Bringing Guides to Every Course

Amanda Clossen

Based on Penn State's Canvas implementation strategy, guides became a primary area of focus for Canvas integration. Guides were of particular interest because they are artifacts that most librarians at Penn State create, often in collaboration with instructors, as course-specific resources. No other instructional resource had been created by the library with such depth of scope and breadth of reach.

Furthermore, it was a particularly timely integration, as guides had been transitioned from an institutionally hosted solution to Springshare's LibGuides earlier in the year. Not only did this transition allow use of the Springshare LTI, but it also followed several revisions to guide content that made implementation of the LTI run more smoothly.

During the transition to LibGuides, guides were created for every major offered at Penn State. This proved of vital importance for the automatic implementation within the LTI. Additionally, transitioned guides were revised to demonstrate a more user-friendly model. Workshops were held to instruct guide creators on writing-for-the-web techniques, as well as to inform them of simple formatting decisions that improved guide usability and readability. Penn State's revamped guides were sleeker, sharper, and addressed more programs than they had before the transition. And this was ideal because if every student in the university was to have a guide in their course, those guides needed to be as usable as possible.

As the more technical aspects of guide integration have been covered in the previous chapter, this chapter will focus on the practical questions of the implementation of the LTI we chose. Springshare's LTI integration allows for two different methods of guide integration, falling under the categories of either manual or automatic (known as automagic). Penn State implemented both methods.

Automatic Guide Association

The first thing required by the Springshare LTI was a static piece of metadata that could be used to establish a connection between a guide and a Canvas course section. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the only piece of static information existing for each course section was the field known as SISID, a course identifier established by Canvas. All other information, such as the course's title, could be altered by the instructor, thus unintentionally breaking the connection between the LTI and the course section. SISIDs are twelve-character strings, including both numbers and dashes, that describe a specific course. They have no identifying characteristics aside from the first number, which indicates the date the section was established. For example, 21811—XXXXX would represent a course starting on the first of January 2018.

With our decision to use the translation table described previously, it was necessary to gather the data required to create a functional translation table. Course information was drawn from LionPath, our student information gateway, and through a script, courses were matched with their course abbreviations. These abbreviations were then used as metadata. For instance, all courses with the abbreviation MATH were associated with the math subject guide. This metadata contained within the guide was static, so that every semester as a new translation table was generated, all MATH courses were associated with the math guide. Some guides, such as our general business guide, had

multiple course abbreviations listed as metadata, as the management and entrepreneurship courses used this as their primary guide as well. Assigning the metadata by course abbreviation was a very large task, but luckily it needed to happen only once.

An unforeseen issue with the translation table was that if two people downloaded it and decided to edit it at once, the data from one editing session would be lost when the second translation table was uploaded. Utilizing tools readily available, we came up with a simple tracking process. We agreed among ourselves to check in by email or in person before making changes. We downloaded the translation table from Springshare and saved it to a designated folder in Box. We utilized agreed-upon naming conventions to name the file by date and author. The initiator of the download would make changes, save in Box, upload back to Springshare, and then alert the others that the work had been completed. While this system was effective, we've realized over time that the much simpler solution of splitting the day in half between guide edits and reserves edits was just as effective.

Custom Guide Association

For some instructors, the automatically associated course guide was not sufficient for their course needs. In certain cases, the courses were offered at a campus other than University Park, with a different librarian contact, and a specific focus that required different databases of frequent use. To describe the other cases, we will look to ENGL 015, the required freshman composition course. While the English subject guide focuses on literary criticism, ENGL 015 focuses on rhetorical analysis and composition. There is very little overlap in content. ENGL 015 is an enormous course that a huge portion of the freshman population takes in their first semester. It is also a course with massive library involvement.

Without intervention in both of these situations, the course would simply continue to have the subject guide associated with it to little effective use. To rectify this situation, we created a systematic process for swapping out guide metadata.

Two pieces of information were needed in order to make the switch: the course SISID and the name of the new guide meant to be associated with the course. The SISID itself became the metadata that was placed in the guide's metadata section, under the label LTI, where we would normally have placed a course abbreviation. Within the translation table, the course abbreviation was replaced completely with the SISID for the course, either in the original entry or as an addition at the bottom. The translation table was then reuploaded, and the Library Resources page now featured the new guide.

When the LTI integration was initially piloted, the system for requesting new guides was not particularly systematic. Instructors would email their subject or campus librarians when they felt the guides associated with their course sections were inappropriate, and those emails were then forwarded to the librarian designated to resolve the issues. These initial emails rarely had the information necessary to adjust the metadata and required several conversations in order to locate the SISID. While having a standard identifying number for the course sections was excellent in terms of making good associations, this number proved difficult for course instructors to find. An additional issue was the number of instructors and designers reaching out to protest inappropriate guide association when no alternative for their course had yet been created. In some cases, they would become so frustrated that they would simply turn off the Library Resources tab completely, which was a situation we very much wanted to avoid.

