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New Library, New Librarian, New Student: Using LibGuides to Reach the Virtual Student

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This article examines the virtual pathfinder and its relationship with distance education students. Various topics are addressed in relation to virtual students, LibGuides and collaborative efforts between librarians and teaching faculty. A brief history of the subject guide is presented, advantages and disadvantages of LibGuides are discussed and a unique collaboration at Chattanooga State Community College is described.

KEYWORDS LibGuides, distance education, online learning, virtual student, virtual library, online classes, subject guides, faculty collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Chattanooga State Community College opened its doors in 1965. The college focused on technical degrees, especially in the areas of engineering and computer science. The school has grown tremendously over the years, adding programs in nursing and allied health while building campuses in several different counties. Currently, the college is building a training center for the Volkswagen assembly plant in Chattanooga.

The Augusta R. Kolwyck library serves the over 10,000 students enrolled at Chattanooga State. The library had over 300,000 visitors in the fiscal year 2009–2010. The two authors work in the reference department.

This article focuses on the library’s efforts to reach out to distance education students through LibGuides. The terms are defined, advantages and disadvantages of LibGuides discussed and the collaborative effort is described. Disseminating timely and relevant information to distance learners offers many challenges and many rewards for librarians.

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Pathfinders

Subject guides were initially called Pathfinders. The first Pathfinders were documented in the 1950s and were simply lists of recommended readings.\(^1\) The first article describing Pathfinders was published in 1972. Pathfinders were created to aid researchers in the initial stages of the research process. One company attempted to sell pre-designed Pathfinders, but quickly ceased production as librarians needed to customize each guide. Pathfinders began to make the transition to virtual documents in the late 80s.\(^2\)

LibGuides

LibGuides are used by over 1,700 libraries.\(^3\) LibGuides are not only used for content management, but knowledge dissemination as well. The guides allow librarians to give online, focused support which only enhances research by removing the “all too common mental research block”\(^4\) that students encounter when researching a topic. LibGuides are customizable and highlight library resources by using Web 2.0 applications.\(^5\)

LibGuides serve many purposes and are constantly evolving. Some libraries use LibGuides as the library home page; some use it to create research tutorials, and many use it as a virtual pathfinder. LibGuides are yet another tool created to keep library resources out in the open. Librarians must provide an online service that is invaluable and can not be found elsewhere.\(^6\) Librarians have been gathering resources for half a century, and this is just another way to present focused information to the student through technology.

Virtual Student/Distance Education

The virtual student is changing. In the past, many may have thought the virtual student was an older, employed student who had little time to devote to class work. Now, many students have both face-to-face and online courses.\(^7\) One third of the students at Chattanooga State Community College took an online course in the fall of 2010, while half of the students took a hybrid course. Distance education is growing in colleges nationwide, “Trends such as telecommuting and the changing profile of ‘traditional’ college students are fueling the demand for distance education.”\(^8\) The new generation of students has worked with the Internet from a very young age. Students are more comfortable with taking an online class and finding information online. Students in 2011 have grown up with technology that almost seems invisible to them; it is a part of their everyday life and should be included in their education.\(^9\)
When defining the virtual student in relation to the library, there are multiple requirements. The virtual or remote user is not standing in front of the librarian at a reference desk. This means the student could be at a computer in the library, a classroom on campus, or a laptop in the student center. The student could also be off campus either at work or home. The virtual student may take only online classes, or they may prefer face-to-face classes. Eventually, there will not be a difference between the traditional face-to-face student and the virtual student. The needs of each will merge as more course content becomes available online and more students elect to take online or hybrid courses in the future.

ADVANTAGES OF LibGUIDES

LibGuides offer many benefits to libraries. For the purpose of this article, the authors will focus on virtual students which will narrow the benefits to three categories of “new” features in the academic library. Firstly, a new library is being “built” as librarians move resources to the World Wide Web. The new library is open all hours of the day and night and is accessible from any device with Internet connectivity. Secondly, a new type of librarian emerges through LibGuides, a librarian with a streamlined process and a simple interface to work with. Lastly, librarians must recognize a new user, a student who is technologically advanced and is accustomed to creating his or her own content in social networking sites.

New Library

In a time where a new online classroom is emerging, a new library must come forward as well. Many online and hybrid classes use a content management system where students access materials for each class. The course content area is prime real estate for library materials. Usage rates will rise as more library material is placed in the content management system. Having a single meeting place where students go for course content is the ideal location for a LibGuide to be linked. The library can expand into the course management area through collaboration with teaching faculty.

