Do the Outcomes Justify the Buzz?: An Assessment of LibGuides at Cornell University and Princeton University

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Abstract

Springshare's LibGuides has inspired significant buzz in the library blogosphere. Touted for its "Web 2.0" functions, attractive interface, and ease of use for librarians, Libguides has transformed the way many libraries build web-based research guides. Cornell and Princeton Universities decided to collaborate on an assessment initiative to discover how these guides are valued on each campus. This study goes beyond the "2.0" dogma to empirically determine if LibGuides lives up to its publicity.

Overview

Springshare's *LibGuides* has inspired significant buzz in the library blogosphere since the company first offered their software in Spring 2007. Touted for its "Web 2.0" functions, attractive interface, and ease of use for librarians, *Libguides* has transformed the way many libraries build, organize, and maintain web-based research guides. Cornell and Princeton Univer-

sities have collaborated on an assessment initiative to discover how these guides are valued on each campus. This study goes beyond the "2.0" dogma to empirically determine if *LibGuides* lives up to its publicity. No evidence-based studies exist that explore the impact of this software on the librarians who use it to create guides, the patrons who use guides for research, and the faculty who depend on guides to support their classes.

In a joint research study conducted during the Fall 2008 semester, researchers at Cornell University and Princeton University conducted user surveys to determine the extent to which *LibGuides* lived up its publicity and marketing. The Cornell and Princeton *LibGuides* implementations were used as case studies. Both institutions were early adopters and the buzz quickly grew amongst staff using the tool and administrators learning about its features. As the numbers of guides being created and overall page views increased, it became clear at both libraries that we needed to

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learn more about how the guides were being used. The usage statistics generated by the software only provided surface-level data.

Our research sought answers to a broad range of questions: Did the social web features such as user-embedded comments, chat, interactive polls, etc. increase student-librarian communication and were guides with those features used more frequently? Did librarians feel that the software met their needs? Were librarians building more course-related guides than subject guides, and if so, why? Were faculty willingly adding guides to their course sites and were they satisfied with the new look and functionality of the guides created for their classes?

History of Library Guides at Cornell and Princeton

At Cornell University:

Across Cornell University Library's twenty unit libraries, subject and course guides have traditionally been created as static HTML pages. These have been done in a variety of methods, representing everything from hand-crafted HTML files, WYSIWYG-created guides (using *Dreamweaver* and other editing software), to content management systems such as *Commonspot*. Uniformity in the look and feel of guides changed depending on the library; there was little consistency from place to place unless they were from units that were administratively linked. Few if any had what are known as Web 2.0 features; many resembled traditional print bibliographical "pathfinders" of subjects. Most of the libraries' subject guides, research and writing guides and "How do I find… ?"-types of guides were grouped together on one long page on the Cornell Library's website.

In 2003, a group of Cornell librarians was awarded a Cornell University Library Internal Grant to develop a production system for the creation of library guides. Specifically, they sought to:

> "… create a database management system that allows librarians to create true "customized views" of a single persistent structured data source, thereby facilitating the presentation of information to specific audiences, increasing the efficient use of staff time, and benefiting end-users through the availability of more, and better, guides."[1]

Though progress was made towards this goal, staffing changes and programming challenges caused the project to remain uncompleted.

By 2006 the Cornell Library's entire web presence was in need of a major overhaul, one that would align the Library's online environment more closely with the needs and expectations of its users, many of whom were by then already adept at Web 2.0-type functionality. A Library Web Vision Team was charged with the research and recommendations towards this goal.

After evaluating the need and usage of existing subject guides at Cornell, the team researched the state of subject guide technologies available at the time. Part of the group's charge was to find an emerging or existing "off the shelf" solution as opposed to developing a "homegrown" system. Their final recommendation was to "implement, evaluate and constantly enhance [Springshare's library guide creation software] *LibGuides*." In their final report they concluded:

> "Library guides are a heavily used and important vehicle for guiding users to the most useful resources of their field, thus helping to develop the research skills of users… users respond well to and expect subject-based guidance that is prominently placed on a web site. Subject guides in the Web 2.0 environment (especially *LibGuides* from Springshare http://www.springshare.com/libguides) can do more than our current subject guides can offer: they can also become interactive and collaborative and can be integrated with courseware such as *Blackboard* and social networks such as *Facebook*. Tag clouds can be used for visual presentation of subjects and terms. Librarians can present themselves in a way that makes them easier to relate to and that invites communication from the users via any IM network (*Yahoo*, *AOL/MSN*). Research shows that the net generation expects experts to be available in their work environment—putting librarians' expertise within easy reach is one of the attractions of LibGuides. Providing another way to promote and highlight our resources in relation to the needs of specific users is also essential."[2]