To remedy this situation, a form was created to process the information necessary to associate a guide. Separate instructions were written for instructors or designers and for librarians. Both sets indicated where the SISID could be found. This cut down on instructor confusion almost completely. Instructors and designers were asked to already have a guide in place to replace the current guide, and if they did not, they were directed to their relevant librarian. Librarians were asked to input the SISID into the metadata for the guide to be integrated, which saved on processing time. This form both sent an email to the librarian responsible for changing the guide associations and also added the data from the request to an Excel spreadsheet so it could be easily accessed again. The permanent form was created using Drupal as that is the standard on the library's website; however, the initial form was a Google form, which functioned just as well.

During the pilot of the LTI in the fall of 2016, eighty course sections requested to have custom guides associated with them. This number increased to 110 in the spring of 2017, and 145 in the fall of 2017. In 2017, three large-impact courses, each with over a hundred sections, were given custom associations before the semester even began. For two of those courses, this was coordinated with the liaison for those courses so that the instructors would be aware of the guide in their Canvas course. Students brought into the library were directed to the location of the guides within their courses as a reminder that the materials demonstrated in the session were easily accessible after the class.

Unexpectedly, the number of requests for guide associations was spread across the demographics, with instructors and designers making nearly as many requests as librarians. Instructional designers

specifically were the most interested in how the LTI was implemented, often calling or emailing the librarian tasked with making guide associations. The process has seen little complication and difficulty in the current semester (fall of 2017), indicating both an effective system and comfort and confidence in the process on the side of those who need to make requests.

Manual Guide Association

Manual guide integration requires no librarian involvement whatsoever. It inserts a blue cloud icon in any WYSIWYG HTML editor within the Canvas course, allowing anyone with editing privileges in that course to embed any item supported by the Springshare LTI into the text box. This meant that guides, portions of guides, and course reserves could be placed at any location the course editor desired. While guides could be embedded anywhere that text can be written, ideal locations were observed to be within assignments and within course modules. These establish the most direct point-of-need intervention. Instructors were particularly interested in integrating boxes from our citation guides in the text of research assignments.

Assessment

In order to track usage of the guides, it was necessary to track each instance of the LTI—that is, each instance of metadata that was inserted into the corresponding field in the guide. Springshare tracks this data. However, it was difficult to access this information via Springshare's dashboard due to the sheer volume of data that Penn State created. Luckily, it was easy to simply request this data from Springshare directly.

With this data, it was easy to see one thing: while 2017 hits on the LTI (clicking on the Library Resources navigation item to open the page) were quite high at 359,784 hits, instances where a guide was selected were many fewer at 223,643 hits. Though smaller, this number represented a fifth of the entire increase in hits that our guides had that year. Clearly, the Canvas integration was making an impact in students' access to guides.

In order to scan for improvement, we are focusing on the courses that had the most engagement with the guides and LTI page. The goal is to interview these faculty and see what they are doing to get the class to engage with the embedded library content.

Manual guides also provided interesting statistics, namely that they were not being used to their full potential. Leveraging influence with instructional designers, our Online Learning Librarian began to market the resource more aggressively in 2018, and we hope to see an increased use of that tool in the coming year.

Things to Improve

An issue that we have seen arise as a result of our translation table system is that of merged courses. Merged courses are created when a designer or an instructor wants to take multiple sections of a course and put them together, allowing for easier course management. This process in many ways makes things easier for the instructor; however, it also has the unexpected side effect of creating courses with SISIDs that do not exist in the translation table created from LionPath data. Original SISIDs are replaced with a merged ID, which is not available for collection unless specifically requested. As a result, merged courses are always given the standard Starting Library Research guide, unless a request is made otherwise. This is a particular issue with large-enrollment courses. Conversations are taking place on a higher administrative level about creating course IDs that do not change from semester to semester and could be used to more permanently map guides, but we don't foresee this process as taking place very quickly when there are many other LMS improvements necessary.

In general, while associations that are made completely automatically would be wonderful, it seems unlikely to be possible in the current instructional landscape at Penn State. We don't anticipate stopping our regular maintenance of our translation table any time soon.

Another concern with this process is that of scale. Increasing numbers of librarians are creating course guides that they wish to custom associate with courses in Canvas. While everything is functioning effectively now, after a certain point, this number will become unmanageable to coordinate by hand. This has led to a level of strategy in our approach to how subject guides are created. Guide creators are encouraged to make guides that are effective for a large number of courses within the discipline, reducing the need for specific course guides. This does not eliminate them completely, and the conversation surrounding this issue is ongoing, but it is a step in the right direction.

Conclusion

Guides are one of the library's most iconic instructional tools. Our experience demonstrates that while closely integrating them within the LMS increases the likelihood that they will be seen, it's far from a guarantee. Collaboration with librarians, faculty, and instructional designers is still necessary to draw

in students to the resources that can help them with their assignments.

As in any other use of human resources, it's important that guide integration be approached with high-impact practices in mind. This goes beyond the simple scope of guide creation, and instead brings into sharp focus how users are interacting with the guide. We want the things we do to have a direct and meaningful impact on our students. As we move forward with guide integration in Canvas at Penn State, we plan to keep this goal in mind.