In Search of the Best of All Possible Worlds: Positioning Cultural Heritage Informatics in Library Science and Archival Education

In the interest of full disclosure I have changed the title of my talk today in order not to mislead anyone. I didn’t want you to think that I have already found the best of all possible worlds, or even that I know what would be best in any one world. But as I have gone from being a practitioner to a professor for almost 6 years now, my job on this panel is to look at what we are doing to prepare the next generation of information professionals to enter the world of cultural heritage institutions. So really we are talking about BEYOND “Beyond the Silos…”

I didn’t realize when I was writing quite what a landmark the flour towers here were, but they do tie in nicely to our theme. Silos may dominate a landscape but empty ones have little useful to contribute beyond reminding us of a more distant past. I’ll come back to this metaphor later.

Several years ago, when my Simmons colleagues and I first started talking about developing a cultural heritage informatics program we came up with what we began referring to as the 4Cs: Curriculum, Cooperation, Convergence and Capacity. We have had a strong visual, digital, preservation, and archives track that has been growing over the past decade and so it seemed a natural next step to apply for grant money to support expanding our curriculum and to reach out to cultural heritage organizations in New England. The seven organizations that became partners in the 4Cs project were chosen precisely because they embodied the challenges of organizing and managing digital assets across library, archives, and museum systems.

In the spring of 2008 Michele Cloonan, Dean of the GSLIS, and I attended the Cultural Heritage Information Professionals (or CHIPS) workshop held in Sarasota, Florida. After two intense days of presentations and discussions we condensed our main topics into a few key points. Namely, we articulated four principles as underlying critical aspects of information access and provision in today’s cultural heritage organizations:

1. On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a library, archive, or museum. People want information, and access to information should be as transparent as possible. People who desire access to cultural heritage resources should not be required first to understand and acknowledge the differences that traditionally have divided and differentiated information providing organizations.

2. Engage your audiences, or lose them. Providing access to information is only a first step; 21st century cultural heritage organizations must transition from connecting people and information to engaging communities around information resources. Cultural heritage institutions should take advantage of new information technologies to open up information access for new users and new uses, and
encourage the growth of new knowledge communities around cultural heritage. Cultural heritage information professionals should play a key role in facilitating this transition within these institutions.

3. Information wants to be free. The best way to breathe new life into information is to give it away, opening it up for new uses and encouraging the spark of human creativity. Done correctly, the ultimate outcome is not the erosion of authority, but the broadening of it, through the merging of traditional authority with participatory democracy. Cultural heritage information professionals should help their institutions understand and embrace the new philosophies that are transforming traditional notions of control and authority, recognizing that one can give away information while still providing added value and preserving data quality.

4. Embrace our commonalities, and our diversities. Finding and promoting areas of convergence between libraries, archives, and museums does not require library and information science, museum studies, and archival studies educators and professionals to discard areas they do not hold in common. Cultural heritage information professionals come from varied educational backgrounds and follow diverse career paths, and it is important that they retain those unique differences over time. In this way, new information technologies can help 21st century cultural heritage organizations work more closely together, while enhancing the unique nature of libraries, archives, and museums.


This last item of what we called the Sarasota Manifesto seems to be critically important. We are pretty much agreed that convergence is a good thing. In article after article we have asserted that this is so. Unquestionably we want to make our institutions more accessible, more economic, and most of all more integrated – at least at some level.

In 1998 Boyd Rayward wrote that the functional differentiation of LAMs “does not reflect the needs of the individual scholar or even the member of the educated public interested in some aspect of learning or life.”


And in 2009 Jennifer Trant noted that while “physical barriers [to collections] recede, intellectual ones remain.” While the gate-keepers are thoroughly steeped in their own intellectual traditions (as Jennifer puts it) progress towards actual convergence continues to seem a remote ideal.

So this seemed a perfect opportunity for Simmons GSLIS to develop a suite of courses directed at precisely these issues.

In July of 2009 we were awarded a 3-year grant from the Institute of Library and Museum Services (IMLS) to develop our curriculum, to collaborate with several New England cultural heritage repositories and to implement a digital curriculum lab where issues of digital asset management, digital preservation and stewardship, and ultimately the whole picture of LAM convergence could be practiced by our students.

Our initial seven partner sites were located all over New England and the common factor among them was that each repository was a multi-faceted, hybrid combining collections and practices from across the LAMs. Typically we had some adjustments to make; one partner dropped out and was replaced, while another decided it was not ready to participate in the first round of internships.

We hoped to find collections where there were already digital assets and where we could study the issues that arise from treating a part of a collection as museum objects, another part as an archival collection, and still another as a library. The partner sites agreed to collaborate with us on developing internship or practicum projects that would be a key part of the curriculum and to work with us on case studies of the ensuing projects.

At the same time we expected to find collections where resources for IT systems were perhaps slender, if not minimal, and where there was a willingness to explore new directions.

We actually found that the repositories, while significantly different in mission, goals, and user base, for the most part had similar issues. Among our partners we had three museums with library and archives collections, a public library with a special collection that includes works of art, manuscripts, and the town clerk’s records, a historical society with museum, library and archives components, and at least four of them were also responsible for a number of historic houses. And of course Historic New England, which is primarily dedicated to maintaining historic properties, has an extraordinary collection of books, manuscripts, photographs, and other archival materials. Inevitably we found that most suffered from not having enough staff. One of the collections has gone from a staff of over 60 to 13 in the past few years. Another has operated quite successfully with a small core staff and good IT support. Differences in administration and organizational mission accounted for similar problems. Two collections with extraordinarily strong archival and book holdings are administratively part of a museum and this has an enormous impact on their approach and their outlook. But the range of digital assets, electronic records and collections management systems has offered us tremendous scope for study.

