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Using Captions and Controlled Vocabulary to Describe Visual Materials as an Alternative to Digitization

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Using Captions and Controlled Vocabulary to Describe Visual Materials as an Alternative to Digitization

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Eric Willey

Introduction

Lois Lenski (1893-1974) was an early to mid-twentieth century children's and young adult author who also illustrated her own books, and occasionally the works of others. Lenski won the Newberry Medal in 1946 for *Strawberry Girl*, one of her regional books about the lives of children who lived in different parts of the United States. Lenski's research for these books partially consisted of visiting and spending time with a child who lived in the region as they went about their daily routines. Lenski retained many, if not all of the notes her work and research generated, in addition to retaining original illustrations, manuscripts, photographs, correspondence, etc. In doing so, Lenski created a fantastically thorough archive for researchers; however, Lenski did not donate her entire collection to a single repository.

Lenski decided that she wanted her materials to go to a former normal school or teaching college, but could not decide on a single institution to receive her collection. She sporadically donated small batches of materials to approximately fourteen institutions across the United States, from Florida to California. Even items associated with the same book were widely dispersed, causing considerable difficulty for researchers looking for specific materials. Further, some finding aids described illustrations as being from a specific book with an associated date of publication, but did not describe which illustrations from the work were present. Therefore, researchers could not always determine which institution held a specific image by consulting a finding aid even if they knew which book it was from.

The Lois Lenski Collection at Illinois State University was deemed appropriate for item-level description and controlled vocabulary access due to the amount of visual material in the collection (617 illustrations), the scattered location of Lenski's materials, and her relevance to scholars. A Google Scholar search showed that scholarly work concerning Lenski had been published as

recently as 2011¹, 2012², and 2013³. A biography of Lenski entitled *Lois Lenski: Storycatcher* by Bobbie Malone was published by University of Oklahoma Press in fall 2016. When contacted regarding the potential usefulness of further description of visual materials in the collection, Malone replied:

In addition to the outstanding collection of her published work, the Milner Library collection has some extraordinary primary materials—photographs, original drawings, and scrapbooks of three Regionals—that make the collection unique and extremely valuable. The scrapbooks for *San Francisco Boy*, *Houseboat Girl*, and *Corn Farm Boy* allow researchers insights into the relationships Lenski created in developing her collaborative methodology of obtaining her “stories from life.” Any visual materials that can be either scanned or described would be of enormous interest to future researchers who want to gain access to this important and prolific mid-twentieth century author/illustrator.⁴

Lenski published the bulk of her work from 1934 to 1971. At the time of this project library administration had elected not to digitize material in its holdings and make them available due to difficulties resolving copyright issues. With digitization and online access not an option, the project attempted to provide metadata similar to that generated for scanned images, but without scanning the image itself and placing the resulting file online. It was reasoned that if such metadata is sufficient for a patron to search for and find an image in a content management system, the same metadata might

¹ Julia Pond, "The rub between fact and fiction: Ideology in Lois Lenski's regional maps," *Children's Literature in Education* 42, no. 1 (2011): 44-55.

² Jennifer Lee Morris, "The Regional Works of Lois Lenski: Her Version of an Idealized American Childhood" (PhD diss., Middle Tennessee State University, 2012).

³ Emily Alisa Rachel Goldman, "I Have Told the Truth': Realism, Regionalism, and the Great Depression in Children's Fiction by Laura Ingalls Wilder and Lois Lenski" (PhD diss., Reed College, 2013).

⁴ Bobbie Malone, "Re: Lois Lenski collection and finding aid at Illinois State University", email, 2015.

allow a patron to find an image in a textual guide and request an associated physical folder number. While patrons might prefer online availability of images, this work would still improve access. Should materials be digitized in the future, the information will serve as a source of metadata.

Overall, it was felt that this collection was of sufficient interest to researchers to warrant further description. There is a large amount of visual material which cannot be digitized and placed on the web for direct access due to issues of cost or copyright. This article describes one project which experimented with a new methodology to improve access. Obstacles to describing images at the item level using captions and a controlled vocabulary rather than at the folder level in finding aids are identified and described in the hope they will aid future archivists. Difficulties which were encountered in the project are described, and potential solutions offered. This approach will not be necessary or even suitable for every collection, and should be considered one option among many.

