LibGuiding the Way: Improved Signposting and Student Interaction with Library Electronic Resources

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ABSTRACT

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This case study describes a project in which significant changes were made to the web presence of subject-specific information by implementing new software. Analyses of the usage of the web pages tell us about student information retrieval and research behaviour and, by appraising the approach to resource access points, we can ensure that students' experiences match their expectations of quick and easy access to information that does not depend on significant prior experience or knowledge. Students can put energy into finding and using resources, rather than trying to figure out how to access them at the start of this process. Lessons learned from the project will be used to inform future developments, including improved methods of engagement with academic staff to ensure that this type of learning environment best suits the needs of students. Moreover, the implementation of the software will lead to a student experience that is greatly improved.

Keywords

Electronic resources │ Equality of experience │ Library help guides │ Subject support

INTRODUCTION

Providing information about, and access to, library resources and services is a crucial liaison function. The paper-based guide is a long-established means of providing essential information. However, as the Internet has evolved, it has often been the case that the provision of guides has not evolved at a similar rate, and it is this situation this project sought to address.

The case study institution is a UK university. The University library is well-resourced for its size, however, it had become apparent through internal and external surveys that students were expressing dissatisfaction with the range of resources available. To tackle the perception that there were not enough resources, and to acknowledge the fact that students were used to, and capable of finding information quickly, via search engines, the library implemented Discover@ in 2015; Discover@ was a new service which allowed users to search across the majority of the library resources. Following this development, it became apparent that students were not having their needs met in terms of how they accessed information about crucial library services, namely resources and other essential tools. This case study presents how the University library sought to improve that experience with the implementation of LibGuides to coincide with the start of the 2016/17 academic year. Provided by the American company, Springshare, LibGuides is used by nearly 5,000 libraries worldwide to provide online

information on library services. LibGuides is flexible and allows those with little or no web editing skills to produce web pages that are both visually appealing and fit for purpose (Erb and Erb, 2014).

Background

Discover@ created an information retrieval environment more closely aligned with students' reasonable expectations that material should be available with minimal keystrokes. It has proved enormously successful with both students and staff at the University. There were nearly 500,000 searches conducted via Discover@ during the academic year 2016/17. However, the introduction of an entirely new way of accessing academic material exposed shortcomings in other aspects of the library provision. These were, principally signposting to resources, information about resources and other library services. Moreover, an examination of the library's web presence revealed that there was no one location for relevant information. It was the case that students needed to visit multiple locations to cover all aspects of the library service. It also revealed that much of the information required to understand how to access resources, and the scope of these resources or further help, was only accessible by clicking additional links.

Given that our users expect information to be available with minimal keystrokes, the University Library was certainly not alone in finding that the approach it was using was no longer fit for purpose. Guillian and Zitser (2015) explored the way in which paper guides, a key component of library help provision, had not evolved with other online services. For example, paper guides were frequently turned into online versions of the same, through making them available via library websites. Essentially, libraries digitising their paper guides. Clearly, it was not possible to link from a paper guide, and until 2015 the Resources by Subject web pages at the University were very closely aligned to the paper guides. Another feature of the Resources by Subject pages was that they were somewhat broad in their coverage.

In May 2016, a series of focus groups were held with students to gain an overall understanding of the way in which the library services could be improved. Although the questions were designed to give an insight into students' opinions of the service as a whole, a number of key issues emerged. These provided further evidence that the way in which information was provided needed to be improved. For example, participants were asked if they had heard of Reading Lists Online. Most responded that they had not. Asked if they had ever accessed their reading lists either through Moodle or via the library website, participants confirmed that they had (their answers illustrated that they

had accessed Reading Lists Online), but they did not know that they had! Several participants mentioned that they did know about accessing other university libraries, but had not heard of SCONUL access schemes, which allow university members to access other university libraries. From discussing these issues, it was concluded that there was a problem with the overuse of library-related jargon.

Implementation

The implementation phase of LibGuides involved considering design, as well as ensuring that the papers guides where not simply being recreated. In the design phase of the project, seeking examples of best practice from across the LibGuides community was essential. This was due, in part, to a paucity of literature relating to the design of library web pages in relation to LibGuides (Ahmed, 2013).

The initial approach was to offer basic information, simply presented. However, this approach led to over-simplification and too much information was presented on each page. For example, the front page of an early iteration of a guide included information on library opening hours, and accessing resources including printed resources and study skills. Essentially, the front page had become an "undefined silo". In effect, what had been created was another version of the Resources by Subject pages with various services lumped together. It was in danger of becoming an online version of the static paper guide, a departure from which was the main intended outcome of this project. At this point, additional tabs were created for each service, however, they were introduced with caution. Ahmed (2013) suggests that too many tabs along the top create a band of colour that is visually unappealing. However, this approach did not address the aim of attacking local issues as it did not allow for any granularity in presentation. The tabs were too broad in scope.

The exception to the separation of concepts can be seen in the approach to the presentation of resource access information. A frequent concern voiced at the Library Subject Help Desk, was that electronic journal articles were not as up-to-date as printed articles. Some students appeared to confuse format with academic suitability. Therefore, an early feature of planning was conveying to users that the format of library material is largely irrelevant when appraising its suitability for use, and indeed is a skill that students should be expected to acquire (Twait, 2005). Preconceived notions about academic differences between print and electronic were addressed by using tabs for just Books rather than Books and ebooks, and another for Databases, journals and articles with no indication of format. The tab for useful websites for each subject was called Useful websites. Despite wanting

to minimise the differentiation between resource formats, it was still of vital importance to provide information on actual access and this was addressed by including this information on each Subject Guide, thus avoiding overuse of the linking out model. In a further development, a Help Guide for Ebooks was created. Particular attention was paid to the use of library-specific terminology. For example, a tab named with the University's brand name for study skills support was changed to Study Skills to make it clear what students might find in that section.

