25 students per section). Providing library instruction for this course has several advantages. As most students in the class are either first or second-year students, I am able to reach them at the start of their studies and thus have a greater impact on their educational experiences. Also, the fact that many of the students in the course are minors in Spanish with a major in another field allows me to promote the Library to the entire campus. Additionally, I have had a great deal of flexibility in designing the instructional session for Spa200. The faculty member responsible for course (always the same individual) has stipulated only that I instruct the students in finding newspaper articles and short stories in Spanish, which they, in turn, use for course assignments. How I convey this information and whether or not I supplement it with other material is left to me. My approach to these instructional sessions has developed over time in response to student needs, advances in web technology and information gleaned from library literature, conferences and seminars. My lessons learned and successful strategies can be chronologically organized into three general stages.

### First Stage

In hindsight I experienced more failures than successes in my early attempts to deliver instruction to Spa200. Initially I offered the instructional sessions in my home base of the Modern Languages and Linguistic Library, one of many departmental libraries in the UIUC Library system. To comfortably fit the classes (which at this stage numbered 75 students) into our small public area and allow for greater access to our four public computers, I divided the classes into small groups and administered instruction over a two days. The sessions had two parts. First, with the help of printed handouts, I gave a 20-25 minute overview on the following topics suggested by the faculty member: how the library differs from Google; how to evaluate websites; how to use the online catalog to find a short story in Spanish; how to find a scholarly article on Spanish literature and language; and how to find a Spanish-language newspaper article. Second, a colleague (either a fellow librarian or a graduate assistant) and I demonstrated the searches covered in the first half using the Library's four workstations. At the close of the sessions and in subsequent weeks I learned from the students and instructor that both were generally pleased with the instruction. However, the fact that around 50% of the students returned to the library for additional help, either physically or virtually through email, suggested to me that I had actually failed in assisting them. Each student who required further guidance had the same question: they all wanted to find a 1000-2000 word Spanish-language newspaper or magazine article on a "current hot topic" for their final oral presentation. My follow-up meetings with the students consisted of helping them pick a topic and locate an article, a time consuming task given the number of students (from 30-50).

### Stage Two: Transition

Stage Two is best described as a transitional one. Several aspects of Stage One were maintained: the organization into a lecture and demonstration and the use of paper handouts. However, there were a number of changes. One was the movement of the sessions to one of the Library's instructional labs that features an instructor's desk, a projection screen and a computer for each student. A surge in the number of students in the class, from 75 to 125, made the switch necessary. A second modification was the creation of a webpage listing pertinent resources for Spanish-language newspapers and tips on searching for Spanish-language short stories, two important sources for the class. The content of the lecture was adjusted to bring it more in line with class assignments and thus the section on searching for literary criticism was omitted. There were several advantages to these modifications. I was able to supplement the lecture with

actual computer searches projected on the screen. More-over, now each student had a computer and could easily follow along with the general lecture and then perform individual searches. Having access to a computer, the students were far more engaged in the learning process. By the end of the sessions many students had found ma-terials for the class assignments. Additionally, students paid more attention to the lecture as it was geared almost exclusively to assignments. As a result of these improve-ments, only 25% of the students contacted me with fol-low-up questions.

### Stage Three: Success!

Stage Three saw the greatest success. After the ses-sions in Stage Two, I was still not satisfied, though the faculty member expressed a great deal of satisfaction with the students' assignments and only 25% of the stu-dents contacted me for additional help. My benchmark of student achievement was to have no student need supple-mental assistance. To meet this goal I changed my in-structional approach from a "lecture and demonstration" style to a series of three short activities and created a course LibGuide (explained below). I explained the re-quirements of each activity beforehand and kept them projected on a screen for later consultation.

The first activity asked the students to find either an actual Spanish short story (e.g., an online text) or a cita-tion to a story along with its location information. I told the students that they could use any means possible with the computers in front of them and left it at that - I did not provide specific examples of online databases or search techniques, as I wanted to see if they could find these for themselves. Students got to work on their com-puters and once everyone had completed the task, several students reported back to the group about their search strategies and results. This activity had several benefits for the students: it built on their previous knowledge; it forced them to be active participants and thus active learners; and, through the group reports of their peers, it showed them successful search strategies. The exercise was instructive for me as well, for it revealed the stu-dents' level(s) of knowledge and their assumptions about using (or not using) the Library. Most of the students were able to find stories online using keywords and phrases such as "cuentos" (story in Spanish) or "breves cuentos" (short story in Spanish) in popular search en-gines such as Google. A few students used the Library's catalog but needed help isolating individual stories, which I then showed them how to find.

