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Web subject guides: virtual connections across the university community

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Abstract

A year ago, West Chester University Libraries began using the LibGuides library content management system. In the first year since implementing LibGuides (<http://subjectguides.wcupa.edu/>) our subject librarians have developed numerous subject guides, replacing outmoded and outdated web pages with new guides that have a more appealing format. We have also found that web guides can be used for projects beyond the traditional library subject guide. One of the best features of the LibGuides software is that it allows our subject librarians to easily repackage information and resources in multiple ways that suit different audiences. In this paper we describe how we have used these guides to respond to the needs of our university community and how we hope to expand the potential uses of the web guides.

Background

West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU) has not been at the forefront of distance education. As a regional comprehensive masters university located at the edge of a large metropolitan area, and rated by Kiplinger's as a "best buy," WCU has enjoyed a steady rise in applications and enrollment. While many faculty members have designed hybrid courses with online components, until very recently WCU offered very few true online classes. Then, with the arrival of a new University president in the spring of 2009, distance education became a stronger priority. Teaching faculty are now developing new online courses at a faster rate. The librarians at WCU libraries have found themselves in a position of needing to respond swiftly to a changing campus environment (without any increases in staff or funding to date).

One of the approaches we have taken is to develop online research guides (we selected LibGuides) to provide resources to distance education students. Admittedly, this was not the primary purpose that we had in mind when the library purchased LibGuides software in the fall of 2008. At that point, the librarians simply wanted a tool to replace old web pathfinders that were in desperate need of updating. For the most part, the old guides were not true subject guides, but just lists of web sources. It was only after beginning to use the guides that their applicability for distance education students was realized.

A very brief introduction to LibGuides

LibGuides is one of a string of library content management systems that have been developed in recent years. LibGuides is a proprietary system, while others are institutionally-developed and/or open source. A number of articles have summarized and evaluated the capabilities of LibGuides software (Bushousen, 2009; Judd & Montgomery, 2009; Kerico & Hudson, 2008; Moses & Richard, 2008). Thus we will not review all system capabilities in this paper, but will point out a few factors that influenced our selection. LibGuides offered a fair amount of customization while still remaining relatively low-cost and easy to use. In addition we did not have the technical personnel to develop our own system or customize open source software.

Like many web subject guide systems, a major advantage of LibGuides over the WCU Libraries' old web guides is that any individual can create and develop a guide. In our old web page listings, all edits had to be made by the Electronic Resources Librarian in her role as library website administrator, which separated the subject area librarian from immediate interactivity with the subject

content. This detachment left most subject pages languishing from lack of attention. The LibGuides system, on the other hand, enables a sense of responsibility and pride in publishing as librarians can create and publish their own content. A connected downside is that each librarian is left to create (or not create) guides to the level of his or her own abilities and interest level, which can lead to great difference among the guides in format, content, and design aesthetics. To support librarians who are less familiar with the web publishing environment the Electronic Resources Librarian has devoted time to individual and group training sessions and has developed a “WCU Librarians Share Guide” with examples of link formats and search box scripts. Overall, we feel that the freedom to develop one’s own guide dramatically outweighs the negatives.

The primary advantages and characteristics which we discovered in LibGuides are present in other web subject guide software systems, so we believe that the uses we found for our LibGuides subject guides will apply in other systems. Thus we will refer to our guides as web guides or subject guides rather than LibGuides throughout the remainder of the paper.

Subject and class guides

Librarians at WCU Libraries began by creating traditional subject guides that provided basic resources for a discipline. Within a year, guides were developed for many subject areas. However, as Reeb and Gibbons (2004, pp. 124-125) have shown, traditional subject guides often do not appeal to millennial students who are used to and prefer highly personalized and contextualized information, and who do not understand the arrangement of information into the traditional academic disciplines. They conclude that:

Guides that are organized or delivered at the course level appear to be more in line with how students approach library research. If librarians are to meet students where they are, we need to move away from the traditional use of discipline-based to more course-based devices for organizing library resources. (p. 128)

The librarians who have created course guides have adopted several different approaches. Some have created separate tabs called “pages” within their existing subject guides with extra information particular to that course, as seen in the guide for Languages and Cultures, which has separate pages for two courses following its main tabs (See Figure 1). A main advantage of this format is that when a librarian or teaching faculty member introduces students to the course guide, the students are automatically made aware of the larger subject guide, to which they will hopefully return in the future for help with other research assignments.