Guides were created for each subject and branded as Subject Guides. Having a guide for each subject represented an entirely new approach. A further set of guides, of which Ebooks at the University is one, was created and branded as Help Guides. These, so far, include a guide to Research Support and Copyright, the content of both had not previously been presented in this level of detail.

A key part of the project was a desire to achieve equality of experience for students in all subject areas and, therefore, all Subject Guides were made available at the same time. This uniform approach is recommended (Ahmed, 2013) and is widely adopted. Links were changed on the library website and, as they remained in the same location, we did not run training of any sort.

Analysis and Impact

Key to the successful implementation of LibGuides was cognisance of absolute clarity in the presentation of information (the concept of ask no questions). If a student needed to ask where something was, then clarity was compromised. Analysis of the usage of the guides over the course of the academic year shows us how the objective of "ask no questions" is being met both in terms of quantitative evidence as well as scrutiny of the changing nature of student queries. Table 1 shows the most popular ten guides and their most popular pages within that guide (after starting point).

Without exception, we can see that Databases, journals and articles is the most used, a pattern that can be seen in all Subject Guides. The fact that we have a clear indication of the most popular section of a guide tallies with our knowledge of the types of queries received by both the Subject Help Desk and the Main Library Desk. In the past a frequent question from students was "How do I access journal articles?". We can also see that there are a wide range of subjects represented, suggesting that equality of experience is emerging. The dominance of the usage of Law and Health and Social Care could be attributable to the fact that these two particular subjects

have fewer print resources available to them. Moreover, Health and Social Care students often combine study with other commitments and, therefore, rely more heavily on electronic resources.

Table 1: Top ten guides for 2016/17 academic year.

Guide	Views	Top page (after starting point)
Law	4010	Databases, journals and articles
Health and Social Care	1041	Databases, journals and articles
Business Management	997	Databases, journals and articles
Nursing	824	Databases, journals and articles
Psychology	798	Databases, journals and articles
Civil Engineering	796	Databases, journals and articles
Education	760	Databases, journals and articles
District Nursing	748	Databases, journals and articles
Art and Design	558	Databases, journals and articles
Accountancy	528	Databases, journals and articles

Linking from Subject Guides can also indicate impact. The most popular guide overall is Ebooks at the University. It was viewed 8,970 times during the 2016/17 academic year. The most popular link on that guide is the link to the MyiLibrary ebook platform which, in turn, is the most popular ebook platform. This guide also includes two downloadable guides in PDF - the Quick Start Guide to Ebooks and the Guide to MyiLibrary. Of these, the Quick Start Guide to Ebooks has been subject to hardly any downloads, whilst this is not the case with the Guide to MyiLibrary. This could suggest that students do not need additional assistance in accessing electronic books once they have accessed the guide. Instead, they would like platform/database-specific help.

Examination of queries to the Subject Help Desk goes some way to demonstrate the impact Subject Guides are having on the way in which students are acquiring expertise in accessing electronic resources. An early expectation was that the introduction of Subject Guides would reduce the number of queries to the Subject Help Desk. Although it was the case that fewer queries were received overall, the percentage of those queries that related to electronic resource access increased slightly from 63 per cent in 2015/16 to 66 per cent in 2016/17. However, what is striking is the nature of these queries in that, as shown in Table 2 below, there has been a discernible shift between basic queries to queries which demonstrate that the initial grasp of using a resource or accessing academic material has been achieved.

Instead of asking how to access a resources, the students are asking for more in-depth help, and are making use of additional features. Moreover, the number of queries relating to study skills decreased by 25 percent. Each guide features a study skills tab, and each guide has seen usage of that tab. Information provided on that tab is extensive. From this, we can speculate that the improved visibility of study skills information has enabled more students to find the information for themselves.

Table 2: Subject help desk queries.

Academic Year 2015/16	Academic Year 2016/17
Total email queries: 81	Total email queries: 62
Electronic resource access: 51 (63%)	Electronic resource access: 41 (66%)
"Why should I…"	"How do I…"
"What can I…"	"I want to do more…"
"I'm not sure…"	"This isn't working…"
"Where do I find…"	"I'm not sure about this feature…"

CONCLUSION

The implementation of LibGuides has allowed students to take greater ownership of their library experiences by targeting the areas in which they require the most assistance. A dynamic approach that moves away from the concept of the static, paper-into-online guide means that students can access information that is relevant to their studies when they need it. Usage statistics show how popular the guides are, and we can also see the impact of the guides by analysing queries to the Subject Help Desk and how these have evolved over the course of the academic year. The project has enabled the library to understand, with greater depth, the needs of our user community and the role we can play in impacting not only on excellence in teaching and learning, but also in ensuring equality of student experience.

The learning from this project has led to the following recommendation:

- Work on the conciseness of guides as recommended by Ahmed (2013) and seek to improve the visual impact of the guides;
- Undertake usability observations to deepen undestanding how students use – and ultimately rate - guides to aid further development;
- Create a pre-university guide to ensure that students have grasped the concept of accessing library information via an online guide prior to their arrival;
- Given the popularity of the Quick Start Guide to MyiLibrary, create Resource Guides for all library electronic resources.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and approved it for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.