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Abstract:
In the past decade, many institutions have undertaken small-scale digital projects (often involving a few hundred items) designed to expand access to cultural heritage online. This work examines a number of theoretical and practical challenges involved in planning and carrying out small-scale digitization projects involving culturally sensitive artifacts. This work builds on a study, Building Digital Cultural Heritage Collections in Arizona, funded by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services. Our larger aim is to help define best practices for online documentation of historically under-represented communities.

Main text:
In recent years, cultural heritage professionals have paid much attention to the sustainability of digitization activities and Web-based exhibits and repositories.¹ Within the digital preservation community, the problem of sustainability has increasingly been linked to access concerns as well as to solving the underlying problem of technology obsolescence.² More generally, digitization of cultural heritage materials has increasingly been viewed by libraries, archives, and museums as a core function—as opposed to a peripheral or experimental activity—enabling institutions to engage users more effectively online, and ultimately to add value to non-digital as well as born-digital collections. In this regard, sustainability of digital programs depends on institutions building a robust Web presence that makes collection items more discoverable as well as accessible online.

In this context, a key objective of libraries since the 1990s has been to increase the scale of digitization, especially in the scanning of books and journals, and to build large aggregations of digitized collection items. Thus far, the results of mass digitization efforts have been mixed, at least partly due to copyright issues.³ A number of large-scale projects have been successful in aggregating public domain works accessible on the Web,⁴ and yet, the digitization of archives and special collections especially has continued to be characterized by relatively small projects, typically involving hundreds or thousands of items (as opposed to hundreds of thousands or millions), often organized on a non-routine or episodic basis by repositories.

In this context, our work focuses on contributions and potential contributions to the Arizona Memory Project (AMP), an online repository maintained by the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records.⁵ AMP’s mission is to support local digitization efforts by a wide range of libraries, museums and historical societies in the state, especially by hosting the resulting collections through a central CONTENTdm repository. Since AMP was founded in 2006, 64 different institutions have contributed over 140 distinct collections, representing about 90,000 total digital objects. With collections averaging less than 700 objects each, AMP serves as a useful case example of

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³ With the Google Books project having digitized over ten million items, and with access stymied by intellectual property rights concerns, we might conclude that the cause of mass digitization has reached a plateau, although Google itself estimates that the total number of books in existence might be as high as 130 million. [http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2010/08/books-of-world-stand-up-and-be-counted.html](http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2010/08/books-of-world-stand-up-and-be-counted.html) (accessed 31 Aug. 2012).

⁴ In the U.S., for instance, projects such as JSTOR, American Memory, and HathiTrust can all be viewed as transformative for library services.

how small-scale digital projects are currently being aggregated and made discoverable online in the U.S. today, with many states hosting repositories comparable to AMP. As we will see, digital repositories such as AMP offer abundant evidence as to the potential impact of digitization, and the sharp limitations faced by cultural heritage institutions in developing digital assets. In general, the small-scale digital projects we see in AMP represent a broad first step—through projects often organized on an experimental basis and with grant funding—toward building the sustainable institutional capacity needed to fully document cultural heritage in digital form. Having taken initial steps in digitization, as represented by AMP and similar efforts, it’s becoming increasingly important to closely evaluate the outcomes of the first generation of small-scale digital projects, both regarding the cost of digitizing items, and especially measuring the value added to collections through Web exhibits and repositories.

In Arizona and the Southwestern U.S., digitization efforts face major challenges in documenting a diverse cultural landscape with an often contentious history shaped over centuries by long-distance migration, scarce natural resources (especially water), frequent territorial conflicts, and the oppression of indigenous cultures. Today, the much-travelled border between Arizona and Mexico is charged politically, making it all the more important for information professionals seeking to digitize and expose cultural heritage collections online to have clear guidance on best practices for digital collection building and access.

