

# Reinventing the Wheel: Effectively Revamping LibGuide Structures at Cunningham Memorial Library

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## Abstract

Having created LibGuides since 2008, Indiana State University librarians' early efforts began to lack cohesion as additional content was added in various boxes, tabs, and subtabs. This lack of cohesion has resulted in an analogous house with odd rooms, windows and doors poking out from unusual positions. Experience and reflection have triggered ideas for improvement so when approached by teaching faculty to create LibGuides for their departments, the librarians have begun to design the LibGuides as a series of strategically planned connections. This connectivity approach moves away from simply providing information links to adding value with the informational content drawn from the librarian's knowledge of the discipline, in partnership with the discipline's faculty, to assure alignment with learning objectives and coursework.

## BACKGROUND

Ranked as one of the best in the Midwest by *The Princeton Review*, Indiana State University enrolls over 11,400 on-campus and distance education students and employs 540 faculty. Cunningham Memorial Library collections contain more than 1.4 million items, including over 50,000 electronic books, 10,000 government documents, 50,000 journals, and 220 databases.

Reference Instruction Librarians at Indiana State University (ISU) have a strong culture and identity as educators of information literacy and consider themselves partners in student learning, but librarians are challenged to maintain quality of services when faced with reduced funding and staffing. LibGuides are a fee-based, content sharing platform from Springshare used by librarians to create research and course guides. Like library pathfinders, they can make library research more accessible, efficient and effective by directing users to library

resources and reliable open Web content. They provide links to information that users need and direct them to information they didn't know the library had. And they can provide research assistance when a subject specialist is unavailable. (Canfield, Gardner, & Stevens, 1973)

Indiana State University librarians have been creating LibGuides since August, 2008, originally as subject guides for instructional purposes and for informational Web pages. Many of the early LibGuides included sources as lists or links with little to no additional narrative. These guides were posted on the library's Web site, promoted to teaching faculty during liaison encounters, and presented in one-shot instruction classes and when working one-to-one at student consultations.

As the LibGuides have been more widely used and the librarians learned more about the needs of teaching departments and programs, new content was tacked onto the existent LibGuides. This has resulted in a lack of cohesion, analogous to a house with odd rooms, windows and doors poking out from unusual positions. Some of the basic LibGuides have grown past easy navigation, and attempts to teach with these LibGuides have been less than satisfying.

## REINVENTING THE WHEEL

Some ISU librarians have begun to reconsider the structure of the LibGuides and are moving away from merely providing links to information, instead adding value to the content in the form of instructional commentary by describing the discipline's literature and how it can be researched. When done in partnership with the faculty of that discipline, these efforts can result in more collaboratively conceived LibGuides that allow the librarian's knowledge to enhance the study of the discipline and provide a stronger alignment with learning objectives and coursework. Many information tools are available but not all are appropriate

for a specific information need. Librarian commentary can help the student navigate the complicated waters of resource selection and information acquisition.

This new perspective aligns with library literature. Dahl advocated that subject guides should teach students to use resources. (Dahl, 2001) Several publications found adding annotations desirable (Dahl, 2001; Jackson & Pellack, 2004; Wang & Hubbard, 2005), although Jackson and Pellack found that most subject guides did not include narrative to explain what each link meant in context. (Jackson & Pellack, 2004) And librarians may wish to pay attention to their choice of headings as Dean (2004) found that students often used headings and titles to decide where to search, rather than annotations. In addition, the scope of a pathfinder should be stated to allow users to evaluate the guide for their specific needs. (Dahl, 2001; Neilson, 2004)

When appropriate, the ISU LibGuides are created for specific courses. In their 2004 article, Reeb and Gibbons recommended creating guides attached to courses because they receive more visitors. They advised librarians to "meet the student on the student's experiential terms" (Reeb & Gibbons, 2004, p. 126) and then lead them to further information literacy knowledge. Although course guides require more maintenance, especially in fields where information is quickly superseded (Strutin, 2008), collection development can be an added benefit of attaching subject guides to courses. During the creation process, the librarian can address gaps in the collection and identify out of date resources that surface when adding content to the LibGuide. Correcting these problems helps keep the collection up to date.

However, this attitude is not universally accepted in the literature. Kapoun (1995) advocates for "careful topic selection with sensitivity to lasting value, academic/functional usefulness, and available resources." Reeb and Gibbons (2004) found that customized course-level guides were not possible, although they offered course level access to disciplinary subject guides;. Dupuis (2004) recommended "fixed categories" for guides in conjunction with customized guides as needed. Vileno suggests that "perhaps there is no right or wrong way to set up subject guides," but then suggests that users should be asked what they think of the guides. (Vileno, 2007, p. 439)

The expectations of faculty and students may also affect design decisions. Collaborating with teaching faculty can help librarians determine how to focus their guide topics and

resources. (Wang & Hubbard, 2005) Students may have unrealistic expectations of subject guides. Students may expect a subject guide to tell them the answers. (O'Sullivan & Scott, 2000) If discipline or course learning outcomes include having students learn how to research on their own, then providing direct access to "answers" may not provide that experience and be undesirable.

Adding descriptive content to updated LibGuides is a slow, labor intensive process and, although in the early stages of implementing this practice, the reference instruction librarians are already finding support for Strutin's (2008) contention that informed, useful guides will result in greater usage, more satisfied students and faculty, and a better "return on investment" for their research.

