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RESEARCH SWAG BAG: BUILDING A STUDENT RESEARCH TAKEAWAY

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INTRODUCTION

The question arises for everyone: are students really taking anything away from our information literacy courses? Are they applying the skills and knowledge we are teaching them in their other coursework and in their careers? We know that teaching students how to successfully conduct research and navigate online tools is an essential component of most information literacy courses. Historically, our students were taught through in-class lectures with handouts and walkthroughs of online resources, with additional class time spent practicing using these tools and discussing their importance and usefulness to the research process. But distributing handouts and working in the university's learning management system (LMS) create temporary resources that are often lost, misplaced or become inaccessible after the course ends.

So how do we combat this loss of information and abandonment of skills? We decided to put more responsibility and control in the hands of our students by having them build and maintain their own research website. This swag bag of research tools became part of a takeaway that would not disappear once class was over. It would not end up balled up in the bottom of their bag or thrown into the recycle bin, like so many handouts before it. The students maintain the control and the life of the takeaway, and its use and death through deletion remain in their hands. This paper will address how to use Google Sites as a template for building a research takeaway that students will be able to access long after they finish their course.

EVOLUTION OF THE COURSE

To understand why we are focused on creating and using an online tool as the takeaway for our students, it is helpful to look at the evolution of our course. Our information literacy course is a two credit elective that has been offered on our campus for almost 25 years. Originally taught by a member of the English department, the course has evolved from focusing on teaching students how to use a card catalog and build a bibliography to being taught by librarians who focus on teaching students how to successfully form research questions, complete online searches in catalogs and databases and use Web 2.0 tools. For the past five years, our librarians have been adapting the course to cover the wide range of research skills that faculty and future employers expect their students and employees to possess.

Most recently, we have made the move to adapt our traditional face-to-face course to hybrid and online offerings. Our campus includes a mix of traditional and nontraditional students who have a wide range of technology skills. It is important that no one who wishes to take our course be left behind or intimidated by our use of web tools. Ultimately, this concern is why we chose to offer both hybrid and online sections of the course. It is believed that students with greater skill and comfort with technology will take the online version, while those who may be intimidated or less familiar with technology will take the hybrid course. Hybrid or online, the change to our course forced us to make some interesting decisions about the course content, delivery, and instructor/student interaction.

Student retention is a big push within our university, and online courses, while popular with our busy nontraditional students, are rife with issues, including students' feelings of isolation, failed time management, and lack of motivation (Rovai & Downey, 2010). It is our job as course creators to design an online course that provides students with successful learning experiences. "A well-designed online course offers an active-learning environment in which meaning is socially negotiated and students are actively engaged in the learning process" (Rovai & Downey, 2010, p. 146). Our idea of building a research takeaway became an integral part of our online

course design and helped support the active engagement needed for our students to succeed.

The concern for ensuring online courses are well-designed was further supported by our university's adoption of the Quality Matters (QM) Program for course design. The QM program (https://www.qualitymatters.org/) provided a rubric with eight general standards which work together to ensure students are achieving the desired learning outcomes for their online courses. These eight standards include: (1) Course Overview and Introduction, (2) Learning Objectives, (3) Assessment and Measurement, (4) Instructional Materials, (5) Learner Interaction and Engagement, (6) Course Technology, (7) Learner Support, and (8) Accessibility. While our course has not officially gone through the final steps to become QM certified, we were required to follow the QM Rubric as the basis for our course design. With their push for using the QM standards, our eLearning department ensured that we were building an online course that would be easy for students to navigate, that the topics covered in the course would be presented clearly, and that the assignments would fit with the topics and would not result in unnecessary work for the students. Following the QM standards, our course was built with a combination of screencast lectures, online forum discussions for student-student interaction, and a depository for assignments that would culminate into their large final assignment, thus building their research takeaway, a place where student work is easily compiled and shared.

Creating the Template

There are a number of free website builders available on the web and part of our concern when creating the assignments and the takeaway was to make the introduction to building a website as easy as possible for the students. We did not want them to run away from the course as soon as they saw that they were required to create a website. Also, the use of a template and one website builder for all would make the grading of their work easier and help focus the knowledge needed to troubleshoot any technology issues. Ultimately, we chose to use Google Sites (http://sites.google.com/) as the home of our students' research takeaways. The choice to use Google Sites came from a number of factors:

- Google email and apps were already in use at our university, so students were familiar with the basic layout of Google tools.
- It is easy to identify the student owner of the website based on the connection with their university ID and their email.
- Students do not lose their email access when they graduate, therefore their sites will remain even when they are no longer students.
- Google Sites allows you to build and share a template of your website, so it was easy to provide students with a frame for their work.
- Knowledge of html is not required to build a site.
- Date stamps on the pages make it easy to verify when the website was updated, so checking to see if work was completed by the due date should be easy.
- Google provides videos and text to help explain how to build and edit your website, as well as how to troubleshoot common problems. (http://www.google.com/sites/overview.html)
- In a mobile world where the use of Flash can be a problem, Google Sites does not use Flash as a required element, so mobile viewing of the sites is not a problem for students or the instructor.