In evaluating the small-scale digital projects in AMP, our first concern is with appraisal—the choice of artifacts to digitize and include in AMP. Here it’s essential that we consider resource constraints that have sharply limited the scale of digital projects in Arizona, as well as the range of artifacts that could potentially be digitized, thereby filling important gaps in the state’s social memory—particularly involving non-English speaking cultures. In addition, many institutions in the region face complex issues regarding the ownership and management of collections, particularly involving indigenous artifacts. As we will see below, the experience of repositories in Arizona to date suggests that substantial research and collaboration with local communities is needed to appraise artifacts for digitization while upholding the spirit of the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials and similar guidelines for respecting indigenous knowledge.

In an effort to understand how digitization efforts in Arizona might be expanded and made more culturally responsive, we began this project with a series of case studies funded by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and conducted in partnership with Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records. Our aim in developing the case studies was to investigate economic, professional and cultural factors affecting repositories’ decisions on whether or not to digitize their collections. Through

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6 It might be pointed out that in spite of the Library of Congress’s status as the de facto national library of the U.S., it does not have a legislative mandate to aggregate and provide access to collections not owned by the Library itself, thereby limiting the potential for a digital repository at the federal level. Hence, a large portion of digitization across the U.S. has been funded and organized at the state level.

semi-structured interviews, we initially investigated a sampling of cultural heritage institutions in the Tucson area, seeking data on their current collection development and preservation plans, organizational infrastructure, organizational culture regarding attitude towards technology, policies on information management and access, technology infrastructure, and scale and technical characteristics of collections that might be digitized in the future.

Our initial findings showed that many institutions in the region have not yet undertaken digitization projects. This is not due to a lack of interest; rather, we found that many organizations have clear aspirations to digitize, and some have engaged in initial planning for digital projects even if they have thus far been unable to initiate such activities. Among those that have undertaken digital projects, including those who have made contributions to AMP, we found a common pattern of organization that tends to be informal, episodic, and peripheral to the institution’s larger mission and core activities. In such an environment, the concept of “best practices” for digitization becomes problematic, as institutions clearly have to strike a difficult balance between what is ideal and what is expedient.

Of course, in the archival context, such trade-offs have long been a factor in organizing and carrying out documentation strategies. This concept, as originally defined by Helen Samuels, was intended to move the archives profession toward a more formal, rigorous approach toward documenting topics of importance to institutions—with the appraisal of records going beyond evidential values and instead seeking to capture a broader range of information of permanent value. As Richard Cox and others have noted, by widening the scope of appraisal in an effort to more fully document society, tensions are bound to arise in the process of appraising particular records, especially as the volume of records produced by society has risen exponentially in recent times. Moreover, as a growing number of archival theorists have noted, archivists today face greater demands for accountability and transparency in making appraisal decisions. Whereas Cox argued in the early 1990s that "even a faulty archival appraisal decision or decision process is better than records surviving haphazardly or not surviving at all"—a view most would still agree with today—and yet, today archivists face new pressures to represent society’s collective memory in ways that are more inclusive and context-rich than users might have expected in the past.

With the growing critical attention paid by archival theorists to the complexity of social memory as it’s represented in archives, archivists might be tempted toward a skeptical view of documentation strategies—especially in the Web environment. In a 2008 article, Doris Malkmus compares the major challenges faced by formal documentation strategies, the most important of which are resource constraints and the accompanying need to limit the topic to be documented. In general, she finds that broader or more general topics have

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been less likely to succeed or to be sustainable over time. Likewise, Malkmus argues that successful documentation strategies have usually been “implemented as a series of narrowly focused, sequential projects, rather than as single, comprehensive projects.”

As Malkmus indicates, archivists have pursued significant numbers of formal documentation strategies in the Web environment, with promising results in some cases. But on the whole, it’s clear that resource constraints have sharply limited the number and scope of formal documentation strategies, and this is certainly the case given the budget constraints facing many archival repositories today.

Judging by the archives literature as a whole, we might conclude that documentation strategies should be regarded as a specialist activity within the archival profession, one that demands a clear focus and a formal institutional mission backed by substantial and ongoing resource commitments, as Cox and others have argued since the 1980s. This longstanding view of documentation strategies might be called into question by the rise of the “More Product Less Process” philosophy, which suggests a way forward for less formal approaches to appraisal as well as archival processing. More work is needed to evaluate and potentially resolve the tensions that might be expected to arise with “minimal processing” as a best practice for appraisal as well as arrangement and description. What is clear is that the rise of the Web has led to a proliferation of what we might term informal or prototype documentation strategies, the results of which make up a large body of digital exhibits available online today, including AMP.

