‘One stop shop’: a collaborative approach to online support & training at the University of Western Australia

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Abstract

This paper will report on an online support initiative for undergraduate students at the University of Western Australia (UWA). The review and response was developed by Learning and Inquiry staff in Information Services, a department within UWA that is responsible for managing six libraries and other information technology infrastructure, and aimed to meet the strategic objective of supporting the University’s new degree structure that commenced in 2012. In particular, the initiative focused on providing point of need information to students who, in the new course structure, would be working across several discipline areas. The response becomes an essential tool in providing a ‘one stop shop’ for students sourcing study support directly relevant to their discipline areas.

The review aimed to:

1. Develop and establish a best practice client service model for online support
2. Establish an ongoing review and audit mechanism
3. Identify up-skilling opportunities for library staff in their role as online content creators
4. Establish a style template for LibGuides in keeping with UWA’s visual identity requirements.

The review resulted in the implementation of a number of key changes that together produce a best practice client service model approach for online support materials:

1. Communication mechanism that enables collaboration and ongoing support between Learning and Inquiry and content creators
2. Learning and Inquiry led training and coaching events for library staff
3. Standard templates and guidelines that enable content creators to work effectively
4. Policy that ensures a LibGuide for each undergraduate major.

The twelve month project exceeded expectations as it not only resulted in the development of a best practice model for training and support of LibGuides but also formulated a model that could be implemented into other technology training and support mechanisms. The successful outcome of the review resulted in Information Services’ LibGuides becoming a heavily used resource by undergraduate students, and enabled Learning and Inquiry to work closely with Library Technicians, Librarians, and Faculty Liaison Coordinators to further develop a collaborative approach to support and training.
Introduction

Information Services is a department at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and is responsible for the Library and Information Technology infrastructure on campus. Within Information Services sits Learning and Inquiry Support, a team consisting of a Coordinator and two Senior Library Officers (who are qualified Library Technicians). The section is responsible for the coordination and support of a range of online services, one of which is our online Guides. These Guides are a source of subject-specific, self-help information primarily aimed at our undergraduate students, they include details on information resources, how to reference your assignments, searching tips, and where to get additional help. Our Guides are delivered on the LibGuides platform, an external product designed by the US company Springshare, who support the technical requirements of the system and host it on their servers.

Currently, as part of the coordination of Guides, Learning and Inquiry is responsible for the overall administration and management of the system. This includes writing and implementing guidelines and procedures, contributing to the creation and maintenance of Guides, ensuring the Guides comply with visual identity standards and conducting internal staff training on the system. Library staff are responsible for the subject-specific content within the Guides.

Background and Context

UWA implemented LibGuides in 2009, after a review of the existing UWA Library Guides model highlighted a need for a more user-friendly approach. In the previous UWA Library Guides model, library staff created a Guide using Microsoft Word, converted it to Adobe PDF for circulation and printing, and finally re-created the Guide on our website using html and a WYSIWYG editor. The process was time consuming and complicated and library staff expressed the desire to have a more streamlined and sustainable process. After investigation and analysis by a project team, LibGuides was implemented as a best-fit solution.

As part of the LibGuides implementation, a decision was made to have a beta period put into place for the system. During this time library staff migrated existing Guides into the new system and practiced creating and maintaining content, getting an overall feel for LibGuides. To get them started, a brief set of guidelines and support materials were produced and a training program was developed.

During the initial stages of implementation, librarians authored content specific to their subject areas and held overall responsibility for their Guides. Senior Library Officers held the technical role of putting the content into the Guide and working within the LibGuides system. This approach allowed library staff to have unrestricted scope to design and structure Guides as they saw fit. It was the role of Learning and Inquiry to help staff use the platform and create learning objects, such as screen capture videos, to be included in the Guides.

LibGuides soon became a popular tool as it provided a flexible platform for staff to create online content with little to no web authoring experience. Librarians were also able to use LibGuides as a tool to complement their face-to-face teaching, which proved to be another means of promoting both library resources and the LibGuides system.
Visions for Change and Review

As the close of the beta period approached in 2010, LibGuides had been in operation for more than a year, and over 60 Guides had been published with a number of other Guides under construction. By 2011, UWA was moving towards a new course structure set to commence in 2012. A number of new majors would be offered and undergraduate degrees would see a significant restructure, with students studying across several discipline areas. The unrestricted scope that library staff had with Guides at this time would mean that students studying different majors would encounter a range of different Guides, as the design depended on the style of the individual library staff members.

Further to this, Information Services were seeking to reduce the number of subject specific face-to-face classes for undergraduate students. Our online self-help materials would become our primary means of providing subject-specific information and referencing help to our undergraduate students. These new UWA and Information Services directions, together with the end of the beta period, provided an opportunity for reviewing our Guides model to identify ways to better cater for these new research and support requirements.

In order to design a best practice model for LibGuides, Learning and Inquiry made the decision to conduct a review of the Guides model, focusing on how LibGuides could align with the new course structure and reduce the impact of fewer undergraduate teaching sessions being offered. The review aimed to establish a best practice client service model for LibGuides and to identify training requirements for staff in their role as online content creators. The review took a period of 6 months to complete and involved heavy participation from stakeholders in the system.

Methodology and Findings

The review consisted of three stages:

1. **Environmental scan** – a scan of best practice methodology applied to LibGuides by other institutions, focusing on subject allocation of Guides and structure.

2. **Staff consultation** – library staff participated in feedback sessions led by Learning and Inquiry to discuss training requirements for the system and how LibGuides could better support their subject areas.

3. **Staff testing** – library staff were asked to evaluate a draft model to identify what worked well and which areas required improvement.

