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Gemma Blackburn

Judy Bastin

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Abstract

The libraries at both Wichita State University and Butler Community College recently implemented new content management systems to create and manage library subject guides. These systems allow library staff to create online resources for instruction and library information quickly, and with no coding knowledge required. Both libraries chose a different option from many content management systems available; decisions were based on the differing needs and resources available at each library.This paper covers aspects that all libraries should consider when choosing a management system, specifically for subject guides: What problem will this system solve, and what are the specific needs of my library?What features does each option offer me?Is there enough product support, and is there a community of users to help?Do I have the resources needed to implement and maintain this system?Can this system grow with our library into the future?

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Originate, Create, Renovate, and Innovate: Leading Revolution in the Academic Library

Subject Guides: Two Different Libraries, Two Different Approaches

Gemma Blackburn
Wichita State University
Wichita, Kansas

Judy Bastin
Butler Community College
El Dorado, Kansas

Abstract

The libraries at both Wichita State University and Butler Community College recently implemented new content management systems to create and manage library subject guides. These systems allow library staff to create online resources for instruction and library information quickly, and with no coding knowledge required. Both libraries chose a different option from many content management systems available; decisions were based on the differing needs and resources available at each library. This paper covers aspects that all libraries should consider when choosing a management system, specifically for subject guides:

- What problem will this system solve, and what are the specific needs of my library?
- What features does each option offer me?
- Is there enough product support, and is there a community of users to help?
- Do I have the resources needed to implement and maintain this system?
- Can this system grow with our library into the future?

The Problem

Both the Butler and WSU Libraries faced a similar problem; to find a system that will manage library subject guides that will be:

- Simple to use
- Quick to setup
- Affordable
- Flexible enough to meet the individual needs of that library

A content management system would resolve most of these problems, and both libraries sought a system that would meet the specific needs of each library.

During a website redesign, library staff at Butler were left with reduced access to modify the library website, making it difficult and time consuming to update content. While a content management system would streamline the ability of the library staff to create subject guides, it would also allow greater access to update other library information online as library staff would have full control over the content.

Previously at WSU, many static HTML subject guide pages had been maintained by subject librarians. This method presented many issues. There was a variety of skill among subject specialists in creating web pages, so there became a lack of uniformity in the appearance, content, and format of the guides. Also, the guides required a considerable amount of time to build and edit, leading to many of the guides becoming neglected and outdated. A content management system would not only provide a cohesive appearance for all the guides, but also require minimal skill to create and update content.

Two Approaches

After a selection and evaluation process, Butler and WSU each chose a different solution to address these issues.

Butler selected the subscription based LibGuides system from Springshare. This popular content management system is currently in use at over 1,600 libraries worldwide. The system is hosted on the Springshare servers, requiring minimal setup for the library. LibGuides manages subject guides, course specific guides, and can handle other library information as well. Butler has chosen to use LibGuides pages to manage general library content, as opposed to using the main library website.

WSU took a different approach by choosing an open source system. SubjectsPlus, developed at Ithaca College by Andrew Darby, is a self-hosted content management system that can be downloaded and installed onto a local server for free. Currently only about 30 libraries are using SubjectsPlus.

While the primary purpose of SubjectsPlus is to manage subject, course, and topic resources, the system can manage other library functions. WSU also uses SubjectsPlus to manage subscription database links and the staff directory. Because of the content management environment, all data in the system is linked. For example, changing a database link in the database list will also change that link in any subject guides the database appears in. Similarly, changing an email address in the staff directory will also update that email address in any subject guides that librarian is managing.

Features

Both LibGuides and SubjectsPlus contain many built-in features for adding content to library guides. These features include boxes that can be added to a blank guide canvas to create Web 2.0 content, links to library resources, multimedia content, and more. SubjectsPlus includes fewer options at startup, but because it is open source, new boxes (called pluslets) can be built later.

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Overview of features

Feature	LibGuides	SubjectsPlus
Polls/Surveys	Yes	Not built-in, but outside polls can be embedded
Embed multimedia content	Yes	Yes
Stream RSS feeds	Yes	Yes
Add search boxes	Google search boxes plus catalog and database search box widgets	Pluslets have been created at WSU to search the catalog and federated search engine
Button in browser to easily add web sites	Yes	No
Comments/Feedback	Yes	Yes (but limited)
Statistics	Yes	Not built-in, but WSU added Google Analytics
Link directly to library resources	Yes	Yes
Checks the links in all guides	Yes	No (highly desired new feature)

Videos demonstrating how to create guides with both systems, including a closer look of many of these features, are available here:
LibGuides at Butler - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rMithrj8CE
SubjectsPlus at WSU - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiZru8iwBZo

Support & Community

When choosing a new system it is often easy to overlook the amount of support that will be needed beyond the initial implementation. LibGuides provides a variety of support options for libraries, including a support blog, Twitter account, various help and FAQ pages, and the Springshare Lounge. LibGuides users can also take advantage of the large community by sharing guides with other LibGuides libraries. For example, Butler could request permission to use and modify content in guides created by another LibGuides library, saving significant staff time.

SubjectsPlus does not have a means of formal customer support, as is typical with open source solutions. However, the SubjectsPlus website does have a wiki for step-by-step installation instructions, troubleshooting information, and advice on how to begin expanding and customizing the system. There is also a community Google group where users can ask and answer questions, and suggest system enhancements. WSU has received ample help from the community and from the developer, Andrew Darby, when specific questions arose during implementation. For example, WSU preferred to change a couple of default settings, and within a couple of hours Andrew Darby had responded with instructions to make these changes. Specific pieces of code, including code for building new “pluslet” boxes for adding content, is available in the code repository section of the Google group.