With the template choice in place, the next step was deciding what content to include. Since 2008, our course has covered a range of topics that deal with building research skills including: narrowing a topic and formulating a research question, citing sources correctly in both APA and MLA citation styles, using citation management tools, avoiding plagiarism, following copyright guidelines, using e-books and e-reference collections, searching catalogs, using digital media, searching research databases, keyword versus subject searching techniques, understanding and effectively using search engines, website evaluation, locating government documents, using primary and secondary resources, and using Web 2.0 tools. Our assignments in the course included discussions of readings, quizzes, in-class work, a working bibliography, an annotated bibliography, a presentation and a research reflection paper. While transitioning to the online course, it was decided that the majority of these topics and assignments would continue to be taught, however, changes were made on how they were presented. As previously mentioned, the addition of screencasts over in person lectures, online quizzes and the addition of a forum for discussion of readings were all added within the LMS for the online course. The majority of their weekly assignments on the topics would become part of their website, which they would eventually use to build their Online Research Guide.

For their guide, the topics covered were divided into different pages of the website with the work done on each page supporting the topic covered in class readings and video/screencast lectures for the week. The pages include:

- Home, which includes a welcome image and citation that connect to the topic of the research guide
- Building a Research Topic, which includes a description of narrowing their topic and developing keywords to search
- Finding and Evaluating Resources, which includes subpages for Books, Articles, Websites, and Primary Sources

- Resource Comparisons, which include subpages for Reference Comparison, Search Engine Comparison, and Video Comparison
- Bibliography, which focuses on 10 of their previously cited sources
- Featured Resources, which includes annotated citations for five of their Bibliography resources
- Database Presentation, which provides a link or shows the embedded screencast created by the student on a database of their choosing

Each week during the course, students were provided with directions on which pages to complete and what information is required on each page. The website template itself also listed what should be included on each page. The completed template can be found at https://sites.google.com/site/edt251long/ or searched for in Google Sites' Template Gallery under MUM EDT251.

OUTCOMES

When designing the template, our only concern was that students would be intimidated by the thought of building a website. It was our hope that once they began working on the site those fears would dissipate and some truly great websites would be created. And while we did see some great website work completed, we had a few failures as well.

Successes

- Students easily built their website from the template provided and the majority seemed to understand from the very beginning how to edit pages with the instructions and video tutorial provided.
- The students' ownership of their site was guaranteed from the first assignment with the creation of their site.
- There were few questions about where assignments should be posted, which resulted in an easy flow from week to week for completing online work.
- The progression of weekly work on the website as part of their final assignment seemed to increase interest in ensuring all work was correct and gave students a chance to fix any mistakes, resulting in a takeaway void of errors.

Failures

The majority of the failures come from a lack of clarification on the part of the instructor and some unexpected issues with the technology. More specifically:

- For students who had an issue with the template gallery not loading, they ran into problems locating the course template. Providing the URL to the template solved this issue.
- Some students were not as comfortable using the online databases, catalog and other tools needed to complete the work on the website. Next time we will clearly state what technology skills are needed for the course.
- There were times when students were suddenly unable to access their website, as it would no longer appear when they were logged into their Google account. This issue may have arisen from the university's change in their domain name, but only time will tell as we continue using this tool.
- Aesthetically, the student's inclusion of their work with the original directions can make the pages look a little cluttered. Clearer directions from the instructor to have the students replace the text with their own work may help solve this issue in the future.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the biggest draw with the research takeaway idea is that students will have something that they can own and maintain not only once class ends, but after they graduate as well. The positives of having an information literacy credit course are that we have more than one session to help students build this resource. Despite any issues with technology we ran into with using Google Sites, we are happy with the outcome of the student built work. We plan to address concerns that arose due to lack of clarity in instructions, and redo the template with more clarification where needed so that we can continue to use the website Online Research Guide assignment with our online course. We also encourage anyone interested in designing a research takeaway to look at our template as a suggestion on how to share the research swag with their students.

REFERENCES

Rovai, A. P., & Downey, J. R. (2010). Why some distance education programs fail while others succeed in a global environment. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *13*(3), 141-147.