Using Student Feedback to Improve Course Specific LibGuides Content

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Introduction

LibGuides is software created by Springshare that allows librarians to easily create Web 2.0 content to promote library resources and services. In January 2008, the University of South Carolina Libraries implemented LibGuides as a way to streamline and facilitate student access to library resources and services. The Thomas Cooper Library, which is the main library on the University of South Carolina campus, uses LibGuides to create course specific research guides that incorporate Web 2.0 technologies such as IM chat widgets, RSS feeds, search boxes, and Camtasia tutorials. Course LibGuides are continuously updated throughout the semester to reflect new resources and unanticipated questions received during bibliographic instruction sessions or from reference transactions. The LibGuides functionality provides for a dynamic research guide that was not previously possible. Librarians feel that LibGuides provide the opportunity to create user centered and intuitive research guides for students. However, relatively little feedback has been gathered from LibGuides' intended audience, the students.

A survey was conducted for four upper-level history courses during Fall 2008 in an effort to measure how many times during the semester a student used each section of the LibGuide and how useful the student found the information under that specific section. Space was provided on the survey for students to leave optional comments about each section of the LibGuide. The survey concluded with three questions:

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- What about the LibGuide did the student find most useful?

- What about the LibGuide did the student find least useful?

- What resources outside of those provided on the LibGuide did the student use to complete his/her research?

Background

The LibGuides administrative module supplies basic usage statistics for each LibGuide. Information contained within the usage statistics includes the number of individual LibGuide page hits and the number of individual link hits. However, it is impossible to determine if a course LibGuide is being used frequently by a small number of students or by all students in a given course. It is also impossible to determine the usefulness of a LibGuide from the students' perspective.

LibGuides were created for four upper-level history courses during Fall 2008. The librarian worked closely with the professors to learn about library-related course assignments and to develop content for a bibliographic instruction session, which was conducted at the beginning of the semester for each course. Based on course assignments and bibliographic instruction session content, the librarian created a LibGuide and submitted it to the professors for feedback prior to the bibliographic instruction session. The professors displayed great enthusiasm for their course LibGuide and felt that the LibGuide would help facilitate student access to relevant library resources and services. The librarian introduced students to their course LibGuide during the bibliographic instruction session.

Each course LibGuide was broken into seven sections with each section listing relevant library resources and services geared towards each course. The sections were entitled Home, Reference Material, Find Books, Find Articles & More, Find Primary Sources, Newspapers, and Obtaining Non-USC Columbia Material. For example, the resources under Find Articles & More focused on article databases for African American history, women, or more broadly on American history as needed for each course. Each section also contained added content such as brief Camtasia tutorials, a library catalog search box, a link to the Ask a Librarian chat service, the librarian's contact information, and other appropriate information as needed.

The course LibGuides were linked from the University Libraries' homepage and the professors were encouraged to provide a link to the course LibGuide from within their course Blackboard site.

SURVEY DESIGN

A survey was developed that asked students three questions for each of the seven sections of their course LibGuide. A screen shot of the LibGuide section in question was provided to remind students of the content provided in that section. The questions asked were:

- How many times this semester have you used the [Home/Reference Materials/Find Books/Find Articles & More/Find Primary Sources /Newspapers/Obtaining Non-USC Columbia Material] section of the HIST [course prefix] LibGuide?

- How useful did you find the information on this page?

- Comments (optional)

The survey closed with asking students three additional questions:

- What about the HIST [course prefix] LibGuide did you find most useful?

- What about the HIST [course prefix] LibGuide did you find least useful?

- What resources outside of those provided on the HIST [course prefix] LibGuide did you use to complete your research?
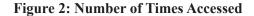
The history professors agreed to take fifteen minutes of class time to have their students complete the survey. The survey was conducted two weeks before the close of the semester as this allowed time for students to use their course specific LibGuide to locate relevant library resources and services to complete their papers and projects. A hardcopy survey was used to ensure that the survey would be completed and returned by the students. A total of 56 surveys were completed and returned.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey results revealed that the majority of students accessed a specific section of the LibGuide between one and five times or never (see Figure 2). The survey results also revealed that the Home section of the LibGuides was the most accessed section with fewer students going further to explore the other sections. This is in keeping with the usage statistics provided by the LibGuides administrative module as these statistics showed

