

# **People Make Research Guides: Transforming the Boundaries of Librarianship**

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## **Abstract**

Software for web-based research guides has allowed librarians to emerge from the stacks and put a face on their work. Web-based research guides highlight not only the resources, but the people who select, organize, and provide access to them. Software such as Springshare's LibGuides and Oregon State's Library a la Carte are helping transform the boundaries of librarianship. These products include contact information and images of the librarian(s) who select and organize information for learners. One can also easily insert a chat widget that will provide opportunities for direct interactions with the subject librarian. These new tools are altering the way librarians teach research and the way library resources are presented and highlighted. Wide adoption of these easy to use technologies has literally presented the faces of librarianship to both their library's user community and the entire population of information seekers on the web.

## **Introduction**

This discussion session covered the various ways that librarians are using web-based research guide technologies to transform access to library resources and services. The discussion included use of web-based research guides for different learner populations, as well as both intended and unintended results of having the librarian as an active part of the information package. Librarians from the University of Southern California and California State University Monterey Bay shared their sometimes similar and sometimes quite distinctive experiences with adopting and effectively utilizing dynamic research guides. The USC presenter shared her and her library colleagues' experiences within the constructs of pedagogy, intellectual property and academic freedom attached to using this type of technology.

The presenters shared factors such as types and sizes of student populations being served, as well as size and age of the institutions, thus providing a foundation for the discussion and allowing participants to see how dynamic web-based research guides can be used effectively in a variety of library settings. The unique attributes of web-based research guides, such as web 2.0 capacities, customizable interfaces, built in statistics, and photograph branding, were highlighted. Emphasis was placed on building upon users' needs as well as their prior knowledge. The presenters shared best practices from both CSUMB, with its small, primarily undergraduate student population, and from the much larger USC with its many graduate students. User-centered design, principles for good practice in undergraduate education, and research guides as learning objects served as a framework for discussing how librarians can more effectively help users to meet their information needs. In the activity, conference participants were asked to contemplate who their users are and consider how awareness of their users'

characteristics and behaviors can help librarians leverage software to produce effective and frequently used dynamic research guides.

## **Background**

If asked fifty years ago or today, librarians would very likely say that the most important aspect of their profession is to provide the most useful information to their users in the most efficient way. However, though this aspect most certainly remains unchanged, what has changed is the sheer volume of available information. One way academic subject librarians have traditionally served this need is through selective bibliographies, pathfinders, and research guides of resources in their collections. As their collections sprang beyond the physical boundaries of their libraries, librarians have adapted, providing online guides, as varied as their users, as varied as the librarians who author them and the institutions for which they work.

As the presenters were investigating research guide creation tools and reading the literature on research guides, we were initially looking for ways to serve up more dynamic pages, using RSS, chat, etc. We also wanted to literally share our work via software, in order not to have to recreate content. Our librarians wanted to keep the research guides relevant. When searching the literature, though, we found statistics indicating that research guides are underutilized by students. In the case at USC, one solution to getting the guides in front of the students was to have the social work lab computers home page set to the Social Work Research Guide. In the case of CSUMB, a much smaller campus with less dedicated space, the presenters decided to not only choose an adaptable tool for creating research guides, but also to experiment with ways to increase their use.

Software like LibGuides and Library a la Carte have the potential to make the librarian's job easier because they are modular and allow sharing of content between authors. In addition, there are global modules that all authors can use in their individual pages, but do not have to create or update. This makes keeping content up to date easier. The modular design also helps librarians organize content into small chunks of information, similar to learning objects. In addition, with the integration of RSS feeds, content remains dynamic. With the use of chat, users can have direct access to the librarian who authored a guide. However, it was when the presenters focused on user needs that we really started leveraging the capabilities of LibGuides and Library a la Carte. Therefore, once we had chosen our tools and had learned their capabilities, we turned our attention to how we could most appropriately focus on the needs of the user, providing avenues for learning both via learning object-like modules and via interaction with librarians.

## **Access Points and User-Centered Design Principles**

As indicated above, much of the literature on library research guides indicates that guides have been underutilized. Reeb and Gibbons (2004) posit that undergraduate students do not yet have a mental model of "the disciplines," and thus do not relate well to guides organized accordingly. Reeb and Gibbons advocate for designing guides at the course level instead, or finding creative ways to steer students toward subject-oriented guides. The tagging feature of Library a la Carte allowed CSUMB librarians to do just that. CSUMB librarians employed

course code prefixes as a controlled vocabulary, tagging subject-based guides with prefixes of courses for which each guide is likely to be useful. Upon clicking on the prefix for the course for which they are doing research, students are presented with a short list of relevant guides. Students must then decide which disciplinary area(s) to explore. This was intended to respond to students' course-oriented mindset, to accommodate the highly interdisciplinary nature of the CSUMB curriculum, and to encourage students to think critically about their research.

The importance of appropriate, logical access points (Cox, 1996) was discussed in the literature. In addition to accessing guides via course prefix via the dynamically-generated Library a la Carte landing page, students already in the habit of doing so, or for whom the subject-based nature of the guides makes sense, may access a guide directly by clicking on the discipline-oriented title of the guide. Also, CSUMB has had a long-standing practice of making research guides available through its very highly-used Articles and Databases page. Now, subject-oriented links steer students to the tab in each research guide called "Find Articles."

