Low Hanging Fruit: Key Components of Learning Focused Web Presences
by Stephen Abram

There’s a lot of rethinking going on in library land about what comprises a great web presence. Sadly, what was great five years ago is merely adequate now. Plus ça change, plus c’est le même chose! This is the nature of the web and digital content. Opportunities progress at such a rate that standing still or implementing simple annual and five year plans stale date very quickly as new methods, and user, board, and teacher expectations inexorably move on. This is frustrating on one level, but it serves as good job security for those librarians who are well aligned with the digital alignment strategies of their institutions.

Indeed this is my major learning from trend watching in the past few years. It’s not just the fact that new technologies evolve or appear on our radars and create new opportunities. The other side of the coin is that user expectations are being driven by a plethora of their own insights and behavioral change. User experiences with the consumer web (largely driven by their personal, only partially teaching and learning-oriented activities) on such services as Google, Facebook, Amazon, and YouTube have fired their imaginations about how such services and environments might apply to their work needs. They often have very low understanding of the quality, licensing, security and privacy issues associated with applying these services without professional advice in corporate and institutional environments. And, somewhat unfortunately, our end-user professionals and learners often have little understanding of what the consequences of ‘free’ are. This is where professional librarians allied with information technology professionals fit in. We can provide the cautions and insight to make sure that the teachers and learners are protected from a plethora of disruptions to the learning goals, such as:

- SEO (search engine optimization) driven and geo-tagged search that focuses on the needs of advertisers, commercial entities, etc. that manipulate the search engine rankings based on their own agenda.
- Privacy, security and confidentiality issues associated with registration on websites, especially with minors.
- Security issues around plus-ins, add-ons, viruses, phishing and more.
- Filtering – both the good and bad consequences of filtering for minors and applying these same rules holistically to adults, librarians and teachers.
- Ensuring age and stage content appropriateness as well as ensuring tools for search and level are secure.
- Test and trial new resources and tools and lead teams of evaluators that seek diverse but targeted input.
Foundations

So, what is the ‘basic’ web presence today for schools? To my mind these is ideally managed by school library staff but also lead by a team who involves and seeks input from IT, curriculum leaders, teachers and students. We have moved past the stage where merely putting resources on a page is sufficient. That said, I don’t mean that this isn’t a good thing. 24/7 websites that are a simple, single, one-stop shop for access to resources that support, teaching, homework, classroom and library activities are a great thing. And this is the foundation for future and current success.

So, again, what is the ‘basic’ web presence today for schools? To a certain extent, this is a list of what’s needed to not be inherently ‘behind’ but also a list that shows the foundation of a good web presence for school libraries. I always use the metaphor of a foundation for a building. The same building foundation can support a ‘house’ or a ‘home’ and there’s a difference. That difference is the same when we talk about a library’s collections of books and databases in our web presence and when we seek to enable real learning and experiences through our web presence. The basics of a web presence remain fairly consistent and include:

- Access to the library’s OPAC
- Licensed Resources (organized logically and not merely alphabetically)
- Free Resources (aligned with learner needs and projects)
- Links to resources like the local public library, museums, science centers cultural centers, and zoos
- Webliographies/Pathfinders/LibGuides/Teacher or course website indexing
- Intelligent aggregation of licensed local, board, state/provincial, and national resources
- Simple authentication

Upping the Game: Advanced Placement

A number of opportunities are being tested and implemented in many school boards. Some of these have been started in other sectors of librarianship which are places our students will encounter in their lives – academia, community colleges, public libraries, and special libraries. Here are some of the emerging short-term trends in educational web presence and learning experience development that are comparatively less onerous on some levels than the bigger picture long-term trends of integrating fully with e-learning strategies, multiple device alignment, e-textbook-library resources integration, providing online 24/7 teacher-librarian assistance and serving statewide curriculum needs as well as developing full-scale lesson-level library integration with classroom learning while
serving the needs of special needs students, home schooled students, and all types of schools.

