TITLE: Framing first-year writing course guides: a content analysis

ABSTRACT

**Purpose**: The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which first-year writing course guides contain instructional content and whether the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy* has been addressed in these guides.

**Design/methodology**: First-year writing course guides were identified from ARL library websites and examined for instructional elements. These elements were categorized using a rubric that mapped the *Framework* to instructional content. Qualtrics was used to organize and analyze the data.

**Findings**: Most first-year writing course guides include instructional content, but less than half incorporate the *Framework* in some way. Guides that do incorporate the *Framework* focus on “Searching as Strategic Exploration” and “Research as Inquiry”.

**Practical implications**: This paper provides librarians with practical information on first-year writing guides and includes examples of how the *Framework* might be addressed.

**Originality**: This study contributes to the literature on research guide content and is the first to inventory first-year writing course guides.

INTRODUCTION

Online research guides are a popular way for librarians to highlight information for users. LibGuides and other similar systems are used as both subject and course guides, allowing librarians to add content in an online format without the need for coding skills or special website permissions. Initially, research guides acted as a replacement for paper pathfinders (Baker, 2014), becoming an online list of disciplinary resources such as databases, books, and more. In recent years, there have been calls to make greater use of these guides by conceiving of them as pedagogical tools, rather than just a list of content (Baker, 2014; Brazzeal, 2006; Hicks, 2015; Pendell and Armstrong, 2014). Librarians have embraced their growing role as educators, shifting to a style of teaching that encourages critical thinking skills, a style the ACRL *Framework* *of Information Literacy* (2015) encourages. To what extent have these ideas permeated library research guides?

Although librarians have not explicitly answered this question, Alison Hicks (2015) comes close in her article, *Libguides: Pedagogy to Oppress*. She argues that LibGuides are a prime example of Paulo Freire’s banking concept of education (1986), as they perpetuate educational oppression by simplifying the research process and providing students with a ready-made list of tools. As with Freire’s theory, students have no agency when using a Libguide comprised of database lists; they are simply consuming librarian-defined notions of authority. She further argues that these lists of resources decontextualize the research process and privilege academic sources, ideas which run counter to what the ACRL *Framework* outlines. The first frame itself, “Authority is constructed and contextual” proposes a much more nuanced approach, as do the other frames. “Research as Inquiry” for example, emphasizes the iterative nature of research, a key idea that research guides comprised of resource lists do not. Hicks (2015) recommends that librarians “engage critically with new technologies such as LibGuides,” but creating guides composed of resource lists does not do so. Instead, she suggests creating guides organized around research processes, such as those advocated by Pendell and Armstrong (2014). The application of the *Framework* could be instrumental to helping librarians develop guides that promote a more complex notion of research.

In addition to the *Framework,* ACRL recently updated another guiding document, the “Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians” (2017), which describes the strengths that a proficient teaching librarian should have and outlines seven roles that teaching librarians often perform. For the role of “teacher,” the document suggests librarians should “adapt concepts from professional documents and guidelines such as the *Framework* in design and content of instructional situations.” For the role of “instructional designer,” the document outlines how teaching librarians should create “educational experiences through designing instructional materials […] and learning objects across diverse learning environments,” some of which are online environments. These recommendations give librarians good reason to incorporate elements of the *Framework* into their library course guides*.*

First-year writing courses are a common space for information literacy instruction, making first-year writing course guides an ideal object of study. This study is the first to undertake a content analysis of first-year writing course guides; it seeks to determine the extent to which librarians include instructional material on these guides, what kind of instructional material is included, and whether librarians incorporate ideas from the *Framework* into any of their instructional content. This analysis provides one measure of how librarians are utilizing the *Framework* and provides practical insights for librarians to consider as they work to improve their course guides.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the *ACRL’s Framework for Information Literacy* was officially adopted, ACRL made drafts available for comment, in an effort to solicit feedback and make the process of developing the *Framework* more transparent (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015). These drafts sparked spirited discussion online, at conferences, and elsewhere (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015; Saracevic, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014, 2015), and once the *Framework* was officially adopted, these conversations showed little signs of waning (Berg et. al., 2015; Bombaro, 2016). For a helpful summation of many of these arguments, see Tefko Saracevic’s (2014) article, “Information Literacy in the United States: Contemporary Transformations and Controversies” which outlines some of the main criticisms. In brief, a number of librarians argued that threshold concepts, the *Framework*’s central organizing principle could not be faithfully applied to information literacy (Bombaro, 2016; Wilkinson, 2015; Saracevic, 2014). Additional criticisms included the lack of designated learning outcomes and assessment options, the preponderance of jargon, and the assertion that it was “elitist” (Berg et. al., 2015; Bombaro, 2016; Saracevic, 2014).

