

Beyond Library Walls

By Michele Behr, Off Campus Librarian

As much as librarians tend to believe that students and faculty are most in need of our help when we are sitting at a library desk ready to give it, the reality is that our users prefer to get answers when they need them, not when our service points are open and available. As a result, 24/7 or "any time access," to the Libraries' Web site is essential to deliver the help and assistance that students need when they need it. One project that the University Libraries has undertaken, in this vein, involves the production of instructional videos to help students access and navigate electronic resources, databases, and services.

These instructional videos are sometimes called "screencasts." And, if they are formatted to be played on a handheld iPod type device, they are called "podcasts." Basically, what we are talking about is a recording of computer screen output accompanied by audio narration. The completed product is usually published as a video file and is a sort of tutorial or virtual demonstration of some computer based activity. Screencasts have become popular in the business world as a way to provide employee training on software and automated systems. In recent years, libraries have started incorporating screencasts on their websites either to enhance in-person instruction sessions or to provide help to patrons on additional topics.

Besides the obvious "expand our presence" reason noted above, there are other reasons why the University Libraries has been motivated to produce Web videos. First, students and faculty need help when searching the Libraries' databases and resources. Different vendors offer different search strategies and what works for one search may not work for another search in a different database. Second, users need that help when and where they are working. Third, we constantly look for ways to promote and make users aware of the many, many resources available at the Libraries. Fourth, we have increasing numbers of distance and non-traditional students who cannot easily travel to Kalamazoo to get help in person. And finally, text-based help systems can be difficult for some people to use, especially younger patrons who are used to a variety of media. Learning styles differ; different users prefer different kinds of media, e.g. sound, text, images, animation, etc. Therefore, Web videos seemed an excellent way to reach out to our users.

In a competitive business market, various software packages were available for creating Web videos. After investigating several of them, we settled on a product called Camtasia, available through

TechSmith. Next, we selected several databases and electronic services that our statistics indicated were heavily used by students. We also selected indexes that we knew required instructions if the users were to make the best use of all their respective features, e.g., *Scopus*, a large database indexing scholarly journals in the sciences and social sciences. Using Camtasia, we recorded scripted movies demonstrating features of these databases. We designed our screencast tutorials with slow pacing and progressive tasks. These considerations allowed users to follow along with the tutorials. Our screencasts also contained added pauses and buttons that prompted users to control the flow of the tutorial and facilitated active responding. Research has shown that this kind of interactivity in Web based demonstrations helps the user to retain what s/he is learning. The videos were designed so that the user could be using them in one window, while simultaneously doing whatever activity was being demonstrated in another window. The end result is a series of short, targeted videos that do not require the user to invest a lot of time; typically the videos are one to two minutes long and focus on very specific tasks or features.

We have found that using the Web videos has many advantages for our users and us. Videos expand the presence of the University Libraries and instructional support beyond the physical library. The student in a WMU residence hall or hundreds of miles away from campus can get help. The videos are interactive, controllable, and repeatable, so a user can go through them as many times as needed as well as paused along the way. For some databases, we have several videos so the student can go through all of them to get an overall background on the use of that database, or a user can choose just one or two to help with a particular feature that needs to be understood. Screencasts make use of multiple media (sound, text, animation, etc.) that appeal to younger users who are comfortable and familiar with video learning. Web based videos are anonymous and easily accessible; no one needs to know that you are asking for help, which appeals to students who have issues with "library anxiety" or hesitate to ask for help in person. The videos provide reinforcement for library skills taught in person and extra practice for those who are still uncomfortable with navigating resources or using new skills. They also make it possible to teach more advanced skills that may only be of interest to a small segment of our users and which we do not have time to cover in a typical instruction session. Once they are created, Web videos can easily be embedded into Web based classes to provide

true "point of need" help to distance students and others taking online classes.

At the present time, the Libraries' Web site [www.wmich.edu/library/] has more than 35 videos available. We have been tracking their use and have a very short survey that appears at the end of the video for users to leave comments. Many of the videos have been used over 500 times in the past several months. Users who have left comments have told us that they found the videos helpful and that they would use this form of help again. One user commented: "Great addition guys! Visual instruction is so much easier to retain than simply reading it and trying to apply it."

To check out WMU's library video guides, click on How-to Videos on the Libraries' Web site. The "Getting Started Screen" will list multiple headings:

- *Interlibrary Loan* (borrowing books and journal articles from other libraries);
- *RefWorks* (a citation system);
- *ERIC* (an index to resources on education);
- *ISI Web of Science* (an index to the sciences, social sciences, and humanities);
- *SCOPUS* (an index to many disciplines);
- *Applied Science & Technology Abstracts (ASTA)*; and
- *World of Engineering Information*, which includes an *Introduction to Peer-Reviewed Journals* and an *Introduction to Trade Magazines*.

In addition, each of these headings, once opened, lists several short titles related to the larger heading. *ERIC*, for example, has videos on *Introduction and Basic Searching*, *Searching by Document Type*, *Searching by Descriptors*, *Finding Research-based Material*, *Examining Search Results*, *Managing Search Results*, *Printing Full-text Documents* as well as other options. *The ISI Web of Science* offers three videos: *Introduction and Basic Searching*, *Limiting Search Results*, and *Journal Citation Reports*.

Future plans include more evaluation via usage statistics, questionnaires and usability studies. We hope to incorporate more live action video, for example, videos of in-person instruction sessions, into WebCT, the system the University uses for delivering online classes. We expect to reformat the videos into podcasts so users can download them to be played on their iPod devices. When this is completed, we can put the library videos into the database of podcasts the University is developing as part of the "iTunes U" project. Each of these expanded video products, available because of wireless technology, clearly breaks down existing walls of the physical Libraries and provides a real presence to our users, any time, anywhere.