

Rethinking the LibGuide Course Page: A Collaboration of Two Minds Addressing the Three Instructional Areas of Library, Research, and Writing

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Abstract

Shifting strategic priorities in the UCSC University Library, prompted by budget and staff reductions and advances in educational technologies, led to an entire program of roughly 40 writing faculty losing a popular library support service: in-person research sessions provided by the school's reference librarians. When an instruction librarian offered to work with one rhetoric and composition instructor who oriented her entire class around writing a single research paper, however, the collaboration produced a new approach to online library research instruction, a Science LibGuide Course Guide offering student instruction in accessing and using library resources, conducting research, and writing up the results. When feedback showed students liked the Science-Oriented Writing Course Guide, the librarian and the instructor expanded on their work by reaching out to writing instructors through interviews. The result was an additional LibGuide oriented to writing across the disciplines. This presentation provided an overview of their experience.

Introduction

UCSC is a large Hispanic serving research university with a sizable population of first generation students from under-performing high schools and a growing number of international students. Writing Program faculty tend to be stable, mature, with little churning. Reference librarians, on the other hand, were transitioning from generalists, whose primary responsibilities were to serve on the reference desk and teach lower division one-shot instruction sessions, to subject liaisons, who support research, collections and instruction. Within the three campus-required writing courses, the reference librarians provided library instruction for the composition and rhetoric courses, the middle requirement. Because the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education have been absent from the UCSC curriculum, library instruction one-shot sessions have centered on topic refinement, search strategies and database searching. In other words, there were few opportunities to integrate information literacy into the curriculum or assess learning outcomes in an integrated way.

This predicament along with developments in educational technologies and the evolving needs of students led the library administration to pursue online instruction for lower division

courses as a strategic goal to mitigate budget and staff shortfalls. The instruction librarian was charged with moving instruction for writing courses online within a year. The project to move this workload online ran from summer 2012 to fall 2013, from the pilot phase to its implementation as a service. As the first quarter concluded, and in order to expand to the next phase of the pilot, the librarian began gathering input from early adopters at the end of fall. In early winter the librarian scheduled meetings to inform writing instructors of the pending service change, preview the online instruction resources (a LibGuide Course Guide with embedded learning objects) and invite instructors to participate in the expanded pilot before the change to service in spring. These avenues of communication presented the librarian with feedback that highlighted the gap between the online instruction resources and the strong desire from the writing instructors for in-person, hands on instruction. Issues raised were: There was no way to confirm students had used the learning objects; the LibGuide Course Guide and learning objects lacked interactivity; instructors associated library visits and talking to a real-life librarian with inspiration and discovery.

To address the desire for interactive online instruction the library adopted University of Arizona's Guide on the Side, which would not be ready until that summer. To address the concerns with moving to online and improve the quality of the online resources and learning objects, the librarian began consulting with writing lecturers to understand their needs and develop ways to support them. One writing instructor, who focused on science-oriented writing, did not think the LibGuide would be helpful for her course, but she was willing to meet with the librarian to discuss options. This meeting led the two to collaborate on a LibGuide specific to her science-based writing course. When that proved fruitful and other writing instructors began to take notice, the two developed a project to create LibGuides for other division-oriented writing courses.

Collaboration: Writing in the Sciences LibGuide

While the two started by discussing the original LibGuide Course Guide with embedded learning objects, the librarian understood that convincing the writing instructor to adopt these resources was not a good course of action. Instead, the two talked about the library and the role it played in writing and research. This led to an agreement to build a resource that would integrate with the writing instructor's course. As a platform the librarian proposed LibGuides instead of an independent blog the instructor had considered. The writing instructor proposed expanding the scope of the Course Guide's content from library-specific resources to also include science-oriented research and writing. The two agreed on user-friendly wording, the scope of the content, and a process for authoring and building the LibGuide Course Guide. Because the Course Guide became the central location for some of her course content, the writing instructor took the lead in authoring the Guide. The librarian embedded library information as well as related learning objects and images. The Science-Oriented Writing Course Guide went live in winter quarter.

