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## Technology in Practice. The Guide on the Side

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# The Guide on the Side

Incorporating active learning into online instruction

by Meredith Farkas

**M**any librarians have embraced the use of active learning in their teaching. Moving away from lectures and toward activities that get students using the skills they're learning can lead to more meaningful learning experiences. It's one thing to tell people how to do something, but to have them actually do it themselves, with expert guidance, makes it much more likely that they'll be able to do it later on their own.

Replicating that same "guide on the side" model online, however, has proven difficult. Librarians, like most instructors, have largely gone back to a lecture model of delivering instruction. Certainly it's a great deal more difficult to develop active learning exercises, or even interactivity, in online instruction, but many of the tools and techniques that have been embraced by librarians for developing online tutorials and other learning objects do not allow students to practice what they're learning while they're learning. While some software for creating screencasts—video tutorials that film activity on one's desktop—include the ability to create quizzes or interactive components, users can't easily work with a library resource and watch a screencast at the same time.

In 2000, the reference staff at the University of Arizona was looking for a way to build web-based tutorials to embed in a class that caused a lot of traffic at the reference desk.

Not convinced of the efficacy of traditional tutorials to instruct students on using databases, the librarians "began using a more step-by-step approach where students were guided to perform specific searches and locate specific articles." Instructional Services Librarian Leslie Sult says. The students were then assessed on their ability to conduct searches in the specific resources assigned. Later, Sult, Mike Hagedon, and Justin Spargur of the library's scholarly publishing and data management team, turned this early active learning tutorial model into Guide on the Side software.

Guide on the Side is an interface that allows librarians at all skill levels to develop a tutorial that resides in an online box beside a live web page students can use. Students can read the expert instructions provided by the librarian while actively using a database, without needing to switch between screens.

A great example of Guide on the Side is this tutorial University of Arizona librarians created for JSTOR ([bit.ly/zA9DCf](http://bit.ly/zA9DCf)). The tutorial not only provides help locating and using the database, but it also gets patrons actively using the database and answering questions about it. Having the tutorial right beside the student is reassuring and convenient, giving

him or her experience using a database, with help easily accessible.



**This is an excellent example of what is possible when teaching librarians, technology librarians, and staff collaborate.**

The moment I saw a Guide on the Side, I was convinced this was a model we should adopt at my own university for database instruction. It's much simpler than the multimedia tutorials many

librarians have been developing, yet it may be a better way to actually teach students how to use library resources. The team at the University of Arizona plans to provide the code for Guide on the Side through GitHub ([github.com](http://github.com)) so that other institutions can benefit from their innovation.

This project is also an excellent example of what is possible when teaching librarians, technology librarians, and staff collaborate to find solutions to common instructional problems. "Many University of Arizona instructional librarians have contributed to helping shape the design and pedagogical approach over the years," Sult said. "The effort and input of members of the team is a major factor in the campus success of the current iteration." ■

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