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# The Digital Literacy Partnership Website: Promoting Interdisciplinary Scholarship Between Faculty, Students, and Librarians

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**ABSTRACT**

In 2013, the Center for Digital Scholarship at Miami University was established and coincided with the redesign of the Children's Picture Book Database, which had a successful web presence for nearly 20 years. We developed the Digital Literacy Partnership (DLP) website project in order to upgrade the project to Omeka as a new digital management tool and to establish a second resource called the Health Literacy Database. Over time, the project grew to include three databases with the mission to promote the contributions of literacy, health, and technology on learning. In this case study, we describe the role of academic libraries in supporting faculty and student design projects; share the history and mission of the DLP project; and explain the digital team of faculty, librarians, and undergraduate students. We also outline the production of public health eBooks targeted to children and adults with low literacy skills; the social marketing decisions we made from web usage statistics; and the technical lessons learned throughout this collaborative digital project.

## Introduction

This case study promotes the value of supporting faculty-initiated digital scholarship projects within academic libraries. About 20 years ago, when digital scholarship did not have the attention that it has today, Dr. Valerie Ubbes came to the University Library, prompted by an interdisciplinary library grant proposal, to seek assistance on a web-based project: The Children's Picture Book Database. This project was one of the first faculty projects that our library supported and was later recognized as one of the 101 Best Web Sites for Elementary Teachers by the International Society of Technology in Education in 2006 (Lerman, 2005). The

collaboration between Dr. Ubbes and several librarians and technologists demonstrated that partnerships for web-based projects were important and had the potential to reach a wider national and global audience. As the current digital project continued to make an impact on faculty, students, and librarians beyond Miami University, Dr. Ubbes decided to incorporate more digital literacy assignments in her health education classes with the goal of practicing academic service learning or "serving while learning." As a result, students began to create and publish digital projects for public health, supported by design templates that helped to boost health-related skills and behaviors. By 2013, the digital team of Dr. Ubbes and several librarians in the Center for Digital Scholarship realized that the number of student projects (e.g., slide decks and videos) had grown and improved in quality. Thus, we decided to share our expanding collection of educational materials online, and the Digital Literacy Partnership (DLP) project was launched. Around the same time, our academic library was also getting ready to establish a Center for Digital Scholarship with one main goal: to provide facilities and services to support digital initiatives that enhance the research, teaching, and learning mission of the university. As a result, the mission of the DLP project is "to form scientific and artistic partnerships to advance the understanding of health communication message design by increasing access to written materials that are valid, reliable, authentic, and equitable for children, youth, and adults."

In this case study, our four main objectives are: (a) to demonstrate the value of library support for faculty projects; (b) to demonstrate the evolution of class assignments from Slide Decks into eBooks; (c) to demonstrate the integration of students' contributions into a faculty digital project; and (d) to demonstrate the impact of local digital literacy projects at a global level. Our case study focuses on the design and dissemination of digital materials via the DLP website in which a template produced by a faculty member's research in health education curriculum gave undergraduate students an opportunity to also produce and help disseminate needed electronic materials for children and adults with low literacy skills. An inquiry-based pedagogical process was used with the undergraduate students who were guided by editorial feedback from the professor in a public health communications course. Students crafted their own interpretations using the design templates by first writing a textual narrative then writing a photographic narrative of daily health routines and habits. During the production of their Electronic Texts for Health Literacy, students used PowerPoint to integrate their autobiographical scripts with personal photographs of daily life situations. As a result, the textual and visual scripts demonstrated both the "thinking and doing" of health-related behaviors. Also, the layered design of the visual-textual narratives showed gestural and postural actions to practice when using the Electronic Texts for Health Literacy as a health education curriculum. Students not only learned how to write patterned scripts for low literacy audiences, they gained autonomy and

voice in their own personal health and wellbeing when serving as a virtual role model for others.

## Centers for digital scholarship in academic libraries

Centers for Digital Scholarship within academic libraries provide a forum for collaboration among faculty, students, and librarians pursuing a digital project to support their research and teaching interests. The number of centers for digital scholarship is expected to grow, as indicated in a 2014 EDUCAUSE article *Trends in Digital Scholarship Centers*, which claims that "Most U.S. universities and colleges do not yet have a digital scholarship center, and most existing centers were established only in the past few years. We expect to see an increasing number in the near future" (Lippincott, Hemmasi, & Lewis, 2014). A year later, the *ACRL Digital Scholarship Centers Interest Group* was established at the 2015 American Library Association Midwinter Meeting (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016).

