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DIY History

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DIY History

The DIY History project at University of Iowaⁱ may be evaluated against the intellectual framework proposed in John Voss' plenary addressⁱⁱ at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists. Voss' framework consists of asking how the resource tells the story between documents and records, their data, and the record creators, how it presents disparate information as a cohesive user experience, and whether it creates its own archival content community by linking documents.

The DIY History project provides patrons the opportunity to "help build the historical record by doing it yourself."ⁱⁱⁱ In practical terms this means users can transcribe handwritten documents, correct OCR (forthcoming at the time of this writing), and use Flickr to tag and comment on historical photographs. Material is drawn from the University of Iowa Libraries' Special Collections, University Archives, and Iowa Women's Archives.

Records, data, and creators are linked through familiar, traditional tools such as finding aids and catalog records. Additionally, crowdsourcing provides context, inviting user generated transcription, tagging, and comments. The two methods complement each other well, with traditional archival processing and access points supplemented by keyword searching of terms supplied by users.

These access points in turn provide the means to build relationships between collections, what Voss terms a mashup. The DIY History project provides many options for users to generate connections between documents. Transcription allows connections to be drawn between documents through keyword searching. For example, a search for *Charleston* in the Civil War Diaries and Letters Collection shows forty-one items associated with seven different personal names, six geographic subjects, six types of material, three archival collections, and three date ranges. A search for *cheese* in the Szathmary Culinary Manuscripts and Cookbooks yields similarly structured results.

The mashup created by this search is derived from words in individual documents or even single pages of documents, without regard to larger context. To use Voss' metaphor, this search is pulling out identical notes without regard to their role in the larger song. Whether this is a useful mashup or not will vary depending on the researcher and the search term used; however, while it seems likely that many users will further refine their search through the facets discussed above, the opportunity for serendipitous discovery across persons, geography, types of material, and other facets of the search is very exciting.

Patrons create connections between photographs by supplying tags and commenting on the photographs on the Flickr platform.^{iv} While Library of Congress subject headings provide for a specific level of detail, Flickr's folksonomy capabilities provides patrons the ability to supply personalized granular data. For example, a patron may go through an advertising images collection and comment on or tag photographs of personal vacation spots. Ultimately, this relates connections between documents and records, their data, and record creators in familiar ways but through much more labor intensive and personal means.

Neither of these are precisely the archivist as DJ, to use Voss' term. Instead, the archives are supplying patrons with tools to remix and create mashups of their own, and a location to store and share those mashups. This is familiar conceptual ground. Patrons have always taken material from disparate sources and used them to create new items, whether it be for a doctoral thesis, family tree, or National History Day student presentation. What this project allows is for users who do not have the time or cannot physically come to the archives to engage in this work and share with others. A user can spend ten minutes tagging photos any time of day, and geographical distance is no longer a barrier to creating links between data, creators, and collections.

At the time of this writing it appeared that there was far more transcription than tagging of or commenting on photos, probably due to the Civil War Diaries and Letters Transcription Project beginning roughly eighteen months prior to tagging. Regardless, connections can be created through traditional cataloging methods and the framework for tagging and commenting, which results in document connections discovered through searching. Further creation of nodes and links is facilitated by following another of Voss' recommendations: each photo has a clear Creative Commons license displayed.

Ultimately, the DIY History project provides more of a framework for the kind of open data cross-use Voss advocates than directly participating in it. Patrons have always used collections in surprising and fantastic ways, and the DIY History provides documents and the necessary tools, allowing patrons to build frameworks and connections. Additionally, there are clear guidelines for using photos and other material outside the collections for patrons interested in doing so. The DIY History project states that it will allow "researchers to quickly seek out specific information, and general users to browse and enjoy the materials more easily"^v and appears to be off to a very successful start. If Voss is correct about linked data use, DIY History will also succeed in ways the creators never expected.

Eric Wiley

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<http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/index.php>

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- ii <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyR59nFFMRg>
 - iii <http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/index.php>
 - iv <http://www.flickr.com>
 - v <http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/about.php>