

If librarians want to lead in creating the digital future, they need to learn how to work with their colleagues in museums and archives

The Collaboration Imperative

By Liz Bishoff

IF YOUR MUSEUM'S web exhibition on ancient Egypt has links to circulating books at the public library, chances are the two institutions are collaborating. Most museum and library collaboration in this country has been of this sort—at the local level. Rarely do we find statewide or even regional resource collaboration. Thanks to the digital library, a cultural shift is beginning to take place, and the new DO IT legislation (see sidebar, p. 35) is putting collaboration on digital initiatives on the front burner for all types of libraries.

Librarians, curators, archivists, computer scientists, publishers, and others in the digital library arena are working together to solve the issues surrounding digital collections. Collaboration, they find, is the key to success. For librarians to lead in the creation of vibrant and sustainable digital collections, we must work with our colleagues and with archive and museum professionals.

Librarians undertake digitization initiatives to attract new users, preserve and increase access to collections, support distance and K-12 learning, and more. Why should we bother to collaborate?

Together, institutions that see aspects of a problem differently can constructively explore their differences. The resulting joint solution is always stronger than

what one library or museum could achieve alone. While we often categorize institutions by type, our public does not. Users don't care where they get the pho-

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to or map from, as long as they get it. Often smaller institutions with important collections that might not be able to attempt a digitization project on their own can participate, learning in the process.

Finally, current funding opportunities support cross-institutional digital collection building. Those opportunities are likely to grow.

Better collections, more users

When we work together, we can gather material from several institutions into one magnificent collection. Here's

a small example: University of Denver (UD) anthropologist E.B. Renaud's collection from his field work in Colorado includes field notes and artifacts that reside at the Penrose Library's special collections department, but UD's Anthropology Museum owns the artifacts. Digitization reunites Renaud's works on a web site created by the library with hyperlinks to the artifacts. On a larger scale, UD and the Colorado Digitization Project (a collaborative program involving archives, historical societies, libraries, and museums of the West) received a 2001 Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership grant for the Western Trails project. Some 30 institutions from four states created more than 20,000 digital resources along with web exhibits and lessons.

Collaboration brings new users to collections. People may know that they want to search the petroglyph collection at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, but they don't expect to find also images from the Museum of Western Colorado, Grand Junction; the Denver Public Library; and others.

Leverage experience, funding

Collaboration makes it possible for every institution to capitalize on the professional traditions and expertise of all. Curators who develop museum exhibits and library catalogers with their metadata expertise can work together with preservation and conservation experts.

Colorado Digitization Program (CDP) participants found that digitization is the same regardless of the type of institution. As a collaborator, the South-

ern Peaks Public Library, Alamosa, CO, could consider and employ the same digital imaging standards, metadata best practices, and legal concerns as a large museum. Collaboration leveled the playing field and offered additional networking and mentoring opportunities.

Working together is also cost-effective. The infrastructure is shared, including digital imaging laboratories, a digital archive repository, metadata creation software, a digital rights management system, and often hardware for the web site and server. Many projects share

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The Digital Dream Bill

In November 2003, SB 1854, the Digital Opportunity Investment Trust Act (DO IT) was introduced. Sponsored by Senators Olympia Snow (D-ME), Christopher Dodd (D-CT), and Richard Durbin (D-IL), it would use proceeds from the sales of the digital spectrum (radio and television spectrum) to enhance use of educational technology and increase access to advanced telecommunication so the public could acquire new work-related skills. The endowment might total \$18–\$20 billion, with annual proceeds of as much as \$1 billion funding the initiatives, including digitized collections. For more information, visit the Digital Promise web site, www.digitalpromise.org.

Ramping up

New legislation could expand digitization programs dramatically, but libraries aren't ready to participate in this initiative. A mere 20 states (and many individual libraries and museums) have statewide digitization initiatives underway. In Colorado, the CDP worked with 80 institutions, but 350 have yet to be involved. While major institutions can probably apply for and receive grants on their own, it is unlikely that smaller institutions can effectively compete for these funds.

