

BUILD A BETTER LIBRARY WEBSITE BOOT CAMP

Catalyst Fund Final Report

Submitted by

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

More than twenty-five years after the appearance of the first public library websites, research published in early 2018 indicated that public libraries across the United States still struggle with the design and ongoing maintenance of their “electronic branches.”¹ However, in libraries without dedicated IT or website staff, decisions about the website and overall management may be left to employees without professional experience or training. Even when consultants are used for website redesigns or upgrades, library staff must still participate in the process and make decisions. Without a background in the core skills around website visual design and functionality or UX, library staff may be unable to fully engage in the process of website improvements or communicate their needs effectively.

After a brief review of a few local public library websites, Andrea Levandowski, Project Manager for Small Business Development and Technology at the New Jersey State Library (NJSL), commissioned a scan of all New Jersey public library websites to determine whether the state’s libraries needed assistance in this area. She determined that there was room for improvement. Bearing in mind the recommendation to follow UX principles in website design and not finding a significant training program on this topic in New Jersey, she undertook a project to develop a User Experience (UX) Boot Camp to teach librarians user design principles and processes that would ultimately help them improve their library websites.

Launched in 2019, the NJSL UX Boot Camp sought to educate New Jersey library staff members and increase their confidence to create better websites. Attendees learned about key aspects of the web design process, which involves multiple audiences and stakeholders. Attendees could leave the boot camp and begin one of the following projects:



Fall 2019 cohort of the in-person NJSL UX Boot Camp.

- Initiate an internal website redesign and design a revised layout, navigation, or visual design with group consensus prior to engaging a consultant or company
- Contribute to decision-making in a committee on how to best utilize a limited website budget.
- Continue with additional trainings (online or in-person) for a specific web technology like WordPress, Drupal, Wix, etc. with the goal of participating in the design and development process of a library website.

While the NJSL UX Boot Camp was successful in training through small cohorts, it was not adequate to bring the content to all of the library staff in New

Jersey and elsewhere who would benefit from it. Through the LYRASIS Catalyst Fund, the New Jersey State

¹ Velasquez, D. L., & Evans, N. (2008). Public library websites as electronic branches: a multi-country quantitative evaluation. *Information Research*, 23(1). <http://informationr.net/ir/23-1/paper786.html>

Library sought to transform the in-person content from the NJSL UX Boot Camp to a virtual format and platform.

PROJECT GOALS

The goal of the New Jersey State Library’s Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp project was to develop a robust online version of its in-person (UX) Boot Camp and make it available at no cost to attendees. The resulting online course, hosted on OCLC’s WebJunction is designed to equip participants with the skills to create vibrant and appealing websites that serve the needs of the public. While the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp is marketed to public librarians, the curriculum is largely applicable to all members of the LYRASIS community who have any responsibility for a public-facing website.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PROJECT

When the application to the LYRASIS Catalyst Fund was submitted in February 2020, it was before the COVID-19 pandemic had fully started in the United States. Over the following months, as libraries of every type shut their physical doors and were only available to the public through their websites, the importance of a strong virtual presence became clear.

In March 2021, the think tank New America released a report, “[Public Libraries and the Pandemic](#)” and among their findings, they highlight the importance of library websites: Two out of three respondents to the general public survey—68 percent—said they were aware of a public library in their area that offered online resources. Among the respondents who had used a public library’s online resources, 42 percent said they found out about them from a library website.

While it was impossible to grasp the future impact of COVID-19 during the initial Catalyst Fund application process, the subject matter, deliverables, and design of the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp project fit perfectly into the state of libraries and the world during the July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021 time period. We have noted at various points during this project that we were lucky to be able to continue with our work despite of library closures and work from home situations. We are also grateful for the opportunity to provide a learning opportunity for library staff members that can have a direct impact on their services to the public through their websites at a time when libraries are reevaluating their online presence.

PROJECT PROCESS

Since the goal of the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp project was to develop an online course, the process toward its development was straightforward, with distinct roles for each of the team members. Even so, organization, open communication, and clear expectations were paramount for keeping the project on track and coordinating each of the project phases. In general, the steps for the project fell into the categories of planning, implementation, reviewing, and launch.