While many digital projects to date might lack the degree of organization and sustained effort we might associate with formal archival documentation strategies, the technical infrastructure built up for first-generation digital projects has much potential to be expanded and refined in future digitization efforts. Metadata in particular can be seen as an area in which progress has been made, but that also remains a critical bottleneck in advancing digitization. A 2009 survey, for instance, found that over 50 percent of archival collections are not yet discoverable online. Digitized collections have often been described at a minimal level of detail, forcing users to search for contextual information outside the repository hosting the collection.

The lack of context in Web-based exhibits has been a serious challenge from the beginning, as repositories have a bigger incentive to digitize additional items than to add richer contextual information to their existing Web presence. This is a problem because, as Terry Cook and many others have argued, appraisal has always depended on transparency about the criteria used in selecting records. This is certainly no less true in the digital environment than it was with print records; what is different with digital collections is the additional burden on metadata to reveal the context of individual items.

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With print records, a user could infer much information about the context of records by their physical arrangement, and in many cases we could rely on collection-level metadata—finding aids and catalog records—to discover items with relevant information.

With Web-based exhibits, however, individual artifacts—usually digitized as a sample or subset of a larger collection—often demand item-level metadata as well as the more traditional types of collection-level description. Hence the problems flagged by Hedstrom, who critiques the way archivists often appear to make “little effort to leave clues about the basis for their appraisal decisions or the contexts in which they are made” in preparing digital exhibits. She also complains about the way much online metadata seems to “pay relatively little attention to the interpretive spin that description places on archival materials.”

Our argument is that where context is lacking in Web exhibits, it’s likely to be due to a combination of resource constraints (especially the dependence on short-term grant funding for digital projects) and the experimental or prototypical nature of first-generation digital projects. Hence, as we look forward to second- and third-generation digitization efforts, it’s essential to have a robust conceptual framework we can use to evaluate the results of digital projects, especially in an effort to allocate scarce resources as best we can in adding value to records by providing essential contextual information for users.

In recent years, an influential effort has been made in the library field to apply the idea of “cultural competence” to the management of information resources and services. Cultural competence is a well-established concept in human services such as nursing and social work. In these fields, “cultures” are most commonly understood as patterns of behavior, or as routine social activities that can be observed in a local institution or community setting. By pursuing cultural competence through professional development programs, the goal is to help professionals interact more effectively with people of different backgrounds, partly by acquiring greater knowledge of the cultures they’re serving, but also by giving professionals a deeper understanding of their own cultural background—especially as reflected in the decisions and activities distinct to professions.

Not surprisingly, the idea of culture-as-activity fits closely with the professional values of librarians. Cultural competence also compliments our existing theories of information seeking behavior, while adding a new emphasis on the ways library services can be tailored according to the needs of an increasingly diverse population of users. Montiel-Overall argues the value of cultural competence for information professionals is that it offers a practical framework for addressing information in the social context in which it’s created and used. In the American Southwest, the need for culturally competent library resources and services has long been acute, with user needs varying dramatically at the local level.

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With respect to archives, the need has long been evident for a culturally competent approach to documentation strategies in the digital environment, particularly as repositories seek to expose records on culturally-sensitive topics involving indigenous knowledge, for instance, or cross-border relations in the American Southwest. Fortunately, such concerns have received much attention by archival theorists in recent years, as the profession has become less focused on its own institutional culture and more attuned to the political and societal dimensions of archival practice. Schwartz and Cook, among others, have argued persuasively that archivists need to deepen their understanding of how society as a whole shapes collective memory, and how archivists act as an integral component of society and not from an impartial or objective position within the political and social environment. Writing in 2002, the authors claimed that by comparison to many academic researchers, archivists have “fallen behind in their theorizing about archives and records, and the power relations embedded in them, shunning the shifting, interactive, and dynamic perspectives of postmodern relativity for the more comfortable and passive stance of the detached observer.”