Literature Review

Options for describing visual materials are extensive and there is a healthy amount of literature on the topic. Jackie M. Dooley began her article on processing and cataloging photograph collections by stating that they are as diverse as the methods used for describing them, and that there is not a single best approach for every collection.⁵ The Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division prepared a bibliography of processing and cataloging resources for visual materials which links to 168 resources, articles, and manuals.⁶ Perhaps the most applicable advice was offered by Margot Note, who stated, "resources are seldom adequate to catalog all collections at the item level, and item-level handling should exist within a framework provided by group-level description."⁷ While this article focuses on item-level description provided in a guide, that

⁵ Jackie M. Dooley, "Processing and Cataloging of Archival Photograph Collections," *Visual Resources: An International Journal on Images and Their Uses* 11, no. 1 (1995): 85.

⁶ Helena Zinkham, *Visual Materials: Processing & Cataloging Bibliography*, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/resource/vmbib.html>.

⁷ Margot Note, *Managing Image Collections: A Practical Guide* (Oxford, UK: Chandos Publishing, 2011), 113.

guide is situated within the context of a more traditional finding aid describing the entire collection.

Even while the Lenski collection material was being initially processed, there was a desire to do provide enhanced access to the illustrations and visual materials it held.⁸ As Sheila O'Hare and Ashley Todd-Diaz noted, "finding aids are still at the heart of the cultural heritage enterprise, but questions surround their future design and ultimate relevance in the digital era."⁹ O'Hare and Todd-Diaz further note that finding aids are "entering a transitional phase."¹⁰ In the case of the current project this took the form of a supplemental guide to provide additional metadata on illustrations and visual materials.

Similarly, Ciaran B. Trace and Andrew Dillon argued that "for too long, the actual consumption and use, that is, the reading of finding aids, has been ignored or overlooked."¹¹ Adding the forty-three pages of metadata generated during the course of this project to the existing finding aid would be both difficult for readers to parse and difficult to format consistently in Archon, the CMS utilized for special collections finding aids. As Trace and Dillon stated, "despite efforts to put this genre online and to make finding aids more accessible, it can be argued that, at least in an American context, this genre has always reflected, privileged, enabled, and given control to the writer (archivist) more so than to the receiver (researcher)."¹² In order to improve readability for researchers, a document separate from the finding aid was created. This decision was made entirely at the practical level, with little consideration of theory.

Theory regarding metadata projects in general may be lacking, as Julia Skinner noted in saying that, "Theory tends to be

⁸ Special Collections & Rare Books Room at Illinois State University, "Lois Lenski Collection, circa 1850-1977," accessed October 10, 2019, <https://spcfindingaids.library.illinoisstate.edu/?p=collections/findingaid&id=28&q=>

⁹ Sheila O'Hare and Ashley Todd-Diaz, "The Devils You Don't Know," in *Annual Review of Cultural Heritage Informatics 2012-2013*, ed. Samantha K. Hastings (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 243.

¹⁰ O'Hare and Todd-Diaz, 252.

¹¹ Ciaran B. Trace and Andrew Dillon, "The Evolution of the Finding Aid in the United States: From Physical to Digital Document Genre." *Archival Science* 12 (2012): 501, DOI 10.1007/s10502-012-9190-5.

¹² Trace and Dillon, 519.

absent from most articles on metadata in cultural heritage institutions."¹³ However, in determining how the pictures were to be described, considerable use was made of Sara Shatford's article, "Analyzing the Subject of a Picture: A Theoretical Approach."¹⁴ Shatford noted that, "The problem, then, is to analyze and describe the meaning of pictorial works, to classify and define the kinds of meaning a picture can have. If this can be done, it should provide a useful base for the construction of subject oriented organizational schemes for pictures."¹⁵ Shatford also stated that "Factual meaning is relatively easy to describe and index, as people are more likely to agree on the description of an object or event than they are on the description of a mood or emotion, on the expressional meaning of a picture."¹⁶ For the current study, the illustrations were from children's or young adult books, and tended to convey relatively simple scenes. For example, an illustration might be of a smiling teacher sitting at a desk or a dog waiting outside of a school. The illustrations were also from published books, and sometimes included captions that made the process easier. This is not intended to suggest a lack of nuance or subtlety in Lenski's materials, merely that the illustrator often supplied a larger context for the image than might be typical. Readers could also consult the book in which the illustration for further explanation of what was being shown if they wished. This allowed project workers to focus on describing the image in a way that would allow researchers to determine which specific illustration was in our holdings, rather than ensuring they provided a complete description of every concept or subject in the illustration.

The nature of the materials simplified the process of metadata creation considerably. As Shatford notes, "Practical considerations of time, money, and personnel mean that in reality one can never provide access to all the subjects of a picture, so it is important to develop some principles to help one choose the subjects to be

¹³ Julia Skinner, "Metadata in Archival and Cultural Heritage Settings: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Library Metadata* 14 (2014): 57.

