

Making it count: Assessing the value and impact of cultural heritage digitization

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Making it count: Assessing the Value and Impact of Cultural Heritage Digitization

Good morning. As you know, the topic of today's panel and discussion is assessment in the realm of digitization and digital collections. I'll start with an overview of this topic (about 20 mins), then Marcus Ladd from Miami University will present the findings from the Ohio Digital Collections Analytics survey he has sent out for the past two years and to which a number of you have contributed data. Then Barb from Defiance College will present a case study of a vended digitization project, and share with us the metrics she receives from the vendor. And then we'll have open time for questions, comments and discussion.

With one or two of your neighbors, please take a couple of minutes to consider the following questions:

- How would you define “assessment”? What comes to mind when you hear this term?
- Have you participated in any organizational assessment-related activities?
 - Any related specifically to digitization or digital collections??
- Why is assessment important in general, and why specifically in the context of digitization?

In the spirit of making this interactive, I’d like to start off by asking you to take a couple of minutes to discuss the following questions with one or two of your neighbors (and if you don’t know each other, please be sure to introduce yourselves first!). You’re all here today because you have at least a passing interest in this topic, and I hope you’ll take this opportunity to think about assessment in your own, specific professional context.

The questions I’d like you to consider are:

How would you define assessment? What comes to mind when you hear this term?

Have you participated in any organizational assessment-related activities? (so, not talking about individual performance evaluations here). Any related specifically to digitization?

Why is assessment important in general, and why specifically in the context of digitization?

“Assessment”

General definition (per Emily):

A coordinated set of activities designed to evaluate how well an organization is performing.

Library assessment (per Wikipedia.org):

“A process undertaken by libraries to learn about the needs of users (and non-users) and to evaluate how well they support those needs, in order to improve library facilities, services and resources.”

In the past decade, “assessment culture” has begun to pervade the non-profit sector as part of the widespread adoption of “business management” practices. The movement toward “data-driven decision making” means that more and more organizations are developing systematic, coordinated approaches to the collection, analyses, interpretation, and use of empirical data – or data that is verifiable by observation, experience, and/or experimentation – and using that data to guide decisions about what to do and how to do it (as well as what NOT to do, and why).

With this shift toward “assessment culture”, libraries have been especially focused on articulating the value they bring to their various constituents, understanding and describing precisely how they contribute to the mission and strategic goals of their parent organizations or oversight bodies, and demonstrating how their collections, services and partnerships make positive impacts on groups of people and individuals in their communities. Many libraries have designed processes, tools, and even whole programs of coordinated assessment activity ultimately designed to understand the needs of their users, determine what is working well and what’s not, evaluate how well they are meeting user needs and define areas in which they could do better. In academic libraries in particular, much time and energy has been

dedicated to fostering this “culture of assessment” and embedding it into most everything we do. Many libraries have even hired Assessment Coordinators in professional or faculty positions.

But there are certain areas that are much more heavily represented both in practice and in the professional discourse (meetings, workshops, conferences, publications) around assessment. To name a few of the most prevalent topics:

Common topics in library assessment:

- Collection management
- Space planning
- Public services
- Programming, outreach and instruction

Collection management – especially balancing print vs. electronic

Space planning

Public services

Programming, outreach and instruction

But you'll see very little evidence of in most discussions of assessment in libraries archives, museums and elsewhere in the cultural heritage sector about digitization and digital collections. In point of fact, since it began in 2002, the biennial Library Assessment Conference has had one or fewer items on the program related to digitization or digital collections.

However, there are a number of efforts that have gotten underway in the past two years, so we should start to see, hear and hopefully do more in this area in the coming years.

Most notably the Digital Library Federation's Assessment Interest Group - more on that in a minute

In my experience, there's an almost inherent value placed on digitization, both by

professionals like the people in this room, as well as by our bosses and members of the general public. I'll bet most of you have heard variations of this before (or might well have asked or said this yourself!):

Are you going to digitize that?
You should really digitize it.
Why don't you just digitize it!?

Are you going to digitize that? You should really digitize that. Why don't you just digitize it!?

So, if digitizing collections and making them openly available to users is inherently valued as being a good thing worth doing, why do we need to demonstrate its value or make a case for its impact? Why should we bother with this whole "assessment" thing?