Despite these reservations, other librarians argued that the *Framework,* and threshold concepts themselves (Townsend et. al.,2011), were a welcome move away from the prescriptive *Standards* (Farkas, 2016; Foasberg, 2015; Jacobson and Gibson, 2015; Seeber, 2015)*.* Foasberg (2015) argued that “the *Framework’s* embrace of a social constructivist philosophy—which holds that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through social interactions—makes it less reductive and more inclusive than the Standard’s positivist approach” (p. 702). Gibson and Jacobson (2014) appreciated the potential for the *Framework* to help librarians illicit “revelatory ‘aha’ moments” in their students and saw it as a vehicle to help students understand the ‘why’ not just the ‘how’” of research (p. 250).

Regardless of the controversies, the adoption of the *Framework* prompted many instruction librarians to reflect on their pedagogy and to experiment with new ideas in the classroom, such as organizing one-shot instruction around one or two threshold concepts and using flipped instruction (Porter, 2014) and developing semester-long community engagement assignments for undergraduate capstone courses (Mays, 2016). These studies and others investigating how librarians are using the *Framework* in their teaching (Bauder and Rod, 2016; Christensen, 2015; Houtman, 2015; Hurley and Potter, 2017; Jacobson and Gibson, 2015) are laying the groundwork for best practices.

Given the popularity of online research guides, the number of studies in the library literature is not surprising. Despite the time and effort many librarians put into creating subject guides, however, several researchers have found that students tend not to use subject guides or do so only as a last resort (Ouellette, 2011; Reeb and Gibbons, 2004; Staley, 2007). Reasons vary; Ouellette (2011) found that students were unaware of the guides, preferred researching on the internet, or felt that they did not need a subject guide. Reeb and Gibbons (2004) found that undergraduate students in particular did not use subject guides because they lacked an understanding of scholarly disciplines and could not determine which subject guide would be most appropriate for their research needs.

Students do, however, turn to subject guides under a few, specific circumstances. Students will use subject guides if they are confused and their attempts to use other resources haven’t been effective; if they are researching a new discipline; or if their instructor suggests they do so (Ouellette, 2011). Librarian advice also plays a role; Staley (2007) found a correlation between students who had library instruction and subject guide use.

Hintz et. al. (2010) also looked at student preferences and found that students favored clean, simple layouts. Students disliked guides that had “too many words” (p. 45) or were messy and cluttered, and preferred guides that kept scrolling to a minimum. Students in their study valued visual design so much that guides rated highest in that category were chosen as student favorites, despite other guides scoring higher on content and student comprehension.

Many librarians have found innovative ways to improve subject and research guides. Reeb and Gibbons (2004) suggest that guides be organized by students’ cognitive processes, rather than by source format, a finding corroborated by Staley (2007), Sinkinson et. al. (2012), and Alverson et. al. (2015). Reeb and Gibbons (2004) argue that “guides that are organized or delivered at the course level appear to be more in lie with how students approach library research” (p. 128). Course guides in and of themselves are not enough, however; they need to be designed in a pedagogically sound manner (German, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). Despite the fact that many librarians have come to see research guides as pedagogical tools (Brazzeal, 2006; Castro Gessner et al., 2015; German, 2017; Little, 2010), Pendell and Armstrong’s (2014) study of psychology subject guides found little instructional content on these guides. Their study did not look at course guides, however, and they acknowledged the possibility that course guides could contain more instructional content than subject guides.

