Weeding the Web: Applying a Collections Management Mentality to Editing Academic Library LibGuides

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Abstract

Content available on LibGuides in the academic library context would benefit from being viewed and curated/edited as individual and distinct collections. Viewing LibGuides through this lens provides academic libraries with a new perspective for resolving the well-documented user experience issues that afflict this mode of information delivery. Novel considerations that emerge from this approach include: a) the value of formalizing a collection acquisition policy for individual LibGuides; b) the importance of creating content responsive to emerging research directions; and c) an emphasis on the need for weeding and deselection processes. Although the author anticipates especial resistance to the idea that content on LibGuides would benefit from regular weeding, from the stance that virtual content takes up minimal space, this paper argues that the prioritization of high-quality, curated content in the era of the attention economy is a practice of prime importance.

Keywords: LibGuides; Lib Guides; research guides; best practices; collection management

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Introduction

Whether in the form of paper handouts or web-based resources, libraries have long provided their users with guides for discovering information and content (Glassman & Sorensen, 2010). Springshare's LibGuides platform has come to dominate the web-based guide environment, especially within the academic library context (Vaska & Vaska, 2017). Part of LibGuides' popularity comes from the ease with which content can be created, information added, and presentation tweaked for user consumption. While the freedom to create is liberating, a lack of universal guidelines for content creation can lead to the development of poorly designed content, such as the infamous laundry list of resources (Hickner, 2019). To help address this issue, many resources have been published that convey LibGuides-editing best practices (e.g., Gonzalez & Westbrook, 2010; German, 2017; Brown, Drummond, & Minter, 2018; Hickner, 2019). While these guidelines have much to say on the proper means of designing and creating guides from the outset, they offer little specific advice when it comes to maintaining and curating a guide as time passes. This omission is problematic, as the ubiquitous creation of LibGuide content has appeared in tandem with a global information explosion: Vaska and Vaska (2017) note that Springshare estimates that there are 400,000 LibGuides in existence globally as of 2016, with the number growing daily. Within this overwhelming environment, which is further compounded by the reality of an attention economy (Lanham, 2008), strategies to address the long-term utility of LibGuides are needed.

This paper provides such a strategy by arguing that recommendations for editing LibGuides may be understood as attempts to define a collection management strategy

for a unique form of information resource. Insight into improving LibGuides-editing best practices is available by viewing individual LibGuides through this collection management lens, subject to the same broad curatorial considerations as other library collections. To support the feasibility of this strategy, I first discuss the typical content of a LibGuide, arguing that individual LibGuides constitute a unique collection of resources. Next, I compare four articles that detail best practices for editing LibGuides against four general steps for collection management practices, conveyed by Wray (2016). Finally, I argue that although LibGuides-editing best practices have largely avoided the idea of deselection, using weeding practices from the collection management realm is a critical aspect for developing and maintaining effective LibGuides.

LibGuides as Unique Information Resources

Gorman (2003) conceptualizes four types of “collections” in a library: 1) locally owned physical documents; 2) physical documents available from other libraries by interlibrary loan; 3) owned or subscribed to electronic documents; and 4) free electronic documents. Although LibGuides are generally viewed as a content management system (Lewis & Griffin, 2011), in Gorman’s (2003) conception they represent a unique combination of several collection types. In the academic context, LibGuides are typically created for a specific subject area or course, though they may also be directed at a particular type of user or tool. The guide is populated with links, videos, and downloadable resources (German, 2017), and this compiled content makes the LibGuide a key discovery and access point for users. Although these resources are accessible through the main interface of the library, the user can also gain access

through the LibGuide, making the LibGuide a de facto repository of these resources, and, as Gorman (2003) discusses, a collection of owned/subscribed to electronic documents. In addition to serving as a collection of links to online content, the LibGuides platform allows authors to add substantial text. Such additions can be quite significant, usually presenting varied and in-depth information on the topic at hand in the guise of instructions for finding particular content. Authors can also add annotations about the scope and use of a linked resource: a practice that is helpful for the user and recommended as a LibGuides authoring best practice (Jackson & Stacy-Bates, 2016). This author-added content means LibGuides also embody collections of free electronic documents, which once again aligns with Gorman's (2003) conception. LibGuides thus blur the line between a resource access point and a resource in their own right: each guide represents the synthesized knowledge of its author(s) in the form of a living document. It is precisely this amorphous identity that Vaska and Vaska (2017) point to in arguing that LibGuides should be considered their own distinct form of grey literature. Significantly, they highlight that "information produced and available on LibGuides is often material that may not be seen anywhere else" (Vaska & Vaska, 2017, p. 81).

