Chapter 12

Creating an Online Image Database: Illustrating a Hands-On Approach to Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

The concept of experiential learning is particularly useful when students are required to create database entries as part of an ongoing, real-life, online experience. A METRO grant in 2005 resulted in an opportunity to use students to create a CONTENTdm database, which, with the continued software support from METRO, has continued and evolved until the present. This case study chapter describes the experience of both faculty and students in the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies course entitled “Introduction to Digital Imaging.” Sections include a review of related literature, the background, technical issues, and implications for teaching, project procedures and workflow, successes and lessons learned, challenges, next steps, and emerging trends. Of particular interest is the use of out of copyright postcards and the metadata that has resulted from intensive student study and evaluation of the data contained on these cards. Those contemplating a digitization project of their own will be able to learn much about best practices, project planning, management, and the advantages/disadvantages of the CONTENTdm software.

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning is an ideal pedagogical approach to teaching many subjects in a Master’s program. Actual practice combined with a theoretical underpinning can be applied in a number of courses in any MLS curriculum. Past experience has shown that the tensions between these two constructs are artificial, and that an ideal situation can result when both are employed. This is particularly evident when one begins to teach, or talk about teaching, the planning, creation, management, and maintenance of an active, Internet-based, online database.

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Creating an Online Image Database

In 2005, the Queens College (QC) Graduate School of Library and Information Studies (GSLIS) and the QC Rosenthal Library received a grant from METRO, the Manhattan based Metropolitan New York Library Council (2012), to digitize a portion of the Queens College archives (see http://qcpages.qc.edu/GSLIS/digitization.html) (METRO is one of nine regional library councils serving libraries and residents of New York State; support for digital projects has been a high priority for much of the past decade). This, admittedly over-ambitious project, was an eye opener for all concerned. In the Introduction to Digital Imaging course, developed by Professor Perry, students and the instructor found that the variety of material designated for digitization (text, photographs, letters, magazine covers, slides, etc.) created an overly complex technological and teaching environment.

Although a new Mac teaching lab had been established in 2003 in time for the first iteration of the course, subsequent modifications added to the difficulties, given the necessity to troubleshoot/tweak hardware and software updates/changes. In addition, from the METRO feedback to the final report, and from a pedagogical standpoint, it became obvious that digitizing a single medium was best for the teaching/learning process. Course objectives were simplified to enhance the theoretical aspects of the course and awareness of essential standards/best practices, along with incorporating a real life database project that included hands-on work.

This chapter has the following objectives:

1. To document, analyze and summarize how the development of a graduate library course, which introduces the concepts of digital image capture and data creation and storage, has evolved.
2. To demonstrate how the experiential learning model is well suited for the teaching of the concepts and skills required in digital librarianship.
3. To identify pedagogy that enhances the teaching of technological concepts and skills integral to the design of digital libraries.
4. To illustrate how user-centered/student-centered feedback is critical to the evaluation and assessment strategies of digital librarianship.

BACKGROUND

According to the ERIC Thesaurus, experiential learning is “learning by doing” (http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/thesaurus/thesaurus.jsp). It is closely related to—and an example of—active learning (“learning in which the learner is the principal driving force, with the instructor [if one is present] as facilitator of the process…”). A similar concept is that of service learning (“learning through community service [or public service in a public sphere] usually integrated with regular instruction in school or college”). Schools of Library and Information Science (LIS) have long offered experiential and service learning in terms of field work, practicums, or internships, in order to offer a balance between theory and practice. Ball (2008) provides a thorough review of the literature on practicums and service learning since the time of Dewey, then addresses these trends historically within LIS education. Interestingly, she notes tremendous shifts in the degree to which fieldwork has been required, from the founding of formal library school education through changes over the decades. In light of recent controversy regarding the success of LIS education in meeting the needs of the profession, Ball suggests the importance of further investigation of the value of experiential and service learning in the field at this time.

Currum (2011) describes an alternative approach to experiential learning beyond that of fieldwork or internships, based on the question-answering components of the ipl2. Formed by a merger of the Internet Public Library (IPL) and