A Link in Every Syllabus: Providing Students with Current Information

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Abstract:

For distance education students, the learning management system (LMS) is their university. An essential document that students access from their LMS is the course syllabus. The standard information included from university support services such as the library can be dry, outdated, and not useful for students. In addition, pulling the information into the syllabus without a link back to the original source risks a syllabus riddled with broken links and incorrect information relayed to students. The project described here focuses on the creation of a LibGuide for online students that functions as both a resource and a portal to other essential resources. This LibGuide is kept current and user-friendly for students and is automatically inserted in all syllabi for distance education courses. This effort has significantly increased use of the LibGuide, a greater awareness of library integration possibilities, and has taken the burden off of academic departments to keep library information current and links working. The reader should walk away with a rationale for why this project is worthwhile and an understanding of how to complete a similar initiative.

Distance education, more commonly referred to as online learning by U.S. higher education institutions, is a particular delivery model for education. In this model, students and their instructors learn in geographically distinct locations (Raish & Carr-Chellman, 2015). Frequently, students have no physical representation construct of the institution they are attending. For this reason, it is prudent to place as much information as possible within the context of the students' world. In the case of online students, this is their learning management system. An effort was taken at Penn State to place a library guide directly in the syllabus of every single World Campus course. World Campus is the online campus of Penn State.

Context

One of the most pertinent issues in online education is the risk of student isolation in the online environment (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Without intentional connections, students can feel like they are not part of a learning community within their class or in the larger community. The action taken here aimed to connect students to their library community. Research has repeatedly found that online students predominately use Google or other search engines to find information for their assignments. The reasons for not using library websites vary, but a majority focus on comfort, awareness, or knowledge of how to use the academic library (Van de Vord, 2010). When students land on an academic library home page, they often do not have a sense of where to go or how to search. Online students have a steep learning curve to map the resources available to them at their institution. Expecting them to dig deep within the library to locate library guides is unrealistic and not student-centered. This means that we are expecting students to come to us rather than going to students.

Online students' level of awareness and interaction with their library should be of great concern to all librarians and library staff invested in meeting the [ACRL Distance Learning](#) concept of 'equivalent access.' This concept states that:

> Members of the distance learning community, including those with disabilities, must therefore be provided effective and appropriate library services and resources, which may differ from, but must be equivalent to, those provided for students and faculty in physical campus settings (2016, para. 29)

My role at Penn State is to strategically increase library services, resources, instruction, and awareness for online students. Distance education at Penn State started in 1988 and utilized correspondence courses. In 1998, World Campus was formed to be the online distance education arm of Penn State. There are approximately 15,000 students at all degree levels from part-time to full-time and from undergraduate to graduate degrees. 98 percent of World Campus students are over the age of 25. In my time as the online learning librarian for Penn State University I have been approached by more than one student who thought they had to pay for materials from the library or who was unaware that they were not using the library website. They frequently confuse the bookstore or tutoring services with the library.

I believe there are a couple of reasons for this. First, this may be the student's first time in higher education or they have been away from school for an extended period of time. Libraries look tremendously different now than they did just five years ago. Students need to quickly adapt to online learning and mastering essential websites like their course registration, tuition, and learning management system. This is a lot to expect students to learn and remember. Expecting students to master another website on their own is unrealistic. Therefore, another cause of confusion is navigation of the library website. Even a well-designed website will require students to learn what aspects of the website are most beneficial to them. The primary ways these students receive information or learn how to navigate through important web pages is through email, listservs, class updates, tutorials, or informational packets. Without a physical and descriptive context in which to place the variety of links and resources they are given, it is hard to build a mental map of how all the different parts of the institution work together. Second, Penn State World Campus students get inundated with links at the beginning of the semester that attempt to scaffold building of their mental map of how the university works. We all know that emails especially those with links can get buried in our inbox. Therefore, any information students receive about the library is not likely to be remembered. Even if students notice a link from the library, it is not at a time when they identify a specific need from the library.