The project followed the plan originally developed during the Catalyst Fund application process, which informed the creation of memorandums of understanding with project team members. Of course, there were hiccups along the process, but the timelines and stages were followed effectively.

Planning

We began the project by bringing together the individuals who would be working on components of the project and addressing key questions. In addition, we reviewed the purpose, audience, and expectations of the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp, which was an important starting point especially for team members who had not been involved with the development of the NJSL UX Boot Camp.

The project team included:

- Project Manager, Andrea Levandowski, New Jersey State Library
- Lead UX Designer, Ben Bakelaar, Human Experience Systems
- UX Designer and Course Developer, Stephen Millett, Princeton Public Library
- Lesson Author, Laura Solomon, Ohio Public Library Information Network

The project team worked closely with Eileen Morales, Grants Manager at the New Jersey State Library and Annie Peterson at LYRASIS for the management of the Catalyst Fund award as well as Kendra Morgan, Kathleen Gesinger, and Dale Musselman at WebJunction for the development of the course.

The initial questions we addressed were centered around the platform and modes of delivery for the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp. While hosting the Boot Camp on WebJunction was proposed as part of the Catalyst Fund application, we pursued other options as well to ensure all of our needs for the project would be met. We investigated purchasing a learning management system and hosting it through the New Jersey State Library's website as well as recording a video series. Ultimately, we selected WebJunction as the host using their Moodle platform for a number of reasons, including:

- Access to staff with expertise in developing online courses and working with Moodle
- Recognition among library staff as a provider of online learning content
- Ability to integrate a variety of features for content delivery, including videos, interactive elements, and online forums

In July 2020, the project team met for the kickoff meeting where we discussed the broad overview of milestones, deliverables, and expectations for the project. We also introduced questions that would require additional attention as the project moved forward:

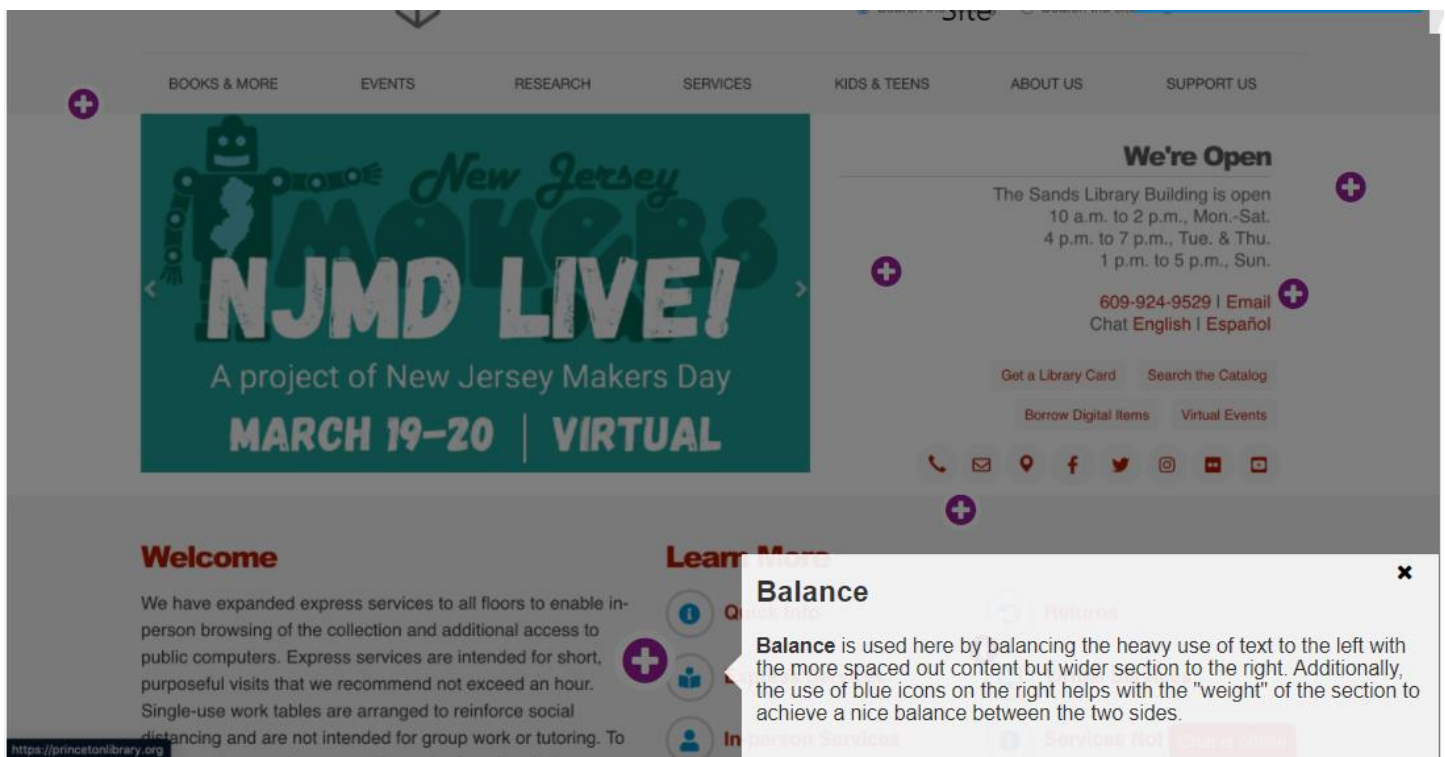
- Aside from the enhancement of the lesson about website accessibility, is any new content required?
- What are the requirements for learners to receive certificates of completion?
- Is there a single certificate of completion or are there combinations of lessons that would result in different certificate types?
- Where are interactive elements necessary to reinforce learning?