Ruth Baker (2014) advocates for tutorial-type guides that can help students at the point of need. These guides rely on learning theories to influence design, for example by “chunking” information to reduce cognitive load, by including scaffolding to build skills, and by engaging students through metacognition (i.e. by embedding reflective journals or other writing assignments) (Baker, 2014; German and Graves, 2016; Little, 2010). When asked to complete an assignment using either a pathfinder-type or tutorial-type research guide, students in Baker’s study reported favoring the tutorial-type guide and having an overall better learning experience with it, a finding confirmed by Lee et al. (2017). Some researchers even found that instruction through LibGuides can be more effective than in-person or blended instruction (Archambault, 2011). Archambault’s study is of particular interest, as it tested library instruction using first-year writing course guides. Archambault mapped the ACRL *Standards* onto her course guide, providing a justification for investigating whether librarians are now doing the same with the *Framework.*

In addition to considering learning theories regarding cognitive load, scaffolding of skills, and metacognition, as advocated by Baker (2014), German and Graves (2016), and Little (2010), another important learning theory that could help shape course guides is the theory of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is a framework which emphasizes accessibility principles in teaching and learning and advocates for designing curriculum and learning objects that cater to students of all learning styles (Rose and Meyer, 2002). It is especially relevant to online learning objects (German and Graves, 2016), and is being used by librarians to design tutorials and even face-to-face instruction (Webb and Hoover, 2015).

UDL has three main principles: “multiple modes of representation, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement” (Hall et. al., 2012). Multiple modes of representation means providing content in various types of media; multiple means of expression involves allowing students various options to display their knowledge; and multiple means of engagement entails developing different activities to engage different types of students. The main idea behind UDL is to provide a diverse learning experience, so that all students benefit.

Shotick (2016) describes how LibGuides can be designed to follow these principles, but cautions against creating so much content that students experience information overload. She suggests limiting each page of the guide to a single lesson with just a few learning outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study consists of guides from American Research Libraries (ARL) as of June 2017. The study only examined course guides, so libraries not belonging to an academic institution, such as the New York Public Library or the Library of Congress, were eliminated from the list, leaving a total of 113 libraries in the sample. To prevent bias, the researcher also eliminated their own institution, bringing the total number of libraries in the study to 112. To determine whether a library had a first-year writing course guide, the library’s website was searched for course guides with terms such as first-year writing, rhetoric, composition, English, or writing. If no guide was found, the university website’s first-year writing web page was consulted to determine if these courses used another term, and the library website was then searched again using this term.

Many libraries had first-year writing guides for the same course but different instructors; when this was the case, the guide with the most views was used. (Springshare allows guide editors to include the guide’s usage data under an information icon; however, guide editors can decide not to include this data.) If page views were not available, a guide was chosen at random. It is possible that another guide might have differed significantly, but for an exploratory study, one guide per library was sufficient. Any guide that was marked “private” or “unpublished” at the time of analysis would not have been viewable.

The survey instrument used to analyze the guides was a modified version of Pendell and Armstrong’s (2014), as their study focused on research guides and instructional content. The first-year writing guides were analyzed for instructional material and organizational elements, such as how many pages were included and how the pages were organized. Qualtrics was used to record and analyze the data.

Mapping parameters were also developed to help determine what material addressed a particular frame. After consulting the *Framework*, including the knowledge practices and dispositions, the researcher established a crosswalk of minimum requirements needed to establish that a guide addressed a frame (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Guides were categorized rather liberally; any guide that touched on the frames in even a small way was considered to have addressed the frame. For example, a guide that included instruction on Boolean operators and keywords was categorized as addressing “Searching as Strategic Exploration” because one of the knowledge practices is to “use different types of searching language (e.g. controlled vocabulary, keywords, natural language) appropriately” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 9). A guide addressing research questions would be categorized as addressing “Research as Inquiry” because of the knowledge practice that states that learners, “formulate questions for research based on information gaps or on reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 7).

FINDINGS

Out of 112 ARL libraries, 76 libraries (or 67.3%) had a course guide for first-year writing. Out of those 76 libraries, 35 had more than one guide for first-year writing, while 41 had one guide. Of the 76 course guides sampled, 90.8% included instructional material of some kind. The most popular form for instructional material was text, i.e. explanatory passages written on the guide, followed by links to other web pages and embedded videos. Infographics and images were the most frequent form of content categorized as “other” (see Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The course guides covered a range of skills and competencies, with search strategies being the most frequently included (75.4% of guides included instruction on search strategies). The next frequent was citing sources, at 72.5%, and then evaluating sources and recognizing scholarly articles, at 62.3% each. The most common skills in the “other” category included the differences between primary and secondary sources, the information life cycle, and how to read a call number and find books in the stacks (see Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Guide organization varied. Eighteen guides were organized by research task, as per best practices (Reeb and Gibbons, 2004; Sinkinson et al., 2012; Staley, 2007). Twelve guides were organized by format, i.e. “Books,” “Articles,” etc., while most guides (27) were organized by a combination of the two. Less frequent organization included a more general organization, i.e. “Start here,” “About the Library,” “Search Tips,” etc. (6 guides), course section and/or assignment (2 guides), and one guide was organized by Joseph Bizup’s BEAM method for determining source use (Bizup, 2008). Ten guides consisted of a single page, therefore organizational tabs were unnecessary. The most frequent number of tabs per guide was 7.

