

Community-Based Digital Initiatives: Challenges and Opportunities for LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

The integration of experiential learning with community service is a prevalent pedagogical approach in Library and Information Science (LIS) education, particularly in courses like digital collections and fieldwork experiences. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities associated with community-based digitization projects within an LIS program, drawing upon anecdotal evidence from various instances of faculty and student involvement. Through reflective analysis, the author identifies key themes such as community needs and barriers, the practicality of hands-on learning, and the complexity of collaboration. The paper proposes a framework for potential interinstitutional and cross-community collaboration, aiming to bridge the gap between LIS education and practical applications. By delineating essential resources and potential avenues for support, the framework seeks to facilitate the sustainability and success of community-based digital initiatives. However, uncertainties regarding funding accessibility and institutional policies pose significant challenges, highlighting the need for ongoing research and collaboration in this field.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Pedagogy; students; community and civic organizations; community-led services; education programs/schools.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Digital collections; community archives; community needs; collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

The integration of experiential learning with community service represents a prevalent pedagogical approach within Library and Information Science (LIS) education. Its efficacy has been demonstrated and documented by numerous LIS educators and researchers (Most, 2011; O'Brien et al., 2014; Poole et al., 2022). This method is particularly pertinent and practicable in LIS courses such as digital libraries, special collections, digital preservation, and fieldwork/practicum experiences. Under the supervision and guidance of instructors, students engage in practical skill-building, acquire hands-on experience, and cultivate cultural awareness while generating value for their respective communities. Within the contemporary socio-political milieu, characterized by the imperative of community engagement, well-being, and empowerment to bolster social cohesion and justice, the inherent mutual benefits of community-based digital projects or activities become self-evident. What's more interesting may be the examination of the challenges and issues encountered by students in these endeavors, which can provide valuable insights into community dynamics and pedagogical practices. This paper serves as the author's reflective analysis of the challenges and opportunities discerned from various instances of community-based digital projects involving master's students within an LIS program. Drawing upon anecdotal evidence, the author aims to reveal some challenges encountered in community-based digitization projects within LIS education, along with the opportunities they afford. Additionally, the author proposes a framework for potential interinstitutional and cross-community collaboration within the field.

BACKGROUND

The LIS program under consideration is within a public R1 university situated in a small city in the US, surrounded by rural areas. The master's program enrolls a few hundred distance education and on-campus students. While the majority of students express an interest in pursuing careers within library settings, a subset is interested in archives, museums, and other information environments. The anecdotal evidence presented in this paper comes from a master-level course on digital libraries that focuses on the creation of digital collection across various information agencies, and from independent study projects stemming from the digital libraries course. Students enrolled in the digital library course typically show a strong inclination towards digital librarianship, special collections, and archives and records management. In the course, while student groups usually develop small-scale digital collections based on their own interest or available resources, the instructor also tries to connect students with authentic, 'real-world' projects, facilitating hands-on experience in planning and developing digital collections, with a few examples show as follows:

1. The Townhall Project: In a small town near the city where the LIS program is located, a political issue arose and caused much public debate. A group of students worked with the director of the town library and a government information officer to start a digitization project of town hall meeting records and other records surrounding the issue. This project was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and did not result in an actual digital collection.

2. The Scrapbook Project: Several groups of students worked with an enthusiastic volunteer museum curator to digitize over 200 scrapbooks showing the history of a local organization, some of which dated to the 1920s. This project took a few semesters to complete, with more than 20 students participating in various aspects with varying degrees of involvement.
3. The High School History Collection: A group of students worked with a high school librarian to digitize the school's collection of 350 historic artifacts, including yearbooks, newspaper articles, photographs, trophies, signs, products of scientific projects, etc. The librarian completed the inventory in consultation with the instructor before students got involved. The high school is located in a city three hours from the LIS program, and the student received help from an archivist (who is an alumna of the program) at a local university.

COMMUNITY'S NEEDS AND BARRIERS

Our field has seen a significant uptick in digitization initiatives in recent decades, primarily within larger information agencies. In the process of reaching out to communities and finding projects for students as hands-on learning opportunities, however, the author has observed a growing interest and eagerness towards digitization among various local community organizations, including political activists, educational organizations, LGBTQ+ groups, and other interest groups. The concept of digitizing their cultural heritage and assets for the benefit of their members, patrons, and stakeholders is enticing, yet many lack the guidance to initiate such projects unless an active member is versed in information management. Frequently, these organizations struggle to articulate their needs clearly, resulting in projects often unsuitable for student involvement. Moreover, they commonly lack the requisite resources, knowledge, or expertise necessary to undertake such endeavors.

The Scrapbook Project sheds light on some of the prevalent needs and challenges. JG, a volunteer curator at a local museum, secured a modest \$5,000 grant to digitize member-donated scrapbooks. Despite lacking digitization expertise as a baby boomer, JG extensively researched equipment and online exhibits, eventually seeking assistance from our LIS program after exploring public and academic libraries. In the spring of 2022, seventeen students engaged in the project's planning and development, facing multiple hurdles, such as selecting a digital platform and finding a suitable host for the collection. Access to university library digitization resources proved problematic, compounded by restrictive collection policies. To overcome these obstacles, JG utilized the grant to procure necessary equipment based on students' research and recommendations and secured a small office space. Demonstrating active collaboration, JG audited the digital libraries course, conducted inventories with students, and provided ongoing support throughout the project. Even with JG's active communication and participation, the museum staff was suspicious of the project initially—they did not believe such work could be 'free of charge.' The skepticism underscores the importance of an engaged community member in fostering collaboration. In fact, every successful project had at least one active community member; building trust remained challenging without such active participation.

Projects like the Scrapbook Project underscore the significance of the ‘community archives’ movement, notably impacting countries like the UK and Australia (Gibbons, 2019). Influential UK researcher Andrew Flinn and his colleagues (Flinn et al., 2009) define community as “any manner of people who come together and present themselves as such” and community archives as “the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality” (p. 75). Organizations like the Community Archives and Heritage Group (CAHG) have played pivotal roles in advancing this movement in the UK. While a similar trend has emerged in the US over the past decades, it may not have garnered equivalent attention (Poole, 2020). Professional and grassroots endeavors have been made to document social justice movements and preserve the voices of marginalized communities (Caswell et al., 2016; Gabiola et al., 2022; Gilliland & Flinn, 2014; Poole, 2020). Professional bodies such as the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the Smithsonian, and various state and local archives have launched funding and training programs to assist communities in preserving their cultural heritage (SAA, 2022). However, there does not exist a central coordinating body like CAHG, and the training materials may not be sufficient (for example, SAA Diverse Sexuality and Gender Section’s work on community archives has yet to be completed [Marston, n.d.]).

One practical problem for education may be the limited exposure of the concept and practices of community archives beyond the archivist community. Many students, particularly those with library experience or an interest in librarianship, encounter concepts such as archives, community archives, and community informatics for the first time. Witnessing the community’s desire for digital preservation in practical settings enables the next generation of information professionals to perceive information needs and practices from a broader perspective, transcending specific information subfields (Jones, 2015). These projects mentally expand students’ perceptions beyond the confines of libraries, archives, and museums (LAM).

Such a perspective is critical in understanding community-based information services and practices. As Flinn pointed out, “in term[s] of collections and activities, traditional profession distinctions between museums, libraries and archives often make little sense in a community-based context” (Gilliland & Flinn, 2014, p. 9). Community interest groups and small organizations typically do not differentiate between library and archival practices, and may not even consider these distinctions. Consequently, they may remain unnoticed by professional organizations within the libraries, archives, and museums (LAM) sector due to limited mutual awareness. This lack of visibility often results in insufficient resources and educational support for these organizations in areas such as material selection, processing, and digitization. While individuals may seek assistance, locating aid demands significant effort, underscoring the necessity for coordinated support efforts led by instructors or other stakeholders. This dynamic presents both challenges and opportunities for LIS education and the broader information profession and its organizations.

THE PRACTICALITY OF LEARNING BY DOING

Located in a small city surrounded by predominantly rural communities, our program often faces challenges in identifying viable projects for students. Successful project discoveries have relied

on personal connections, alum engagement, serendipitous encounters, or other informal channels. Identifying such opportunities can prove elusive, and not all projects align within the confines of a single semester. Further, extensive coordination and research efforts fall on the instructor's part, a task compounded by the demanding research commitments typical of regular faculty members.

