REIMAGINING LIBGUIDES

University students have enough challenges in grappling with their course material, so negotiating library guides should not present them with further difficulties. DONNA WILEMAN and FIONA MURPHY of La Trobe University in Melbourne outline how their library guides have been revamped to make it easier to access information.

Information and communication technologies have transformed the way we learn and teach. In higher education there is an increasing emphasis on online and blended learning, which requires the use of innovative technologies to enhance the student's experience. Springshare's LibGuides software is one such popular tool used by many university and school libraries worldwide,

Before and after shots of the LibGuides. The busy image at the left is the before shot and the image at the right is how LibGuides look now.

and it has been used by La Trobe University Library as both a curatorial and instructional tool since 2009. A recent software upgrade to LibGuides v2, as well as significant organisational change throughout the university, provided a perfect opportunity for a total review of the library's current practice with LibGuides and to determine if they were meeting a pedagogical need.

To ensure a successful transition to v2, a working group was established with the aim of overseeing the project. An audit was conducted of our existing guides, and those considered outdated or no longer required were removed. Feedback and usage statistics determined the fate of remaining guides. Many guides appeared to be frequently used, but this seemingly high rate of use was often limited to the home page content. Book and journal links were rarely accessed, especially if the lists provided were extensive. The audit also uncovered duplicate content in guides and on our website and revealed a need for a more cohesive approach to our digital space.

The consistent message from usability studies (our own and those of others) and best-practice studies prompted us to reflect on our content. Users are overwhelmed by large guides, have difficulty in locating the drop-down menu content and find library terminology unhelpful. These findings prompted us to limit the number of links for books and journals and concentrate on directing users to appropriate sources and showing them how to get the best out of them.

To ensure best practice for all guides, an editorial process was also established; a proposal form must now be submitted before any new guides are created and guides are also peer-reviewed before publication. A gap in our knowledge management soon emerged during the transition; a lack of documentation meant that we did not know why certain guides existed. To remedy this, each guide now has a hidden Guide Management page that includes an authorised guide proposal form as well as information on where the guide is currently linked, for example, to the learning management system.

Our new guides include the publicly available specialist and discipline-specific Expert Help Guides

(latrobe.libguides.com) and Assessment Help guides (which are created to assist students at point of need and are embedded into the curriculum via the learning management system in collaboration with academic teaching staff). Guides have also been created in collaboration with other stakeholders in the university.

Using best practice in web usability and design, the library's Digital Experience team were instrumental in designing the new guide templates. Evidence has shown that content should be easy to use on all devices and that accessibility guidelines should be met. The innovative and attractive design of these guides follows conventions similar to those for a web page and provides a sequential pathway for students. The consistent structure and style allows more time to focus on creating content.

Evidence has also demonstrated that when reading online, users browse, scan and read a little at a time, and this reading pattern requires a certain approach to writing. Library staff, as well as other partners, were invited to attend an in-house 'Writing for the Web' workshop (4syllables.com.au) Training sessions were held and a style guide was created to ensure users were provided with a consistent experience.

The migration process is continuing and is not without its challenges, but we are confident that this new approach will ensure both quality and consistency with the aim of creating instructionally robust guides.

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