From that point, our work on the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp occurred outside of the Moodle platform and included recommendations on the structure of the course, preparing in-person course content, and writing new content. The accessibility module was completed in October 2020 and two revisions of recommendations were delivered as planning documents for the migration to WebJunction. At that point, the project moved into the implementation phase, but planning continued as questions around completion certificates and interactive elements were developed.

Implementation

From November 2020 until March 2021, content was populated into Moodle and the structure of the course took shape. Content included instructor guides, slides, handouts, and other materials created for the NJSL UX Boot Camp as well as new content written for the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp. There were challenges with using Moodle, mostly as we learned the language of the platform and the best way to integrate features for our desired course experience. For example, the sections of the Boot Camp were originally formatted as “Lessons” after much discussion and testing. However, when the staff at WebJunction reviewed the course and provided their recommendations, they suggested converting the content to “Books” so that learners could move more easily from the end of one section to the start of another. Understanding some of these subtle differences comes from experience, which the team gained through use of Moodle. Relying on the expertise of WebJunction also proved invaluable to save time and prevent errors that would negatively affect the learner experience.

Along with migrating existing and new material from the in-person training to the Moodle platform, additional resources, videos, and links were added to provide extension activities for learners. The final step was to create interactive elements to further reinforce learning through direct application and practice.



A screenshot showing a learner activity from the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp lesson on Visual Design Principles.

Reviewing

After we completed adding the lesson content to Moodle, we began the process of recruiting participants from the in-person Boot Camp to serve as reviewers. Because of the small size of the cohorts who participated in the NJSL UX Boot Camp, participants have felt connected to the project and the instructor. Additionally, the development of the in-person Boot Camp involved beta testing before the official launch, which encouraged another level of buy-in from participants. They have a vested interest in the success of the program and support its expansion.

Twenty-eight participants in the NJSL UX Boot Camp were asked to serve as reviewers for the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp. From April 13, 2021 to May 10, 2021, eleven reviewers registered for the Boot Camp as learners, read the sections, completed the interactive components, and filled out a survey with questions about their previous experiences with the NJSL UX Boot Camp as well as the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp.