Resources Needed

While both LibGuides and SubjectsPlus achieve the same results, the greatest contrast between the two systems can be seen in the varying resources needed to implement and maintain them.

Very few resources are needed for LibGuides. Only the subscription fee is required, which is currently $899 for most libraries, $549 for K-12 libraries. Larger libraries may expect to pay more; up to $2,999 according to the LibGuides website. LibGuides can also be purchased for consortiums and library systems. Extra features, such as direct image uploading, XML exports of data, and local backups, are available at an additional cost.

SubjectsPlus, as with any self-hosted system, takes a considerable amount of resources to implement in contrast to LibGuides. While the system files are free to download, hardware (an Apache server with MySQL and PHP) is required, as well as staff with appropriate expertise to install and maintain the system. Many libraries are already using applications in a similar server environment and will possess all necessary skills, or have a computer support unit on their campus that will oversee this process. At WSU these responsibilities were shared between the library and the University Computing and Telecommunications department.

While SubjectsPlus will function adequately out-of-the-box, most libraries will want to make some customizations. The possibilities for modifying SubjectsPlus are endless, from simple changes such as adding a university logo to the header, to complicated enhancements that require database modifications and additional PHP files.

WSU has made many significant changes to SubjectsPlus, including the creation of new “pluslet” boxes for adding content to guides, to building a page that organizes all subscription database links by subject.

Feedback

Evaluating the success of any new system requires feedback from all parties involved. In the case of subject guides this would include library staff, teaching faculty, and students.

At Butler the response from librarians was positive, with all library staff participating by creating at least one guide. Training for staff was minimal as the guide creation process is intuitive. Prior knowledge of programming is not needed by the librarians. The teaching faculty has collaborated with librarians to create guides in developmental psychology, sociology, and digital design. The only downside is that the creation of more course specific guides has required faculty to be more organized in order to provide librarians with the information required to build the guides before classes begin.

Librarians at WSU were provided with a one hour training session before using SubjectsPlus, as well as brief one-on-one time to answer any follow up questions after the initial training session. Librarians were quick to complete guides once they began using the system, and some librarians have found creative ways to use SubjectsPlus beyond the information covered during training. Several teaching faculty have already collaborated with librarians to build course guides, and the content of these guides ranges from brief collections of course-specific resources, to guides containing graded assignments for the class.

Neither library has received documented feedback from students yet, but both see the value in collecting this information. It is seen as especially important to record any data that would determine if these guides are positively affecting student success. Possible methods of assessment would be focus groups, interviews, and using the polling feature in the guides.

Plans for the Future

The ability of a system to adapt and grow with a library is essential, as services frequently change, and new ideas and technologies are constantly being introduced. At Butler, there are plans to continue building content in LibGuides by creating guides for all academic departments and also create miscellaneous topic pages. As LibGuides is already mobile accessible, it can be easily integrated into the new Butler mobile library website. Further integration of the subject guides into courses is also desired, and the handy LibGuides widgets can be used to achieve this goal.

Embedding library guides into more courses is also a high priority goal at WSU, with priority being given to the courses with high drop-out or failure rates. So far course guides have been built through collaborations between teaching faculty and librarians. A larger embedded librarian initiative at WSU would make use of these course guides as a part of a larger plan to integrate librarians into more courses – especially those courses that are fully online. Other enhancements to SubjectsPlus, such as better integration with the Blackboard course management system and mobile optimized access, are dependent on future releases of the system.

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Further Resources

Butler and WSU both feel that their subject guide content managements systems are a success. However, there are many other options for streamlining subject guides besides LibGuides and SubjectsPlus, including:

- *Library a la Carte* – an open source system from Oregon State University
- MyLibrary – an open source system from North Carolina State University
- Dashboard creation resources such as NetVibes, PageFlakes, and Google Pages. Most of the dashboard resources are free and hosted in the cloud.
- Blogs & Wikis
- Folksonomies/bookmarking tools

A free trial of LibGuides is available through the LibGuides website for libraries wishing to try this option before purchasing. Also, SubjectsPlus can be downloaded and tested without a large investment of time or resources: it is possible to download Apache, MySQL, and PHP easily onto any Window's based computer using a WAMP (Windows/Apache/MySQL/PHP package) available at wampserver.com. Instructions at both the wampserver.com website and the SubjectsPlus website provide detailed instructions of the many processes to set up a test server and install the SubjectsPlus files.

Conclusion

Librarians who have been considering a content management system have a wealth of choices that encompass many different levels of knowledge and price. LibGuides has a modest price tag, and the technical knowledge for the librarian is low. SubjectPlus is a free, open source software with the ability of flexible development, but the librarian needs a moderate level of technical knowledge. Whichever choice is right for your library; both products provide an exciting new potion for providing information to our students and faculty.

Useful Websites

LibGuides at Butler Community College - http://butlercc.libguides.com
Subjects Plus Guides at Wichita State University - http://libraries.wichita.edu/subsplus
LibGuides Website - http://libguides.com
SubjectsPlus Website - http://www.subjectsplus.com
SubjectsPlus Google Group - http://groups.google.com/group/subjectsplus

Gemma Blackburn is an Assistant Professor and Library Systems Developer at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas.

Judy Bastin is the Reference Librarian at Butler Community College, El Dorado, Kansas.