The library community must identify and seek funding for collaborative projects now. Librarians must establish relationships with their museum and archival partners. They must train library staff in new skills and new vocabularies and convert cataloging skills into metadata skills. They need to negotiate group prices for outsourced work. Librarians must address the system issues associated with interoperability and simply get over that everyone doesn't use LCSH and MARC. We must convince vendors to implement emerging standards more rapidly.

If librarians aren't ready when the DO IT legislation passes, others will be. For more than a decade, computer scientists have received millions of dollars in National Science Foundation digital library funding. The DO IT sponsors have identified the vast reservoir of resources available for digitization in libraries and museums, but if we aren't prepared to make the content available, they will see that others make it available for us.

the cost of training programs. Collaboration also greatly increases funding opportunities. More than half of the IMLS grants awarded in 2000 went to collaborative initiatives, which private foundations encourage as well.

Same goals, different words

In 2000, Lorcan Dempsey, then director of the UK Office for Library and Information Networking, described the first framework for digital cultural heritage collections. We have common goals: we want to make collections available for creative use by citizens; to develop practices that uphold the values and purposes of library, archive, and museum traditions in the digital environment; and to explore what it means to develop a virtual civic presence. Finally, we want to create sustainable economic models that support development and continued access to cultural heritage.

Collaborators share a common vision. The collections house and organize the memory of the people, communities, institutions, and individuals. The content is made available to the citizens to create new knowledge, while the act of digitization focuses traditional values on the challenges of the rapidly changing digital resource. Finally, col-

laborators develop best practices to support the use and management of the resource over time.

Institutions may have common goals and visions, but they lack a common language. This lack of shared vocabulary regularly causes the professionals to talk at cross-purposes. For example, one element in a Dublin Core record is contributor. To librarians, the contributor has a role in the creation of the work—as the illustrator, translator, or photographer. To museum professionals, the contributor is a donor.

Every institution employs a range of professionals, but the scope of the professions involved is even broader when you collaborate. This inherent strength can also be a challenge as different languages and assumptions collide. Expect to work with the full range of professionals and library workers—from archivists to computer scientists, from web designers to teachers—and embrace what they bring.

The metadata migraine

Interoperability is critical to the digital library community. However, metadata standards differ within one institution and between institutions. Different standards are often based on dif-

ferent formats. Encoded Archival Description (EAD) is used for finding aids. Dublin Core is used for digital photos, maps, letters, etc. MARC may be used for e-books and e-journals, and Visual Resource Association's VRA Core Categories v. 3.0 is used for art resources.

Adoption of metadata and interoperability standards, such as Z39.50 or the Open Archives Initiative (OAI), is typically required to participate in library projects. Unfortunately, neither Z39.50 nor OAI are widely used across the community of cultural heritage institutions.

Subject or controlled vocabulary is equally varied. The Western States Best Practices for Dublin Core Metadata allows a wide range of subject headings and controlled vocabulary to accommodate the various institutions, subject disciplines, and formats. When faced with 18,000 images of mammals from one institution, 6000 fossils from one national park, and every specimen of Rocky Mountain alpine plant in Colorado, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) just don't work.

Cooperating institutions typically create metadata in their local database. CDP's solution for handling vocabularies was to develop categories and sub-categories based on the subjects covered in the collections and supported by a series of precoordinated searches. It's not a perfect solution, but it does get users into the collections.

Culture wars

Organizational cultures are as varied as vocabularies. Libraries believe in resource sharing, are committed to freely available information, value the preservation of collections, and focus on access to information. Museums believe in preservation of collections, often create their identity based on these collections, are committed to community education, and frequently operate in a strongly competitive environment.

All the partners must be involved at the outset to make cooperation work in these disparate cultures. While the players may share common goals, respect that each institution has a different mission, culture, and funding structure. If we build digital collections based on common values, making certain that every participant derives some benefit from the end product, we'll thrive, just as our patrons will. ■

For more on digital collections, see the winter *netConnect* with this issue

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