Most teachers and school librarians are great at decorating their teaching spaces. Flashy and informative posters, colorful bulletin boards, book displays, and student artwork all contribute to the aesthetic appeal and the functionality of a library and classroom. But probably the most important library space isn’t one patrons will see when they walk in the door; it’s the one they will see when they turn on the computer. Whether a school librarian is beginning a new library position or working on a library upgrade, creating a virtual library space should be a priority. **BUT WHERE TO START?**
Why Have a Virtual Presence?

Every school library should be accessible via the Web to meet the needs of 21st-century students. These days even elementary-aged students often have mobile devices, and a virtual presence enables the school librarian to extend services outside the library walls and hours. Students expect to be able to access materials from the classroom, during study halls, and at home at the touch of a button. If authoritative sources are not easily accessible through the school library’s website, students will resort to the first result on their Google searches, often Wikipedia or Answers.com.

Beyond allowing students 24–7 access to authoritative research materials, a virtual presence allows school librarians to promote the library program! Blog posts about library events, photos of students in the library (with appropriate permissions, of course), virtual displays of student work, curated links, communication tools, and links for parents and community members help show off all the great things we do! And in this economy, frequent advocacy about our library program is absolutely necessary.

STEP 1: CHOOSE A VIRTUAL PLATFORM.

The first step in creating a virtual presence is choosing a platform, or as Joyce Valenza would say, a “parking lot” for the website (Valenza 2012). Three primary options exist: the school’s Web platform, the online catalog’s Web platform, or some other independent platform.

Using the School’s Platform

Using the school’s existing platform has its benefits, the primary one being that the site probably already exists and just needs to be enhanced. Some might take a “better to ask forgiveness than permission” attitude about their school library’s virtual space, but building a website takes a lot of time, and it would be heartbreaking to design a fantastic site, only to be told by a principal or IT director that it won’t work with the school’s existing software.

Many school authorities like uniformity in their website pages and prefer that the library page parallel the appearance of the rest of the school’s site. For this reason, my current library website is built in Edline (see figure 1).

While it is possible to create a functional website using pretty much any platform, using school sites has some disadvantages. For one, school sites often don’t play well with widgets, which will be discussed below. For another, the library’s Web address is sometimes really long, making it harder for students to remember. However, if the students know how to find the district homepage, they can easily be taught where to click to find the library site. (The fewer clicks the better.)

Using the OPAC

Using the school’s online catalog for a Web platform is another option. Many online catalog programs, such as OPALS (Open-Source Automated Library System) and Follett Destiny, provide the option to customize the OPAC homepage for use as a jumping-off point. This feature has the advantages of being easy for the librarian to set up and for patrons to use and providing a one-click access point for all patron needs (for an example, see figure 2). As with a school platform, however, sometimes an OPAC site has little flexibility in layout and appearance, limiting usability and visual appeal.

Figure 1. School library homepage built in Edline.

Figure 2. Example of a library site on an OPAC platform.
Using an External Platform

Despite the ease of using an established internal school or OPAC website, many school librarians prefer to build their library website using an external platform such as Wordpress, Google Sites, Google Blogger, Glogster, Weebly, LibGuides, or a wiki. Typically, when this kind of Web platform is used, a link to the external site is provided on the school website. While an external site provides far more customization options, it may require an extra click for students accessing the main page via the school’s website.

For a great list of external platform options, visit the School Library Websites wiki at <http://schoollibrarywebsites.wikispaces.com/Building+Tools>. For ideas, this wiki also contains a great list of exemplary websites.

Figure 3 shows an example of a Wordpress site I created for the Franklin Academy school library. Figure 4 shows an example of the Glogster site created by Joyce Valenza for the Springfield Township High School Virtual Library.

**STEP 2: DECIDE WHAT RESOURCES TO INCLUDE.**

Before building your site, spend some time visiting other school library websites for ideas. Place the most important (i.e., most often used) resources at the top of the page since students don’t always like to scroll! On their websites most school
libraries provide links to research materials such as pathfinders, virtual reference materials, databases, online catalogs, and scheduling calendars. Other possibilities include links to downloadable e-books and audiobooks, online safety information, curation tools, search strategies, book trailers, information about Mock Caldecott voting, blogs, readers’ advisory information, fun sites, free Web tools, copyright information, games, and much more.

