

The librarian's role in portal development

Providing unique perspectives and skills

by Mickey Zemon

From learning portals created for specific courses to campus portals that provide all the computing services a university will need via its Web site, portals promise to reshape how information is exchanged in higher education.

A portal allows its users to customize information sources by selecting and viewing only those they find useful. For many, the portal is the epicenter of the Web experience, a "home base," a place to return to when you get lost, a place to keep your information, a place from which to communicate with others, "a security blanket or a safety net, and a trusty guide to all things 'Web.'"¹

As educators who organize and evaluate information resources, academic librarians bring unique perspectives and skills to the development of portals in their colleges and universities. To campus portal planning and implementation, they bring their expertise with content, their knowledge of copyright, their commitment to customer service, and their experience in creating customized Web-based information delivery systems.

Content

Academic librarians provide credible content that has been selected for a specific learning community. Their libraries' homepages and

collections have what every Web site wants: brand and content.² Libraries have the brand name of the academic institution they serve and content that has been customized to meet the needs of their users. To students who may have difficulty determining what is valuable and what is useless on the Web, the library offers a safe harbor in a flood of information.

Increasingly the content of libraries is in digital form and is composed of databases and digital libraries. Click on any library homepage and you will find an array of databases selected to support the academic programs offered by the institution. These databases are made available both on and off campus through licenses arranged through the library.

Some users think these full-text articles and indexes are free because they are available through the Web. However, these sources are published, paid for from library budgets through licensing agreements, and reflect a more academic and scholarly focus than the sources that are available for free on the Web.

Many academic libraries, working with their parent institutions and other agencies, are converting special collections into digital form. The Digital Library Initiative

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(www.dli2.nsf.gov), a multi-agency federal program with funding from the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, has been a major impetus to creating scholarly digital libraries. Under Phase 1, six projects were funded at major universities that created storehouses of information available through the Internet and, currently under Phase 2, the next generation of digital libraries is being developed. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (www.ims.gov) has recently awarded digitization grants to 12 libraries for projects that will add special materials to their Web sites.

Several digital initiatives have been undertaken on regional and state levels, as well. For instance, Nelineet and its member libraries have begun to create the New England Digital Library Initiative, an inventory of existing digital library programs and collections that will become a definitive catalog and collection of important materials about New England.

Copyright

Librarians' knowledge of current copyright policy is being called upon now more than ever in setting up electronic reserves and online information for learning portals created using Blackboard and other Web-based

course management systems. Faculty and students may assume that if educational material is on the Web, no copyright restrictions apply. However, this is true only if the copyright for the work has expired, its author has allowed the work to go into the public domain, or the work was authored by the federal government. Since there is a mix of works in the public domain and under copyright on the Internet—and some works under copyright are posted without authorization—it is not always clear which are in the public domain.

Librarians provide guidance in determining which Web-based materials are under copyright and seek permission for use of these works with the Copyright Clearance Center and other agencies. Librarians inform faculty about the fair use guidelines and library-related provisions of the 1976 Copyright Act and the 1997 CONFU (Conference on Fair Use) Guidelines, which place time, copying/distribution, and portion limitations on the use of educational multimedia works not in the public domain.

Customer service

As libraries make more digital resources available on the Web, research is increasingly conducted outside of the physical library. However, remote users want interactive assistance from a qualified human being and not just a help button to click on. Librarians have developed a number of ways to extend person-to-person reference service in a digital environment that are applicable in supporting portal use on campus.

Digital reference services (DRS) offer quality service at any time to users outside the library. DRS refer to "all Internet-based, human-mediated information services, including those based in library settings and other types of organizations."³ Such services range from e-mail reference—which libraries have offered for years—to online reference chat—which many librarians are now implementing using customer services applications like HumanClick (www.humanclick.com) that enable Web site visitors to get immediate real time on-demand help.

Comprehensive Digital Reference Service (CDRS), a free service offered by librarians from around the world, will help users find information on the Internet by directing their

Institutions offering library portals

Institutions offering library portals include the following:

- North Carolina State University (<http://my.lib.ncsu.edu>)
- Virginia Commonwealth University (<http://www.library.vcu.edu/mylibrary/cil99.htm>)
- University of Washington Libraries (<http://www.lib.washington.edu/resource/help/MyGateway.html>)
- California Polytechnic State University Library (<http://www.lib.calpoly.edu/mylib/cgi-bin/index.cgi>)
- Cornell University Library (<http://mylibrary.cornell.edu/development/mylibrary>)
- University of California Los Angeles (<http://my.ucla.edu>)

[Portals] shared several common objectives: to shorten the number of clicks users need to make to get to the information they want; to increase the "stickiness" of their library's Web site . . . and to make the library portal the user's main gateway to information.

questions to the library best able to answer them. *Ed Note:* CRDS is described in detail on the Web broadcast "Digital Reference," available at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/denver.html>.

The Virtual Reference Desk (VRD) is dedicated to the advancement of digital reference and the successful creation and operation of human-mediated, Internet-based information systems. Sponsored by the National Library of Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology, VRD includes a number of Internet-based question and answer services that connect users with individuals who possess specialized knowledge.

These AskA services (www.vrd.org/locator/subject.html) use the Internet to place people in contact with those who can answer specific inquiries—for instance, Ask-a-Scientist or Ask-a-Linguist.

Customized informational delivery

MyLibrary is a library portal that allows users to create a personal Web space where they can customize the information contained on their library's homepage. Users can customize categories, such as library links, bibliographic databases, and electronic databases based on the subject area of their choice. Instead of looking through an array of online sources, they have one place to access all the resources they need. The profile created for a MyLibrary user allows the library to keep him or her informed of new resources or services, as well. Library portals have been used as a teaching tool for classes and as research tools for faculty and graduate or upper-level students.

Using the MyYahoo model, several librarians developed these portals at almost the same time. In doing so, they shared several common objectives: to shorten the number of clicks users need to make to get to the information

they want; to increase the "stickiness" of their library's Web site (in other words to get users to come back again and again); and to make the library portal the user's main gateway to information. Unlike commercial portals, the library models focus on scholarly materials, including electronic journals and authoritative ready reference material. Users have the option of adding Web sites or other resources to the preconfigured links offered on their profiled account.

Most of the libraries that have developed portals are sharing their open source code with other libraries. For instance, librarians are welcome to download and use the MyLibrary code developed at North Carolina State University (see sidebar for institutions offering library portals).

Over the past decade, academic librarians have been evaluators, selectors, and organizers of information on the Web. Our experience and expertise make us valuable players in a team approach to planning and implementing portals on our campuses.

Notes

1. Michael Looney and Peter Lyman, "Portals in Higher Education," *EDUCAUSE Review* 35 (July/August 2000): 30.

2. John Lubans, "Opening the Gates: Developing Our Information Communities," ACRL/New England Chapter Fall Conference, November 17, 2000.

3. Abby Kasowitz, Blythe Bennett and R. David Lankes, "Quality Standards for Digital Reference Consortia," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 39 (Summer 2000): 355. ■

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