

Karen Pruneda, Amber Wilson, and Jessica Riedmueller

Writing on the walls

Engaging students through whiteboards

In today's digital environment, connecting with students in a meaningful way can be difficult. Our recent whiteboard project at the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) was a successful way for us to engage students in the physical space of the library. UCA's Carnegie classification is "Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)" and had a total enrollment of 11,487 students for the fall 2016 semester. For the fiscal year 2015–16 our gate count was 482,934 students. The UCA Library operations are managed by 11 faculty members and 30 staff members, plus the assistance of 35 student workers.

UCA students use the library as both an academic and a social place. While we constantly remind them about our electronic resources, we do not often highlight our physical resources, such as study rooms and comfortable furniture. We can easily count database usage and book checkouts, but sometimes it is a challenge to understand how students are using the physical space in the library.

Our library has no room to grow physically, so we wanted to make the most efficient and effective use possible of the space that we do have. The whiteboard project afforded us an unobtrusive way to engage with students while also offering a way to understand their use of the physical space.

Student-use whiteboard project

In the first iteration of our project, we mounted whiteboards to the walls in our

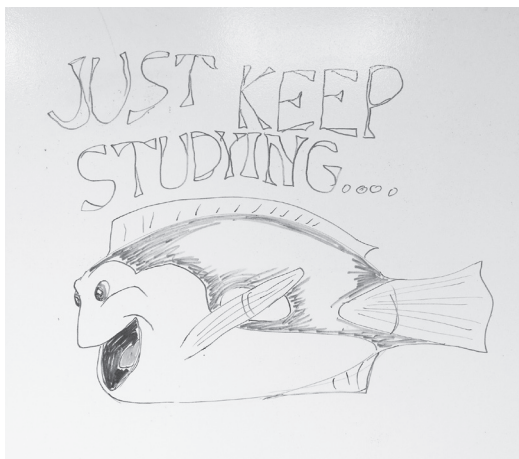
large group study rooms. However, we quickly discovered that the students needed more space as their scrawlings continued onto the glass windows of the study rooms. In response, we painted the large study rooms with whiteboard paint. Upon receiving positive feedback from the students, we painted the smaller study rooms, as well. As we built new study rooms, we automatically included whiteboard walls. Once we saw the popularity and success of the whiteboard paint in study rooms, we extended into the rest of the library study spaces, purchasing mobile magnetic whiteboards that could be wheeled around the library.

As we all know, student engagement is just as much about the digital environment as it is about the physical library space. Incorporating the whiteboard project into our social media is important to us. While we discuss specific engagement efforts below, we were able to entwine the student-use whiteboards and social media by creating #UCALibraryArt, allowing us to share student art we found throughout the study rooms. Sometimes these are simply doodles that we find. Other times, students attempt

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to encourage and motivate other students through their art. For example, one student drew a picture of Dory from *Finding Nemo* that said, “Just Keep Studying . . .” and we wanted to share that with all students. We also feature academic work such as math problems, chemical equations, conjugated verbs, and anatomy diagrams.



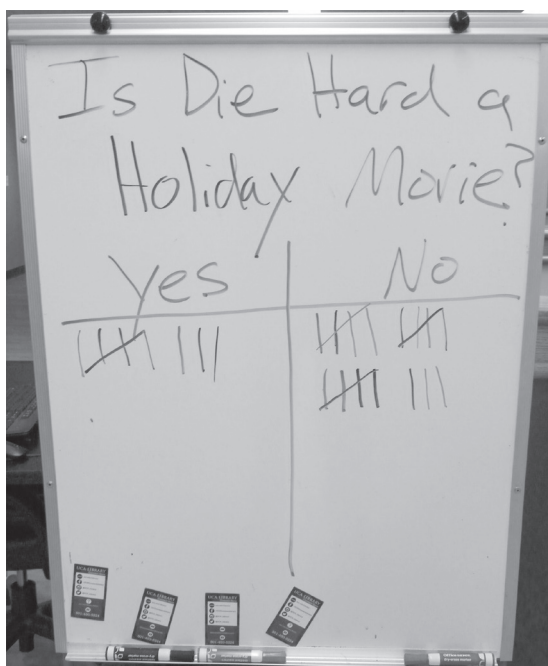
Dory drawing on UCA whiteboard.

