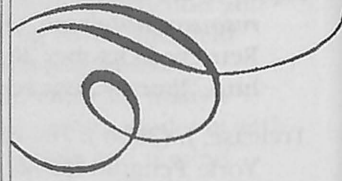


USING LIBGUIDES FOR OUTREACH TO THE DISCIPLINES

by Juliet Kerico & Diane Hudson



Library outreach is an essential part of an academic library's mission, infusing the traditional elements of library instruction and collection development with a marketing approach. The ultimate goal is for the subject librarian to be introduced to patrons as an essential resource. In *College & Research Libraries News*, Jon C. Cawthorne (2003) argues that through "...meaningful partnerships with students, teaching faculty, departments, research centers and institutes, library outreach can have its greatest impact on the manner in which the educational community deals with lifelong learning" (p. 667). Although Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville (SIUE) has only just begun subscribing to LibGuides, Springshare's Web authoring and hosting service, access has already proven to be a valuable tool for improving disciplinary outreach to faculty and students. Using LibGuides for disciplinary outreach helps introduce and reinforce the librarian's role and importance in the educational process.

Academic librarians engaged in public services on the front lines have long been aware of this need for increased visibility to patrons. Subject librarians are well-placed to lead outreach efforts because they have the opportunity to work directly with students and faculty at the point of need within the disciplines. As more resources are sought and delivered online, communication and innovative information delivery efforts are becoming increasingly important. The ease with which patrons can now access information electronically and efficiently through online subscriptions or interlibrary loan has made it essential to continually reinforce the need for some form of contact between librarians and their constituents. That contact now takes place, most often, online either via more "traditional" electronic methods such as e-mail or through some of the Web 2.0 technologies such as instant messaging, blogs, or RSS feeds, just to name a few.

LibGuides is useful in this capacity by providing the framework for subject librarians to easily create attractive and usable Web pages to showcase library resources and services. This is because there is no need for librarians to have expertise in HTML or other Web coding languages in order to produce a guide. Pages

are created by selecting from a variety of content modules which display as boxes in a three column layout. Guides may contain one or more pages and use tabs for navigation to specific pages within the guide. Librarians can choose from modules that display text, links to web resources, links to documents or files, as well as modules that incorporate Web 2.0 features such as RSS feeds and podcasts. Another module provides the ability to include any type of formatted text including scripts or other dynamic content. LibGuides supports such interactive features as the ability for users to rate resources, submit comments, suggest resources to include in the guide, or to participate in short surveys. Librarians, as editors, are notified when interactive features are used. Each page also has contact information for the subject librarian, including space for a photograph and the option to include a Meebo instant messaging widget. The flexibility of these features is further amplified by the fact that content modules can be reused among colleagues and across guides, making it easy to create consistent content across disciplines.

This user-friendly tool can be used to create general online resource guides (electronic pathfinders) or to create course-specific subject guides, complete with downloadable handouts, multimedia tutorials, and links to important proprietary databases and Web resources. Reeb and Gibbons (2004) found that "guides that are organized or delivered at a course level appear to be more in line with how students approach library research" (p. 128). We have found that the biology students at SIUE are pleased with the LibGuide we created which is designed with tabs for individual biology courses. Resources that are useful for specific course assignments can be highlighted when the guides are constructed in this way. Designing this LibGuide to meet student expectations at this point-of-need has been critical in reinforcing that the student should access reliable sources of information through the guide rather than simply using Google.

One of the advantages to using LibGuides is that it ameliorates the problem that Brazeal (2006) discovered: fewer libraries have course level research guides on their Web pages due to the greater effort required to create and maintain them. In the past, libraries have

had to develop their own mechanisms for meeting these needs by creating subject guides from “sophisticated dynamic databases driven systems to hand-coded HTML pages” (Gibbons, 2005, p.33). LibGuides further supports specialization by providing the flexibility to meet last minute requests for library instruction from teaching faculty. Content can be customized in seconds for specific user groups which enables greater collaboration with teaching faculty to create resources to support course assignments.

In order to effectively incorporate LibGuides into the library’s existing online presence, the guides can be branded to include graphics that match other library Web content. Additionally, librarians can choose from a number of color schemes and fonts to either standardize or differentiate one guide from another. The choices are not unlimited, but sufficient, and seem to be a reasonable trade-off for not needing to have extensive Web design and programming expertise. The domain name can be set to match the institution’s, and individual guides can be given URL masks that are easy for students and faculty to remember such as the following URL we used for a biology guide: <http://siue.libguides.com/biology> (Kerico, 2008).

The ease of use and functionality are some of the standout features of the LibGuide software, but LibGuides can function as more than just a user-friendly toolbox. At SIUE we are finding there are additional organizational and professional development benefits to using them as well. This software enables librarians to develop Web content in a collaborative environment with colleagues which increases a library’s potential to enhance user-centered design, to refine instructional approaches, and to keep librarians current with new trends in online communication and social networking.