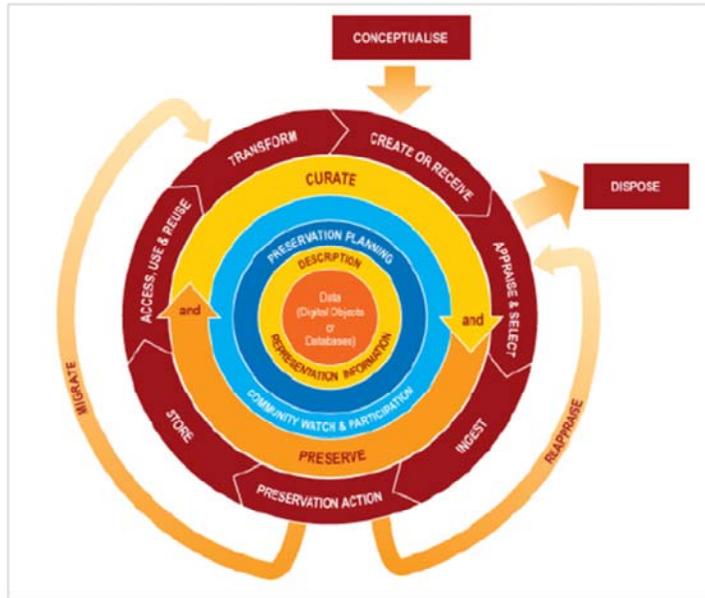
We shouldn't! Forget about it! Just kidding. We probably should, because...

These questions belie the complex reality of work in this area: Digitizing collections, describing them, opening them up for meaningful discovery and access, and preserving them over time is complex work. Folks who have scanned their family photos on their home printer/copier/scanner and thought "that was pretty easy. Isn't it basically the same thing to scan an archival collection, or some books?" When someone asks these questions, it's typically an indication to me that they probably haven't done much digitization and might not have a particularly mature understanding of how scanning your own family photos at home for personal use is

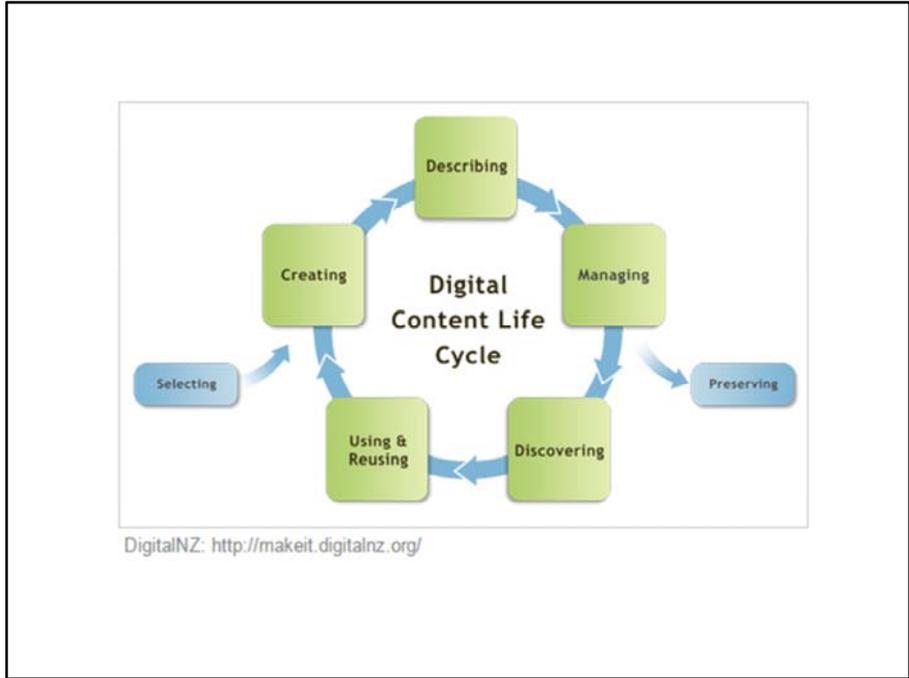
different than scanning library or archives collections and making them publicly accessible.

We in this room know from experience that converting something from an analog form to a digital form cannot simply be done with the wave of a magic digitization wand

- We know that not all scanners or cameras are created equal – far from it!
- And even if the conversion from analog to digital is pretty straightforward, that is just one piece of the workflow
- Even if your digital collections workflows don't look like this:



Digital Curation Centre: <http://www.dcc.ac.uk/resources/curation-lifecycle-model>



Or this

If digitization = good, why bother with assessment?