¹⁴ Sara Shatford, "Analyzing the Subject of a Picture: A Theoretical Approach," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2008): 39-62, DOI: 10.1300/J104v06n03_04.

¹⁵ Shatford, 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

indexed.”¹⁷ When the project was being scoped, it was decided that users of the collection would be those interested in Lenski’s work and her illustrations specifically. As there are numerous images available online of dogs, for example, there was no need to describe what kind of dog appeared in a given illustration. This decision was supported by Shatford’s assertion that “The first consideration in indexing a picture must be the nature and intended use of the collection of which it is a part. Essentially, there are two kinds of collections: those intended for users with a specified purpose or subject interest, and those intended for general unspecified use.”¹⁸ As Shatford further noted, “It is relatively easy to index a picture for a collection intended for a specific use: the indexer knows the subject interest or discipline of the user, and can index accordingly.”¹⁹ By indexing and describing images for researchers interested in Lenski’s work instead of general users, considerable time and effort was saved.

Methodology

Visual materials in the Lois Lenski Papers were described by student workers who used captioning techniques similar to those accompanying photographs in newspapers and magazines and assigned terms from the *Thesaurus for Graphic Materials* (TGM). This approach offered an item-level alternative to traditional folder-level archival description. The goal was to create metadata that would be rich enough that a researcher could discern the content of an individual image without seeing the image itself, or at least tell if the metadata described the same image they were looking at in a book. While this method has its own complications, it does present an option which might be utilized where appropriate in processing or re-processing a collection.

A \$2400 Illinois State University Research Grant was received and used to hire two student workers at \$10 per hour for 240 hours total (120 hours each) to create captions and metadata for illustrations, photographs, and scrapbook materials in the collection. After consultation with Milner Library Metadata Librarian Angela Yon it was decided that the *Thesaurus for Graphic Materials* (TGM)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Shatford, 55.

was an appropriate controlled vocabulary for illustrations from children's books, which formed the bulk of the materials to be described. TGM was also a vocabulary with terms which could be understood and intuited easily by the student workers as they described images.

Due to their class schedules and the relatively limited—compared to the library as a whole—hours that the Special Collections Unit was open, students worked about five hours a week. Staff walked student workers through the process of creating captions and assigning metadata once, and then gave them a written manual with links to several websites discussing issues which might occur in their work. In addition to brief biographies of Lenski, these resources included information on describing images as being “of” versus “about,” websites where they could see controlled vocabularies in action, caption writing tips, and a workflow with links to the Thesaurus for Graphic Materials (TGM). Workers were also reminded that the terms in the controlled vocabulary needed to be followed exactly, with the recommendation that they copy and paste rather than transcribe terms.²⁰

It was later found that this was not sufficient training for workers without prior experience in assigning metadata and using controlled vocabularies. Failure to impart the importance of following the terms in the TGM *exactly* resulted in images with one boy being assigned the metadata term “boy” instead of “boys” (as the TGM term is recorded). This was a more accurate description of the image—there is only one boy present—but does not follow the controlled vocabulary. In hindsight, it should have been expected that workers who were not given sufficient training and examples would value accuracy of description over consistency in terms, and it was solely the fault of the primary investigator that this was not conveyed.

²⁰ Training materials provided included: “Caption and Keywording Guidelines,” Controlled Vocabulary, accessed October 10 2019, https://www.controlledvocabulary.com/metalogging/ck_guidelines.html; “What is a Controlled Vocabulary and how is it Useful?” Controlled Vocabulary, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.controlledvocabulary.com/>; Fred Leise, “Controlled Vocabularies: An Introduction,” *The Indexer* 26, no. 3 (September: 2008): 121-126; “I.I.B. ‘Of’ and ‘About,’” Thesaurus for Graphic Materials I: Subject Terms (TMG 1), accessed October 10, 2019, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/tgm1/iib.html>.

It was initially planned that students would enter metadata and captions in Excel spreadsheets and check each other's work on a regular basis; however, one of the students who was initially hired and their replacement both had to leave the project. This required finding new workers and training them, and it was not practical to ask the remaining student to pause his work while this happened. This led to multiple days in the cross-checking of work. Eventually it was decided that it would be easier for the primary investigator to check the metadata and captions at the end of the project. A plan for worker attrition could have solved this problem, and not establishing one was an unfortunate oversight. Procedures should have been developed for when there was only one worker, and how a disparity in experience between workers might be accommodated with a modified workflow. Ultimately a second worker was hired and stayed until the budget for student workers was expended.