Good Web design is something that many librarians don’t have the time or skills to adequately develop. Although some institutions may have an individual webmaster or team of “techies” who are skilled in user interface design, many libraries must rely on their subject librarians to both create content and work through design issues. In most cases, this work is done with limited time and resources. LibGuides is valuable because it offers the freedom to develop customized content quickly without having to spend an enormous amount of time on design. The guides effectively incorporate some Web usability standards like those articulated by Steve Krug (2000) in his book about Web usability, *Don’t Make Me Think*. He argues that it is good practice to “break pages up into clearly defined areas” (p. 31). He also recommends using “tab dividers for navigation” (p. 81). These are automatic features of any page created with LibGuides.

Another benefit to using LibGuides is that doing so helps facilitate an ongoing dialogue about online instructional approaches both generally and within the

disciplines. Academic libraries, depending upon size, could have anywhere from 2 to 12 subject librarians responsible for a wide range of activities: selecting materials, participating in general and subject-specific reference, as well as providing library instruction within the disciplines. In an environment like this, it is often difficult and perhaps not altogether feasible, to unify or standardize instructional approaches. The differences imposed by the varying research demands of individual disciplines are further exacerbated by the even larger question of if and how a library should consider the way in which interface design and instructional philosophies are connected. We have found that using LibGuides can help spark a discussion about such things among colleagues. Although subject guide content and the research particularities within the disciplines may be outside of the range of possible areas for standardization, the medium itself is not. LibGuides makes it easy to discern those instructional elements that are common to all disciplines and in doing so encourages a refined and collaborative approach to best practices for delivering content online to students and faculty alike.

A very powerful side effect to having an institutional subscription to LibGuides is the way in which it helps subject librarians stay aware of trends in online information delivery. It’s no secret that what we call “Library 2.0 technologies” are numerous and expanding rapidly. This has led to a great deal of confusion and has caused many academic librarians to question which new tools should be used and promoted to students and faculty. Evidence of this can be found in the sheer number of blogs and websites dedicated to keeping track of trends. To this end, LibGuides does much of the investigative work for the librarian. They provide a suite of delivery options, from RSS feeds, to user polls, to imbedded video, to instant messenger widgets. Additionally, adding these interactive elements to a guide is uncomplicated and automatically unifies all the librarians’ pages. Students in biology courses will now find added benefits when taking a course in business because the LibGuide used for one will look and function similarly to the other. Over time, a student or faculty member’s expectations may become more streamlined due to the establishment of institutional norms like those created by course management software such as Blackboard.

At the heart of the discussion of Web 2.0 is the concept of participation. The current generation of college students, coined Millennials in 2000 by Neil Howe and William Strauss, not only desire control over the interfaces they encounter online, they expect it. In their article, “Library 2.0”, Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk (2006) argue that a library’s value and appeal can be increased by “implementing customizable and participatory services” (p. 41). Therefore, it’s important for libraries to attempt to meet some of the expectations of these students. Although it s not always

easy to know which technologies to incorporate, LibGuides provides a set of tools encouraging interactivity from which to select and experiment. For skeptics of this participatory approach, assessment of user response to these features is straightforward. The LibGuides administrative interface provides usage statistics by month including number of page, link, and file hits, ensuring that if certain technologies or resources are not adopted, it's easy to assess their use, remove elements, and try new ones. This process follows one of Laura Cohen's (2007) "Librarian's 2.0 Manifesto" affirmations, "I'll not wait until something is perfect before I release it, and I'll modify it based on user feedback" (p.48).

Some items that are of concern are that LibGuides are hosted remotely; therefore, an institution does not have ultimate control over the availability or long-term access to the content. Additionally, although LibGuides makes it easy to publish Web pages quickly, the library must accept the challenge of establishing its own internal processes for reviewing guides prior to publishing because there is no automatic oversight of content or formatting. Additionally, although specializing Web content at the course level may be ideal for the individual student, it may also breed student dependence on that particular method of finding those resources which presents problems when guides are edited or removed. In spite of these challenges, however, LibGuides' functionality, cost, and potential to extend library outreach initiatives has enhanced our services and improved our ability to provide effective outreach to the disciplines.

Our opinion of LibGuides is quite favorable, but this is not an attempt to serve as a comprehensive review of the product. Rather, our goal has been to highlight the approach to general and discipline-specific outreach that LibGuides addresses, supports, and facilitates. We have found that the ease of use eliminates the need for librarians to be programmers or Web designers, it incorporates interactive features that Millennials expect and to which they respond, it provides for easy assessment, and enables flexibility so that librarians can adapt and respond to changing information needs. Furthermore, LibGuides has the potential to foster productive collaboration among colleagues, and can aid in helping to refine instructional approaches.

Sample LibGuides:Nursing LibGuide:
<http://siue.libguides.com/nursing>

Biology Libguide: <http://siue.libguides.com/biology>

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