- Resource allocation
- Prioritization
- Sustainability

So, again, why bother with assessment? For a couple of general reasons, all of which are interconnected:

As noted, creating high-quality digital collections that can be found and shared broadly can be pretty resource-intensive. A program of assessment can both us better articulate what our work *is* (besides simply scanning things), and help us to argue for the resources we need to do this work.

If digitization = good, why bother with assessment?

- Resource allocation
- **Prioritization**
- Sustainability

Prioritization: This has a couple of dimensions

Your time and energy is finite. We're all busy, and those of us who work in smaller organizations in particular have to wear a lot of different hats. Engaging in some sort of assessment of the value and impact of your digitization and digital collection management activities can help you (and your higher ups) prioritize your efforts.

For example:

Should you focus on creating new digital collections?

Enhance existing description to make collections more findable, provide richer context?

Improve the existing platform, or investigate other options?

Promote existing collections?

Assessment of our digitization activities and our digital collections can also help us prioritize resource allocation (the first bullet point), such as equipment and software purchases, work with external vendors, staffing, etc.

If digitization = good, why bother with assessment?

- Resource allocation
- Prioritization
- **Sustainability**

Though a given digitization project may come to an end, preserving that collection and continuing to provide access to it requires an ongoing organizational commitment. While digitization may still be shiny and new – perhaps even characterized as a “strategic initiative”, as it is in my organization – as it becomes a more regular and established program of activity, it has to compete with everything else we do for a share of the same limited resource pool.

Again, assessment with data that is thoughtfully collected and presented can provide decision-makers within our organizations sufficient justification when they’re looking at their budgets to continue to support digitization and digital collection management activities, and even increase that support.

1. Why?
2. What?
3. For whom?
4. Who?
5. How?

So, perhaps you're convinced that assessment is something you are going to do, or that you ought to do, or maybe you're just interested in maybe doing.

What does it actually look like?

I just walked through a couple of general reasons why you assessment might be useful in the context of digitization and digital collection management, but what form assessment actually takes can vary significantly from one organization to the next.

Why are we doing this?

Ex 1) "To evaluate progress toward the strategic goal of increasing the scale and scope of our digital collections."

Ex 2) "To understand the reach and use of our digitized collections."

Ex 3) To improve the efficiency of our digitization workflows."

Each organization needs to ask itself "why do we want (or need) to do this?"

A few examples:

"To evaluate progress toward our strategic goal of increasing the scale and scope of our digital collections."

Or

"To understand the reach and use of our digitized collections."

Or

"To improve the efficiency of our digitization workflows."

1. Why?
- 2. What?**
3. For whom?
4. Who?
5. How?

From these general “why are we doing this?” statements will follow somewhat more specific articulations of **what** you want to assess. Looks a lot like the “why” statements, but is a more active articulation of what you’re going (or what you want) to do.

What are trying to assess?

Ex 1)

If "Why" = "To evaluate progress toward the strategic goal of increasing the scale and scope of our digital collections."

"What" might = "Define what constitutes progress toward the strategic goal of increasing the scale and scope of our digital collection, and establish a regular system for tracking and reporting progress."

Ex 2)

If "Why" = "To understand the reach and use of our digitized collections."

"What" might = "Determine who is using our digitized collections and for what specific purposes."

Ex 3)

If "Why" = "To improve the efficiency of our digitization workflows."

"What" might = "Evaluate how efficient our processes are at each step in the workflow, with an eye toward bottlenecks and inefficiencies."

1. Why?
2. What?
- 3. For whom?**
4. Who?
5. How?

Who is the audience (for whom)?

Ex 1)

If "Why" = "To evaluate progress toward our strategic goal of increasing the scale and scope of our digital collections."

"What" might = "Define what constitutes progress toward the strategic goal of increasing the scale and scope of our digital collection, and establish a regular system for tracking and reporting progress."

"For whom?" = Our library director

Ex 2)

If "Why" = "To understand the reach and use of our digitized collections."

"What" might = "Determine who is using our digitized collections and for what specific purposes."

"For whom?" = Our digital collections team and our higher up

Ex 3)

If "Why" = "To improve the efficiency of our digitization workflows."

"What" might = "Evaluate how efficient our processes are at each step in the workflow, with an eye toward bottlenecks and inefficiencies."