Structurally, ISU's LibGuides are hierarchical in nature with some aspects being sequential. Students often do not understand what an academic discipline is. (Reeb & Gibbons, 2004) Librarians can provide context for a discipline and tie it to its literature. Through their experience of collaborating with teaching faculty, the librarians understand that some disciplines have specific information requirements that must be respected whether they are accreditation driven or propelled by teaching faculties' opinions of style and content. However, there are basic research concepts that cross disciplines. These concepts may be best addressed by broader LibGuides about Library Basics, Sources, Databases, Finding Full-Text, and other topics.

Because some information concepts take time for students to absorb well, tabs and boxes from these broader LibGuides can be linked and copied into more specific LibGuides for reinforcement, taking advantage of the capabilities of electronic text. (Neilson, 2004) They can then be reused in a "PHY 360: General Astronomy" LibGuide as well as in a guide for "ENG 105, Freshman Writing II," or "LLL 280: Topics in Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics." Learning how to locate a full-text article from a citation challenges many students so that information is repeated in many LibGuides.

Interactions with disciplinary faculty have helped inform recently constructed LibGuides. In December 2010, the astronomy professor contacted the physics librarian to ask for a list of journals for physics and astronomy and instructions for how to access them. The discussion led to the creation of not only an Astronomy LibGuide for the course, but also a Physics LibGuide for the discipline and a

broader Science LibGuide which described characteristics of the discipline scientific literature in general. The Astronomy LibGuide was created quickly but the librarian is adding descriptions to physics resource links that help students decide whether to access them for specific information needs.

In October 2011, a biology professor asked for help with the senior mammalogy class. This class was challenged by library research and citing sources appropriately and a major research paper was imminent. The librarian visited the class on short notice to hear the professor provide feedback on the students' last assignment and to provide basic library research instruction. Afterward, she created a Mammalogy LibGuide specifically designed to address the upcoming assignment and student questions. Later individual consultations with students led to feedback to the professor and continuing refinements to the LibGuide. The professor made suggestions about the content and descriptions in the LibGuide. Brief targeted information was provided to answer questions about how scientists research, about primary sources, and about tips for searching key databases for species data efficiently. It was truly a collaborative effort.

The latest example of this move away from simply providing information links to adding value with the information content is currently under construction at a department level. A language professor approached the librarians about creating a LibGuide for a core course that will cover the basic needs, information sources, and expected outcomes of the course. The department's practice is to rotate the course among its faculty. Although a bare-bones course syllabus was available, successive teachers felt that they were, in a sense, reinventing the wheel each time it was their turn to teach the class. The professor provided a copy of the syllabus and also offered to poll her colleagues to glean insights into the "spin" each faculty member put on the course. By incorporating this information into the selection process of gathering multiple information resources, the LibGuide will become a richer and more valuable piece of the course's structure.

After consulting with the requesting professor to learn the perspective and learning objectives of the department, the librarians recommended that the structure should be planned as a series of connected LibGuides. In conjunction with the faculty, the librarians are starting with a Languages LibGuide that will cover themes common across languages

and will then connect the guide to LibGuides on Spanish, German, French, and other major topics within the department. In theory, the Spanish LibGuide will not include the overriding content of the Languages LibGuide but will instead focus on themes specific to Spanish. Culture is a major theme in the language disciplines. Knowing this, librarians will look for and include relevant cultural publications and sources. If broader themes are included, they will link back to the content in the Languages LibGuide.

### **WHAT'S IN THE FUTURE?**

The authors are facing some challenges as they implement their new philosophy. The librarians at Indiana State University are actively working toward achieving buy-in from the teaching faculty whether the topic is LibGuides or the librarians' desire to be embedded in courses. Librarians are using one-to-one discussions and Qualtrics surveys in their efforts to assess their success with the faculty. They are also designing surveys that will be used with students to assess the usefulness of LibGuides, and the quality of information literacy classes and one-to-one teaching encounters with the students.

In addition, the authors are making efforts to increase the buy-in from colleagues. After all, the LibGuides are also created to help other reference librarians assist students with disciplines outside the librarian's own specialties. Feedback and support from colleagues improves the subject guides.

Bringing their own experiences to the table, the ISU librarians are working together to build consensus on a workable "best practices" method that incorporates the component of information literacy context into LibGuides. Some who have created many guides feel they have already developed their own "best practice" method of creation. The lesser experienced librarians are still finding their path. Achieving the at-times elusive concept of a workable "best practices" method takes time. An argument can be made for the potential lack of wisdom in incorporating structural changes in the middle of a semester. Already stressed students are directed to previously familiar LibGuides as they work on research projects. Faculty and others linking to LibGuide content become upset when content is changed or moved and links are broken if they are currently using that information.

Reflecting the unfortunate situations at universities and academic libraries throughout the country, librarians at Indiana State University have watched their numbers dwindle as enrollment rises. Time management is

necessarily an issue as the librarians find themselves being asked to assume more liaison, instruction, and administrative responsibilities. In addition, responsibilities of the pre-tenure process affect the authors and other ISU instruction reference librarians. These are factors that affect the time available to create and update LibGuides.

Although revamping existing LibGuides is taking longer than was anticipated, when the authors compare the useful quality of the revamped LibGuides to the content of the original ones, they feel that the process is worth pursuing. Their efforts will continue and it is hoped that the older guides will be updated by the end of the Spring 2012 semester. By focusing on adding value that enhances the LibGuides' effectiveness, they feel confident that they are moving in the right direction to help students at Indiana State University achieve a higher level of information literacy.

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