This view sits well with Cook’s earlier arguments about the need to treat archival appraisal as a “work of complex scholarship” as opposed to an act of expediency, a “mere process or procedure,” the outcome of which might depend as much on organizational constraints as a conscious analysis of the archival record.

Such calls to advance state-of-the-art archival practices are very much in line with the issues addressed by cultural competence. Writing from a library perspective, Montiel-Overall argues that the concept of “information” needs to be broadened beyond traditional (Western) record categories, including “anything that informs, builds, develops, and enriches thinking and human integrative thought.” This view is consistent with a growing number of archivists who argue for a broad view of records in collective memory, even as it might appear in forms that lack the permanence we normally associate with paper. Thus, Diana Taylor argues for a view of archives that includes both static artifacts and “repertoire” or “embodied practice/knowledge” as it may appear in social activities such as spoken language, dance, sports, and rituals.

From a cultural competence perspective, there is certainly a need for archivists to base appraisal decisions on a transparent set of criteria, and to shape the institutional mission of the repository around the constituencies we serve, as opposed to the records themselves. Yet the problem in implementing the “postmodern” vision of archives remains a practical one: if we expect archivists to do more analysis in the appraisal process for Web-based collections, and especially to create richer contextual metadata, we can’t necessarily expect institutions to find the resources needed to support an expansion of digital collections on the Web. In particular, we might expect to see fewer and smaller, yet better described, digital collections available to users, even as we greatly

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20 Montiel Overall, p.182.

expand the range of potential documentation—both through metadata and access to digitized records—that might be included in online collections.

From our perspective, what stands out is the need for a culturally-competent process for digitization, one that acknowledges the values and constraints of the recordkeeping culture as well as the cultures being documented. It’s worth noting that “competence” in this framework is very much a relative and not an absolute value, just as “culture” is a broad term representing many facets of human behavior.

**Cultural Competence as a framework for evaluating digitization efforts**

As noted above, by “culture” we mean a pattern of activity within a distinct social or ethnic group. This definition reaches beyond the idea of cultural heritage as a set of physical artifacts embodying distinct values, beliefs, and traditions, to name a few. It also goes beyond the idea of culture as ethnicity or group identity. By focusing on a broader concept of culture grounded in social activity, our aim is to establish a framework we can use to analyze the work of information professionals as they collect and describe artifacts representing cultures (i.e., the daily activities or events that occur among a group or organization). In other words, to properly evaluate the value of documentation we need to understand the culture that produces artifacts and also the recordkeeping culture that aggregates and preserves information. Our main argument is that the value of documentation strategies of all kinds depends on the reciprocal relationship between creators and collectors. In this regard, it’s essential to view cultural competence as a process, not an outcome. In essence, the cultural competence framework developed is designed to help professionals acquire essential knowledge at three basic levels:

**A. Cognitive dimension**

1. Building cultural self-awareness

In the human services, many researchers have highlighted the need for practitioners to be conscious of their own cultural background as they attempt to communicate with people representing different cultures. In many disciplines, self-examination of customs, values, and social identities is encouraged as a way to help individuals identify actions and beliefs within their own cultures that may prevent effective dialogue or understanding and inhibit cross-cultural interactions. For professionals who work directly with the public, cultural self-awareness has to include both personal or family cultures and the professional cultures in which we operate—and which are often opaque to users. Of course, librarians and archivists have long invested in instructional and reference services in an effort to educate users about the less intuitive aspects of our professional cultures, as reflected in our collections and access systems. But as we’ll see in the case of digitized collections and online exhibits, repositories have often provided minimal contextual metadata, both on the meaning of particular items and on the rationale for digitizing certain items and not others. Thus, in designing online exhibits, archivists should not expect users to understand the centrality of provenance in archival arrangement and description. Rather, by understanding the difference in perspective between a
provenance-based view of records and the subject-based information needs of many users, we might find better ways to assist users as they search for relevant information.

