



*Evidence Summary*

**Embedded Library Guides in Learning Management Systems Help Students Get Started on Research Assignments**

**A Review of:**

Murphy, S. A. & Black, E. L. (2013). Embedding guides where students learn: Do design choices and librarian behavior make a difference? *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 39(6), 528-534.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2013.06.007>

**Reviewed by:**

Dominique Daniel  
Humanities Librarian for History and Modern Languages  
Oakland University  
Rochester, Michigan, United States of America  
Email: [daniel@oakland.edu](mailto:daniel@oakland.edu)

**Received:** 24 Nov. 2015

**Accepted:** 10 Feb. 2016

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To determine whether library guides embedded in learning management systems (LMS) get used by students, and to identify best practices for the creation and promotion of these guides by librarians.

**Design** – Mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis (survey, interviews, and statistical analysis).

**Setting** – A large public university in the United States of America.

**Subjects** – 100 undergraduate students and 14 librarians.

**Methods** – The researchers surveyed undergraduate students who were participating in a Project Information Literacy study about their use of library guides in the learning management system (LMS) for a given quarter. At that university, all course pages in the LMS are automatically assigned a library guide. In addition, web usage data about the course-embedded guides was analyzed and high use guides were identified, namely guides that received an average of at least two visits per student enrolled in a course. The researchers also conducted a qualitative analysis of the layout of the high use guides, including the number of widgets (or boxes) and links. Finally, librarians who created high use library guides were interviewed. These mixed methods were designed to address four research questions: 1)

Were students finding the guides in the LMS, and did they find the guides useful? 2) Did high use guides differ in design and composition? 3) Were the guides designed for a specific course, or for an entire department or college? and, 4) How did the librarians promote use?

**Main Results** – Only 33% of the students said they noticed the library guide in the LMS course page, and 21% reported using the guide. Among those who used the guide, the majority were freshmen (possibly because embedding of library guides in the LMS had just started at the university). Library guides with high use in relation to class enrollment did not significantly differ from low use guides in terms of numbers of widgets and links, although high use guides tended to have slightly fewer widgets. Of those guides, 55% were assigned at the course level, 30% at the department level and 13% at the college level. Over half the librarians with at least one high use guide conducted a library instruction session in which they used or promoted that guide. For 39% of the courses with high-use guides, the librarian was actively engaged with the faculty and students via the LMS, but others reported no specific involvement in courses.

**Conclusion** – Those students who used library guides reported the guides helped them get started on their research paper or assignment and find research materials, two areas for which previous studies show students have great difficulty. Since the majority of students did not notice the link to the library guide in the LMS, librarians could emphasize it in the news section of the course, which gets much more attention. Within library guides, simpler groupings of links might be easier for students to use, but this conclusion would require further research to confirm. In any case, nearly half of all high use guides were not promoted in any way by librarians, but simply automatically embedded in the LMS, a sign that passive embedding may provide an easy way for the library to reach a large number of students early in their academic career. Since the automatic embedding of guides began, guides have seen a dramatic increase in usage.

## Commentary

Although there are many articles describing how library guides have been automatically embedded into learning management systems (LMS), there are not many assessments of their effectiveness. For this reason, this study is thought-provoking. The researchers do not just rely on Web usage statistics but also on student and librarian feedback to see whether students found the guides useful and what design practices improve use. Their conclusions add to the growing body of research about patron use of guides embedded in course pages (Wakeham, Roberts, Shelley, & Wells, 2012; Chiware, 2014).

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods involving both creators and users of guides yields interesting results. One finding challenges the generally accepted view that students prefer course-specific guides over general subject guides (Reeb and Gibbons, 2004; Barr, 2010; Leighton & May, 2013). The researchers believe that generic subject guides may be as highly used as customized course guides if they can easily be found in LMS course pages. The authors also argue that library content delivered passively, without instructional or other promotional effort, can still be successful, since nearly half of all high-use guides were created by librarians who did not do any instruction. However, promotion in the LMS or in the classroom somewhat encourages student discovery. This counters the commonly accepted view that promotion of guides during instruction sessions is essential for guide use (Chiware, 2014).

Unfortunately, the student survey relied on a small sample population that limits the implications of the study. The study does not specify if the respondents who expressed satisfaction used subject or course-specific guides, and what discipline they were from. It would also be interesting to see how helpful the guides truly were by comparing the skill level of students who used them and of those who did not. The placement and discoverability of the guide are probably as important as its content and design regarding

the number of users, but the guide's success, as measured by student learning, does depend on its content and design.

Still, the study has important practical implications for librarians. When preparing guides, librarians should weigh the time spent creating guides versus their impact as measured by student use and learning. The decision to create course-specific guides or more general guides should be based on numerous factors, including the nature of the course and level of students, the discipline involved, the purpose of the guides, their intended life span, and the instructors' intended promotion and use of the guide in class. Librarians should decide between guides "as a teaching tool" and guides "as an answer to a student's research" (Gessner, Chandler & Wilcox, 2015, p. 505). This study's findings can help librarians identify the most effective strategy.

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