The Miami University Libraries' Center for Digital Scholarship was established in April 2013 (Miami University Libraries, 2013). The mission of the center is to serve as a collaborative partner with faculty, students, and staff by providing access to a digital library and data repository, including multimedia, digitization, geospatial, and data management services so that members of the Miami community can accomplish their research, scholarship, and teaching goals. After four years, we have worked with approximately 20 faculty members, as well as 60 graduate and undergraduate students. Our current project portfolio falls into the following categories: building and curating digital exhibits; prototyping and publishing open access eBooks; building and publishing undergraduate student journals; developing digital storytelling apps; building digital archives and companion websites; developing data collection systems; and supporting the University institutional repository. During this time, we have also learned that one of the ongoing challenges in digital scholarship requires selecting the correct, most cost-effective and sustainable, software tool for a project. In this regard, our current IMLS Sparks grant, *On-Demand Digital Scholarship Applications Dashboard* allows us to easily and quickly choose, configure, deploy, and evaluate a set of common web applications in a shared virtual environment (Miami University, 2016).

## CDS and DLP collaboration

One of the emerging academic service models within university libraries is the support for interdisciplinary digital projects with faculty. For us, the establishment of the Libraries' Center for Digital Scholarship (CDS) coincided with the planning for the Digital Literacy Partnership website project. Digital scholarship is one of the top trends identified in the *2016 ACRL top trends in academic libraries* (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2014). Finding an accepted definition

for digital scholarship can be challenging, but, in general, digital scholarship extends traditional methods of research by applying new technologies to advance the teaching and learning process. According to the U.S. Digital Literacy website (2015), digital literacy is "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills." They also outline three components of digital literacy: (a) the ability to use digital technology to locate, evaluate, use and create information; (b) the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources; and (c) the ability to perform tasks effectively in a digital environment.

In the following sections, we describe our experiences in developing the DLP project (Ubbes, 2013), which was officially launched in February 2014. The lead researcher for this project is Dr. Valerie Ubbes, Associate Professor of Public Health, along with Elias Tzoc, Digital Scholarship and Associate Librarian. The project runs on Omeka (Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, 2015), an open source web-publishing platform for scholarly collections and exhibitions developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University.

The role of the Center for Digital Scholarship is to provide the technical infrastructure and support for the DLP website project. Our main contributions have included: leading the website design and prototype sessions back in 2013; installing and maintaining Omeka instances on a library server; migrating content from a local system into Omeka; installing and modifying custom plugins and themes; running web standards tests to validate HTML files; modifying core files to embed image viewers; implementing Vimeo code for video files in Omeka; providing training for student assistants; maintaining and updating the website; and providing web usage reports to the project team.

## DLP history and mission

The Digital Literacy Partnership website was beta tested in February 2013 after a migration of the Children's Picture Book Database at Miami University to Omeka and the development of two additional interdisciplinary databases on the DLP site. The DLP promotes the contributions of literacy, health, and technology on learning by offering a collection of three databases in one website so users will find, access, use, and disseminate print and electronic materials to advance health literacy. The mission of the DLP is to form scientific and artistic partnerships to advance the understanding of health communication message design. Miami University students in health education and public health courses learn how to craft materials to share on the DLP website so we can increase access to written materials that are valid, reliable, authentic, and equitable for children, youth, and adults.

**Figure 1.** Digital Literacy Partnership homepage.

The three databases in the DLP (see Figure 1) are as follows:

1) The Children's Picture Book Database at Miami University is a collection of picture book abstracts searchable by topics, concepts, and skills for building content-area reading, writing, and oral language skills across all academic subjects. Undergraduate students read and abstract newly acquired picture books into a bibliographic citation with 10 to 12 keywords to help identify the storyline in a broad cross-disciplinary way. The primary audience for this database is teachers of all disciplines, librarians, authors, illustrators, and publishers—all of whom find, write, illustrate, or promote picture books for children.

2) The Health Literacy Database at Miami University is a collection of Electronic Texts for Health Literacy, which promote cognitive-behavioral life skills for health. Undergraduate students follow a design template originated by Ubbes when writing visual-textual-lexical-gestural content in a sequential format to show healthy human role models demonstrating positive health outcomes. The primary audiences for this database are health professionals

interacting with clients, participants, and learners in nonprofit agencies, dental and medical clinics, governmental organizations, universities, and pre-K[1] educational settings.