A second approach, used primarily by librarians who teach a large number of library instruction sessions, has been to tailor the larger subject guide to fit the needs of their courses. This was the approach used by the librarian for English, who teaches a number of sessions for upper-level undergrad and graduate classes each semester. She combined the information that she regularly taught in these types of classes into one ‘English’ guide. The challenge of this approach is to maintain a balance between keeping the content of the guide general enough for a wide audience but also specific enough to be useful to individuals from various classes. That librarian is still planning to add some class specific tabs to the guide in order to include information like suggested reference sources and subject headings that truly apply to only one class. The librarian for Social Work also used this approach, creating a guide that meets the needs of two classes (one undergrad and one graduate level) that regularly meet for research instruction. The advantage of this format is that there is less work involved for the librarian compared to developing multiple guides. However, it will only work well for subjects that tend to have similar assignments in various classes (such as literature research papers). Classes that have unique assignments will always need a separate tab or guide.

Developing a free-standing guide for an individual course has not proven popular yet at WCU Libraries, probably because more work is required to start a new guide from scratch compared to expanding an existing guide. One librarian did create a guide aimed at the many sections of general

education writing courses (WRT 120 and 200), but chose to give the guide a subject name, News and Current Events, to give it broader applicability.

One issue which we will need to address in the near future as more course guides are developed is the establishment of consistent format and naming conventions to make it easier to locate an appropriate guide. In addition, the “Browse by Subject” display of the default LibGuides “Subject Guides Home” does not offer sufficient granularity to optimally direct users. One option is to develop a customizable library web page as a gateway to the guides, but that seems like a step backward in web subject guide management, because such a page would once again require development and maintenance by the library website administrator.

But do they actually get used?

One issue with subject guides is that, for all the work that librarians put into creating subject guides, they often are used very little. In addition to the fact that students seem to prefer course specific guides to broader subject guides, they also often have trouble identifying the correct guide to help them or even locating guides on a library’s website in the first place (Reeb & Gibbons, 2004, pp. 124-126). Staley (2007, p. 122) summarizes the findings of several studies showing that most students have never used a research guide and do not even realize that such guides exist. Our experience at WCU Libraries corroborates these findings to an extent. Our usage statistics indicate that it is not simply enough to create and post a guide; it is also necessary to promote it in some way, or preferably, multiple ways.

For example, WCU Libraries’ Humanities Librarian completed guides for three subject areas (Art, Philosophy, and English) in August of 2009. The Art guide was not publicized at all and from the period of September 1 through November 30 received only 44 hits, some of which presumably came from librarians. The Humanities Librarian sent the link to the Philosophy guide to several members of the Philosophy department, along with the suggestion that it might be particularly useful for the department’s graduate students. That guide received 101 hits during the same period. The English guide was used as a teaching tool during several upper-level undergraduate and graduate library instruction sections in late September and early October. That guide received 742 hits in the September through November period.

This spike is reflected in other guides that were used in class sessions. The librarian for Theater used the Theater guide as she taught two sessions (47 total students) for an introductory Theater classes in the first week of September. While the Theater guide had received only 21 hits in August, in September the number grew to 385. Even after the hits for the students attending the classes are removed, enough hits remain to show that students returned to the guide later, often multiple times. These results are very much in line with those reported by Michael Strutin at Santa Clara University, where science guides that were used in instruction received a high number of return visits (2008, para. 13-14). The Social Work guide provides another example. The librarian for Social Work taught four instruction sessions for an undergraduate class, totaling 93 students, on September 14. The Social Work guide had only received 30 hits in August; this jumped to 474 hits for September. While the numbers did drop in the following months (108 hits for October, 52 for November) they did remain higher than before the instruction sessions, indicating that students were perhaps returning to the guide for help with other assignments (See Figure 2).

The positive implication for this trend is that if students are shown where a guide can be found and how to use it, they will return. This correlates with the findings of a survey done at San Jose State University, which found that students who had received library instruction were more likely not only to revisit the guide that they had received instruction on, but also to visit the subject guides homepage (Staley, 2007, p. 129). All the course guides developed to date at WCU were in fact created in response to a request from a classroom faculty member for an information literacy instruction session. Planning for the session automatically leads to the librarian learning about the research needs of that particular class and allows them to create a highly specialized guide. As WCU Libraries extends its use of subject guides for distance education classes, the problem is how to create guides for

distance education students who do not participate in a library instruction session. Librarians at WCU Libraries need to address how these students will be connected with appropriate guides.

Moving from in-class to distance education

One venue to connect online students to online resources is through a course management system (CMS). Most students already log into the university's CMS on a regular basis to get information related to their classes, so integrating library resources into the CMS places them in a location where the students already go. WCU uses the Blackboard CMS, which includes a visible tab in the system for Library Services, with links to commonly-used resources and services. While adding a link to the library "Subject Guides home" page is one option, users would need to click multiple times to reach a relevant subject guide, and thus will no doubt lose interest before reaching useful content. The most advantageous approach is to embed a link to a library course guide directly in the course itself.

