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Evaluating and Implementing Open-Source Research Guides Powered by SubjectsPlus

by Gabriel Ortiz and David Kriegh, St. Patrick's Seminary & University

Open-source tools are an appealing alternative to proprietary applications, but are they necessarily the best choice for every library? Goals for this session included: (1) demonstrating the comparative advantages and disadvantages of SubjectsPlus and LibGuides; (2) discussion of the implementation process and the technical skills required; and (3) answering questions about the use of the application.

Open-source software, while financially attractive, does require a substantial amount of work to maximize its use. "Open-source applications are like free puppies, not free beer," the saying goes.[1] There are clear advantages to using open-source, but one should anticipate the work that will be involved. Solutions will not be fully formed out of the box. Open-source software offers a significant yet potentially enjoyable challenge through the implementation process.

SubjectsPlus (http://www.subjectsplus.com/) is an open-source content management system used to promote and expand upon a variety of library services. This application was created by East Carolina University, and is currently developed by University of Miami Libraries. SubjectsPlus is built on Symfony framework, using HTML, CSS, JavaScript, PHP and MySQL. The closest commercial comparison to SubjectsPlus is LibGuides by SpringShare.

We then discussed a detailed comparison of LibGuides to SubjectsPlus. The categories for the comparison of features were User Interface, Development and Customization, and Data Management. In the User Interface section, we noted that both SubjectsPlus and LibGuides can create custom subject guides, staff lists, and FAQ portals. Both can manage videos, and process RSS feeds, and are ADA compliant. However, SubjectsPlus does not have the ability to display library records with book covers, something LibGuides can do. In the Development and Customization comparison, we identified that both have mobile responsive design, custom CSS and JavaScript capabilities, customizable headers and footers, CKeditor Content Editor, a layout and section builder, organizable tabs, reusable content boxes, and upgrade support. SubjectsPlus, however, uses a Pure CSS framework, while LibGuides uses Twitter Bootstrap. SubjectsPlus has the capacity to create a custom menu, which LibGuides does not. SubjectsPlus does not have a formal customer support.

Next, we discussed the cost of implementing each application. For small institutions, LibGuides costs $1,200 per year. This cost is based on the number of full time students at the institution. On the other hand, SubjectsPlus is completely free. The only cost would be from the hours worked to install and configure the system. Some Internet programming skills are required in order to maximize the potential of SubjectsPlus. For basic configuration, HTML and CSS are required. For more complex customization, JavaScript, JSON, and PHP are necessary.

Finally, we discussed considerations for stakeholders. It is important to acknowledge and address colleagues who are a part of approving the implementation

of SubjectsPlus. Internally, libraries should consider who has the ability to code, and their willingness to take on this project. The Library Director should be consulted and consistently updated on the implementation and maintenance process. Externally, the institution's Information Technology and Development offices may wish to be involved in the implementation of SubjectsPlus. Information Technology may have concerns about access to server space, and who is capable of maintaining the site in the event of conflicts. Additionally, Development might need to get involved to guarantee that SubjectsPlus branding matches that of the institution. It is important to consider all the departments, these as well as potential others, that might have a stake in the implementation process. Proactively reaching out can empower colleagues and increase the likelihood of an enthusiastic buy-in.

Again, it must be stressed that an open-source solution such as SubjectsPlus may not be the optimal solution for every library and institution. Consider the resources and expertise you and your library already have before moving ahead with an open-source project. If that appears to be lacking, a library may be better served by a similar commercial product and the conveniences it affords. For libraries with the prerequisite skill sets required for successful implementation, however, open-source tools can prove to be beneficial to an ever-challenged budget and offer a flexibility not found in their commercial equivalents.

ENDNOTE

[1] This originally came up in casual conversation with James Darlack at the 2015 conference, but examples abound on the Internet, such as: Mary Branscombe,"Open-source: Free as in speech, beer - or puppy?" *ZDNet*, accessed September 8, 2016, http://www.zdnet.com/article/open-source-free-as-in-speech-beer-or-puppy/