"For whom?" = The person(s) directly engaged in digitization

1. Why?
2. What?
3. For whom?
- 4. Who?**
5. How?

Who is going to do this work? This can be one of the trickiest parts.

Assessment work is work, to be sure. It can be quite time-consuming, and it can require specialized knowledge and/or special permissions, depending on the methods and metrics you wish to employ. You might be able to flesh out replies to the other 4 questions on this list and develop a great plan, but it all hinges on having one or more people invested in the process and willing to do the work.

For us at OSU where there are a lot of actors and decision-makers in the mix when it comes to digital collections, I'd actually say that the "who" question is the first one we need to address, and that will actually guide the "why, why, how, etc."

1. Why?
2. What?
3. For whom?
4. Who?
- 5. How?**

And, last but certainly not least – how are you going to do it?

What methods and metrics are you going to use? There are lots of options:

Quantitative metrics (things that can be counted, measured)

- # of files created
- # of digital objects created
- # of visits
- # of unique visitors
- mean/median duration of visits
- # of downloads
- mean/median minutes it takes to do X

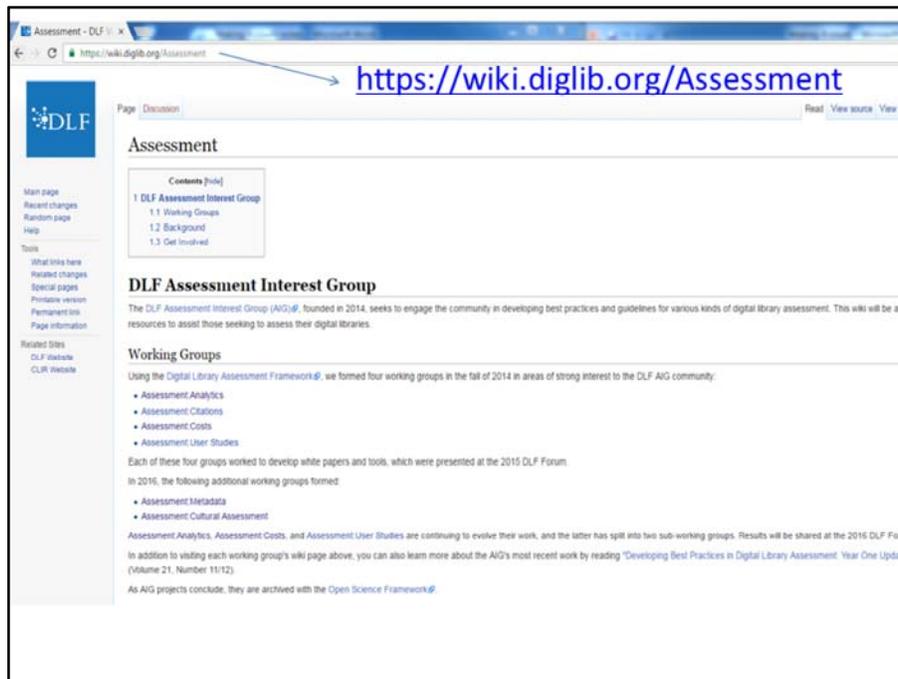
Quantitative methods

- Web analytics
 - “Best Practices for Google Analytics in Digital Libraries” (DLF Assessment Interest Group’s Analytics Working Group 2015 white paper)
- Web log analysis
- Analytics from platforms, software, productivity and workflow tracking tools
- Surveys
 - LibQual
 - Preservation Statistics Survey
 - Heritage Health Index
- Citation analysis
- Social media “altmetrics”

Qualitative methods

(things that can be observed, described)

- User feedback
- Focus groups
- Interviews
- User and usability testing
- Stories



And of course, you can mix and match and take a multi-method approach

Selection of methods and metrics will depend on the why, what, who, and for whom

As a wise colleague once said, “you need to decide what counts before you start counting”

So, this was a very cursory overview of assessment in the context of digitization and digital collections, but it is a rich topic for thought, discussion, and a lot more action

If you are interested in learning more about this topic, I highly recommend that you check out the DLF Assessment Interest Group’s wiki at

<https://wiki.diglib.org/Assessment>, which links to child pages for the analytics, citations, costs and user studies working groups, and the two newest WGs, Metadata and Cultural Assessment

And with that, I’ll pass it on to Marcus. And please note that we’ll have time for

questions, comments and discussion after Marcus and Barb's presentations.