The review period served multiple purposes. Reviewers:

- Identified errors in the content, such as grammatical and spelling mistakes, broken links, and mistakes with formatting
- Tested the usability and structure of the Boot Camp to ensure the order of the lessons was appropriate and that the content flowed from topic to topic
- Compared their in-person experience with the coverage of the topics in the Boot Camp
- Provided suggestions for future improvements to the Boot Camp and identified gaps that should be addressed
- Reported the length of time they spent working on the Boot Camp to inform the number of learning hours that appear on the completion certificate

During the review period, we corrected errors and other mistakes as they were reported, but other larger issues were saved for discussion with the team and staff from WebJunction. One of the last changes to the course before launch was updating the completion certificate to reflect the number of credit hours. While reviewers predicted that learners would spend anywhere from four to thirty-six hours completing the course, we ultimately decided to list a range of four to eight hours on the certificate and WebJunction catalog. We did not want to dissuade learners with an estimated time that was too long, and we also wanted to reflect the amount of time it would take to complete the course alone and not include the additional resources and linked information.

“In some ways it was easier to understand the information with the online course. It seemed more clearly organized and less intimidating.”

“As I went through the course materials I felt I was getting access to the same content (and more) as the in-person course. I also appreciated the exercises and visual examples of webpages and the fact that, with the online platform, it was easy to go back to refer to them.”

“It is missing the “spirit” of the program - the interactions between the people there, to me, was an essential part of the experience. But, of course, that isn't going to translate as well to an asynchronous web environment. It's a big change from that to this. Having the ability to ask questions live and see the considerations/problems that other libraries had was invaluable.”

Launch

The official launch of the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp occurred on May 6, 2021 once WebJunction enabled the course for self-enrollments. We expected there might be feedback with further edits or issues, but as of this report, that have been no problems and the course seems to be working as it should.

PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS



Since May 6, 2021, there have been 391 enrollees, representing forty-six states. The states with the highest total enrollees are New Jersey, New York, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. Forty-three enrollees are from outside of the United States. In terms of institution types, the majority of enrollees report that they represent public libraries, followed by school and academic libraries.

Due to the length of the course, WebJunction advised that the number of completions would lag behind the number of enrollments. Reviewers advised that they spent more time than expected while reading the course material and visiting suggested resource links. During the development of the online course, we also planned that some learners would only review the content of direct interest to them, which would result in fewer participants completing every lesson.

LESSONS LEARNED

Use of learning management system

While there were expectations that work on the course could be completed outside of Moodle, the reality was that the platform guided the project more than we realized. Due to limitations and intricacies of the learning management system, we needed to work in the platform and become acquainted with its nuances rather than simply transferring content in. Had we realized that there was a learning curve with Moodle, we may have begun working in the platform sooner and built some of the interactive features earlier in the process.

Content informing creation

One of the additions to the curriculum was the expanded accessibility module, designed to assist library staff to create a website experience that follows best practices for accommodating users with disabilities. This comprehensive lesson covers topics such as images, color choices, fonts, and navigation with clear recommendations for each. While inputting content into Moodle, we realized that some of this guidance had been overlooked, particularly with how links to external sites were written. We caught this error and moving forward we were more aware, but ensuring the UX and accessibility of the online course became clear priorities, especially since it would undermine the content if we failed to “practice what we preach.”

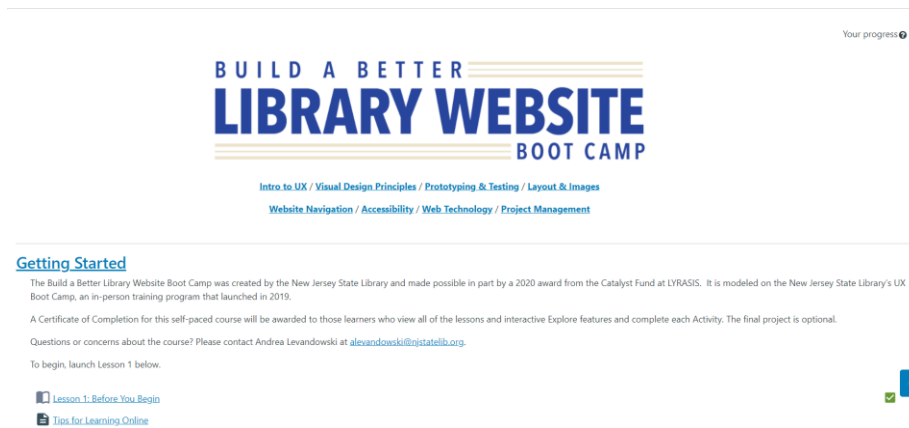
Iteration while building

Although this final report describes the project as having separate distinct steps, in reality they were occurring simultaneously. It became clear as the project moved forward that the Build a Better Library Boot Camp’s lessons about agile thinking and iterative design were at times built into the process of making the course.