2. Acquiring cultural knowledge

Beyond self-reflection, a critical step toward cultural competence involves learning more about other cultures, with the aim of developing a greater sensitivity to cultural nuances. Such knowledge often requires a mix of formal and informal methods of learning. For human services professionals, it’s often considered essential to build trusting relationships with members of the community being served, facilitating the sharing of tacit cultural knowledge that might be an essential factor in the outcome of services. Trust is vital in developing a network of confidants who can help mediate between the professional and the community. Here again, reference librarians have a long history of working directly with users, especially face-to-face, to navigate the conceptual and physical obstacles separating users from collections. The problem of assisting users becomes still more complex in the digital environment, as we have to design access systems to support a broad range of information needs, beyond the needs of individual users as might be discerned in a reference interview. Given these complexities, it’s helpful to think of cultural competence in digitization less as a function of true expertise (based on formal knowledge) and more as the capacity to engage in a robust dialog with creators and users as we go about designing digital exhibits and exposing metadata online.

B. Interpersonal dimension

Within the cultural competence model, the cognitive dimension focuses on the individual, calling for self-reflection and for acquiring knowledge about other cultures. By contrast, the interpersonal dimension involves direct social engagement and dialog, thereby extending and reinforcing the knowledge gained through self-reflection and formal learning. For information professionals, an important task at the interpersonal level is to evaluate collections, information services, and technologies, to ensure that they are designed to facilitate effective interaction within and across cultures, including our own as well as the culture of users and creators.

1. Building cultural appreciation

Especially in situations where a professional exercises authority— that is, where an imbalance of power exists between practitioner and client—the outcome of an interaction may be affected substantially by the degree of cultural appreciation shown by the professional. In other words, it’s not enough for the professional to understand the cultural differences that may be present in the interaction; rather, the professional needs to offer positive acknowledgement, approval, and respect for the client’s cultural background and values. In this sense, cultural appreciation on the part of practitioners involves deliberately creating opportunities for clients—and by extension the communities they represent—to express their own ideas and expectations regarding the services they are to be provided.
2. Ethic of caring

The concept of “caring” has been developed in helping professions like social work and nursing to emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships in professional work. A caring relationship is marked by authenticity—demonstrating in concrete ways that one is concerned with the outcome of a social interaction. Authentic caring requires reciprocity, building mutually beneficial relationships that transcend mere obligation. For libraries, it’s important to understand the value of users’ affective or emotional needs as well as their intellectual need for relevant information.

As information professionals, we have a clear need to build an ethic of caring into the design of access systems and digital collections. One practical way to do this is to invest in continual, visible improvements to systems, and to closely monitor user interactions with systems to gather evidence on how they might be improved in the future.

3. Personal and cultural interaction

Ultimately, the process of acquiring cultural competence requires practice, through active engagement with users from diverse cultural backgrounds. In general, face-to-face communication affords a richer level of interaction than normally found online, as physical proximity and real-time interaction enable us to receive information in nonverbal as well as verbal form. Online communication may offer new opportunities for professionals to interact with creators and users of collections, but effective communication online requires close attention to the cultural barriers separating these communities.

4. Reflecting on values

As in the cognitive dimension, the process of building cultural competence requires us to regularly evaluate our interactions with users and creators, enhancing our cultural knowledge and enabling us to show responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities. As we suggested earlier, the larger aim of cultural competence is to institutionalize a process of continuous improvement in our information systems and services.

C. Environmental dimension

In the helping professions context, building cultural competence requires attention to a wide range of physical, geographical and societal factors such as language that shape cultures—beyond the set of values and interests we can attribute directly to a given community. Environmental factors also broadly affect the information environment of libraries and archives, of course, requiring practitioners to work actively to mitigate barriers inhibiting the appropriate use of collections and services.