More than a simple repository of links, LibGuides are a unique blend of library-authored content and access points to published electronic material. As such, an individual LibGuide may be considered a collection of unique resources, distinct from the rest of the library's collection (even as it uses the same owned/subscribed to electronic content). Accepting an individual LibGuide as a separate entity creates the need for the formulation of a distinct collection management strategy tailored to these resources.

Editing LibGuides through Collection Management Practices

There are a plethora of editing best practice guidelines for LibGuides' design, creation, and management processes. While often discussed through the lens of instructional design or user experience (Sonsteby & DeJonghe, 2013; Baker, 2014; Bergstrom-Lynch, 2019), these guidelines are an attempt to formulate a collection management strategy for a unique information resource. The situation is complicated because references to "editing LibGuides" in the literature encompass managing the two natures of LibGuides content: choices around the presentation and inclusion of owned/subscribed to resources, and choices surrounding the unique information written by the guide's author. Essentially, the act of editing in this context is simultaneously an act of curating content. This juxtaposition may create a situation where authors are too close to the situation to view their content as objectively as they would otherwise. In viewing their editing practices as components of collection management (both in terms of which external resources are linked, and what sort of authored content is included), LibGuides authors can attain a more objective perspective on their work.

The following literature analysis highlights how the suggested best practices for editing LibGuides parallel the main aspects of collection management practices, and identifies areas that have been overlooked. The articles for analysis were chosen after searching through the Library and Information Science Abstracts database, as recent examples from a variety of perspectives that offer techniques for improving LibGuides. In the first article, Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) offer an overview of their library's development of a working set of best practices for LibGuides. The second article, by German (2017), considers LibGuides best practices from an instructional service design

perspective. Brown et al. (2018) discuss their development of a review process to evaluate research guides, while Hickner (2019) succinctly describes four techniques for improving research guides.

In order to consider these four articles through the lens of collection management, an understanding of common collection management practices is required. However, a review of the literature on collections management reveals that there is no uniform standard for this area of practice, and moreover, that the terminology itself (whether “collection development” or “collection management”) is fraught (Corrall, 2012). Even so, Corrall (2012) helpfully identifies recurring themes in this realm: collection development is associated with the selection and deselection of library materials, while collection management is understood as a broader term involving all aspects of managing access to information resources. While Corrall’s discussion of the nuances of collection development and management reflects a fascinating historical tradition in libraries, it is not helpful for understanding the major aspects of this work in practice. Wray (2016) addresses this gap in her article aimed at guiding new librarians through the “on the job” process of collection development and management.

Wray’s (2016) approach in explaining collection management as a process closely resembles the “how-to” structure of the LibGuides-editing literature and thereby allows for easy comparison of the two. The processes she describes can be grouped into four distinct steps: 1) understanding the needs of the collection’s users; 2) understanding the characteristics of the material contained in the collection; 3) understanding the use of the collection; and 4) maintaining the collection. Wray’s steps

for success represent a model of collection management that I will use to analyze the four previously identified articles on editing LibGuides.

1) Understanding the Information Needs of Users

Wray (2016) emphasizes that assumptions should not be made about the nature of a collection's users, and instead offers two means to determine the intended audience. These suggestions include looking to the department supported by the collection, and compiling existing user data, with the option to conduct a user evaluation study. This initial step is one that is recommended within all four of the articles. Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) discuss the challenge of identifying the information needs of their users, reporting that librarians succeeded in understanding these needs when they partnered with faculty, but otherwise struggled. Likewise, German (2017) discusses the importance of recognizing the information needs of users by employing "user-centered" terminology, and emphasizes that the learning outcomes for users should be considered. Brown et al. (2018) echo this focus in defining the purpose of a research guide as "assist[ing] the user in meeting a specific information need" (p. 370), while Hickner (2019) also emphasizes the need to conduct research on the user to determine the supports they need within a research guide. Such findings suggest that this initial stage of collections management is one that is well-recognized in the literature and well-aligned with Wray's suggestions.