Testing with known vs. unknown reviewers

The decision to test the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp using participants in the NJSL UX Boot Camp skewed the feedback from the review period. Since learners were familiar with the in-person Boot Camp, their responses were beneficial in terms of turning one successful learning experience into another. However, some of their feedback also focused on elements that would be impossible to replicate in an online environment under the constraints of the project, such as interaction among attendees and with an instructor.

WHAT’S NEXT



Screenshot of the home screen from the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp.

The reviewers of the online course frequently noted the absence of the benefits of in-person instruction: cohort building, discussion, and opportunities to ask questions. Unfortunately, many of these elements are difficult to build into an online learning experience. WebJunction has developed a [Learning Group Facilitator Guide](#), which is a “framework for organizing, structuring, and leading a group of learners through self-paced courses on any topic.” As a general

guide, it could help learners develop their own community learning experience. WebJunction has also overseen the creation of course-specific facilitator guides which provide guidance that is directly linked to a particular course in their catalog. A potential next step would be to contact library organizations, consortia, systems, or other groups to assist them with creating learning groups for the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp through the general guide or work with them to formulate a guide specific for the Boot Camp.

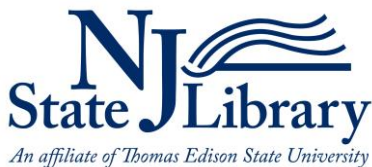
Since the best practices, trends, and technology for website design and management are ever changing, the content within the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp will need to be reviewed and refreshed periodically. We will work to develop and implement procedures that will ensure the material in the Boot Camp does not become dated and to catch errors, such as broken links, that would negatively impact learner success.

Finally, the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp is an extensive exploration into UX, design principles, and other topics. However, there are other skills that would benefit learners to improve the virtual presence of their libraries. Topics such as writing for the web, social media management, or platform-specific courses could become part of a larger learning experience.

The purpose of the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp project was to take one specific in-person training and make it more accessible because the topic is too important for the delivery mechanism to be limited by small cohorts. This project can serve as an inspiration to other institutions. We hope that other institutions creating their own training will consider transforming these curriculums into online courses or other virtual learning mechanisms to have a broad reach. It is possible to expand the number of robust and free trainings available for institutions of all types if we commit to employing online learning opportunities rather than stopping at the development of in-person training programs.

LEARN MORE

To enroll in the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp, learners must create a free account in the course catalog at learn.webjunction.org. For new users, they can follow the instructions under, “Is this your first time here?” Learners who already have an account can sign into the WebJunction Course Catalog with their username and password. Then use the search option to find the course or browse in the Technology section in the catalog to locate the Build a Better Library Website Boot Camp and enroll as a learner. A Certificate of Completion for this self-paced course will be awarded to those learners who view all of the lessons and interactive Explore features and complete each Activity.



**For further information about this project,
visit the New Jersey State Library's website:**

<https://www.njstatelib.org/better-library-website>

Press

- Press Release, published by the New Jersey State Library on May 10, 2021: <https://www.njstatelib.org/news/nj-state-library-launches-online-training-program-to-help-libraries-build-more-user-friendly-websites/>
- Crossroads: The newsletter for library learning, published by WebJunction on May 19, 2021: <http://view.e.oclc.org/?qs=fb872aa25f4ed753b3c1eac234f5e74f31e438fa406c4636f8951784a65f4c6f0dc91f9d5ecd0f33af24053645acfd7fc0d4ba31be0d8d91bd43ce6a2c9fca549a7024e3fca0623646dbf84c65b5dba6>
- Information Today News Breaks and The Weekly News Digest, written by Larissa Pack and published on June 15, 2021: <http://newsbreaks.infotoday.com/NewsBreaks/Boost-Your-Online-Presence-With-the-Free-Build-a-Better-Library-Website-Boot-Camp-147379.asp>