At Princeton University:

Princeton University librarians began creating on-

line research guides in the late 1990s for one of the early library websites. Early on, these early guides were online representations of traditional print research guides with, hyperlinks to relevant electronic resources. Only a few librarians knew how to maintain web pages at that time and most pages were built using HTML editing programs like *Microsoft FrontPage* or Netscape *Composer*. Although the library's web presence evolved as a result of major redesign efforts in 2001 and 2005, little progress was made in making subject and course guides consistent in look and feel. In 2005, the library's web development manager created style sheet templates that subject librarians could use for their guides. Some librarians elected to use the guide templates, others designed their own sites with in Dreamweaver or other web design software. The Princeton University Library (PUL) website had pages dedicated to both course-specific and subject-specific research guides, but the guides themselves were inconsistent in style and content.

As the sophistication of web design increased in the early 2000s, the expectations of academic library users also evolved. Experiences with sites like Yahoo, Amazon, Google, and many others in the commercial sector changed how people seek information, and altered what patrons expected of libraries. Library users began find it tedious to navigate webpages that do not reflect their aesthetic and usability preferences. Librarians around the world were looking for ways to leverage the power of the web to avoid the being rendered obsolete. As excitement about Web 2.0 technologies began to spread in the library profession in 2005 and 2006, Princeton librarians began to explore the use of blogs, RSS feeds, and social networking sites to connect with library patrons and colleagues.

A pivotal moment in PUL's evolving interest in the use of "2.0" technologies was the event "*Technology and Library Services: Meeting Today's Users' Needs*", a one-day symposium held on Princeton's campus on March 15th, 2007. Co-sponsored by PUL and the New Jersey Chapter of the Association of College & Research Libraries, the symposium featured presentations that highlighted innovative strategies for employing technology in libraries to transform user services. The event made Princeton librarians more aware of potential applications of this new approach to technology. This event also galvanized administrative support for experimentation in Princeton Uni-

versity Library, which traditionally had a conservative, top-down approach to adopting new technology.

In the months following this symposium, a Princeton librarian heard about *Springshare's LibGuides* and initiated a trial subscription. Librarians immediately began using it to create course guides for specific classes and subject guides for departments. PUL's early adopters of *LibGuides* conducted a demonstration to share their experiences with the system at the end of October 2007. The reaction to the product was overwhelmingly positive and Princeton subscribed to *LibGuides* a few weeks later.

Methodology

Surveys were conducted of three target population groups at both Cornell and Princeton: faculty for whom at least one course *LibGuide* had been created; students who had taken at least one class for which a course *LibGuide* had been created; and library staff who had created at least one *LibGuide*. We used Cornell's online survey tool, Checkbox, to administer and manage all six surveys. Checkbox provides default reports and the ability to download all responses into MS Excel for customizable analysis.

Survey questions were identical at both schools except for one demographic question concerning the respondent's academic department / program affiliation. Terminology differentiations between Cornell and Princeton's academic structure required a slight modification of that particular question. The survey questions will appear in the final version of the paper

Both institutions targeted five faculty respondents in each of these broad academic categories: arts and humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Our analysis will discuss whether this approach worked equally well at both institutions.

The surveys were administered in early December, before the end of the semester at both institutions. This was a strategic timing decision. Rather than ask for survey responses during the semester, we wanted students to have the fullest opportunity to use their guide, recognizing that many would only visit the guide while completing final assignments.

The surveys did not include mandatory responses to any particular question, and we are not aware that any faculty member required his/her students to complete the survey. We are also not aware that any incentives were offered, such as bonus points added to a student's grade.

Note

The survey results are being tabulated and analyzed in January 2009 for review and discussion in Seattle. The final version of the paper will be posted online in March 2009

Notes

1. Paul McMillin, Lance Heidig, Angela Horne, Kornelia Tancheva. 2003, *"A Dynamic System for the Creation of Library Web Guides"* (unpublished grant proposal). Cornell University Library. NY: Ithaca, p. i.

2. Zsuzsa Koltay, Adam Chandler, Michael Cook, Marty Kurth, Kornelia Tancheva, Carla Demello. 2007. "Web Vision: Report and Recommendations for CUL's Web Presence" (unpublished report). Cornell University Library. NY: Ithaca, p.15-16.