Applying the cultural competence framework
Our starting point for this project was a series of case studies of cultural heritage institutions in southern Arizona, designed to assess the current state of the art for digitization and online access to collections related to the diverse cultures of the state. Our initial questions centered around institutions’ motivation to digitize, their appraisal of items to include in digital projects, and how digital projects were being organized and carried out, especially in relatively small institutions marked by constrained resources and possessing collections representing historically underserved or minority populations in the state. In selecting institutions to include in the study, we had the benefit of a number of efforts in recent decades to survey archival collections in the region and to identify communities lacking adequate documentation. After consulting local archivists, we developed a sample of 25 culture heritage institutions in the Tucson area. We completed interviews representing six institutions.

In general, our initial findings have reinforced the view that digitization activities in these institutions have been shaped more by resource constraints and organizational routines (especially centering on physical artifacts) than by conscious efforts to pursue online documentation strategies, whether of a formal or informal nature. This is not to say that institutions lack aspirations in this area, especially given the example of AMP. Indeed, one institution we studied, the Arizona Historical Society (AHS), has made a number of digitized collections available through AMP. Not surprisingly, we found that the Society’s motivation to digitize collections was largely driven by the need to increase public awareness of the Society’s collections. AHS itself is a visible presence in the state, with branches in four locations and a collection that includes roughly 700,000 historical photographs. However, budget cuts in recent years have greatly limited its capacity to undertake digital projects. For instance, the Tempe branch was actually forced to close down from 2010-12. It reopened with a total of four employees, all of whom have to act as archival generalists, taking turns on the reference desk, and having multiple tasks including processing and preserving physical collections.

Thus, to undertake digital projects, AHS has little choice but to rely on volunteers and student interns, placing a heavy burden on permanent staff to ensure quality in imaging and metadata production. At one time, AHS had a staff member dedicated to working with archival photographs, including reproduction and digitization, which is one reason the repository actually possesses a scanner. Still, with past as well as current resource limitations, AHS has encountered significant challenges in pursuing even small-scale digitization efforts involving a few hundred images. In many instances, a lack of standard descriptive metadata and consistent file naming practices has hindered efforts to appraise items and organize scanning projects. Likewise, the Society hopes to set up a dedicated online repository, and yet at present it lacks the technology infrastructure to do so at present. For this reason, a resource such as AMP has value for institutions as a content management system as well as a hosting service for online exhibits.

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In fact, given the dependence of many Arizona cultural heritage institutions on the repository infrastructure provided by AMP, we decided to make a closer examination of a sampling of AMP collections, focusing on the metadata provided at both the collection-level and the item-level. Our aim was to understand the meaning of “best practices” for digitization in the local context of institutions and collections in Arizona.

In general, we found AMP to be a rich source of evidence on institutions’ decision making both regarding appraisal and description in producing online documentation for a wide range of topics related to Arizona’s diverse cultural landscape. More work is needed to provide a comprehensive analysis, and, using qualitative methods, especially to refine the cultural competence framework as a basis for analyzing the results of digital projects. And so, for this project, we decided to focus on a sample of collection items to highlight some of the specific issues raised by the cultural competence framework in evaluating the outcome of digitization projects.

Example: Three Indigenous Baskets

   http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/asmspicer/id/10/rec/51

This image was contributed to AMP by the Arizona State Museum, as part of a collection of digitized photographs by anthropologist Rosamond Spicer beginning in the 1940s. The Museum included a Web page with contextual information about the collection. The stated rationale for digitizing these materials was that in taking photographs, Spicer aimed to document events and activity in everyday life among the Tohono O’odham, especially during a nine-month period in the 1940s, when Spicer lived on the reservation as part of a funded research project.23 A number of the digitized photographs added to AMP suggest that Spicer interacted directly with tribal members, but it’s not made clear how the resulting images were influenced by these interactions.24

In fact, the Spicer photographs arrived at the Museum with a minimum of contextual metadata. Consequently, the metadata for the sample artifact is necessarily sparse--with the creator’s identity and the date marked as unknown, for instance. As for the item itself, the metadata record simply indicates that it’s a “Tohono O'odham woven plaque with maze design.” With no reference to the figure at the entrance to the maze, the larger cultural significance of the meaning is not apparent as it’s exhibited in AMP.


The Pueblo Grande Museum has contributed three collections to AMP, documenting indigenous cultures near the museum’s home in Phoenix. One consists of Hohokam artifacts (most dating between 1000-1500 ad). A second represents an early 20th century collection of Maricopa pottery, while a third featuring baskets from the museum’s

23 http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/landingpage/collection/asmspicer
24 See, for instance: http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/asmspicer/id/54/rec/9
permanent collection. Most of these were made by members of two related though
distinct indigenous cultures: the Tohono O'odham (based in southern Arizona, along on
the Mexico border) or the Akimel O'odham (based in central Arizona near Phoenix).

The basket in this example is labeled as a “man-in-the-maze” pattern, which the metadata
identifies as a “common design for O'odham basketry.” On the meaning of the figure, the
description indicates that the “maze is said to represent the house of Elder Brother, and
symbolizes a person's journey through life and search for balance.”

From a cultural competence perspective, we might expect this description to raise
significant questions for users, especially calling for additional context about the Elder
Brother figure and the story behind the maze. In this instance, the user is provided an
indirect path to additional information, by way of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian
Community, which donated the basket to the museum, and, as the description explains,
the Community uses man-in-the-maze image as its logo. No direct link is provided by
AMP, but by navigating to the Community’s website, we can access a fuller account of
Elder Brother and the maze. However, the image is not exclusive to the two
tribes represented by the Community (Pima/Akimel O'odham and the Maricopa/Xalychidom
Piipaash) and accounts of Elder Brother might be expected to vary, especially as the story
has traditionally been transmitted orally. More importantly, given the spiritual nature of
the image, we might argue that the description ought to include specific, authoritative
information on the religious implications of the image and also the cultural context in
which the basket was created and used.

3. Arizona State Museum: “Collection of Tohono O'odham Woven Containers”

This image is part of a series entitled: “Coiled Basket Making,” which is part of a larger
collection contributed by the Arizona State Museum to AMP, consisting of photographs
by photographer Helga Teiwes in the 1970s and 80s. In documenting the process of
basket making, this series provides more detail than the Spicer collection in documenting
the context of activities as well as artifacts produced by the Tohono O'odham. However,
the image of finished baskets (shown grouped together) offers scant contextual
information about the designs on the baskets. The description indicates that the baskets
have “traditional and modern designs. Some of the designs are man in the maze, squash
blossom, star and wheat.” Unfortunately, the metadata does not provide specific
information about each item in the photograph, and it does not provide contextual
information on the meaning or cultural significance of the designs, including the man-in-
the-maze basket.

In spite of these shortcomings, the Teiwes collection (as depicted in AMP) shows a
relatively high level of cultural awareness and personal engagement with the people
represented in the photographs, especially by comparison to an early-20th century
collection of Southwestern outdoor photography included in AMP by the Arizona State
Museum: photographs by Forman Hanna, who was active in documenting the Arizona
landscape as well as both the indigenous and American settler cultures.
Example: Arizona State Museum: Hopi images from the Forman Hanna collection

1. Hopi woman placing fuel around pots to be fired

2. “Steps, Shipolovi”
   http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/asmhanna/id/12/rec/19

3. “Hopi girl sitting at the edge of mesa”

4. “Girl dressed in traditional manta etc., standing near edge of cliff”
   http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/asmhanna/id/14/rec/21

From a cultural competence perspective, one factor that stands out in these images is the apparent cultural distance between Forman and his subjects. In the first example, we can infer that Forman intended to document an everyday activity in a naturalistic way (hence the three subjects are all looking away from the camera) and yet it’s not clear whether the photograph was staged—with the two children posed behind the woman in the foreground—or whether the subjects were even aware they were being photographed.