As an example, we found at Historic New England’s Gropius House that the on-site collection included a large collection of uncataloged books, art works, furnishings, and the surrounding landscape as well. Additional materials are not stored on site, and a
major collection of papers is held by a local university. HNE staff are eager to provide better online access to the collections as well as to promote better internal coordination of information resources – just maintaining effective communications between the site managers, the curators and the librarians is a major undertaking.

Last fall we offered our first course of the suite, now known as our Cultural Heritage Informatics group. We hope that within the next few years this will become an official “track” or concentration with additional courses, an advanced certificate program, and continuing education components.

The class, Concepts in Cultural Heritage Informatics, was co-taught by Michele Cloonan and myself. We had 23 students who came with varying degrees of experience and interests. Expecting that our students would be more familiar with libraries and archives we began with an overview of the common historical roots shared by libraries and archives and museums in the cabinets of curiosities of the 17th century. We introduced them to the concept of informatics as it applies in cultural heritage organizations. Guest lecturers talked about the process of selecting and implementing a content management system in a university archive, the impact of the transition from the card catalog to the cloud, and the complexities of trying to unify a information management system across a collection as diverse as that of Historic New England. The class visited three of our sites as a group and worked in teams to develop a preliminary overview of potential internship projects at the individual sites.

The other two courses in the suite are being offered this semester. Digital Stewardship is taught by Visiting Professor Ross Harvey and the Practicum course is supervised by Jeannette Bastian and the whole project team. So I’m right in the middle of student anxieties, unexpected difficulties and challenges, and concerns about what comes next. Our emphasis for the internships has been to get a working model for future projects rather than to complete a specific task. Students are looking at the systems in place (when they are in place) and considering whether open source content management systems might provide solutions.

At Historic New England’s Gropius House they are concentrating on the collection of books that are displayed in Gropius’ study and plan to create an inventory and a reference tool that will help users to understand the collection – which is treated as an object in the house rather than as a group of individual books – and guide them to circulating copies at other institutions. This is just a tiny subset of the goals that we originally articulated for this site.

When I met with HNE’s librarian Lorna Condon and David Dwiggins (their IT person) last week we talked about a potential future project in which our students would interview site managers and site maintenance supervisors to understand how they use the digital image files that they are creating on a daily basis. Site workers at each of the 39 historic properties are regularly uploading hundreds pictures of details of exteriors, interiors, damaged drains, repairs to windows and roofs, while the landscapers document seasonal changes in the planting. We agreed that understanding how these stakeholders
used their information would help us to create a set of data elements that could be collected systematically at the time the images are uploaded. This is just one small example of the level of detail that we are engaged with at the sites.

The three courses will be offered again in the next academic year and the case studies and project evaluations will be completed after that. Shaping this year’s project has been challenging as we attempt to ensure that the students have an opportunity to engage with issues of digital asset management, needs assessments, and day-to-day operations.

So where are we, and where is the issue of convergence, in the larger picture of library and information science programs? We are currently one of 11 ALA-accredited schools offering some type of career track in cultural heritage. The discussions that arose in Sarasota have borne considerable results and numerous approaches to such programs. At Simmons we already have a strong archives and preservation management program and the new courses fit well with our existing strengths.

My colleagues at the other schools continue to discuss how we can best serve what is still a somewhat amorphous area of practice. Robert Martin’s comments about the importance of the “preparation of personnel – shared backgrounds, values, ethics & mutually held perspectives” pointed us in our current direction. We have much more to do.

At Simmons we believe that the program we are developing will fill a definite need in our community, that we are offering courses that are not part of the typical museum studies program, and that as a next step we will broaden our outreach to include continuing education for practitioners in under-resourced collections.

This has been a very exciting project for me to work on and I will be glad to tell you more about it as we continue to grow and evaluate our results. We see this very much as a work in progress. Our students this semester are building models for future projects and our partner sites are engaged in continuing to define the projects’ goals and scope.

Going forward I hope that we can find a new, less agricultural, defining metaphor. Silos after all, are designed to contain only one thing, to exclude air, and presumably to discourage anything so indelicate as “cross-fertilization.” Some silos live in close proximity to each other, some are off in isolation by themselves, some are not flourishing and are in need of propping up. Some are already falling down. If we want to develop professionals who can work and communicate laterally across or through the silos that are libraries, archives and museum organizations then it may indeed be time to change the metaphor – after all, we don’t want to tear the silos down, we want to open them up and let some air in so we can learn from each other.

So let’s look to the future with some new images – perhaps umbrellas… or what about a big tent…no, that leads to images of the three-ring circus…maybe the peaceable kingdom (back to LAMS and now lions too)? Or, maybe just herding cats?

Well, I will leave it to you. For myself, I’m going to stick with trying to infiltrate the silos
of practice by training a new and unbiased generation who will easily move laterally across and among the documents of our cultural heritage.

Words of wisdom from my mother: “Get ‘em young and train ‘em”

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