Also in an effort to increase both use and usability of research guides, the presenters thought carefully about language considerations. Reeb and Gibbons (2004) say that "web users seek 'trigger words' in web links. When the trigger words match the user's goals, they find those words right away and the links make them more confident that they are going to find their content" (p. 127). Thus, active, goal-oriented words and phrases were used for links, headings, etc. The link to the Library a la Carte landing page from the CSUMB Library home page, for example, is labeled "Start Your Research." Tabs on guides read "Find Books," "Find Articles," "Cite Your Sources," and so on. Throughout their guides, librarians carefully avoided use of library jargon, instead choosing words that students would readily understand. The use of professional field-specific language was used in varying degrees. The graduate students at USC have a higher level of familiarity with professional vocabulary and a more advanced concept of a discipline, while the primarily undergraduate population may be more likely to search in ways mentioned in the section on trigger words above.

Adherence to learner-centered design principles informed the development of CSUMB's new guides. Current wisdom supports eschewing long annotations in favor of limited text with ample white space. Consistent with ideas put forth in the literature, CSUMB librarians designed guides that serve as starting points for research in a given area, as opposed to exhaustive lists of resources available locally. Rather than striving for true consistency across guides, CSUMB librarians aimed for "recognizability," which allowed for flexibility with regard to design, while ensuring that content would be familiar and easily understood by users. The concept of "transparency" was important as well; only if the destination of a link was not immediately obvious, a short annotation was included (Hemmig, 2005).

### **Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education**

The CSUMB librarians reflected on how modern research guide tools such as LibGuides and Library a la Carte can uphold Chickering and Gamson's (1991) Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. The Principles include encouraging student/faculty contact, and providing prompt feedback. These are supported by the presence of the contact module, with multiple options for communicating with the librarian asynchronously and in real-

time. Encouragement of active learning is another of the Seven Principles, and modern research guides support that because they are intended to be used while the student is actively engaged in the research process. Modern guides emphasize meaningful time on task, another of the principles, in that they are starting points for research, and thus lend themselves to active exploration and discovery of information resources on the part of the student, which should result in deeper learning than what would likely occur were the guides exhaustive or comprehensive lists. The easy inclusion of fairly sophisticated features, such as displays of tables of contents of selected journals via RSS, supports the principle of communicating high expectations to students. Finally, modern research guides respect diverse talents and ways of learning, or allow librarians to teach to various learning styles, by supporting video, audio, interactivity, and visually engaging content.

### **Activity and Takeaways**

For the activity, the presenters focused on Allen's user-centered model for the design of information systems (Hemmig, 2005). We asked the participants to work in groups and create a portrait of their "typical" users with steps in Allen's model. Specifically, we wanted the participants to reflect on what characteristics and behaviors made their student(s) both "typical" and "unique" to their institution. First, participants were asked to determine the user's goals, purposes, and objectives. Then they were asked to think about the tasks and activities that users accomplish in meeting their needs. Next, we asked the participants to think about what resources users would need to complete the task. Based on these steps, participants created a profile or a number of profiles based on their group work. A selection of these was presented by groups to the rest of the participants. Some of the groups even created a drawing of their users, some of which included gadgets their users come to college with. Some groups created multiple user profiles. Finally, participants were asked to think about how they might design their research guides to better serve their users. We hope that one takeaway for the participants was the importance of leveraging tools for creating dynamic research guides that include web 2.0 functionalities. Even better would be if participants left thinking about their users' characteristics and behaviors and how these inform their needs. The best takeaway of all would be the desire to create research guides that the users will be able to find and find useful.

See more of our research guides at <http://libguides.usc.edu/> and <http://alacarte.csumb.edu/subject-guides>

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# Appendix 1

## Activity

Participants will work in small groups. Each group should choose one member whose user population(s) will be the focus of the activity. Keeping in mind that each user is unique, focus on characteristics/behaviors many users within the population exhibit.

Create, using **Allen's user-centered model for the design of information systems** (summarized below), a portrait of your 'typical' user. To do so, think through steps 1-4:

- 1) **Needs analysis:** determine the user's goals, purposes, and objectives
  
- 2) **Task analysis:** determine the tasks and activities that users accomplish in meeting their needs
  
- 3) **Resource analysis:** investigate the resources (both cognitive and social) that are used in completing the tasks
  
- 4) **User modeling:** synthesize the typical user's needs, tasks, and resources to create a portrait of the user

Once you have a portrait of your user, start on step 5 if there's time. Groups who share their user portrait with the class will have the opportunity to receive feedback on designing for usability with that specific user in mind.

- 5) **Designing for usability:** describe how modern research guide tools might be leveraged to better serve the user

**Several groups will be asked to share their user portrait with the class, and the class will be asked to provide additional suggestions for step 5.**

Source: Allen, B. L. (1996). *Information tasks: Toward a user-centered approach to information systems*. New York, NY: Academic Press, as cited in Hemmig, 2005.