3) The Health Advocacy Database at Miami University is a collection of Public Service Announcements that advocate for human health and wellbeing in national and international contexts. Undergraduate students follow a design template, which includes musical and rhythmical cues when aligning their written message to the U.S. *Health People 2020* agenda or the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2014).

The primary audiences for this database are health professionals and program planners seeking media releases on a variety of health topics and initiatives.

## DLP team and project workflow

The DLP project involves a highly collaborative team of undergraduate students who assist faculty and librarians with a variety of DLP processes both inside and outside the classroom. At the end of the semester, public health students are offered a short list of DLP projects that they can join during the interim winter break and/or summer break to gain experience in digital technology. Because Miami University supports undergraduate research through its Office of Undergraduate Research, students are encouraged to look for projects to build their resumes, which often results in a collaborative DLP partnership that continues until graduation. Many of the public health students seeking research experience may have engaged in designing low-literacy service learning projects for one of the three databases through their public health coursework, so it's a natural extension to encourage them to learn additional skills outside the classroom for data uploading, metadata creation, web analytic reporting, and marketing strategies for promoting digital health literacy.

Workflow for student projects usually involves the following trajectory: (a) students complete a successful project in their public health communication class which focuses on writing for a low-literacy audience across the lifespan; (b) faculty invites a few interested students to learn additional technology, digital literacy, and/or health communication skills by contributing to a current DLP project need; (c) students meet the project director (public health professor) and CDS contact (associate librarian) in a mutual meeting held at the CDS to understand the project, people, and the place where the students gain training and contribute their work; (d) the project director outlines the requisite skills and purpose for student contributions on the current project; (e) students are given access to the Omeka platform at a meeting in the CDS; (f) students continue to practice their new skillset from a remote location using login access for approximately two weeks before feedback is given on their accuracy and quality of work; (g) the project director

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[1]Pre-K is a class that prepares children, typically 5 or 6 years old, for first grade.

calls additional meetings as needed at the CDS to gain student insights and to troubleshoot student contributions; (h) students complete the remaining parts of their project while staying in email communications with the project director; and (i) the project director usually offers a nominal gift card for students when their work has met quality standards and suggested timelines. When a new project need is identified, the same students may be asked again to contribute, but the closure of one project and the beginning of another project ensures that the new training with additional outcomes will be accomplished.

## DLP technology infrastructure and future direction

In mid-2013, we began looking for a more compatible system for the Children's Picture Book Database. Because of the number of metadata fields in the old database and the type of digital objects (text, documents, images, and videos) used for the new projects, we decided to migrate to Omeka. For the content migration, we used the Omeka CSV plugin and we updated the browse.php file to include book covers from our library catalog. Because the team became familiar with Omeka, it made sense to continue with the same platform for the new DLP project. Using the same platform for all three databases was an early advantage when we needed to train new student assistants. Perhaps the only limitation with this approach is that Omeka does not support a multi-site option yet. As a result, each one of the three databases uses its own Omeka instance. However, the upcoming release of Omeka S will support multi-sites, and we look forward to upgrading and merging the three instances into a single one. The upgrade to Omeka S will provide us with better search options across the three databases using a common thesaurus and also help with website maintenance.

One of the most important lessons we have learned in implementing this digital project is that collaborative exploration and experimentation with different technologies is a must. In the chapter entitled *A Sustainable Repository Infrastructure for Digital Humanities: The DHO Experience*, Gourley and Viterbo (2010) indicated that academic institutions planning to support digital projects must create an infrastructure that is easily sustainable on its own while using dynamic, scalable, and cost-effective hosting and development resources. We believe that Omeka S will be a great update for the maintenance and sustainability aspect of projects like this one. As we continue to work with students as part of the undergraduate research experience, we also hope to implement a test instance for the project, which will be a safe place for students to prototype and test changes without affecting the live instance.