2) Understanding the Characteristics of the Collection's Material

Wray (2016) explains that this step in collection management involves knowing what types of materials are within a collection and how to subcategorize the collection into meaningful units. Determining the characteristics of a collection's material is a practice

that allows one to see the tangible results of a collection acquisition policy. This step underscores the importance of understanding the scope of what a collection should or does contain: an idea that appears in all four articles. Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) address this concept in a discussion of LibGuides templates, which in their context is the provision of a large database of common content boxes that are likely to be used in more than one guide. The choice architecture of master templates dictates a certain baseline of content that is likely to appear on the LibGuides, and thus represents thought towards content inclusion criteria. German (2017) also specifies the characteristics of the content that should appear in LibGuides and ultimately offers the simple directive to “include [only] content that supports the learning objective” (p. 164). Brown et al. (2018) echo a similar sentiment with regards to content inclusion, as their process for creating a LibGuide includes submitting a form outlining the objective of the guide, a summary of planned content, and a rationale for why a new guide is needed. Ultimately, the content included in a guide is selected based on “the expertise of the guide authors” (Brown et al., 2018, p. 371). Finally, Hickner (2019) avoids explicit consideration of subject-specific content in LibGuides, stating only that a set of internal guidelines should be developed to ensure quality control.

While the four articles all recognize the need for a plan around the content that populates the LibGuides, direction beyond this basic exhortation is vague. German (2017) is the most explicit on this matter, but her contention that content should be included that helps achieve the learning objective is not helpful in practice. The need for content inclusion guidance is especially evident when considering Gonzalez and Westbrook’s (2010) proposal for a master templates solution, which falls into what

Quinn (2000) sees as the McDonaldization of academic libraries: increased standardization and efficiency at the cost of creativity and full use of librarians' expertise. The question of what to include in terms of content in LibGuides may be answered by looking to formalize a collection acquisition policy for each individual LibGuide. Such a solution recognizes the expertise of authors, as prioritized by Brown et al. (2018), while avoiding the potential for McDonaldization evident in Gonzalez and Westbrook's use of master templates.

3) Understanding Use of the Collection

Wray (2016) suggests that collection use can best be understood by looking to circulation statistics and more complex metrics, such as the relative use of a subcategory within the collection, or the price per use of particular items. This stage of collection development, which represents an assessment of the collection's success, is a common theme in the literature on editing LibGuides. Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) convey the importance of assessing guides, both at a basic level by tracking guide use and also at a more developed level by investigating student perception and success using LibGuides. German (2017) also acknowledges the vital importance of assessment and recommends "usage statistics, pre- and post-quizzes, focus groups, usability studies, and user satisfaction surveys" for doing so (p. 166). Brown et al. (2018) assess the use of LibGuides according to the basic metric of views per year, while Hickner (2019) echoes the first two articles in understanding use through a broad suite of web analytics, cautioning against using page views as the only measure of a guide's value. This comparison suggests that the LibGuides-editing literature is already well-aligned with this stage of the collection management process.

4) Maintaining the Collection

Wray (2016) concludes her guide to collection management with some strategies for maintaining the collection. These strategies are largely ways to remain abreast of developments within a research field in order to ensure that new purchases are valued and reflective of a responsive collection. This concern for ongoing maintenance can be tracked across the four articles. Gonzalez and Westbrook (2010) state that LibGuides must be maintained to avoid out-of-date guides that are missing hyperlinks. German (2017) also emphasizes the importance of maintenance, suggesting the use of a content plan and checking that “links work, screenshots and videos are up to date, and terminology is current” (p. 165). Brown et al. (2018) agree on the importance of maintenance “to minimize broken links or outdated content” (p. 373), which is a sentiment that Hickner (2019) repeats almost verbatim.