Actions

I wanted to find a way to provide students with direction on how to use the libraries at a time that was relevant to them. I brainstormed a couple of ways to go about this. I could send out a 'mass' introductory email to students connecting them to valuable web pages they should visit. However, email overload is a real concern and can cause undue stress (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006). Penn State takes active steps to reduce the number of emails students receive at the beginning of the semester. Another option for communication was through the World Campus student blog. I post blog updates there but it is not the best place to post long-term resources for students.

Ultimately, my solution was the creation of a LibGuide for online students. The content of this guide is focused on introducing students to essential services and resources that would be of benefit to them during their time at Penn State. When considering a similar project, there are important processes and partners to consider. If you have a dedicated online librarian, that person should take ownership of the content. If this is a shared responsibility, consider who has the expertise necessary to create a useful guide for students. The creation of the guide is the easy part. What is more challenging is stressing the importance of the guide and finding partners to build awareness for students. This will depend heavily on the structure of your university. I presented this guide and the importance of students being able to effectively use the library to various groups on campus including learning technology groups, instructional designers, and academic advisors. To embed the guide within syllabi, I worked with a designer to host the file on a server and create code to enter it in an HTML document. The final step of the process is to create publicity around the guide so that other units on campus include it in their syllabi. This process could work for subject specific guides as well if you wanted them on certain department syllabi.
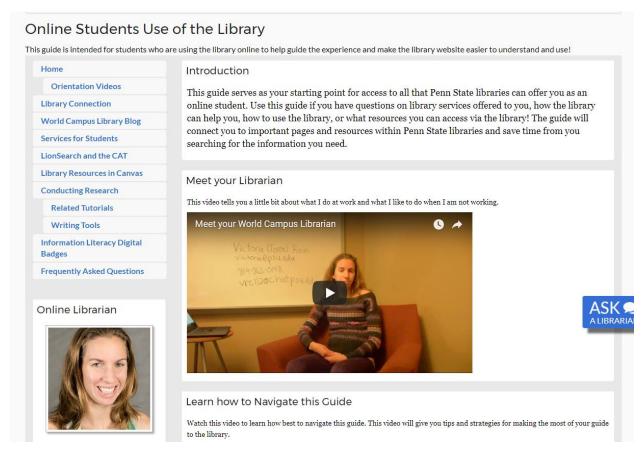
Figure 1. Online Students Use of the Library

Creating a guide for online students is not new or innovative. [The University of West Florida](#), [New York University](#), and [Arizona State University](#) all have guides for online students. As many of us know, library guides are created with good intention, but are often not used as much as we would like. A lack of awareness and direct information need can prevent the utilization of valuable resources. A study by Emily Sanborn found that 53% of students at Duke Library never used LibGuides and 24% of students rarely used them (as cited in Reeb & Gibbons, 2004). The major reasons for students not using library guides are a lack of awareness and the perception that they do not need a guide to help them find information (Ouellelte, 2011). Knowing this, I did not want all of my effort put into making a guide to be in vain, so I strategically sought to place the guide into a place where students need to access information to be successful in their class. This would, theoretically increase use of the guide. Existing research on information included in syllabi and handouts inspired my decision to start an initiative to place a link to the guide within all syllabi for World Campus students.

Jeffery, Houk, Nielson, and Wong-Welch (2017) found that of the 1,226 syllabi they analyzed, only 665 mentioned the library at all. The most common library keywords found on the syllabi include library space, library resources, and citation management. Research paper and APA were also very common keywords. At the University of Notre Dame, only 38 percent of syllabi included content beyond course reserves (Smith, Doversberger, Jones, Parker, & Piatrasweski, 2012). Head and Eisenberg (2010) found

that six in ten assignment handouts prompted students to go to the library to find physical materials, 13% of the handouts suggested contacting a librarian for research help, and 14% pointed students to the library's online resources. The syllabus, similar to a handout, should theoretically be the resource that students refer to most when learning about the requirements for their classes. Therefore, I wanted to find a way to include a link to the online guide in their syllabi. This takes the burden away from colleges or instructional design units to create library related content and provides an effortless way for them to include a link to the library that always contains current content.