The DLP project is also a good example of how digital projects never end. For example, some of the Electronic Texts for Health Literacy presentations from three to four years ago, are now being converted into eBooks using the popular eBook file format ePUB -a free and open standard format for eBooks published by the International Digital Publishing Forum and used by many publishers where users

can download and read on their own devices like smartphones, tablets, computers, or e-readers. The nature of many digital projects is that they do not seem to be completely done, as there is often room for changes, updates, data curation, or even content migration. As noted by humanist and textual scholar Jerome McGann, our digital work "is not the achievement of one's desire: it is the shadow of that desire" (2004, p. 76). Thus, if today's digital projects are only the shadows of the scholars' ideas, then we have to ask: what system do we choose today that will continue to secure access to these projects in 5–10 years? Who is going to continue to provide support for these projects? Without a future plan and a system of support, today's digital projects "can be at real risk of becoming quickly outdated, if not completely lost in the shuffle" (Maron, 2015, p. 30). The *2014 ACRL Top Trends in Academic Libraries* states "Libraries, IT, research administration, and grant support will have to collaborate to find the expertise necessary to provide data management" (p. 294). Thus, securing data access and data preservation for scholarly digital projects are becoming required activities in the age of big-data. For the DLP website project, we look forward to implementing a preservation method where we can save and preserve the digital objects and maybe even the entire website.

## Our newest innovation: eBooks for health literacy

In 2015 and 2016, we were awarded grants with aims to create and publish a series of interactive eBooks targeted for children, which could be read in elementary schools or dental clinics. The content for the eBooks are based on new and existing files available in the collection of Electronic Texts for Health Literacy. We completed the first prototype for our eBook on Oral Health Hygiene, which is a collection of five of our best electronic texts written about daily dental habits and routines. The eBook format includes audio narration that allows readers to increase their fluency by listening and reading along. The goal is to have users read both the picture and the written text in a fluid integrated way before they click on the icon to hear the script being read to them. This extra feature increases tactile interactivity, repetition, and multisensory benefits to learning in digital environments.

Our pilot study focused on "Using Narratives to Promote Habits of Health" and included three different Electronic Texts for Health Literacy selected from our second DLP database. The purpose of the grant was to determine if children and their caregivers in the waiting room of a dental office would stop what they were doing to view the three continuous Electronic Texts for Health Literacy on oral health. Unobtrusive observers completed a checklist of behaviors that children and their caregivers exhibited while waiting for their dental check-ups in order to determine if reading the screen without an audio recording would motivate and focus their viewing in the waiting room. From that initial work, we experimented with the addition of music to the three
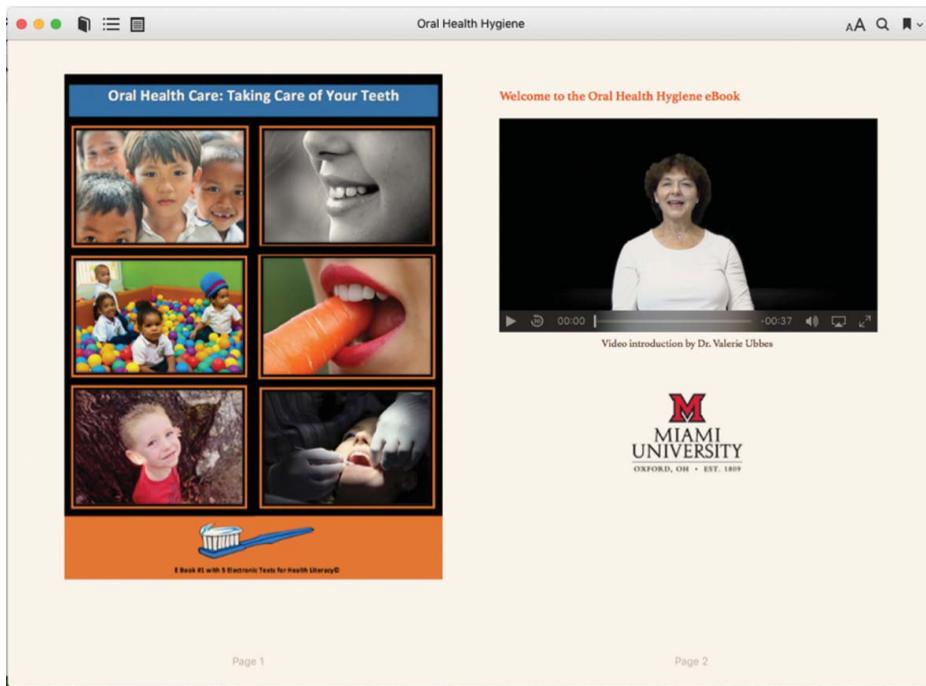
**Figure 2.** Oral Health Hygiene eBook as viewed in the iBooks App.

