For a school librarian, particularly in the first couple of years, it can be a struggle to maintain a sound program that meets the needs of the students, faculty, and administration. One challenge in particular that has made my life difficult is clunky and inaccessible web design software.

Although I battled daily to keep student resources and library information current, I also had to painstakingly push my way through the restrictive updating process to make the most of what I had: pages of simple web links to “important websites” and PDF uploaded document pathfinders. As far as my faculty and students were concerned, it met their needs and expectations. But as a professional, I felt trapped. I needed a comprehensive site that trained my students not only to find information, but also to discern the quality and allow them to effectively synthesize that information. In the age of social media and web 2.0, there had to be a way to create a “virtual learning community” rather than an inward-looking, static website.

LibGuides to the Rescue
The content management and publishing system LibGuides came into my life when I needed it most. LibGuides is most often used as a vehicle to present a wide array of library resources and research support in the form of subject and course guides, and it allows for the integration of multimedia content. But I use LibGuides as a tool for library website design and information literacy support. It has proven to be accessible, user friendly, and effective for learning and teaching.

Whenever faculty members request my help, I design a LibGuide tailored specifically for their projects. These guides offer a project overview, including the assignment and rubrics, useful books in the library, featured databases and websites, as well as notes and minilessons on plagiarism, note taking, and MLA citation. LibGuide has improved student access to and comfort levels with project-specific resources, and it provides a sound foundation for building assessments.

The LibGuide alleviated the chaos that normally accompanies any classroom project. It allows both the teacher and the students to maintain organization throughout the research process and provides support through the completion of the final product. The project LibGuide simplifies what is often an overwhelming process and is as useful for the classroom teacher as it is for the students.

Content Management with Netvibes
Recently I collaborated with Spanish teacher Abigail Theberge on a project to design a Netvibes site. Netvibes is a free web tool that manages content and allows users to create personalized spaces, similar to Pageflakes or iGoogle. Each student was assigned a region in Spain and was required to research that region using the library resources listed on the LibGuide page. I taught several lessons on information literacy skills before the students embarked on their research. They used the project LibGuide I created to reinforce and support the information literacy skills they learned, which enabled effective research for the creation of their Netvibes site. The unit, called Una Vista de España (A View of Spain), was the first example...
of this type of collaboration at Bishop Stang High School and illustrated how information literacy, technology, and academics can merge to enhance students’ digital age skills.

Rave Reviews from Students
At the end of the project, I surveyed students about the process. The results revealed that students enjoyed the project and, in particular, appreciated the project LibGuide.

One student commented, “The research databases were helpful because they were all organized into one area. They were easily accessible, instead of having to search for information all over.”

Another remarked, “I liked how everything that we needed to complete the project was in one central place. The project assignment, the rubrics, all the resources, etc., were a click away.”

That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. Theberge shared similar sentiments: “Not only was the project LibGuide an important tool for my students, but for me, as their classroom teacher, it facilitated a smooth process, especially regarding the assessment of the final products.”

An annual subscription to LibGuides is $549 and, in my opinion, is worth every penny. It’s easy to use, comes with incredible technical support, and is used by more than 1,420 colleges and universities. If I can expose my students to information literacy skills using a tool they may see at college, they are going to be that much more prepared for higher education.

Acknowledgment
The author would like to thank Lori Cooney, project coordinator and instructional design specialist at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, for introducing her to Netvibes as an effective technology tool in the classroom.

Resources
Bishop Stang High School library website: http://bishopstang.libguides.com/home
Bishop Stang High School student projects page: http://bishopstang.libguides.com/student_projects

—Jennifer Thomas is the library media specialist at Bishop Stang High School in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts, USA. Her library website won the Web Seal of Excellence Award from the Massachusetts School Library Association.

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