Although many guides included instructional material, fewer addressed the ACRL *Framework* in some way(32 out of 69 guides)*.* The most popular frame addressed in the 32 guides that addressed the *Framework* was “Searching as Strategic Exploration” followed by “Research as Inquiry” (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

DISCUSSION

Most first-year writing guides in this sample did contain instructional content. Although many librarians use research guides because they are easy to create, evidence from this study demonstrates that many librarians are using research guides as instructional design tools, rather than simply a place to list databases. Some librarians are taking advantage of the guides by including content such as in-class activities and handouts they might not have time for in class. This content could be used either in a flipped classroom scenario or for just-in-time instruction.

Text was the most frequent type of instructional content included. Instructional material was considered text if it stood alone or introduced or explained other content such as a video, link, or handout. (For example, an infographic has text on it, but this text would not be categorized as text in the findings.) Perhaps utilizing text does not take advantage of all that Libguides can offer in terms of functionality, but text, especially in combination with other forms of instructional content, can be highly effective for facilitating student learning (Mestre, 2012; Turner et al., 2015). Adding too much text, however, is detrimental, as students have complained about guides with large amounts of text to read (Hintz et al., 2010).

Links to other webpages (62.3%) followed text as the most frequent type of instructional content. (Although technically not a form of instructional content, these links led to other sites that included instructional material.) The impulse to link to another website is understandable; many library sites have excellent tutorials and other instructional content, and sites like Purdue’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl) have a wealth of information on citation. Reusing good material can help save time and effort, however, including too many links can be confusing for the user. Alverson et al. (2015) found that students were frustrated by too many links that went elsewhere. One student from their study noted, “I don’t want to have to go to a bunch of different places to find what I’m looking for” (p. 127). Other students felt overwhelmed, and often clicked on the first link, regardless of whether they knew what it did or not. Students in another study felt similarly; they noted that too many links resulted in unwanted clutter (Oulette, 2011).

The fact that search strategies were the most frequently addressed skill in first-year writing was not surprising; search strategies are an integral part of library instruction. Guides ranged in how they addressed search strategies, however. Some guides mentioned trying a variety of databases or discussed how to use the library catalog. Others went much more in-depth, addressing affective dimensions of searching: Encouraging students not to give up, for example, and to work past the frustration of not finding relevant sources quickly. In addition to search mechanics such as how to use Boolean operators, developing keywords, and using truncation, some guides addressed the philosophy behind search, the idea that one is not looking for a perfect source, but rather exploring what is available and using those sources to learn about a research topic.

Citing sources trailed search skills in frequency, but only slightly. Most guides that addressed citation addressed the nuts and bolts; how to cite using a particular style such as MLA or APA, how to avoid plagiarism, and the like. Many guides linked to the Purdue OWL site or included handouts with citation style examples. A few guides moved beyond these issues by addressing why citation is important and how to use citations to find additional sources. These ideas were generally presented in videos.

Examples of how guides employed the *Framework* were varied*.* In one guide, “Research as Inquiry” is addressed through text and an image. The image, labeled “Choosing your topic is research” depicts the research process as circular, rather than linear, and emphasizes the importance of reformulating ideas after reading and learning from sources. Another guide includes a video addressing the frame, “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” (<https://info.library.okstate.edu/engl-1213/evaluating-information>). The Oklahoma State University Library has produced a series of videos entitled, “Inform Your Thinking,” that address each frame head-on, with students in the videos discussing them in ways other students can understand. Finally, the University of Alabama English 102 guide includes a simple image addressing the *Framework* while at the same time pointing to the important connection between writing and research (see Figure 2). By doing so, the guide reinforces the process-oriented nature of research that the *Framework* outlines.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

This figure also points to the habits of mind included as part of the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project (2011). Grettano and Witek (2016) noticed similarities between this document and the IL *Framework* and mapped the frames to the eight habits of mind included in the writing document: Curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. This type of mapping can help facilitate cooperation between librarians and other instructors by allowing us to speak the same language and by demonstrating that our professions value the same pedagogical ideas. The caption for the image explicitly states that research and writing are “intrinsically” related. Another way of showing this relationship would be to emphasize the writing center, although less than half of the guides (37.7%) in the study did so.