Info-Tech Compendium

Many school librarians incorporate online learning platforms and fun widgets to draw their students to the library website. If the school uses Edmodo, My Big Campus, Moodle, Dropbox, or other online learning platforms, the library website should include links to these resources, even if links are already posted elsewhere on the school website. Think of the library site as an information-technology compendium for the school! Consider incorporating a blog or news feed into the site. This feature allows the school librarian to promote library events and highlight student projects, and also provides an easy way to post timely information and pathfinders for classes coming to the library for research. Most-recent projects show up on the top of the list, and the information remains available for a long time, making the news feed convenient for students doing research, as shown in the L. P. Quinn Elementary school website in figure 1.

Appeal and Functionality

Visual appeal and functionality are nearly as important as content. If a site is difficult to navigate or visually boring, students won’t want to spend much time there. It’s not difficult to incorporate attractive graphics or create custom icons to make the page more attractive and user-friendly. For example, as shown in figure 5, Gail Brisson of Trumansburg Elementary School designed big custom buttons to highlight the most important items on her page, making it easier for her young students to find the online catalog and other important links.

Whenever possible, the school library website should include photos and videos of students. Children are developmentally narcissistic, and they love to see themselves online! Opportunities to see themselves can be a big draw to the site for any age group.

Widgets

Widgets are small Web tools, usually located on a page’s sidebar, that can add fun and learning to a site. Facebook and Twitter widgets, Shelfari or Goodreads widgets, ClustrMaps, Flickr slideshows, Wolfram Alpha, Voki—a quick search will turn up a host of interesting educational widgets that can be embedded into a site by simply copying and pasting some HTML code.

For an example of what widgets look like on a site, visit Deb Schiano’s excellent site at Lounsberry Hollow’s Virtual Learning Center <www.lhvlc.com>, part of which is shown in figure 6.
STEP 3: ASSESS.

Once the school library website has been up and running for some time, send around a survey to get feedback from students and staff about how they use the site and what they use most or don’t like. Getting responses can be difficult so don’t hesitate to offer an incentive, such as placing students’ names in a drawing for a guaranteed study hall pass or an iTunes gift card. To tempt teachers, offer a free class period (“Bring your kids to the library for booktalks—a free prep period for you!”). As often as possible, respond to the recommendations that appear in the survey responses. This acknowledgment encourages future feedback.

STEP 4: TWEAK CONSTANTLY.

Once the virtual presence is up and running, continue to monitor patrons’ needs and adjust the features of the virtual library as needed. One of the most difficult things for most librarians to resist is including too much information on the website! If the site is too busy, finding things is hard—especially for younger patrons.

While including lots of images and widgets may make a site visually appealing, be aware that not all users may have a super-fast Internet connection at home. Build judiciously and check to see how long the page takes to load on a slow connection.

Also keep in mind that many users will be viewing the library website on a mobile device. View and explore the site on a smartphone or tablet to make sure the site is user-friendly on mobile platforms.

Finally, always test out widgets and links at school to make sure they work with the district’s filters. While it may not be a problem if a Facebook or Twitter widget doesn’t work at school—especially if you are targeting parents or other adults in the community who can use the site unfiltered at home—anything that will be used at school or by students should work with the filters. Check links often to make sure they aren’t broken or the destination sites blocked.

JUMP IN!

The options for creating a virtual library presence may seem overwhelming, but don’t be intimidated by all of the choices and decisions—jump in! Any virtual presence is better than none, so don’t be afraid to play around with different platforms and tools and build over time.

Whenever possible, get students involved in the creation, testing, and upkeep of the site. Students who curate information on their school library’s site not only learn more, they feel ownership and are more likely to use the site. A virtual library space is always a work in progress and can be a fun sandbox for testing new technology tools as well as helping students and teachers meet the Common Core State Standards and AASL learning standards.

Rebecca Buerkett is the school librarian, computer teacher, and technology coordinator at L.P. Quinn Elementary School, in Tupper Lake, New York. A graduate of Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies, Rebecca was previously a high school librarian at Franklin Academy in Malone, New York, and an elementary school librarian in Saranac, New York. She was recently appointed secretary of the New York Library Association/Section of School Librarians. Rebecca regularly presents at conferences and provides professional development to teachers in her district and librarians in her region.

Work Cited: