CASE STUDIES

Snakes or Ladders? Evaluating a LibGuides Pilot at UCD Library

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Online subject guides are commonly used by libraries to provide information support to students. LibGuides (a cloud-based commercial product launched in 2007) represents one of the latest incarnations of the traditional subject guide or portal, and are widely used across American academic libraries. In Ireland however, library subject guides of entirely local design and hosted on a local web server still dominate.

This paper outlines the project management process involved in implementing a LibGuides pilot at University College Dublin Library, including the planning, design and implementation of a new range of subject-related guides. The pilot nature of the project necessitated a strong focus on evaluation, particularly in assessing the effectiveness and suitability of LibGuides as a platform for delivering information literacy support, both from an administrative and end-user perspective. A two-stranded approach was used in this review process, incorporating quantitative web statistics and analytics alongside qualitative feedback from students, academic staff and Library staff.

Feedback that was gathered suggested that the LibGuides subject guides were generally viewed very positively by both staff and students. Notwithstanding this, awareness (as indicated through usage statistics) remained moderate during the pilot, pointing to the importance of the visibility, positioning and promotion of guides.

INTRODUCTION

The use of library subject guides or pathfinders can be traced as far back as the traditional recommended reading "booklist" format of the 1950s (Vileno, 2007). Since then, they have evolved in consonance with the changing information environment—most notably to accompany the emergent transition from print to electronic and online resources in the 1990s.

LibGuides is a cloud-based Springshare product first launched in 2007, with a major new revision LibGuides v2 going live in 2014 (LibGuides for academic libraries, 2010). The platform represents one of the latest incarnations of the traditional subject or help guide, and is now used in many academic libraries across the globe. In Ireland, LibGuides is currently actively used by only three third level institutes at present: Athlone Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and University College Dublin (UCD). Several other Irish third level libraries are at early stages of implementation or pilot of the product.

Although the use of LibGuides is relatively well documented in the literature, particularly the North American experience, many of the existing studies primarily focus on technical aspects, implementation and design, or content (Adebonojo, 2010; Judd & Montgomery, 2009;

Mokia & Rolen, 2012; Stankus & Parker, 2012). In contrast, whilst this case study outlines the overall project management process involved in implementing LibGuides at UCD Library, the emphasis is placed on evaluating the initiative using a two stranded (quantitative and qualitative) approach. The pilot nature of the project necessitated this overarching focus on appraisal, particularly with respect to assessing the effectiveness and suitability of LibGuides as a platform for delivering information literacy support, both from an administrative and end-user perspective. The paper also elucidates the experience of using the platform in an Irish setting, where the use of in-house or home-grown guides very much remains the norm (Kouker, 2014).

WHY SUBJECT GUIDES?

Subject guides have been a traditional channel of user support in libraries for several decades (Vileno, 2007). In contrast to bibliographies or more comprehensive help guides, subject guides are designed to be brief, compact and introductory in nature;

> "*They are not designed to serve either the experienced scholar or the reference librarian. They are for beginners who seek instruction in gathering the fundamental literature of a field new to them in every respect*". (Stevens & Others, 1973, p. 41)

In this respect, the intrinsic purpose of subject guides has not changed dramatically over time, even if both their appearance and

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format may have. For instance, many libraries are now incorporating Web 2.0, social media and other interactive elements within guides in an attempt to engage and attract users (Morris & Bosque, 2010). In this respect, LibGuides (LibGuides for academic libraries, 2010) represents one of the newest and most popular (Ghaphery & White, 2012) flavours of the traditional guide.[1] In contrast to some of the more static forms of guides, the LibGuides Content Management System allows content to be dynamically pulled in from other sources, shared across multiple guides, and also supports interactivity through chat and discussion forums. The nature of the platform also supports standardised workflows, policies and processes within an organisation, generating a consistent look and feel, and layout across all guides and authors. The LibGuides model is also based around the concepts of reuse and sharing, not just of in-house material, but also guides created by other institutions, supporting a culture of best practice and minimising duplicated effort in "reinventing the wheel".

However, to date subject guides have received a mixed response in terms of both usage levels and user feedback. Given the "challenging and time-consuming" effort involved in creating and maintaining guides (Jackson & Pellack, 2004, p. 320), it is not unreasonable to expect some evidence of their efficacy. Based on a sample of over one thousand students, Duke Library found that 53% of those surveyed had never used one of the Library's web guides, with a further 24% reporting that they rarely used them (Jackson Sanburn cited in Reeb and Gibbons, 2004, p. 124). From in-depth interviews with a sample of 11 students, Ouellelte (2011) finds three primary explanations as to why students may not use subject guides: a lack of awareness of their existence; a preference for using the open web to find information; and a perception that they do not need to use them, instead relying on other techniques such as citation chaining to locate material. Even when users are aware of guides, feedback often remains tepid. Courtois, Higgins, & Kapur (2005) found that 40% of respondents rated a suite of 80 web-based guides as either "not helpful" or "a little helpful". This kind of reaction may suggest that a significant proportion of students do not typically engage with this form of support. However, it is possible that underlying problems or issues may partly contribute to poor feedback, such as broken links, omitted resources, or content that is not up to date (Courtois et al., 2005).