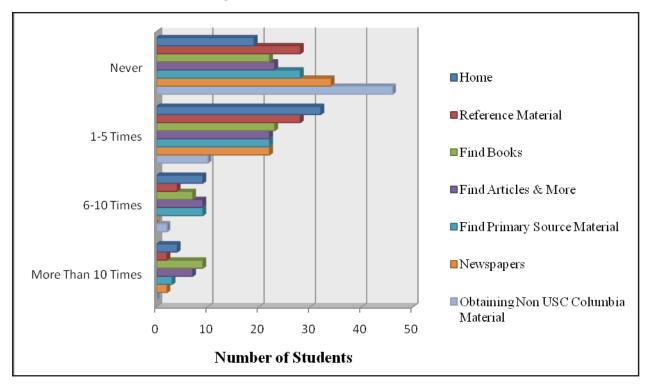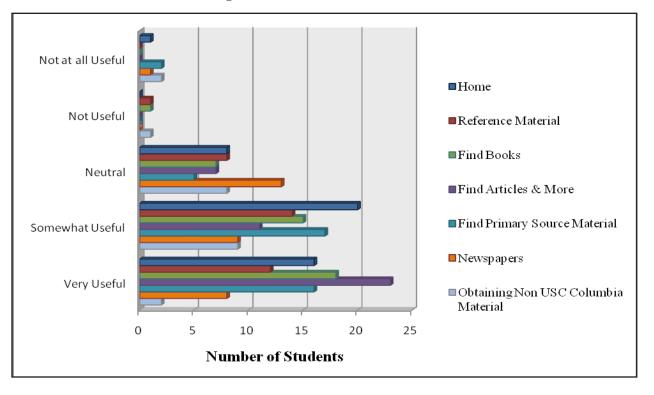**Figure 1: Find Articles & More Section**

Figure 2: Number of Times Accessed

Legend:
- Home
- Reference Material
- Find Books
- Find Articles & More
- Find Primary Source Material
- Newspapers
- Obtaining Non USC Columbia Material

X-axis: Number of Students
Categories: Never, 1-5 Times, 6-10 Times, More Than 10 Times

Figure 3: Usefulness of Information

Legend:
- Home
- Reference Material
- Find Books
- Find Articles & More
- Find Primary Source Material
- Newspapers
- Obtaining Non USC Columbia Material

X-axis: Number of Students
Categories: Not at all Useful, Not Useful, Neutral, Somewhat Useful, Very Useful

that the Home section of the LibGuides received the most hits, with the other sections receiving significantly fewer hits. Of the students that accessed a section of a LibGuide, over half of those students found the section very useful or somewhat useful (see Figure 3).

The most advantageous aspects of the LibGuides on which students overwhelmingly commented were having relevant resources pulled together in one location and ease of navigation. Students also commented that the guide was convenient and made locating scholarly articles and books easy. The least useful aspects of the LibGuide varied from the

amount of information to sift through to a specific section being too broad or not relevant. Several students stated that they were not sure how to navigate the guide or that they were not able to locate the guide. The Newspapers section was cited often as not being useful and the librarian thinks that this can be attributed to the fact that most time periods for which the students needed newspaper resources predated the online databases. The Newspaper section of the LibGuides pointed students to historical newspapers available in hardcopy at two campus libraries and listed the few newspaper databases available that had appropriate date coverage.

Regarding what resources outside of those provided on the course LibGuide were used to complete research, resources listed included Google, Google Scholar, and the public library. Students also listed the South Caroliniana Library, which is a University of South Carolina Library that focuses on South Carolina history.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although there was a great amount of positive feedback there is room for improvement. Some ideas that came from examining student feedback are:

- Developing a brief tutorial using Camtasia or similar software that introduces students to their course LibGuide would be beneficial. The tutorial will be placed on the LibGuides' Home section and demonstrate navigation tips as well as provide information about what can be found under each section.

- Student research topics can vary greatly which makes it difficult to narrow the number of resources listed or more specifically target resources. Further breakdown the resources listed on a section in an effort to help students quickly target a useful database. For example, the Primary Sources section can have databases categorized by subject area or time period rather than simply providing a long list of possibly relevant databases.

- Sometimes less is more. As librarians we tend to want to let students know about every resource that might possibly be available. Limit the number of resources listed on a section and let students know that help is available if they need additional information.

- Currently librarians' contact information and IM chat widget appear only on the Home section of course LibGuides but having this information appear on all sections will remind students that help is easily and readily available.

- Several students commented that they were unable to locate the LibGuide. Ask professors to remind students of the LibGuide and how the guide can be accessed.

The initial purpose of the survey was to discover how course specific LibGuides content could be improved but the survey also demonstrated the need to examine why students did not use the LibGuide created for their course. The survey results indicated that a large number of students did not access their course LibGuide and this is disappointing. It is unknown whether students bypassed the Thomas Cooper Library's resources and services all together or if students accessed library resources and services in a different manner. It is also unknown if further promotion of the LibGuides would have increased usage or if the reason why students did not use the guide is indicative of a larger problem. Another interesting area of investigation would be to determine if the same pattern occurs in other disciplines. These are things that the librarian plans to further explore.

CONCLUSION

LibGuides is an incredibly easy to use tool that makes it possible to develop dynamic and interactive course specific research guides that incorporate Web 2.0 technologies. The course specific LibGuides proved to be beneficial to students that took advantage of the resources and services made available from the guide. As more classes are surveyed and more data is collected, we will discover more ways to improve LibGuides content.