dental health E-Texts and included an introductory greeting that was recorded in the DLP studio. This led us to experiment with I-Pads (tablets) to disseminate the recorded material, but we did not take the new upgrades into a research setting. Ultimately, we decided to create an eBook (see Figure 2) of five dental health E-Texts organized in the following order:

- Practicing Good Oral Health Habits (Dent, 2015)
- Teeth to Treasure! (Schosker, 2014)
- Improving Oral Health Routine (Griffin & Liu, 2015)
- Healthy Choices for A Great Smile (Engels, 2015)
- Set Goals to Keep Teeth Pearly White (Rupright, 2015)

Rather than expecting the end user to read the E-Text chapters on their own, we invited five pre-dental undergraduate students at our institutions to narrate one chapter each. This afforded us a variety of voices to add interest for the end user who will "see, hear, and read" the material, but it also helped to advance the potential use of the eBook project in the dental students' future job shadowing and dental school projects in local communities. By building in a captive audience during our final design, we believe that we are moving forward in a social marketing way. We expect to share the dental health project on eBooks and also migrate the eBooks back to our DLP website where the use of Google Analytics can afford us valuable user data for upgrading our project.

In summary, the CDS's contributions in the eBook production include: prototyping an eBook for the project using ePUB, developing a practical workflow for

producing eBooks, validating and fixing HTML and EPUB files, identifying and recommending publishing tools like Calibre, and creating MP3 files for the audio reading of the electronic texts. Some of the tools we used for the eBook production were: Audacity for audio recording and editing, Final Cut Pro for video editing, Dreamweaver for HTML editing, and Calibre for HTML to ePUB file conversion.

## DLP statistics and impact

Digital literacy has been described as "the myriad of social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008 p. 5). As we mentioned in the previous section, the DLP website project went live in February 2014 and since then we have used Google Analytics to collect web usage statistics (see Figure 3). Between February 14, 2014 and November 30, 2016, our data shows that the DLP has had more than 31,000 users and a total of 142,753 page views from 153 countries. The United States represents 70% of total sessions with 19 countries having over 100 visits during the two-year time period. Examples of countries include Australia, United Kingdom, India, Japan, Spain, Brazil, Philippines, and Indonesia. The top ten U.S. states with 600 visits include in order: Ohio, California, Florida, New York, Texas, North Carolina, Illinois, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts.

The Google Analytics reports have also helped us understand more about our audience; for example, the data about the type of devices people are using to access our site is helping us to make our site more mobile friendly. Our mobile device data indicates the following percentages: desktop (79%), mobile (17%), and tablet
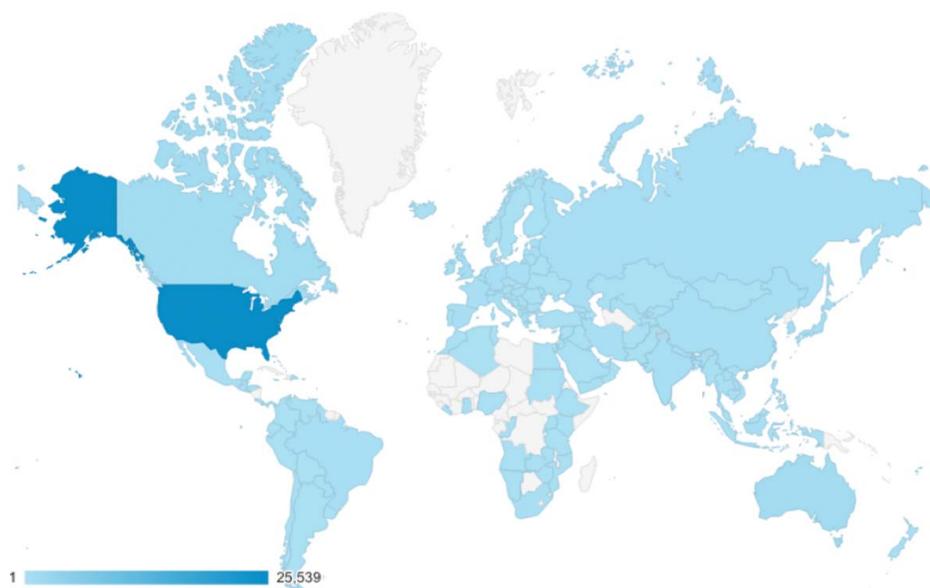


**Figure 3.** DLP and country visits.

(4%). The types of browsers used include: Chrome (52%), Safari (24%), Firefox (8%), Internet Explorer (6%), and others (10%).