Notwithstanding the mixed success levels reported, the advantage of "one stop shopping" (Little, Fallon, Dauenhauer, Balzano, & Halquist, 2010, p. 439) is still a recurring motif. This appears to indicate that one of the principal aims of subject guides still addresses users' needs, to some extent at least. Indeed, this aspect is likely to be particularly helpful for first year undergraduates transitioning from second level education, who often report feeling overwhelmed by the volume of resources and information available (Head, 2013).

WHY LIBGUIDES?

Given that the cost–benefit ratio of subject guides is far from compelling based on the evidence presented to date, how might LibGuides offer a more efficient and effective solution to subject guide provision? Firstly, Markgraf (2009, p. 270) notes that one of the most basic advantages of the platform is that it allows "all librarians—regardless of their levels of technological savvy or library Web site access—to do what they do best, that is, create, organize, and share content". The ease of use and lower learning curve attached to using the product when compared to editing a website via a CMS interface or tool such as Dreamweaver, may lessen both training and implementation time for staff considerably, compared with having to learn HTML or these more complex interfaces. Moreover, a built-in link checker, the ability to embed dynamic widgets of constantly "fresh" content, and to share and duplicate content, reduces some of the potential pitfalls associated

with more basic guides, which may require manual checking and constant updating at the level of each individual guide. Whilst the recommendation that librarians should share and adapt other libraries' guides to maximise efficiency is not a new one (Stevens & Others, 1973), the potential for this kind of sharing has never been fully realised or formalised. In contrast, LibGuides actually promotes this as one of the selling points of the product, and also maintains both a directory of other libraries that are using the product and a "best of" listing for staff to explore.

From an end-user's perspective, there are also potential benefits from using a standardised and consistent format such as LibGuides. The platform allows for significant flexibility in terms of the volume and nature of content, alongside a broadly consistent and standard look and feel. In looking at the more traditional forms of guides that are used in Canadian University libraries, Dahl finds that "recommendations regarding the consistency, scope, readability, and usability of pathfinders are not uniformly followed by the creators of electronic pathfinders" (2001, P. 237). This can ultimately result in confusion for the user, and therefore potentially a reluctance to engage with the guides. With LibGuides, the ability to reuse common templates that follow best practice in terms of usability and mirror content across guides, may help to dampen the potential for variation and inconsistency across different guides and authors.

There is however a further aspect that is particularly relevant to the design and delivery of self-directed supports for today's students, who are "working increasingly in a world of customization and personalization" (Reeb & Gibbons, 2004, p. 125). Guides that address a broad subject area may hold little meaning to a student confronted with a highly unique and personal information need, such as a specific essay or research question. In this respect, Reeb and Gibbons recommend designing guides at the course level rather than attaching broad discipline- or subject-headings which have little meaning to a student's personal need. Alternatively, they suggest that the existing nature of subject guides could be adapted to make them "more contextual to students" (2004, p. 125). The flexibility of LibGuides potentially allows for this kind of contextuality by embedding guides into virtual learning environments, interconnecting guides for different subjects to reflect multi- and inter-disciplinary relationships, and the potential to develop an extensive range of highly customised guides with relative efficiency (potentially even at course level) through the use of templates, mirroring and the sharing of similar content across different instances.

As subject guides primarily represent a support for self-directed learning, it is important that students also feel comfortable with using them. Some students report that the way in which content is presented, and not just the volume of information, can determine if it is manageable or overwhelming (Ouellelte, 2011). In this context, the ability to separate and organise information into separate tabs, drop-down menus, index card displays, galleries and boxes using LibGuides, may help to present information in a more accessible, cleaner and logical way, allowing information to be drip-fed and more easily navigated, compared to an unstructured basic HTML webpage which may require extensive scrolling.

However, even with these potential advantages, it remains far from clear whether LibGuides ultimately represents snakes or ladders for students faced with information needs, gaps and challenges.

BACKGROUND TO THE LIBGUIDES PILOT PROJECT IN UCD LIBRARY

In 2013, UCD Library redeveloped its Learning Support Strategy (UCD Library, 2013) around three core strands of finding, evaluating and managing information in line with the ANZIIL Standards for Information Literacy (Bundy, 2004). In delivering this strategy, the Library aims to provide a range of solutions to support the specific needs of different user groups using a blended approach, including online, librarian-facilitated, academic-led and self-directed supports. An increasing focus on online and self-directed resources that will allow

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[1] For a detailed discussion of the features of LibGuides see Glassman & Sorensen (2010).