Helping users find their way: Usability testing of LibGuides
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Introduction

Springer’s LibGuides have made the process of creating electronic guides easier and more accessible to librarians; all library staff, regardless of their level of web-development skills, can create and easily maintain a subject guide on course page. However, though librarians continue to develop these tools, few studies are done to assess user satisfaction (Volino, 2007). At the propensity of this tool grows, it is important to evaluate LibGuides’ utility and usability, and develop standards or best practices that increase the effectiveness of these resources.

In the past two years several studies have looked at research guide usability and user preferences (Hilton et al., 2010; Hungerford, Ray, Torzan, & Will, 2010; Skliková, Alexander, Hicks, & Kohn, 2012; Vileno, 2010). Generally, these studies found that users prefer:

• simple, clean layout
• short annotations describing resources
• clear instruction linked to resources
• shorter pages
• cleaner labeling
• fewer tabs

Users also found Web 2.0 features confusing.

Duke University Libraries previously conducted a faculty survey (Gamsby, 2008), student survey (spring 2009), and usability study (spring 2009) and collected Google Analytics metrics. They found that users appreciate an uncluttered interface, that they wanted enough content to make the guide useful, that users do not usually read tabs and that fewer tabs with shorter labels increase their effectiveness; that nearly all users prefer short, targeted lists of resources and find descriptions of resources helpful; and that users consider social networking features and commenting unnecessary.

This study assessed the usability of LibGuides developed by Duke University’s librarians, to discover which features or qualities of LibGuides help users find the information they are looking for as well as which features or qualities give users trouble.

Methods

I selected four subject guides and four course guides, attempting to cover a broad range of subject areas and guide design. Subjects comprised two tabs for each guide, then the ease of use of the guide, as well as discussed features that made the guide difficult to use and easy to use, and made suggestions to improve the usability of the guides.

I found two different methods of data collection. First, I went to the Bryan Center, a public space on campus, and randomly asked people to participate in the study. A librarian facilitated while I observed and took notes. We asked subjects to think aloud as they completed the tasks. We also recorded screen capture and video for later analysis. Only subject guides were tested in this way.

Next, I adapted the subject guide and course guide test instruments into workbooks. Students in the Undergraduate Advisory Board completed the tasks and answered the questions writing their processes and thoughts on the workbooks.

In total, 20 students participated in the testing: 13 turned subject guides and 7 turned course guides. We had each student look at two guides, so each subject guide was tested by at least six different people, and each course guide was tested by at least three people.

I used the videos of the observed tests and the workbooks to develop code and used the codes to analyze the videos and workbooks and designate which features were either observed (by investigators) or identified (by subjects) as a facilitator or barrier to guide use, as well as which features subjects suggested would improve usability.

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Results

Previous experience with LibGuides

Eight subjects had used LibGuides before. All eight had been introduced to guides by an instructor or librarian.

Subject guides

“What made this guide easy to use?”
“First, I like the organization of the guide and the information is easy to find. This is very important. I had no trouble finding any of the resources.”
“Clear instructions, the tabs, the navigation, and they have a lot of resources in it.”

“What made this guide difficult to use?”
“Long list of resources. I didn’t know which one to click on.”
“Pretty overwhelming. I don’t know where to start. I need to read through all this.”

“Would you have made this guide easier to use?”
“Clear outline of the guide, the organization of the guide, and having a smaller amount of resources.”
“Just fewer resources. No need for so much detailed information.”

Course guides

“What made this guide easy to use?”
“Very easy to navigate because there is a clear section for searching and a quick search.”
“Quick links, clear instructions, short lists of resources.”

“What made this guide difficult to use?”
“Lots of tabs. To many resources.”
“Text that is difficult to read.”

“Would you have made this guide easier to use?”
“Clearer instructions, clearer organization, less redundancy.”
“Better organization, fewer redundant tabs.”

Highlights

• Users preferred short, targeted lists of resources and fewer tabs, though they expressed appreciation for having the guide organized into several tabs, rather than listing all resources on one page.
• Users found succinct descriptions of resources helpful, but did not seem to use descriptions that appear upon mouseover.
• Users found the LibGuides navigation easy, but were confused by ambiguous or unclear tab naming.
• Users appreciated the organization of resources into boxes, but were again confused by unclear tab naming.
• Users focused on the top center of the first page and generally did not scroll all the way down a long page.
• Users who were unfamiliar with the LibGuides interface waited some sort of guidance or orientation.
• Users found LibGuides of search results from the library catalog containing or not useful and expressed a preference for a link to a catalog search on a topic.

Recommendations

• Limit the number of resources, or highlight a note to give guides a reading point.
• Provide short in-line descriptions of resources indicating what information can be found using a particular guide.
• Provide an introduction to the purpose and organization of the guide on the first page (this can be a table of contents with a short plot about the contents of each page).
• Give a short when naming tabs and boxes, making sure they clearly describe the content they contain in language users can understand (i.e. avoid library jargon).
• Rather than creating an RSS for recent literature research on a topic, provide a list of suggested books or search terms, or link to a catalog search on a topic.

Further study

Librarian feedback

A 1999 survey of librarians in the southeastern United States found that while librarians feel that subject guides are useful, most do not know if their patrons find them useful or usable (Moore & Grimes, 1999). Some possible topics to discuss with librarians are perceived usability and usability of guides, and what support (e.g. training, documentation) librarians need to develop effective guides.

Maintenance

Librarians at UNC-Chapel Hill presented at the 2012 ACRL-ERIC Conference on enhancing LibGuides maintenance. They provide librarians with usage statistics and estimated maintenance time on their guides and require them to update yearly.

Marketing

This study identified faculty and librarian promotion in class to be an effective marketing tool, but it might be worth investigating other methods. Some Jounal State University Libraries found that 

Resource

Guide creation and maintenance is time consuming, and it would be worth reflecting the long-term assumption that broad subject guides are worth the effort.

References


Staley, S. (2007). Many libraries, including those at Duke, link to course guides within course/learning management systems (Adowebio, 2010; Funker, 2010; Kolb, Cox, & Withell, 2005; Solis & Hampson, 2009; Libraries at San Francisco State University found email to be an effective marketing tool (Foster, Wilson, Aikenworth, & Solis, 2010). University of Florida Libraries found the library catalog another effective tool (Stimpson, Wilcox, Atten, & Bushbail, 2005).

Consortium of guides

Several studies commented on content they liked, usually librarians’ contact information. It might be worth investigating what other content they liked or did not like included in these guides.

Rebuilding subject guides

Several studies suggest that subject guide approach research from too broad a perspective and are therefore not as useful as well as used at course pages (Reeb, 2010; Strain, 2008). Creation and maintenance of these guides is time consuming, and it would be worth reflecting the long-term assumption that broad subject guides are worth the effort.

Further information

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