Awareness of the guide was crucial due to the low use of library guides by people outside of the library. This awareness initiative is known as "A Link in Every Syllabus." This was promoted by sharing of information and visual signs to all of the different instructional design units on campus through presentations and emails. The promotional material was created by the libraries' Public Relations department. I also discussed it on my newsletter that goes to hundreds of people involved with World Campus in different capacities. While this awareness was crucial towards providing reasons for adding the guide to syllabi, nothing would have happened without the technology support. Rather than focusing on manual integration of the link, it was hosted on a server and provided to different instructional design units in a variety of formats. It was provided as a HTML page or an iFrame. Other design shops on campus used PHP to include it on their pages. Adoption of the link was very rapid as at least five major instructional design units have included the link in their syllabi for Spring 2017. For example, The John A. Dutton e-Education Institute now includes this link on their syllabi within the Learning Management System and in their Open Educational Courseware. Currently, the link is connected to all World Campus syllabi or within the course resources section.

In a guide for distance students, a connection to your university needs to be intentionally built. Web-based interactions are the predominant way that these students engage with their educational experience. Adding personal touches such as a map of the university, stories, and student testimonials can help foster this connection.

Discussion

When I talk to instructional designers about this initiative I stress two major advantages for them. The first is that this link is stable. It is not changing for the foreseeable future. I keep the guide current and update necessary links within the guide. They no longer have to worry about updating their syllabus with various library resources. The second is that students who use the library have a higher GPA and higher retention rate than students who do not use the library (Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2013). Retention is a persistent concern of those invested in online learning (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007). If use of the library has the potential to increase retention, then stakeholders should be excited about increasing students' library access. Retention is one part of the World Campus strategic plan for the next two years and any efforts to increase retention are important.

Statistics show that the guide has 870 views since the first day of Spring 2017 semester, January 9th through January 31st. From September 1st to September 30 of the Fall 2017 semester the guide had 1,506 views. The Fall 2017 semester is the first time the link was placed in all World Campus syllabi or course resource pages. Conversely, in the first month of Fall 2016 semester, the guide had 239 views.

This represents a 264 percent increase from Fall 2016 to Spring 2017 and a 73 percent increase from Spring 2017 to Fall 2017. The highest number of views was on the second day of the Spring semester and the sixth day of Fall 2017. This makes sense because students should be actively reviewing their syllabus at that point. There are pages within the guide that have more views than others. The home page is viewed most frequently, with the portal to library resources and library services close behind. It is important to consider sustainability of the process if the creator of the guide would transition to a new role. The department should consider ownership of all guides created and determine a revision and review process for all online content in their domain.

However, just inserting a link to the guide in all syllabi is not the end of the process. The guide can always be improved. In particular, an iterative design philosophy was used in this project. To improve the user experience, a focus group was conducted with five students. I started off with the question of: "You click on this guide from your syllabus, where do you start?" and then a natural conversation ensued. The biggest change based on this focus group was reordering and renaming the tabs so that the terminology made sense to students. Planned annual focus groups help to keep the guide current and user-friendly for students.

Conclusion

Overall, creating this initiative, "A Link in Every Syllabus," was a substantial time investment but has proven to be a very easy way to provide consistency in online students' initial experience with the library. It is essential to keep the guide updated and keep communication lines open with instructional designers or faculty to check on the status of the guide within their syllabi. By placing the guide where students look, issues of awareness and misunderstanding about what LibGuides are can be avoided. It is not perfect, and some students still will not see the link or understand how it may be helpful to them, but providing many opportunities to engage with content is good pedagogical practice. I have been able to refer students to the guide and have academic advisors talk about it proactively with their students. If you are interested in doing this, consider your audience and student population. What information would be especially helpful for them? If you are not sure, conducting user-design studies can help to create a relevant guide. How will you market this effort? What do your faculty communicate? Are there instructional designers at your institution? Inserting a link to the guide in syllabi was easy to do, and I encourage other distance librarians to consider a similar project. To maximize your chance of success, set out targets to indicate success and build the necessary infrastructure to reach those targets.

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