Helping users find their way: Usability testing of LibGuides

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Introduction

Springshare'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 quickly and easily create a subject guide or course page. However, though librarians continue to develop these tools, few studies are done to assess user satisfaction (Vileno, 2007). As the popularity 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 (Hintz et al., 2010; Hungerford, Ray, Tawatao, & Ward, 2010; Sinkinson, Alexander, Hicks, & Kahn, 2012; Vileno, 2010). Generally, these studies found that users prefer:

- a simple, clean layout
- short annotations describing resources
- brief instruction linked to resources
- shorter pages
- clearer labeling
- fewer tabs

Users also found Web 2.0 features confusing.

Duke University Libraries previously conducted a faculty survey (fall 2008), librarian focus groups (fall 2008), student survey (spring 2009), and usability study (spring 2009) and collected Google Analytics statistics. They found that users appreciate an uncluttered interface, but that they wanted enough content to make the guide useful; that users do not usually notice 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 seeking 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 completed two tasks for each guide, then rated 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 usability of the guide.

I used 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 audio in Morae for later analysis. Only subject guides were tested in this way.

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

In total, 20 students participated in the testing; 13 tested subject guides and 7 tested 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 video of the observed tests and the worksheets to develop codes and used the codes to analyze the video and worksheets and designate which features were either observed (by investigators) or identified (by test subjects) as a facilitator or barrier to guide use, as well as which features subjects suggested would improve usability.
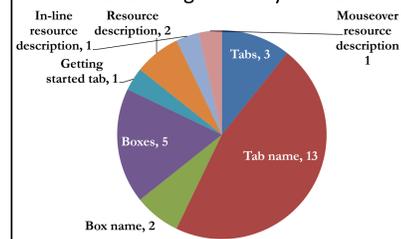
Acknowledgements

Results
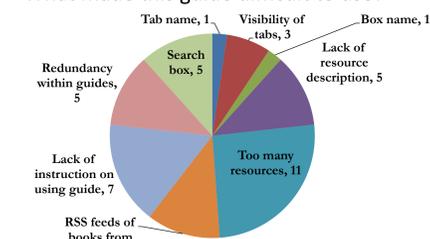
Previous experience with LibGuides

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?"

In-line resource description, 1; Resource description, 2; Mouseover resource description 1; Getting started tab, 1; Tabs, 3; Boxes, 5; Tab name, 13; Box name, 2

"What made this guide difficult to use?"

Tab name, 1; Visibility of tabs, 3; Box name, 1; Search box, 5; Lack of resource description, 5; Redundancy within guide, 5; Too many resources, 11; Lack of instruction on using guide, 7; RSS feeds of books from catalog, 5

"What would have made this guide easier to use?"

Consistency, 1; Visibility of tabs, 1; Resource description, 3; Getting started tab, 3; In-line resource description, 1; Table of contents, 3; Fewer resources, 1; Boxes, 1; Instruction on using guide, 4; Vert. arrangement of boxes, 2; Order of tabs, 1

Course guides

"What made this guide easy to use?"
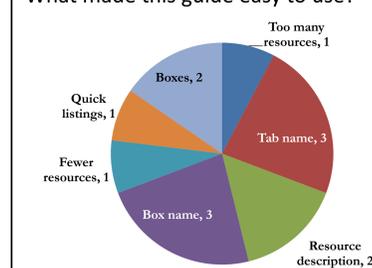
Too many resources, 1; Boxes, 2; Quick listings, 1; Tab name, 3; Fewer resources, 1; Box name, 3; Resource description, 2

"What made this guide difficult to use?"

Search guide box, 2; Too many resources, 4; Too few resources, 2; Tab name, 3; Lack of resource description, 1

"What would have made this guide easier to use?"

Icons, 1; Direct link to db, 1; Quick list of articles, 1; Instruction on using guide, 1
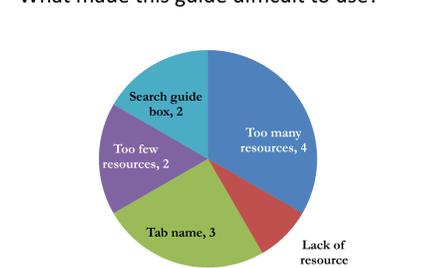
Highlights

- Users preferred short, targeted lists of resources and few 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

- Most users found the tabbed 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 box 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 wanted some sort of guidance or orientation

- Users found RSS feeds of recent books from the library catalog confusing 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 few to give students a starting point
- Provide short in-line descriptions of resources indicating what information can be found using a particular resource
- 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 blurb about the contents of each page)
- Take care when naming tabs and boxes, making sure they clearly describe content they contain in language users can understand (i.e. avoid library jargon)
- Rather than creating an RSS feed for recent library materials 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 (Morris & Grimes, 1999). Some possible topics to discuss with librarians are perceived usability and utility 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 LAUNC-CH Conference on enforcing 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. San Jose State University librarians found that students who had received library instruction tend to use subject guides more and find them more useful (Staley, 2007). Many libraries, including those at Duke, link to course guides within course/learning management systems (Adebonojo, 2010; Fletcher, 2010; Kellam, Cox, & Winkler, 2009; Solis & Hampton, 2009). Librarians at San Francisco State University found email to be an effective marketing tool (Foster, Wilson, Allensworth, & Sands, 2010). University of Florida librarians found the library catalog another effective tool (Simpson, Williams, Arlen, & Bushnell, 2005).

Content of guides
Some subjects commented on content they liked, usually librarians' contact information. It might be worth investigating what other content they like/would like or do not like included in these guides.

Rethinking subject guides
Several studies suggest that subject guides approach research from too broad a perspective and are therefore not as useful or as well used as course pages (Reeb & Gibbons, 2004; Strutin, 2008). Creation and maintenance of these guides is time consuming, and it would be worth rethinking the long-standing assumption that broad subject guides are worth the effort.

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Further information

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