Virtual students might live down the street or across the country. Using local libraries is not always an option, as some students may not live close enough or may not have the means to access the library. Many libraries have agreements with local libraries, but one cannot assume students will have access; therefore, the librarian must give all students the opportunity for success by providing links to databases and multiple ways for students to access library content.
The new library goes where the student is. The new student is on the computer. Librarians are aware of this and are working towards a better, more versatile library. In order to create the new library, librarians must use technology that students are comfortable with. Now that librarians are all aware of the new challenges, they can step up and create LibGuides to assist these students.

The new library must be cell phone friendly. The thought of searching a database on a cell phone may baffle even the most tech savvy librarians. This is the next wave of searching, and LibGuides are mobile. The new user is rarely without a phone. The younger generation not only uses the most up to date technology, they “embrace” it as a new form of communication. LibGuides can be viewed on cell phones in an easy to read format.

Ultimately the new library is adaptable. The library is not a lone silo relying on its internal staff to be experts in various fields. The new library allows for more collaboration amongst teaching faculty, students and librarians. Giving professors at Chattanooga State editing rights was a natural step in the goal of creating a user friendly virtual library. This collaboration allows librarians to give much more focused information and gives professors the opportunity to immediately create content for the students. While many libraries use LibGuides to give subject-specific or even course-specific information, the librarians at Chattanooga State chose to use LibGuides to give assignment-specific information. This lets the student and professor know that the librarians care about assignments and want students to find credible sources.

New Librarian

Obviously, the role of the traditional librarian is changing. However, through the years, one core function remains, librarians still gather resources based on subject or assignment. The librarians then take the resources and present them in an organized way. Librarians teach face-to-face instructional sessions, but the true test comes when the student sits down to research his or her topic. What resource does the student have at home? The librarian cannot rely on the student to take notes, or even to pay attention in the instructional session. Distance education students taking an online course will most likely never set foot in the physical library. What are librarians providing for these students? Again, the two types of students merge into the “virtual” student who is researching independently online. Creating an electronic guide gives students a tool, something they can refer to over and over again throughout the research process. Incorporating helpful videos, chat services and handouts are just a few of the resources the librarian can provide for any student, whether traditional or virtual.
LibGuides provide an easy to use format that allows even the novice librarian to create content. Beyond the basic creation of a guide, LibGuides offers many attractive features for the new librarian. LibGuides allow the creator to copy other guides from the system, either within the creator’s home library, or the LibGuides community. LibGuides allow customization for each box on each page for every guide. This may overwhelm the new librarian. Establishing a template is a positive way to start creating guides, as it gives a standard and sets an expectation. The template helps to reduce confusion on style and content for librarians.

The new librarian will find that LibGuides work well with material that needs to be updated on a regular basis. LibGuides allow the creator to “link boxes” so that when one box is created and later updated, it will automatically update on each guide with the linked box. This is helpful for items such as featured books or databases. Instead of updating each of the subject guides, the creator can change one box and the update is reflected in each linked box. This is beneficial when working with widgets. A widget can be added to a page easily and can be altered easily.

The research process is changing as well, which creates even more challenges for the new librarian. Studies show that students change topics if they cannot find resources after searching the Internet. Browsing the Internet for resources can be frustrating, which is why librarians must provide relevant links to scholarly materials. Librarians must embrace the LibGuide as a teaching instrument which allows a new type of interactive instruction.

New Student

Students change each year, trends come and go and new technology evolves quickly. The new student is not only comfortable with technology, they expect the library to keep up with new Web sites and tools. The new student is accustomed to creating content through various social media Web sites. Students are constantly hooked into social networking sites while texting multiple people at a time. Also, these students seem to be more at ease expressing themselves virtually rather than face-to-face.

The new student is familiar with a computer and knows how to navigate most Web sites he or she may come across. Many students are more comfortable with an electronic pathfinder than approaching a typical reference desk. The student may know help is available; they may see the help available in the form of a librarian at a desk, but they would rather use something like a LibGuide to assist them in research. This new user may not be accustomed to asking for help face-to-face. This user can find how-to videos in YouTube and answers to many questions on Yahoo Answers, so why start asking for help in the library?
Larry Rosen found that students were more comfortable sharing with others through technology. Shy students enjoy writing down ideas or responses much more than speaking out in class. Rosen writes, “Even though the shy students know that everyone will read what they write, they feel safe doing it from behind their personal screen.”\(^{19}\) Sharing is a part of learning in most college classrooms. Allowing the student to share in a comfortable online setting provides the student with a safe place to write down and express ideas.

The new student benefits from many features in LibGuides, especially those that allow the student to become the creator. For example, there is a box in LibGuides called “User Link Submission” where students can submit links for classmates to review. Another user-focused element is the comment feature. Students can rate items and comment on boxes on any guide with this feature turned on. Students appreciate this type of social networking where they can add to the discussion in a meaningful way. One student can upload a new site, another student can rate it and another can comment on the submission. This creates a new type of online classroom where learning has no boundaries to a time and place.

