LibGuides: Pedagogy to Oppress?
Alison Hicks

You have to be a pretty tenacious researcher to find any criticism about LibGuides, the practical and convenient tool that librarians use to create online guides to research. My search for "LibGuides and critique or criticism" taught me a great deal about how to interpret literature, while keying in "LibGuides and problems" merely returned information about the occasional scheduled downtime. It was not until I limited my search to wordpress.com and then traced a bunch of links and pingbacks that I could even start to gather a sense of the conversation round the topic. Yet, ironically, it is exactly this twisting, infuriating and (occasionally) joyful process of research that is stifled by the way that most librarians structure and organize their LibGuides. Web-based research guides have helped to bridge the gap that the growth of online resources has put between the library and its patrons. However, their typical focus on librarian-defined notions of value and authority conceals an industrial-era adherence to library-centric, behaviourist learning theories and provides a textbook example of Paulo Freire's banking model of education. In short, while librarians have started to think about the nature of critical pedagogy in the classroom, a failure to subject instructional materials to the same processes of reflective, critical thinking serves to dehumanize both our students and the nature of research and inquiry.

What is a LibGuide?
If you have never seen a LibGuide before, a quick browse of the [LibGuides Community site](#) will turn up a typical example of how librarians employ this proprietary software. Most simply, librarians use LibGuides as a guide to relevant or recommended sources and sites that students can use to search for information on a topic. Mirroring typical research assignment prompts that may ask for 5-10 scholarly articles, guides are typically created for courses or for general topics such as criminology or art history and organized by source format, for example, databases or images. Today, 78,000 librarians from nearly 5000 libraries have [produced](#) over 400,000 LibGuides. Providing an easy way for even the most non-tech savvy librarian to produce or highlight content on library websites that are often heavily locked down, or poorly designed and cluttered, LibGuides have now expanded beyond their original research guide design, and are marketed as a core instructional tool for academic, public, school and special libraries. Simple and practical, LibGuides are deservedly popular. However, by failing to consider LibGuides within the context of broader pedagogical

practices, librarians run the risk of misrepresenting both the nature and the scope of research and inquiry.

Understanding the Nature of Research

One of my major issues with LibGuides centers on how they are used to represent the nature of research. For example, my search for criticism about LibGuides formed part of the broader research for this article: as my writing has unfolded I have drawn upon my understandings and experiences of librarian communication habits and tools in order to engage with the resources that constitute information and knowledge within this community. Yet, as Olof Sundin points out in his analysis of library tutorials, in using LibGuides to create decontextualized lists of key (textual) resources in the field, we isolate tools and resources from critical considerations of the contexts and practices in which they were created. This is problematic because it removes research from its sociocultural context, or from the processes of knowing that give information and knowledge its very meaning and legitimacy within a specific community. It also, in Freirian terms, moves the focus of inquiry from creation to listening, and from problem posing to consumption. This positions LibGuides as a tool to acculturate students into the current system's logic rather than to help them question what they are becoming as they deal creatively with these new worlds.

My research for this article has also formed a highly iterative process. As my thoughts have developed, I have had to chase new references and interrogate my original sources in different ways while I engaged in a maddening and seemingly never ending quest to marshall my arguments meaningfully. Yet, when we design LibGuides around the key search tools in a field, we isolate research from reading and writing processes. This is troublesome because it positions research as static and linear and makes it sound like the point of research is, as Barbara Fister eloquently puts it, to engage in a one-stop shopping process for "solid nuggets of truth." Furthermore, in listing the authorized knowledge that, as Freire puts it, students must consume, memorize or bank in order to be successful, it privileges the librarian's carefully built up "expert" researcher model over the student's tentative meaning making process, even though it's through reflection and self-experience that we become what we are.