For the eBooks that we are going to publish in 2017, we are also planning to make those available for download. The general web traffic to the DLP site is coming from 4 sources: Referral (42%), Organic Search (31%), Direct (24%), and Social (3%). For the Referral section, top sites that send traffic to our website include: Wikipedia, Society for the History of Children and Youth, McKinley Memorial Library Children's Services, University of Texas at Austin School of Information, The University of British Columbia, Internet Public Library, Beacon Educator, University of Canberra in Australia, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Fresno Pacific University, Newport News Public Library System, Literature Circles Resource Center, Teaching Reading and Language Arts!, Mid-Continent Public Library, Michigan State University, Internet for Classrooms, Edina Public Schools, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Children's Literature Association, Read Tennessee, Education World, Fairfax County Public Schools, Oklahoma Homeschool, among others.

In addition to usage statistics, another project indicator has been the number and quality of work created by students throughout the years. Student contributions have gone from just a class assignment to a publicly available website where anyone can access and read their work. From the very beginning of our second database project, our work was grounded in the faculty philosophy that students can voluntarily "learn to serve" when crafting low-literacy public health materials for children or adults learning to read. By coupling the need for low-literacy materials on a variety of health topics with learning how to write for a target audience, students develop a dynamic sense of purpose and focus in their professional journey, owing to the critical need to gain additional experience in technical writing and health communications. Students choose to sign a service learning contract to share their work on the DLP website rather than leave their co-produced course assignments in their computers for the rest of their college career.

Additionally, in response to the increasing number of visitors accessing the DLP through mobile devices, we recently began a social media campaign for our project using Twitter @DLPMiamiOH, supported again by undergraduate students. One public health student has been selecting three types of media from the DLP on a health-related theme to coincide with the monthly National Health Observances from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. After sharing our website links for the selected picture books, electronic texts, and public service announcements on one health theme with the Project Director for approval, the edited list is sent to another student who provides Twitter feeds from our DLP MiamiOH account (Twitter - DLP MiamiOH, 2016). Our current plans are to migrate some of our social media activities to Pinterest in the near future to capitalize on educators, teachers, and librarians who look for instructional materials on a regular basis. By

**Figure 4.** DLP MiamiOH Tweet.

clicking on a visual of our specific material, the end user will be able to link directly to one of our three databases housed on our DLP website. We anticipate increasing the number of visitors to our three databases by scheduling activity via different social media channels. One of our recent tweets is shown in Figure 4.

## Conclusion

The future direction of our work includes addressing the ongoing need for web usability standards in the design and dissemination of digital materials, including any revisions for accessibility principles. We will migrate our work to Omeka S to increase accessibility and usability and seek another grant to fund both principles. By looking to public health venues, we may have an advantage because the Health Communication and Health Information Technology objectives for the United States include the following need: HC/HIT- 8 Increase the proportion of quality, health-related websites. The *Healthy People 2020* agenda (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012) also indicates that public health needs to: (a) increase the proportion of health-related websites that meet three or more evaluation criteria for disclosing information that can be used to assess information reliability (HC/HIT-8.1), and (b) increase the proportion of health-related websites that follow established usability principles (HC/HIT-8.2).

For the CDS team, the DLP website project has been an excellent opportunity to learn about the possibilities, and to some extent, the limitations of popular library and open source platforms such as Omeka. The DLP project has also allowed us to better support other Omeka-based projects we currently support in the Center. Another highlight of this collaborative project has been the opportunity to work with senior undergraduate and independent study students who work with Dr. Ubbes in uploading class-produced content and metadata into the site, manage user data trends, and organize our social media outreach. We are also excited about three recent developments for this project: a research study about the impact of this interdisciplinary project in pre-K-12 education, the partnerships with organizations such as Story Share and Chiropractic Science, and a new *Interdisciplinary*

*Research Grant* with a team of three faculty members from three different departments with the support of two centers: Center for Digital Scholarship and the Center for the User Experience. We hope the case study discussed in this article can contribute to the conversations around supporting innovative and sustainable faculty research projects, especially at those liberal arts institutions with a focus on undergraduate education.

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