Library engagement whiteboard

We kept a few of the mobile whiteboards near a high-traffic area in the front of the library that could be used to generate interaction or to display important library information. We often pose light-hearted questions on the mobile whiteboards such as the popular, “What mythological creature would you want to be?” or “What’s your favorite old-school video game?” This ensures that students are always checking the boards and will see any new services or information we want to share with them. Sometimes the only engagement we ask them for is to make a tally mark indicating their opinion on

something like “Who do you think will win the NCAA Basketball Final Four?” A simple choice is likely to garner engagement because it is quick and easy, although sometimes we still get written comments on such questions. At the beginning of a semester, we feature tips and information for new users such as how to check out items, how to print, how to access our online resources, or how to get help

from a librarian. We also share new services and products offered in the library on whiteboards throughout the year. We usually leave magnets with our social media accounts, website, phone number, and our “Ask Us” link on the whiteboards.



Example of a fun UCA whiteboard poll.

Social media promotion of whiteboard images has had a marked impact on UCA Library engagement and awareness of services and events. We often tag related departments on campus with the whiteboard posts to extend

our reach to those other departments. Whiteboard images posted on social media fall into several categories: publicity of library

services, events, whiteboard questions and answers, student art, or contests.

In terms of whiteboard publicity, we have informed students about Banned Books Week readings outside the library, and readings by the creative writing department. We also used our mobile whiteboards to create displays. For example, for African American History Month, we used magnets to display photos of individuals at UCA from our archives. We asked students to go on our social media to learn more about each photo, and then revealed the information on the board the following day. Students responded well to these projects. For instance, when we celebrated National Poetry Month students wrote poems or phrases using the magnets that other students later added to or altered. The lower half of the board encouraged students “to take or leave a poem” thus creating a shared poetic space.

We have also engaged with national campaigns such as the ALA’s #LibrariesTransform Campaign, which provided students with the opportunity to note how libraries transformed their lives on the magnetic whiteboard with printed word bubbles. We took photos of these statements and shared them on social media.

Suggestions for other libraries

Occasionally, it is difficult to strike a balance between letting students have free rein with the whiteboards and keeping content appro-

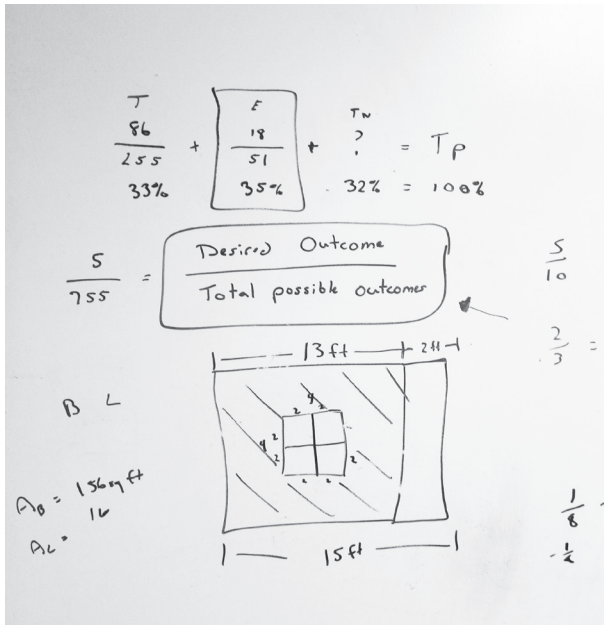
priate for a university library. When we rolled out the whiteboard walls in the study rooms, we had a lot of inappropriate drawings both on the whiteboard areas and the light switch plates, which were not whiteboard surfaces. While these problems occurred primarily during the first few weeks, it was frustrating. We appreciated the students’ enthusiasm for the whiteboards, but we were not happy about policing the content. Any library considering implementing whiteboards as a way to engage and interact with their stu-