Collaboration: Writing across Disciplines LibGuide

When other writing instructors began to take notice of the Science Course Guide, the two discussed the possibility of a LibGuide Course Guides that could be generalized for use in all writing courses. Upon getting the go ahead from the Writing Program chair, the two decided

course guides specific to writing by academic division may be a viable path, and began discussing ways to approach building such guides. To ensure the guides were relevant to the needs of the writing courses, they decided to talk to writing instructors to gain insights into their writing pedagogy and needs. They decided to invite writing instructors whose course descriptions fell into at least one of the major academic divisions: arts, social sciences and humanities. They planned to use the information gathered to develop the guides.

The two prepared discussion topics in advance of the interviews and left plenty of room for open ended conversation. During the interviews, they shared an overview of their collaboration and work, asked the instructors how they approached writing pedagogy and how the academic disciplines figured in, and what ideas or suggestions they had for the two. They interviewed 5 writing instructors, meeting them at various locations across the campus. In one case, the two visited the home of a writing instructor who had small children she was caring for. Writing instructors who lived in town—many lived out of town and commuted to campus to teach or attend meetings—proved to be easiest to schedule for interviews. The two debriefed after the interviews to capture conversation highlights.

The interviews brought into question the need for discipline-specific writing course guides. Instead, based on the interview subjects' input, the two decided a single guide, writing across the disciplines, would be a better fit. To create the guide, the two followed the same process as was outlined previously. The Writing across Disciplines Course Guide went live in fall 2013.

Results

The collaboration provided a built-in means to obtain information from the science-oriented instructor. At the time of the presentation, follow up information had not been obtained from the instructors who used the Writing across Discipline Course Guides. The science-oriented instructor interacted directly with the Course Guide and provided a first-hand account of her experience.

The instructor reported that the decision to group together writing, research and library resources proved useful and convenient. The co-location of this information provided a reason for the instructor to make greater use of the Course Guide throughout the quarter. The convenient access to these materials saved the instructor time over the quarter. The instructor also reported gaining better awareness of students' use of technology and library resources, especially how and why they found resources challenging to use. She was able to see library resources better from the students' perspective. The collaboration also highlighted the difficulties students brought to the library reference desk but not their teachers. Overall these results benefited the instructor's pedagogy.

With the instructor taking the lead in presenting the library instruction content, the library's role shifted to consultant. In that role she made some key observations based on the instructor's findings as well as the interviews with the other writing instructors:

- The instructor's involvement in the development of the LibGuide Course Guide opened the door to new conversations and understanding. Students benefited from the integration of the Course Guide and new insights the instructor brought to the course throughout the quarter.
- The one-shot library sessions created an environment where most students who found sources during library class expected not to return to the databases on their own time. Since the instructor had more time with her students, which provided a stronger teacher-student dynamic, the instructor was able to intervene more effectively when students reported having problems with databases or finding materials.
- The instructors previously viewed the librarian/one-shot class as helping students with topic refinement, which led them to skip this lesson in their classes and assume the library session would take care of it. They also viewed librarian/one-shot as primarily helping students learn tricks of the database, how to search better, which boxed the librarian into enhanced bibliographic instruction.

Conclusion

This project was a response to shifting priorities in the University Library and the changing landscape of educational technologies and evolving needs of student users. Through an open dialog and spirit of collaboration and experimentation, the librarian and writing instructor were able to redefine the LibGuide Course Guide at the UCSC library for writing courses. Instead of a library-centric guide, the two co-designed a resource that integrated with writing courses and helped mitigate the loss of in-person library instruction. In the process the two gained an awareness and appreciation of their respective department issues and challenges.

As libraries seek new ways to make work scalable and manageable, collaborations such as these are essential. They promote cross departmental understanding. They give opportunities to go on listening tours to find out what challenges instructors are facing. They promote meaningful tools that are relevant and more likely to be used repeatedly during the course of the class.