Stage 1: Environmental Scan

Learning and Inquiry initiated the LibGuides review by examining Springshare’s ‘Best of LibGuides’ website (Springshare, 2013) which provides links to LibGuides content that Springshare view as examples of best practice. The search was refined to include only academic institutions similar to UWA. Comparisons across the board revealed that the most popular documents adhered to best practice web design principles, with clean, simple navigation, succinct content, standard font, colours and format that remained consistent with their organisations’ visual identity. The layout of these documents had a simple tab structure for ease of access to content; and the documents with the most ‘hits’ were specific to subject areas.

Stage 2: Staff Consultation
Library staff were consulted in a series of feedback sessions where staff had the opportunity to give their subject-specific perspective. The feedback sessions were beneficial in identifying skills and knowledge gaps of staff, limitations and benefits of the current model, and needs and wants of library staff.

Staff reported that they would like more opportunities for training, including follow up sessions on how to use the LibGuides platform as well as sessions on specific web content skills (such as writing for the web and basic HTML). It was also suggested that a process be put in place to capture the training requirements for commencing staff. Work load and time was another area of concern. Librarians and Senior Library Officers stated they did not have enough time amongst their other tasks to plan Guides ‘from scratch’ and felt creating Guides to be too time consuming during busy periods of semester. All requested more detailed procedures and guidance to help them determine what is “right and wrong”.

Stage 3: Staff Testing

We used the information gathered in the environmental scan and staff consultation to create a draft Guides model which included:

1. An outline of the role Learning and Inquiry and library staff would take in the new model, including a list of procedures and guidelines
2. An example of how a Guide might look
3. A template structure designed to streamline the creation and maintenance process
4. An example of reusable templates

We then took the draft model back to the library staff surveyed in Stage 2 to share our findings and gather their input on how the model might be finalised. From the information we gathered in Stage 3, we were able to create a new Guides model.

New Guides Model

At the outcome of the review, four recommendations were tabled with the Information Services Senior Management Team:

1. **Standard Templates**
   1.1. **Subject Guide template**

   A template be designed to ensure consistency and standardisation throughout the Guides. The template design would reflect the UWA visual identity and comply with online best practice principles as determined by the environmental scan.

   1.2. **Style guide for postgraduate and staff Guides**

   A style guide, containing formatting advice and best practice tips to reflect the UWA visual identity, and best practice web authoring.

   1.3. **Template boxes guide**

   The guide would consist of standard template boxes used regularly in UWA Guides. Content authors could copy a box rather than creating it from scratch, saving time and ensuring all content boxes are consistent.
2. **Training and up-skilling opportunities**

2.1. *LibGuides specific training*

Introduction to LibGuides – one session offered per semester to capture commencing staff. The session would be conducted by request throughout the year if required. Refresher training – by request, aimed at staff already familiar with the system. This could be a general refresher session or training in a specific area of the Guides.

2.2. *Learning and Inquiry led training opportunities*

In recognition of staff’s request for further training opportunities in online content creation, Learning and Inquiry will offer training opportunities in basic HTML and writing for the web sessions.

2.3. *Standard lessons plans for training sessions*

Learning and Inquiry Support to create a set of approved lesson plans to streamline the teaching.

3. **Support resources**

3.1. *Procedures manual*

Distributed during LibGuides training, this manual features instruction in all elements of the system. After training, staff should be able to use different features of the LibGuides system with support of the manual.

3.2. *Guidelines*

Learning and Inquiry Support to revise the current guidelines document to further streamline the Guides creation processes.

4. **Policy update**

4.1. *LibGuide for each undergraduate major*

Create individual subject Guides for every major, to ensure point of need information is available to undergraduate students.

4.2. *System name change*

To reflect the direction of UWA Information Services, change the client-facing name from ‘LibGuides’ to ‘Guides’.

The Information Services Senior Management Team analysed the full review closely and endorsed all four recommendations put forward. Learning and Inquiry then set about implementing the new Guides model.
Implementing the new Guides model

Learning and Inquiry began by orienting library staff to the new model and highlighting the wider role that Learning and Inquiry would adopt. Library staff were given information on how a finalised Guide should look, together with templates and instructions for achieving the desired outcome, and were given approximately 6 months to convert their existing Guides into the new format. Staff were also provided with a list of all current Guides and a list of the Guides that needed to be created, so they could keep track of their progress. At the end of the implementation period, there would be one Guide for each UWA major, in a consistent format for our undergraduate students.

Throughout the implementation, Learning and Inquiry supported library staff by clarifying parts of the model, helping to create content, delivering training and refresher sessions, and monitoring the progress of changes. By the end of the implementation, more than 90 Guides had been created, all providing consistent content for students. The new model enabled staff to create and maintain more subject-specific content; and provided opportunities for Learning and Inquiry to initiate training and support for staff.

Conclusion

The review exceeded expectations. As a result, UWA now has a Guides system which better meets the research needs of students and faculties, and conforms to best practice web standards. Feedback on the new model has been extremely positive, with students reporting that they have benefited from having specific tools and resources for their majors easily accessible at point of need.

The review also resulted in the development of a successful training and support model, which is now in place for Guides as well as for other technology focused training sessions. Training packages have been created by Learning and Inquiry for Adobe Captivate, Adobe Photoshop and the Information Services content repository system. Other bespoke training is available to library staff by request. In addition, Learning and Inquiry Senior Library Officers are able to put their skills into practice with the opportunity to conduct regular training sessions for staff, thus gaining further experience in preparing information, designing presentations, writing lesson plans and conducting face-to-face teaching.

The Guides review project was a very positive experience for all involved. It created a valuable opportunity for Learning and Inquiry to collaborate in-depth with other Library Technicians and Librarians across Information Services. With the success of this collaborative approach, a number of other productive interdepartmental projects have been initiated, strengthening the Learning and Inquiry Support section.

References