Students are usually driven by a desire for hands-on learning experiences that yield tangible outcomes, such as creating online exhibits featuring a considerable number of digital objects. However, the inherent uncertainties within digital projects frequently present obstacles. The unexpected disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, profoundly affected initiatives like the Townhall Project, leading to an indefinite suspension of progress. Moreover, challenges often emerged from various sources, ranging from delays in community analysis due to a lack of response from community members to the withdrawal of some key resources. Despite understanding that planning for digital initiatives is time-consuming, students were still taken aback by the extent of effort required, occasionally feeling disappointed when they were unable to execute their plans. Indeed, a project may take several semesters to complete, and some students choose to continue working on the project on a volunteer basis or as a practicum course, which adds to the work of coordinating.

Another layer of complexity stems from the diverse geographic locations of students enrolled in our LIS program. Successful projects thus far have all involved one or more local on-campus students or those residing within a reasonable driving distance. Each project entails dividing students into multiple groups based on both tasks and locations. Distance learners often contribute to research, technological planning, and metadata development. While remote work has gained acceptance post-pandemic, it remains challenging for archival and special collection projects. Remote tasks, such as metadata creation, may not align with students' interests, such as processing and digitizing physical materials. We have managed to accommodate remote participation in our projects, although logistical hurdles persist.

Despite these obstacles, hands-on projects afford students invaluable opportunities to deepen their understanding of contextual nuances, content intricacies, and user needs. However, navigating complex contextual factors can overwhelm students, as exemplified by the experience of a white female student tasked with processing archival material related to the civil rights movement at an HBCU institution. This underscores the importance of professionalism and the cultivation of skills to manage uncertainty, with instructors assuming a significant role as project coordinators.

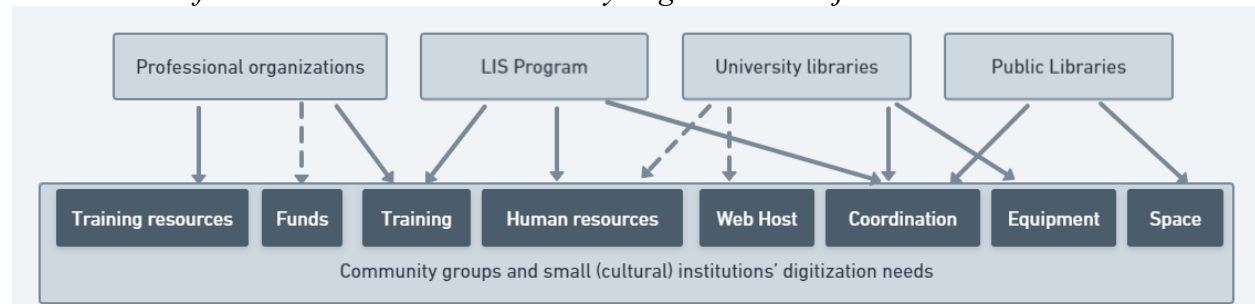
A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

Based on the teaching, learning, and collaboration experiences outlined earlier, the author proposes a framework for potential interinstitutional, cross-community collaboration, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. The bottom section delineates the essential resources required for community-based digital projects, encompassing funds, training activities, training resources, human resources, web hosting services, coordination bodies, equipment, and space. Positioned along the top row are professional organizations, LIS programs, university libraries, and public

libraries—institutions that may express interest in and possess the capacity to support small-scale community projects in various capacities. The arrows in the figure symbolize the avenues through which assistance can be provided, drawing from the author’s firsthand experiences in teaching and coordination.

Figure 1

A Framework for Collaboration on Community Digitization Projects



While the solid arrows represent practical support that organizations may offer, the dotted arrows indicate activities that the author has observed but remains uncertain about their future sustainability. For example, professional organizations like state archives and funding agencies such as IMLS traditionally provide financial support for cultural institutions to develop digital collections. However, the author questions whether such funding will be accessible to smaller community groups. Some university libraries, such as Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, extend digitization services to their local communities, including processing, digitizing, and hosting community digital assets before returning physical materials back to the community. Nevertheless, most libraries, including the author’s own university library, maintain more restrictive collection and resource policies.

The proposed framework may serve as a foundational step towards bridging the gap between LIS education and practical applications in community-based digital initiatives. By identifying essential resources and potential avenues for support, the framework aims to enhance the sustainability and success of such projects. However, challenges such as funding accessibility and institutional policies underscore the ongoing need for research and collaboration within this field. As we continue to navigate these complexities, it is imperative that educators, practitioners, and policymakers remain committed to fostering a collaborative environment that empowers communities and promotes equitable access to information resources. Through collective efforts and strategic partnerships, we can work towards overcoming these challenges and realizing the full potential of community-based digitization initiatives in advancing social justice and cultural preservation.

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