dents should be aware that students often find unsuitable content funny and be prepared to monitor this. When writing questions on the whiteboards, it’s important to think of unintended consequences and the type of responses that might be generated. Sometimes if a question is very earnest or expected, students may

attempt to inject some humor. Humorous, light-hearted, poignant, or timely questions tend to be most successful in eliciting student responses.

To avoid any implication of censorship, we will often erase the entire board or wall that has any inappropriate content instead of just singling out one drawing or message. Other considerations for effecting a whiteboard project include upkeep on the walls as the finish wears off, fixing or replacing wheels on the mobile whiteboards, or the

(continues on page 268)



Student work on UCA whiteboard.

Saturday, June 24

Instruction Section. Soiree, location TBD, no registration required, 5:30–7:30 p.m. Contacts: Sue Franzen, srfranz@ilstu.edu.

Literatures in English Section. Social, location, TBD, no registration is required, 6:00 p.m. Contacts: Meg Meiman, meg.meiman@gmail.com and Piper Martin, pmarti17@uwoyo.edu.

University Libraries Section. Social, Municipal Bar & Dining Co., no registration required, 5:30–7:00 p.m. Contact: Sara Holder, shholder@gmail.com.

Sunday, June 25

Community and Junior College Libraries Section. Awards and Dinner Meeting, The Berghoff, pre-registration is required, 6:00–9:00 p.m. Contact: Sandy C. McCarthy, mccarthy@wccnet.edu.

Distance Learning Section. Award luncheon, pre-registration required, 1:00–2:30

p.m. Contacts: Rebecca Nowicki, Rebecca.nowicki@ashford.edu, and Brandon West, westb@geneseo.edu.

Science and Technology Section. Dinner, location TBD, pre-registration is required, 6:00–8:00 p.m. Contacts: Rachel Hamelers, rhamelers@muhlenberg.edu, and Beth Blanton-Kent, bwb9f@eservices.virginia.edu.

Western European Studies Section/Slavic and East European Section. Boat cruise, pre-registration is required, 6:00–9:00 p.m. Contact: Adan Griego, griego@stanford.edu.

Monday, June 26

EBSS Communication Studies Committee. Media tour of NBC 5 Chicago's newsroom, 454 N. Columbus Dr., Chicago, IL 60611, pre-registration is required, 5:30–7:00 p.m. Contact: Chimene Tucker, cetucker@usc.edu. ¶¶

(“Writing on the walls,” continues from page 257)

possibility of permanent markings due to the use of unauthorized markers.

To avoid this last pitfall, we keep a large supply of several different colors of whiteboard markers and make them readily available to students. However, we sometimes have difficulty meeting requests for markers or have had to ration them when our supply budget has run low. The cost of upkeep on both the walls/boards and markers is something that we have committed to for the foreseeable future, as students now expect us to provide these things.

One final consideration might be to start this as a small project, maybe just focusing on whiteboard content in a small part of the library, before doing it on a large scale.

In addition, it takes some time to maintain the mobile whiteboards, which are used as a shared intellectual space for library information and monthly activities. It can be time-consuming to add information, materi-

als, and questions to the boards. We often write a question for students to answer on the boards, and it's important to think about who will monitor the boards and create the questions.

In our library, various individuals have taken on the task of posting questions in a fluid system. Sometimes the board fills up quickly, so it might eventually be a good idea to designate certain individuals who will create questions, and develop a process for reviewing the questions, or a Google Doc for suggested and planned questions.

Overall, the whiteboard project has been very successful for the UCA Library. We have seen marked increases in both our social media following and engagement with students. Though we have incurred some maintenance and upkeep costs, we are excited about continuing the project. ¶¶