The new student sets his own schedule. The new student may choose to research in the late hours of the night or the early hours of the morning. Long after the library has closed, librarians will receive instant messages or emails asking reference questions. LibGuides are available 24/7 and do not require a password. The new student expects materials to be available when and where he wants them. In order to stay, or even become, relevant to these new students, the library must keep up as this generation has “radically altered time boundaries and daily asleep/awake patterns.”\(^{20}\)

**DISADVANTAGES OF LibGUIDES**

Much of the research on LibGuides and electronic pathfinders was positive, only a few issues and concerns have been raised in the research. The disadvantages focus on the student experience. Students must be motivated to access a LibGuide, and they must find value in that LibGuide. If students have a negative experience with a LibGuide or accessing materials off campus, they are less likely to use the library in the future.

Motivating students to use a LibGuide in their free time seems impossible. Taking the time to look up a guide that is not required reading is a challenge, as Pastula observes, “Students that do not possess intrinsic motivation could struggle due to the independent nature of accessing the instruction.”\(^{21}\) The guide is there simply as an enhancement, a product created for the student by a librarian. The student has to want to access the LibGuide. This is where librarians return to the thought of the new library, where links to LibGuides are embedded in the course content at point of need. Students are
more likely to be motivated to explore the materials if the professor deems the LibGuide worthy of space in the course content area.

Another concern surfaces as librarians create general subject guides. Researchers found that students do not connect with general subject guides, but do find use for guides that are focused on specific courses. Librarians at the University of Rochester reported that presenting sources based on a discipline was not helpful for students as the students did not understand what a discipline really was. Further, many classes range across disciplines making the typical single subject guide irrelevant. Librarians at Chattanooga State focus much attention on assignment guides, creating one for each library instruction class taught in the library. These guides are meant to help the student with a particular assignment, not subject. Within the assignment guide, students can view learning outcomes as well as the actual assignment. They can also see available resources for the assignment. As an added bonus, most of the assignment guides come with stock information about the library, including hours, password information, instant messaging options and any items based on the need of that class. This may seem like too much work for a single class assignment, but once the guide is made, it is easier to copy and adjust as required. Guides are used several semesters in a row.

LibGUIDES AT CHATTANOOGA STATE

Chattanooga State librarians began using LibGuides in the summer of 2009. The guides were focused on assignments and subject areas. As the LibGuides were developed, the librarians began to seek out new ways to use the guides. The full-time speech instructors approached the library staff to ask how the library could help the speech department deliver its curriculum to the many distance education students. This request allowed for a discussion on how to incorporate the library into the lives of speech faculty and students. The speech professors needed to share YouTube videos and important documents in a safe place. The professors particularly wanted a space with a link-checker, so that when YouTube videos were taken down, they would be aware of the change.

Collegiality among staff and faculty at Chattanooga State is encouraged. Because of this encouragement, the collegiality culture provided a unique opportunity to expand the services of the library into the lives of speech students. After displaying some of the library resources that met the needs of the faculty, the discussion became focused on creating a LibGuide for speech. This LibGuide would go beyond the traditional library subject guide and would incorporate the needs of the speech faculty and the desire of the library to have a role in delivering information resources.

For the first time at Chattanooga State Library, two faculty members were given editing rights for a library LibGuide. Providing these editing
rights allowed the speech faculty to use LibGuides to enhance their classes without the assistance of a librarian. At the same time, the library’s speech librarian was able to promote library resources for different types of speeches and for general speech resources.

Distance education speech students use YouTube videos as a part of the course work. Many times, the selected speech-related videos on YouTube become unavailable for public viewing, as the creator deletes the video. The link-checking feature of LibGuides helps keep links up-to-date for access. The embedded video box provided by LibGuides allowed speech faculty to rotate highlighted YouTube video examples for different types of speeches. The library provided links to databases that gave speech students access to concept mapping, reference sources, images and diagrams, electronic books, videos on how to give a speech, and many more high-quality speech resources. The comment feature built into LibGuides allows for sharing of ideas in both directions.

The availability of LibGuides created the bridge to merge the curriculum needs of the speech faculty and the desire of the library to become more involved in providing access to focused and relevant library resources.

REFLECTIONS

While the project was a success for the librarians and the instructors, it has yet to be seen if it was successful in the eyes of the students. The guide is available for student use and the librarians await feedback. The collaboration aspect of the project was vital, but finding the time to work with each member’s busy schedule proved to be quite a challenge. LibGuides serve many purposes in libraries and classrooms and definitely fit the needs of distance education students at Chattanooga State.

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