A similar naturalism (on Forman’s part) can be found in the second photograph, which depicts a Hopi man at a distance from the camera as he descends stone steps built into a mesa. From the image itself and the accompanying metadata, it’s not clear under what conditions the photograph was taken. Did the man agree to be photographed? Was he asked by Forman to hesitate near the bottom of the steps, an optimal position within the frame? As with the first image of the Hopi woman, did the man consent to be photographed? Such questions also apply to the third example, which shows a Hopi woman sitting on the edge of a cliff, at a distance from the camera. Unlike the photograph depicting pottery making, this image projects a distinct exoticism, both in the landscape and in woman’s clothing and hairstyle. The accompanying image—the fourth example above—provides some context by showing the woman close up in traditional garb, and almost certainly posing for the camera. But here again, the interaction between photographer and subject is obscured by a lack of information. Did the subject make a special effort to dress up for the photographer, or did Hopi women at this time normally wear this type of clothing every day? Also, from all of the photographs, can we infer that Hopi culture was welcoming or at least neutral toward an American photographer?

Taken together, these examples highlight a number of theoretical and practical issues archivists face in pursuing online documentation strategies. Clearly, the AMP collections are relatively informal and limited in scope by the standard originally envisioned by Helen Samuels. Still, a “micro-scale” digitization effort such as the Helga Teiwes collection shows the potential for larger-scale digitization projects designed to aggregate digital objects and to add contextual information to existing collections available on the Web. We see the cultural competence framework as a potentially valuable tool for such
efforts, especially in guiding the decision making process behind appraisal and re-appraisal of digital objects, and in preparing metadata.

One advantage in viewing digitization through a cultural competence lens is that it calls for transparency and self-examination by archivists as an integral part of the digitization process. For instance, in the AMP examples, some explanation of appraisal decisions was provided at the collection level, but the item-level metadata was opaque on the choice of items for inclusion in AMP. The sparsity of item-level metadata is not surprising given the general resource constraints on many first-generation digital projects, and the resulting technical limitations imposed by the use of Dublin Core elements as a default for online repositories. Using the cultural competence framework, archivists would begin digital projects with an assessment of their own culture—that is, activities, values, organizational structures, standard operating procedures in record keeping—while at the same time engaging in formal study of the cultures they are seeking to document.

In turn, the knowledge gained at the cognitive level should lay the groundwork for regular and productive interactions with members of the communities being documented. In recent years, a growing number of archivists have called for closer and more effective collaboration between archivists and members of indigenous communities to ensure ethical treatment of artifacts, including repatriation and improved ways to describe the cultural context of items exhibited online. Broadly speaking, we see the cultural competence framework as supporting the emergence of best practices for managing digital cultural heritage, particularly as we seek to enhance the contextual information linked to digital objects on the Web. On this point, recent arguments on behalf of “participatory archives” and generally for archival practices that are “flexible, open, transparent, and collaborative” also support our broader argument for cultural competence as a framework for digitization and the creation of online exhibits.

As noted above, the concept of cultural competence is rooted in the professional interactions that are fundamental to the human service fields. Of course as a professional culture, archivists have traditionally played a rather different kind role in society, especially as records and artifacts are a medium of communication across time and distance. As many archival theorists have noted, the highly complex role archivists play in shaping historical and cultural understanding places a heavy burden on the profession, especially as we seek to define standards and best practices that balance practical

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25 Bastian has explored in detail the need for deep engagement of local cultures in documentation efforts. Jeannette A. Bastian, “The Records of Memory, the Archives of Identity: Celebrations, Texts and Archival Sensibilities,” Archival Science, (published online, 8 July 2012).
constraints on recordkeeping against the need to support the highly diverse modes of understanding and interpretation that make up archives as a form of cultural heritage.²⁹

Ultimately, in applying the cultural competence framework to the problems we face in digitizing archives, it becomes clear that the existing environment—both in the physical legacy of paper records and in the technical affordances of the Web and online repository systems—calls for archivists to set explicit constraints—both positive and negative—on digitization to make online documentation a sustainable enterprise. By negative constraints, we mean that archivists have to take into account institutional capacity in appraising records—thereby limiting the scope of online collections. By positive constraints, we mean that for digital repositories to achieve cultural (as well as organizational) sustainability, archivists have to pursue explicit documentation strategies designed to capture—as much as possible—the full diversity of artifacts and cultural meanings implicit in archival collections.