While all four articles address the importance of maintenance, this concern is entirely focused on LibGuides as a content management tool. While ensuring the continued workability of links and resources that support finding and accessing owned/subscribed to material is important, this narrow view misses the unique position that LibGuides have as living documents. If each LibGuide is viewed as an individual collection in its own right, Wray’s (2016) emphasis on staying current with research directions gains traction and allows for the creation of LibGuides that are responsive and current beyond simplistic link maintenance. LibGuides’ content should reflect developments in the fields they support and provide guidance for emerging research directions.

Weeding the Collection

Although Wray (2016) provides a useful guide for collection management that allows for easy comparison to the four articles on LibGuide-editing, her article reflects a growth imperative that neglects to discuss a key component of healthy collection development: weeding. Wray's avoidance of this topic is reflective of a well-documented distaste for weeding in the profession (Zuber, 2012). Regular weeding has long been recognized as necessary in the face of high subscription costs and space shortages (Sandhu, 1997), though Zuber emphasizes how the practice also creates opportunities for criticism and growth. According to Larson (2012), libraries "have a responsibility to maintain a collection that is free from outdated, obsolete, shabby, or no longer useful items" (p. 11). While some might balk at weeding electronic resources because their format avoids the physical realities that traditionally prompt a weeding exercise, Waugh, Donlin, and Braunstein (2015) emphasize that improving currency and quality remains a primary consideration when weeding virtual resources.

Weeding and deselection are largely neglected issues in the four articles on LibGuides-editing. Removing content is addressed in the sense of deleting guides as a whole, rather than weeding the content contained within a particular guide (Gonzalez & Westbrook, 2010; Brown, Drummond, & Minter, 2018). Even removing guides, however, is considered "the extreme case," according to Jackson and Stacy-Bates (2016, p. 226). As an information delivery modality that demands a hefty cognitive load from users (Little, 2010), LibGuides require periodic content weeding in order to ensure the delivery of current and quality information.

The importance of high-impact LibGuide content is especially apparent when considering the information-seeking practices of the new generation of academics. A recent study shows that millennial researchers tend to rely on Google and similar search tools and are moving away from subject specific resources like LibGuides (Gordon, Meindl, White, & Szigeti, 2018). Simultaneously, this study reports that researchers are “increasingly feeling inundated and overwhelmed by information choices” (Gordon et al., 2018, p. 132), a new reality in the attention economy era. As such, LibGuides represent important information resources for the academic context, but only if they can provide more targeted information than competitors like Google. Information that is most relevant to academics may be better conveyed in LibGuides by engaging in formal weeding processes. Since LibGuide authors are charged with the tasks of both creating and weeding their own content, the use of formal weeding practices may allow authors to assess the content of their guides more critically.

Developing formal weeding processes for LibGuides constitutes a particular challenge that will be shaped by the realities of individual institutions. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to propose specific LibGuides weeding strategies, general guidelines are evident by considering the four stages of collections management as put forth by Wray (2016). LibGuide editors should remain vigilant and remove content from their guide if it: a) no longer supports the needs of users; b) no longer aligns with the guide development policy; c) is no longer used or clicked on; or d) is part of an outdated research direction. Rigorously sticking to these guidelines will do much to create robust, effective, and well-curated LibGuides.

Conclusion

The literature on editing LibGuides offers a multitude of tips, ideas, and best practices for enhancing the usability of these guides. This literature focuses on LibGuides primarily as a content management system, thus neglecting to address usability issues that persist across the unique content of the guides. In reframing LibGuides as distinct collections, this paper has viewed the LibGuides-editing literature through the lens of collection management practices. This analysis reveals a need to consider the unique content contained in a LibGuide as an independent information resource that requires its own formalized form of collection development policy. Such a policy should encompass specifics on selecting content, maintaining a responsive collection, and most importantly, developing a periodic weeding schedule. Although these recommendations require more work from LibGuide authors, adopting this mindset shift will improve the quality of LibGuides, and ultimately, their usability for researchers.

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