So, here are some of my thoughts on some of the things that need to be addressed. At first glance these would appear to be out of reach of the average school library due to resource, budget and staffing limitations. That speaks to the clear need for more board and state level leadership on these issues if our learners are to be prepared for the digitally-enabled world that is clearly their future. I suppose the first strategy is to ruggedize the consortia we participate in and move beyond ‘buying clubs’ for discounts on books and databases, to evolve to one where cross-functional, expert teams collaborate on content, experience, and e-learning creation and deliver value and improved learner performance and teacher support.

**OpenURL**
OpenURL is an international standard widely adopted in academic libraries that allows for the instant identification of fulltext articles from such embedded clues and bibliographic citations and footnotes and indexes. It gets the searcher to the resource faster.

**Broadcast search and Discovery**
Discovery systems are quite different than search engines and there is often confusion about what they do. Libraries have been teaching native search skills by licensed database and consumer search engine for a long time. As the resources have multiplied beyond feasible human memory, the discovery of where to search became a problem. Discovery services show the searcher where to search – simple as that. It rises above trying to remember the name of ‘that database’ and removes the issue of being just single supplier dependent and replaces it with a best database decision.

**Recommendations and Public Library Integration**
The Bibliocommons initiative that seeks to integrate OPAC search at New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, Queens Borough Public Library AND local New York school libraries (overlaid on several different ILS’s) promises to be transformational in providing local access to students in that region. Combined with the ability to see reviews and provide reviews as well as make recommendations to peers, this serves as potential platform for the transformation of reading discovery and usage of local book and ebook assets.

**Streaming Media**
This is, in the short term, a licensing and rights challenge. However, this is unlikely to remain a long term issue given the money chasing various niche markets like education in this space. Simply, it’s one thing to have scripts for Shakespeare in the library and electronically, and it’s quite another thing to see the play performed. Non-fiction video and audio, such as that from National Geographic, are already part of the curriculum
as physical DVDs but the ability to assign these as homework resources represents a clear and present opportunity.

**Learning Objects: Learning Management Systems**
This is the mountain! It seems so steep and overwhelming. However, school libraries must start now to position themselves better in this space. The risk of being pushed aside by commercial entities or having e-learning courses that neglect to integrate with library services is too high not to increase the ability of school library professionals to develop and contribute in the learning management system space.

**eTextbooks**
The e-textbook will ultimately not be a mere digitally wrapped version of the ‘old’ printed textbook. The common e-textbooks now are mere seeds compared to what they will ultimately be. They will include embedded links to further resources, video, assessments, dynamic exercises, and more. Developing a foundation to integrate and contribute to these initiatives is a key to longer term success. Over time managing textbook ‘learning objects’ will move from the school and classroom environment to the board and state level.

**Curriculum-based alignment**
Is your web presence primarily organized by resources? Is there a parallel alternative organization that puts resources in a plan that aligns with the learner’s needs? By this I mean that appropriate grade, course, stream, age, and unit level alignment of resources which can be advantageous to reducing the threatening feel of too-much-information for that grade nine science student who flips to Google just to feel less overwhelming.

**Create your own**
This is for extra marks – creating templates and resources for both students and teachers to succeed can position the library well. Do you have blog, wiki, essay templates, bibliography samples, and PowerPoint styles and templates available to show them what success looks like? For teachers, is there an offering to demonstrate best practices in classroom websites, blogs, private social networks, homework support sites etc.?

**Teacher Resources and Curriculum Standards**
Many school systems and libraries already link or provide these resources. It is wise to ensure that the library services are conceptually tied together. Libraries and librarians are not add-ons, they are critical to the success of learning.

**Conclusion**
So, there are some quick ideas of my thoughts in 2013 based on what I am seeing in the world of web presence for learning and teacher support. Some of you are well along the path and we can learn from your experience. Many of you have a great foundation to proceed. Learning by doing pilots and experiments will surely allow you to prosper.
**Stephen Abram, MLS** is managing principal of Lighthouse Consulting Inc. and an affiliate of Dysart & Jones Associates. He has held executive roles in information and software vendors as well as management roles in libraries. He is a Past President of SLA, the Ontario Library Association and the Canadian Library Association. He is an international speaker, author of ALA Edition’s Out Front with Stephen Abram and Stephen’s Lighthouse Blog. Stephen would love to hear from you at [stephen.abram@gmail.com](mailto:stephen.abram@gmail.com).