»tech tips for every librarian

by donna f. ekart, guest columnist for jessamyn west

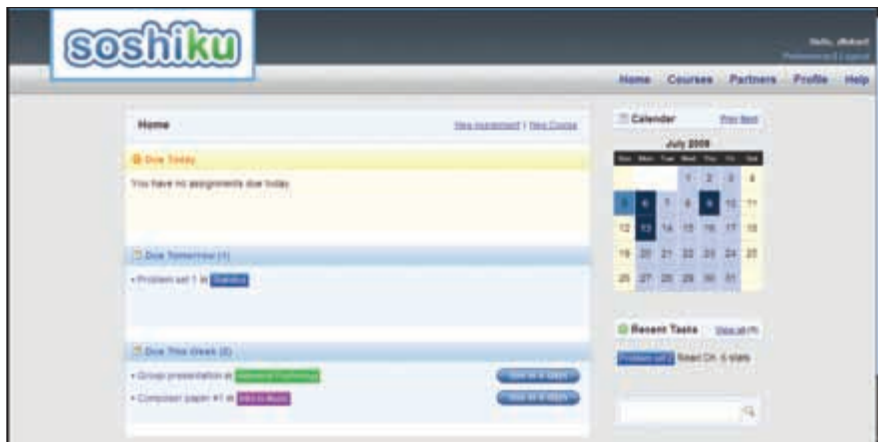## Cool Tools for Back to School

Now that I'm an adult and working in education, I can freely admit my childhood shame—I loved "back to school" time. And really, what's not to love? You get to go to the store with a list and pick out a bunch of cool new supplies, you get a new outfit or two, and everything in your classroom seems shiny, bright, and laden with possibilities.

In celebration of those memories, this month I'd like to offer you some truly awesome library and research tools that will be useful for your school-bound patrons. For students who may use a wide variety of computers in campus labs, at home, and at your library, having simple online applications that don't require anything but a web browser and a login can make a huge difference in the ability to get work done. All of these tools are free and can be easily linked and promoted from a page on your library's website.

Soshiku

Soshiku is the online equivalent of those paper semester planners that college bookstores love to give out. Launched in 2008 by 17-year-old Andrew Schaper, the concept is simple: Enter classes and associated assignments at the beginning of the semester, and Soshiku keeps track of all the due dates for you. Students can set reminder alerts via text message or email and attach related files such as instructions or problem sets. On the Soshiku homepage, there is a calendar and list of upcoming assignments.

If classmates get Soshiku accounts, they can link up as partners and as-

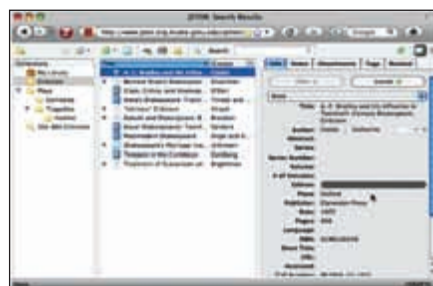*The Soshiku homepage makes it easy to tell at a glance what assignments are coming due.*

sign and receive tasks from one another for group projects.

Another great feature allows for setting a series of tasks associated with an assignment. It's often not possible to focus on a giant project all at once, and being able to break a big assignment such as a term paper or group project down into a set of smaller, more simple steps and check them off as they are completed really comes in handy when juggling multiple classes. The developers are also responsive to user feedback; the site's forum has tabs for "accepted" and "completed" user suggestions. The more I play with it, the more I become convinced that Soshiku would be a great way to keep track of projects for anyone, not just students.

Zotero

Zotero is a Firefox browser extension created at George Mason University that helps users store, organize, annotate, and cite research sources without ever closing their browsers. It's similar to other reference management software, such as RefWorks or EndNote, but since it's free and has an iTunes-like interface, it's likely easier for novice users to learn.

Zotero's interface creates simple "playlists" of resources that will look familiar to many students.

Although users need to download and install Zotero and the Firefox browser on each computer they use, personal information archives can be accessed from any internet-enabled computer and synced to remote computers for backup. For students who are savvy enough to carry a portable Firefox installation on a flash drive,

Resources Discussed

adding Zotero will yield a very powerful personal research tool.

Browser integration means users don't have to constantly switch between information sources and reference management software but can make notes and add tags as they read. Citation information is captured automatically from a wide variety of research cites such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and even Wikipedia. Zotero libraries can be organized via tags or saved searches, and personal libraries can be shared with other users, making it a great tool for group research projects.

CiteULike

CiteULike takes the traditional research and reference management recipe and folds in a little social bookmarking flavor. In addition to saving and tagging citations, you can discover related articles by checking out other users who have saved the same citation or by browsing groups formed around specific research areas or problems. Groups often represent specific professional organizations, institutions, or even research labs. CiteULike simplifies the import process with one-click citation extraction from dozens of popular academic publishers and platforms.

While the site holds obvious appeal for academics and graduate students, undergrads and even high school students can also benefit from it. In effect, the citations have been vetted twice— once by whatever review process led to their publication in the first place and a second time by researchers who actually

Students can use CiteULike to discover articles about and groups interested in specific research topics.

BibMe's colorful interface guides students in finding complete citations for their sources.

found the articles interesting or useful. This might be reassuring to students new to the research process who have no real way to identify "what's good" from the thousands of citations a simple database search likely uncovers. Students can also start CiteULike groups based on specific courses and save citations for collaborative projects. Just for fun, check out the CiteGeist (www.citeulike.org/cite geist), a list of trending topics and most posted works over various time periods. Appropriately, the all-time post leader is a paper about collaborative tagging systems.

BibMe

BibMe is a free bibliography generator that was created as a student project at Carnegie Mellon University in 2007. It pulls data from a variety of sources to automatically complete bibliographic entries. Users start by simply typing the book, journal article, film, or newspaper article title or website URL into BibMe's simple and colorful homepage.

BibMe then searches for the resource using data from Amazon, Find-Articles, CiteULike, and Yahoo! News. Users select a source they want to cite

from the results list, and it is entered into a bibliography. Once all citations have been found, the bibliography can be formatted for APA, MLA, Chicago, or Turabian styles and exported to word processing software. BibMe can also help cite less traditional sources such as interviews, lectures, television shows, and photographs.

A user who registers for a free account can save, name, and tag bibliographies for future use. Additionally, related resources are suggested for any added citations, allowing users to discover more sources as they create bibliographies.

GPA Calculator

OK, this last one becomes more useful as the semester progresses, when you've used all the preceding tools and want to see how your grades are coming along. Admittedly very simple, it would have saved me a lot of time that I spent painstakingly figuring out how various grade scenarios would have affected my GPA as an undergraduate.

Listed among a host of great student resources on the University of Texas–Austin's College of Liberal Arts website, the GPA Calculator turns your credit hours and current letter grades into a bona fide GPA. It's great for answering questions such as, "If I can't do better than a C in Calc 2, will an A- in Sociology save my scholarship?" ∎

Donna F. Ekart (dfe@ksu.edu) is a librarian and the communications coordinator at Kansas State University Libraries in Manhattan, Kan., and she spends whole chunks of her days playing with new technologies. She's substituting for regular Tech Tips author Jessamyn West a few times this year.