The second activity was similar to the first activity but focused on finding newspaper articles around a pre-determined topic. In all cases, the self-guided students turned to the Internet. Online sites for newspapers tend to feature a single newspaper and very few provide free ac-cess to archives. Thus while many students found articles on current topics, no more than a few were able to dis-cover articles older than a week. Not surprisingly, none knew about the Library's wealth of online newspaper databases and thus did not consult them. No one even tried searching the Library gateway for such resources.

The third activity had the students work in groups of two or three to evaluate the Library's online newspaper databases plus one Internet resource (the BBC's El Mundo) and report their findings to the class. I projected the list of databases on the screen with links to them and assigned a database to each group, but left it to them to discover the details. Working in small groups the students were able to deploy each other's searching skills and thus be more successful in investigating the databases. More-over, the students seemed to enjoy very much sharing their findings with each other. Perhaps the most striking aspect was how happy they were to discover relatively each-to-use databases with rich holdings that they could use for class assignments.

For the students' future reference I created a Lib-Guide (http://uiuc.LibGuides.com/Spanish_SPA200) that features: 1) detailed instructions on finding a short story using the Library's online catalog; 2) links to online Spanish short stories; 3) links to the Library's newspaper databases; and 4) my contact information, office hours and services. I chose not to reveal the LibGuide until the end of the class as doing so would have given the stu-dents information that I was hoping they would discover on their own. I chose to use Springshare's LibGuide soft-ware for several reasons: my library had just signed a yearly contract for this relatively inexpensive software (around $1,000 per year); its Web 2.0 capabilities that allow for RSS feeds, videos, user comments, etc.; its easy-to-use editor; and its ability to be easily shared with other colleagues at institutions with subscriptions to Lib-Guides. For more, see http://www.springshare.com/libguides/

After the sessions three factors strongly indicated to me that I had been successful in helping the students eas-ily find the best materials possible for their course assign-ment: only one student contacted me for help (he had missed the session and thus did not know about the Lib-

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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 LibGuide, 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.
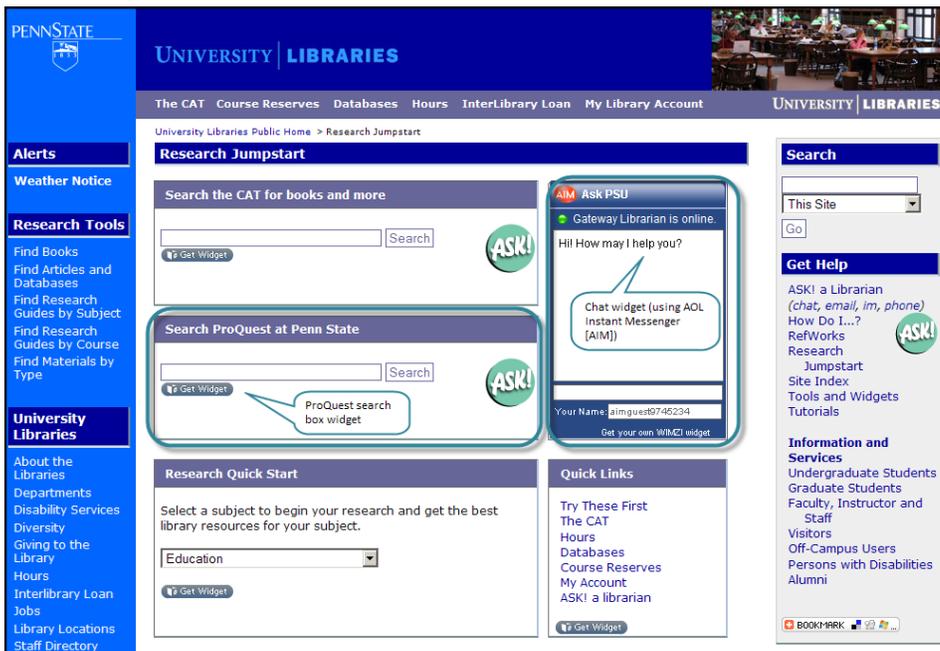


**Figure 3:**
**Penn State Libraries use a variety of widgets to create a "Research Jumpstart" page.**