But getting teaching faculty to embed a guide requires communication and cooperation between faculty and librarians which may be highly idiosyncratic, based on past relationships, individual personalities, or even broad institutional practice and traditions. Since WCU has no established patterns for library services to online distance students, we will need to work on new ways to encourage collaboration. Faculty need to be made aware that the guides exist (or could be created to meet the needs of their classes) and taught how to embed them in their course pages. A possible first step could be to create a page of "Tips for Faculty" which would include how to insert a link to a subject guide. A screencast to illustrate the process might also be useful. WCU's Blackboard "Faculty Help" page could be another venue for promoting our subject and course guides.

In parallel with the technological supports for embedding library guides into online instruction, it is important to take advantage of opportunities to publicize our customized resource guides through person-to-person contacts on university-wide committees and task forces. Presentations at university-sponsored events such as the annual "RECAP: Resources for the Electronic Classroom" conference also provide opportunity for librarians to showcase the subject guides to teaching faculty. This type of promotion will be of particular importance in attracting faculty who have not made use of the library's instruction program in the past, but may be interested in having course guides created for their classes.

Beyond the subject guide

After librarians at WCU Libraries became adept at creating guides, they began to see opportunities to move beyond subject and course guides for students and develop guides aimed at connecting with the campus in general and faculty in particular.

Because the web guide software made it easy to create guides quickly, one use was to provide information about library/campus events. In February 2009, the Special Collections librarian worked with history faculty members and a staff member from the WCU's Student Support Services to develop a series of events around Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday. The Special Collections librarian created a web guide for the celebration, which included both information about the individual presentations and also links to websites and library resources on Lincoln. After the series was completed, she removed the information about the events, but kept the list of resources available in the guide.

LibGuides software allows for multiple authors, which makes it easy for librarians to collaborate on guides with faculty and staff in other department. WCU's Electronic Resources librarian used this feature to create a guide in concert with staff at the university's Career Development Center. The guide blends together library and career center resources. While designed primarily to help students make decisions about careers and help them find jobs, this guide has also proved to be useful to librarians. Several professors who teach general education writing and speaking courses have

assignments that include research on careers and the guide can be used both in library instruction sessions for those classes and by librarians assisting students at the reference desk.

Another example of a successful non-subject guide is WCU Libraries' new information literacy page. The Information Literacy librarian took the old page, which had a basic list format, and created a new guide with two separate pages, one for information literacy instruction and one for information literacy assessment. Both pages are aimed at faculty members rather than students. In addition to describing the library's instruction program and providing names of subject librarians as the old page did, the new page also has a section of videos and tutorials and a link to a view-only version of the library's instruction calendar. The latter allows faculty to check room availability before they schedule their classes.

The Information Literacy Assessment page was developed as a response to WCU entering into its ten-year reaccreditation process. WCU falls under the review of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, which is now including information literacy assessment as a requirement. Each department on campus has to conduct its own assessment of their students' information literacy competency. Since this was a new requirement, many departments needed help to get started. The library's Information Literacy Assessment page was developed to provide departments with the basic tools to get started: definitions, information literacy standards, and sample rubrics and questionnaires.

The Information Literacy guide has actually been WCU Libraries' most frequently visited guide. It received 1025 hits in September through November. The high usage may be attributed to at least two factors. First, this guide has been publicized in several ways. The guide has a direct link in a prominent location on the libraries' homepage. Information about the new guide was also emailed to a number of faculty. Also, the guide's Information Literacy Assessment page was mentioned at a campus training session held for departments on information literacy assessment.

More importantly perhaps, the guide responded to a direct need on the part of faculty. Using a web guides system allowed the information literacy librarian to gather the information, organize it, and make it available very quickly. The site was already up by the time departments were beginning to plan their assessment.

Conclusion and future goals

What the librarians at WCU Libraries see as the greatest benefit of our new online guides system is that it allows us to be more responsive to the needs of the entire campus community. Like all academic libraries, we have put a great deal of time, energy, and money into selecting great resources to help our students, faculty, and others. But with so many resources available, it is often hard to raise awareness and direct those groups to the best resources for each class or project. As Stephen Bell has pointed out, librarians want their web page to act as a portal to the information they have worked so hard to gather, but that is often not the case. Students and even faculty have great difficulty navigating through the myriad of sources available to find the best one, with the result that they often skip the library. Bell (2009, para. 6) suggests that "The primary function of the contemporary academic library Web site is to connect a user to content, be it an article database, e-book or e-journal article, and to do it with minimal barriers and maximum speed and ease". WCU Libraries' new web guides have allowed us to sort through and repackage our resources to suit the immediate needs of a group on our campus, and do so very quickly. They support the personalization of the research process and will help us to serve the new influx of distance education students. The additional opportunities for collaboration and responsiveness have opened other windows of possibility for connecting the university community to library resources and services.

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