Given the interconnection between research and writing, librarians should consider using guides as a platform for demonstrating this relationship. Only 5 guides included instruction on writing a thesis and only 10 guides on using sources. Barbara Fister (1992) was one of the first librarians to point out the similarities between information literacy and rhetoric and composition; since then many other librarians and rhet/comp instructors have followed suit (Bowles-Terry et. al., 2010; Jacobs, 2008; Noorgard, 2003). Perhaps collaborating with first-year writing instructors on a course research guide would truly marry research and writing skills and make the guides more successful, particularly since instructor recommendations tend to improve student use of research guides (Ouellette, 2011).

Although 46.3% of first-year writing course guides with instructional content did address the IL *Framework* in some way, guide design was problematic at times. Some guides were particularly text-heavy and involved a lot of scrolling, two elements students strongly dislike (Hintz et al., 2010). Many guides used three columns, rather than the one or two columns advised by best practices (Alverson et al., 2015). Information overload was also a problem; some guides included entire pages of links to videos, tutorials, and other web pages. No guide excelled in addressing the *Framework* and design best practices.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although this study focused on the guides themselves, information about why the guides were created and how they are used could enhance the analysis. Some guides might have been designed as a stand-in for in-person library instruction, while some may have been used in tandem with a robust set of instructional sessions. Interviewing librarians about their thought processes for developing their guides—what criteria they used for including instructional elements, their thoughts about the *Framework,* if they updated their guides to address it, etc.—could provide valuable insights. Research could also be done on stand-alone introductory guides. Many libraries have Research 101 guides—essentially guides that explain the research process without being tied to a course. Do these types of guides incorporate the *Framework* to a greater degree? Finally, studies on the learning outcomes resulting from incorporating the *Framework* into LibGuides would be especially beneficial.

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates that although most first-year writing course guides do contain instructional elements, few are addressing the *Framework*. Resources such as the Peer-Reviewed Instructional Material Online Database (PRIMO) (http://primodb.org/) or the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox (http://sandbox.acrl.org/) could help those librarians who wish to update their guides to better reflect it. Other librarians may feel that the *Framework* is better addressed elsewhere, in other types of guides, on the library website, or during in-person instruction. More research is needed to determine best practices.

Research guides, and LibGuides in particular, are popular because they are so easy to create. Adding elements of the *Framework* to course guides could be an easy way of promoting these ideas to students, particularly if the guides are used during instruction sessions. If designed intentionally, first-year writing course guides employing the *Framework* could reinforce complex ideas presented during library instruction sessions, and underscore the research process as Hick’s (2015) describes it, as a “rich, sociocultural practice that forms an integral part of human activity.”

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APPENDIX: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

1. Name of library
2. What type of institution? (Public/Private)
3. Is there a First-Year Writing course guide (Yes/No)
4. How many tabs does it have? (If Q3 is Yes)
5. How are the tabs organized? (If Q4 is more than 1)
   1. By task
   2. by format
   3. other
6. Does it link to the Writing Center? (Yes/No)
7. Is instructional content included? (Yes/No)
8. What topics or skills are covered? (If Q7 is Yes)
   1. Topic development
   2. Writing a thesis
   3. Using sources
   4. Keyword development
   5. Search strategies
   6. Evaluating sources
   7. Citing sources
   8. Popular and scholarly articles
   9. Other
9. What type of instructional content is included? (If Q7 is Yes)
   1. Text
   2. Screen shots
   3. Handouts
   4. Embedded video
   5. Link to video
   6. Link to another website
   7. Link to another LibGuide
   8. In-class exercise
   9. Out-of-class assignment
   10. Other
10. Are any ACRL Frames addressed? (Yes/No)
11. Which ACRL Frames are addressed? (If Q10 is Yes)
    1. Authority is constructed and contextual
    2. Information creation as process
    3. Information has value
    4. Research as inquiry
    5. Scholarship as conversation
    6. Searching as strategic exploration
12. Anything else of note?