In order to create a LibGuide that doesn't fall prey to these problematic assumptions, we must think more holistically about the nature of research. One effective way is to design LibGuides around research processes, an approach that was adopted by Annie Armstrong and Kimberly Pendell in their psychology research guide and refined by Kathy Shields in her English guide. While this approach still positions inquiry as an individual rather than a social practice, it at least centers on the user rather than information. Alternatively, librarians can move beyond the typical organization by format towards an arrangement that is organized by student assignment, need or habit. A better solution, however, would be to look to the

inspirational work of [Buffy Hamilton, who helps students create their own LibGuides](). This focus on [developing]() personal learning environments engages students in today's rich information landscapes, as well as situating them as active participants in broader conversations about research and inquiry. Of course, LibGuides are not the only tool that can help accomplish this, with the social bookmarking tool [Diigo](), a wiki or even class blogs forming alternative options. As [Rosen and Seale point out](), the use of open digital platforms such as these explicitly work against the banking model of education.

Expanding the Scope of Research

My other major issue with LibGuides is linked to the way that we present the scope of research. To return to the research that I undertook for this article, my inquiry carried me throughout today's cluttered and dynamic information landscapes -- and forced me to make a variety of evaluative judgements on the go as I moved from scanned copies of paper articles that live in my personal library to tweets, blogs, hashtags and more. Yet, when we organize our LibGuides solely around peer reviewed, textual, library resources with a cautionary tab on the end for "internet resources", we ignore the broader processes of meaning-making that characterize our understandings of research. In other words, when we organize LibGuides by format (books, articles, databases, etc), we fail to account for the development of personal information strategies, or engagement with the social and physical sources that [Annemaree Lloyd argues]() constitute today's information landscapes. These designs are problematic because they appear to be more interested in protecting the librarian's traditional tools rather than engaging with the nature of research.

More worryingly, LibGuides that are structured by librarian-defined understandings of the "best sources" move the focus of research away from the rhetorical evaluation of evidence. In effect, we privilege concepts of value and authority that are based on what [Barbara Fister calls]() "oversimplified external signs" rather than a critical interrogation of argument. In addition, as [Amy Mark highlights](), we position librarians as the "arbitrators" of useful knowledge, or the people who have the power to make judgments about the "rightness" of information. In other words, the student is placed in opposition to the authority of knowledge even though, as [James Elmborg makes so clear](), "the only judge of 'aboutness' is the person who seeks to be informed 'about' something." In creating LibGuides that define research through its resources, we unconsciously reinforce academic power dynamics, limit dialog and marginalize the student voice from the very academic conversations that surround them. This also centers the professional librarian's existence on an assumption of student ignorance, a particularly insulting observation.

One way that librarians can move beyond these problematic understandings about the scope of research is to work more closely with faculty and instructors. Research paper requirements that ask for five academic sources, with nothing from Google or Wikipedia,

make it hard for librarians to design instructional materials that don't rely on banking models of education. By working with faculty and instructors, we can move beyond the idea that research papers are the only way that students can experience inquiry. Alternatives, which include multimedia, [critical textbook](#) or [digital curation](#) projects can often provide a dynamic way to move the focus of research from the final product to the more important intermediary ideas, conversations, and connections. As [Kris Shaffer notes](#), these alternative approaches are useful because they move beyond an understanding of research as "a fixed expression that is both physically and legally prevented from being altered" to challenge the inherent binaries within the scholarly research process. Engagement with faculty should also focus on the way that we talk about research in class, with [Joseph Bizup's](#) BEAM model providing an interesting rhetorical perspective for research-based writing, as well as the design of the research assignment handout, which, as [researchers from Project Information Literacy found](#), tend to dedicate more space to margin widths than to the nature of research and inquiry.

Ultimately, when we construct LibGuides around the resources that the librarian thinks the student should know about in order to ace their research paper, we attempt to simplify the processes of research. Yet, as Freire points out, this is problematic because it positions research as a transferral of information, rather than as an act of exploratory and liberatory meaning-making. In effect, when we fail to engage critically with new technologies such as LibGuides, we run the risk of perpetuating banking-model pedagogies that deny learner agency and position inquiry as a procedural skill instead of a rich, sociocultural practice that forms an integral part of human activity. While this lack of conversation about pedagogy and design is not unique to LibGuides, [librarians have a long commitment](#) to social justice, critical praxis and liberatory teaching. Let's make sure our instructional materials don't let us down.