When their hours were completed, workers were asked to copy and paste their Excel sheets to Google Docs for formatting before being compiled into a PDF guide. This led to the discovery that it was difficult to reformat data in Google Docs. The Versions feature in particular made it difficult to make changes and close out documents without saving and re-opening the document if the results were not what was desired. It was possible, but considerable care was required to make sure that the correct version of the document was being displayed. Formatting was also complicated by the students using their own laptops for the project. Initially, this was viewed as a positive due to a limited number of computer terminals in the Special Collections space; however, it was later discovered that different versions of Excel were used, which led to slightly different formatting. This could have been avoided if all workers used the same software version (possibly using free software such as LibreOffice or Google Sheets), or at least minimized through testing for software compatibility. Another solution would be to save all work to a single, backwards compatible file format. If this were done, files may have appeared differently on different computers, but the file formats would have been the same with the same features. Excel itself also caused some difficulties in editing data, primarily through the auto-fill feature. If "Automobiles" was initially entered as "Automoblies" Excel offered the option of auto-filling "Automoblies" whenever "Auto" was typed into a cell. This could

have been mitigated by further training on the software, as well as a more thorough consideration by the author of how the software chosen would affect data from the project.

The final notable complication was in how the finished project would look. There were attempts to solicit input from student workers, but the primary investigator failed to break the finished project down into manageable, discrete tasks that could be more easily envisioned. Rather than asking workers to describe their vision for the entire guide, a more productive approach might have been to ask what each type of data they were collecting should look like. For example, “What should the TGM terms look like?” or “What should the captions look like?” would likely have produced better answers than “What do you think the guide should look like?”

Breaking every portion of the project down into small, manageable chunks for workers would have allowed them to see step-by-step what they were doing. This also would have allowed them some input on the final form of the project deliverable. This did not happen because the initial schedule was thrown off sufficiently by departures that by the time captions and metadata were completed, spring classes were over and the student workers were gone. While it was certainly possible for the author to complete this portion of the task, providing this experience to the student workers would have enhanced their understanding of the project and provided a more valuable experience.

Ultimately, the student workers created a 43-page guide that listed captions for 617 illustrations or scrapbook items. The document included 2913 metadata terms, as well as 129 citations and took 240 hours to complete. The guide was made freely available for download from the institutional repository in pdf format, and a link to the guide was included in the finding aid for the collection.²¹ From August 2016—when the guide was made available—to October 2019 the guide was downloaded 152 times. As a courtesy to researchers, the compiled spreadsheet file, in comma separated value format, was also made available in the institutional repository. This file has been downloaded fourteen times in the same period of time. No copyright is claimed over either file, and patrons are free to share and adapt the contents, including commercial usage, without restriction.

²¹ Illinois State University, “Lois Lenski Collection.”

Conclusion

This approach potentially offers several advantages over existing common practice. It allows for description of and improved access to materials which cannot or will not be digitized due to copyright or other concerns; it improves access compared to folder-level archival description in a finding aid; and it provides improved, if not ideal, access to materials for visually impaired patrons. It also allows for keyword searching of items found in illustrations in the collection and utilizes a controlled vocabulary for consistency. While it was not an initial goal of the grant or project, it also allowed students to interact deeply with special collections material and gain a deeper understanding of the special collections department. While this approach will not be ideal for every collection, it does offer an additional option for providing access to visual materials.

There are also disadvantages to this approach. One weakness is that none of the participants, including this author, had the subject knowledge to provide specific names from the story that might be relevant to researchers—i.e., they could identify an illustration of a dog, but might not know if it was a named dog from a specific story. This method also requires a considerably larger investment of time than folder-level description. This approach has also not been applied to any other collections in the local holdings, and the suggested lessons have not been applied in follow-up studies to test their validity. Finally, usability studies have not been conducted to determine if this approach and the attendant opportunity cost is warranted.

Opportunities for further research are available. Given the geographic dispersion of Lenski's work, a collaborative project with another institution or institutions to present a combined guide might be of interest. A user study to determine to what extent captioning and controlled vocabulary improve access would help archivists when evaluating if the additional time is a worthwhile investment. At this time, this method represents an alternative to folder-level description in a finding aid, but one which could benefit from further analysis and testing.

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State University. He received an MA in History from Western Illinois University, and an MLIS from University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has previously worked as an intern at the Illinois Regional Archives Depository at Western Illinois University, as a project assistant with the McCormick-International Harvester Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society, and as an associate curator at the Filson Historical Society in Louisville, Kentucky. His research agenda is focused on improving metadata in cataloging and archives, particularly for creators from marginalized communities. For further publications see orcid.org/0000-0002-7514-0011.