

ACURIL XL – June 6-12, 2010
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

IT-SIG Presentation
Sub-Theme 3. Organization and Representation of Information

Organizing and Representing Thematic Collections through evidence-based practices
By
Judith Rogers, University of the Virgin Islands

[slide one] In this presentation, I will examine some practices in organizing digital collections around thematic areas and identify two reports as some evidence from the literature for effectively getting users to your digital resources. The first report is from an article by Peter Lor called : Digital libraries and archiving knowledge: some critical questions. This article revisits the access issues for digital collections and the question of why we digitize in the first place. The second report is in the article by Lorcan Dempsey called Libraries and the Long Tail. This report makes the case for aggregating collections and users to enhance use.

As we were told in the opening presentation this morning, presenters can only hold the attention of the audience for 20 mins. As I am at about the 20 minute threshold, I will use a storytelling format for this presentation and ask you to visualize or imagine with me the experiences of users in navigating digital collections.

Finally, I will examine the articles by Lor and Dempsey as evidence supporting thematic applications for digital libraries.

[slide two] We'll begin with this quote from Peter Lor's article: "It follows from the nature of digital content, much of which is online, that the organisation of digital content cannot be limited to the silos of individual institutions." (Peter Johan Lor 2008) speaks to the reason for opening up access to collections. Keep this in mind as we work through the presentation.

[slide three] The year is 2012 – I would like to introduce you to Samantha and Olga, the 19 year-old college students enrolled in a SSC 100 course during their second semester in college. The SSC 100 course provides students with an understanding of Caribbean social, economic, physical and cultural experiences. After introducing the students to the areas that would be covered in the course, Professor Eduardo gave their students their first assignment

[slide four – choose a Caribbean island and describe the evidence of the human experiences in historical maps of that island.]

The year is 2012 and like most of their friends, Samantha and Olga begin every assignment by logging onto their favorite search engine, typing in a few keywords and reviewing the first three pages of results. For this assignment, however, the professor requires that students use the collection of maps organized and presented through the digital library of the Caribbean (dLOC). **[slide five]** This is restricting their style, it is not Yahoo, she moans - at least the assignment allows me to go online, she

says, logging on to her computer. As is also typical, Samantha has scheduled her research time with her friend Olga. Although it was not a group project, Samantha and Olga are energized by the social contact achieved through MSN chat as they work through the web pages.

After locating the dLOC web site, Samantha and Olga saw the link for partner collections in the group of tabs at the top of the page. This should be easy, says Olga. There cannot be that many documents on a web site called the Digital Library of the Caribbean, and how many of those documents would contain historical maps anyway.

[slide six] So they began by reviewing links to the partner collections. Do you realize that there are over 50 partners contributing to this project? Let's use the advanced search feature to see how many of the collections include maps. There were over 1,000 documents described with the maps document type.

[slide seven] Wow, this is impressive, Samantha says. I think this will take much longer than we thought, if we can't find a simpler method for refining this search. When I used the **all items** tab, it shows over 1,500 unique titles, and some of these have over 50 items under one title. There could be over 2 mil pages of documents on this site. **[slide eight]** Surely there's a way to browse all these documents by subject areas as we do with Yahoo and Alta Vista.

At that moment Olga spotted the Collections link on the bottom of the page. **[slide nine]** Bingo, she wrote on her chat page. I just located the solution to our dilemma. The collections page organizes the partner collections using 40 broad themes and sub-themes. **[slide ten]** There is a heading called Caribbean maps in the Geography area, I've already found a historical map of St. Kitts and of the American Virgin Islands. **[slide eleven]** The map of the Virgin Islands includes Danish, French, and Dutch place names. **[slide twelve]** Professor Eduardo had explained how changes in governments and languages played a critical role in framing the human experiences of residents of any area.

Samantha and Olga were well on their way in successfully completing their assignment.

Come back now to the reality of 2010. This particular website does not yet have the depth of themes and topics to make it the research tool that would yield results such as those experienced by Samantha and Olga, but it has the beginnings. With continued effort, dLOC partners can achieve that 2mil record mark and full thematic collections by 2012.

[slide thirteen] The CARICOM Carifesta collection is one of the resources that's well on its way towards that goal.

But what does this scenario say about the organizational standards and professional practices that should drive digital resources? To answer these questions, we must re-examine the purpose for creating a digital library in the first place.

[slide fourteen] According to Peter Johan Lor in his article: Digital libraries and archiving knowledge: some critical questions, there are two primary reasons for creating digital collections, aggregated access and enhanced access. Aggregated access refers to the bringing together of resources under one umbrella for delivery through a single interface. Enhanced access refers to promotion gained as a wider

audience becomes aware of the resources and the creation of finding aids or search engines for effective retrieval.

Bringing resources together (aggregating) is a major factor in achieving enhanced access. It is much easier to find a shoe in the haystack than it is to find the needle. It is this effective retrieval that is significantly impacted through the development of the topical divisions for organizing collections. Lor's statement that the organization of digital collections cannot be limited by displaying them solely under the banner of the owning institution captures the critical reasoning for integrating collections within a digital library. In other words, it's not enough to simply digitize your collections and place them online. If all our institutions did that we are simply maintaining the silos in which these collections already exist. If we aggregate them within a collection without facilitating further integration, the power of the technology is wasted as some of the segregation still remains.

Organizing the collections by subject or topical categories takes aggregation one step further. Best practices dictate that contributors to digital collections take that next step and identify the categories of documents existing within digital resources placed online. If we are removing barriers, then remove the barriers completely.

Evidence on which practice of aggregating access is based is everywhere in the literature. The Peter Johan Lor article addresses this issue as well as others such as the lifespan of digital collections not discussed in this presentation. The Libraries and the Long tail article by Lorcan Dempsey applies the long tail argument of how the aggregation supply and demand impact usage, and also provides data to support improving access through integration. It is not enough to get users online to your collection – you must also reduce costs. Time is a cost in this case that we don't often consider. Samantha and Olga in our scenario were not prepared to spend too much time digging around dLOC to find those maps. If some success didn't happen for them within the first 5-8 minutes they were ready to look elsewhere and forget Prof. Eduardo. The behaviour in the futuristic scenario is supported by the evidence in articles such as Dempsey and Lor.

The vivid imagery of students attempting to execute a research assignment and questioning the usefulness of library resources sends shivers through any dedicated librarian. When all is said and done, libraries want resources used. This is true for traditional collections, it's true for online collections. The ultimate goal in building and organizing online resources is to enhance access. Organizing by topic is one way to accomplish that. The research scenario is set in 2012 because we are not there yet. Perhaps the plight of the Samanthas and Olgas among our users will be sufficient motivation to perform the difficult the time consuming process of applying themes to our collection. We look forward to seeing greater development of topics from partners of the Digital Library of the Caribbean Collection or any other collection serving up Caribbean materials.