

Assessing Teaching and Learning with Digital Collections: Narrative Emerging Grant Writers Program

Project Description

The Ames Library at Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU) recently embarked on an initiative to offer digitization services to faculty who integrate still images, moving images and audio into their courses. The Swahili Expressive Arts Collection is an excellent example of how diverse materials enhance course content. With this grant, we plan to create an assessment tool for the collection to evaluate its impact on student learning. The assessment tool will aid us in understanding how faculty use digital collections, how students interact with the collections, and whether digital collections add value to their experience.

Illinois Wesleyan University's new Strategic Plan emphasizes Teaching & Learning, as well as Diversity and strengthening faculty's scholarly achievements. The Swahili Expressive Arts collection is a lifelong project of Professor Rebecca Gearhart, who has built her career interacting with the people of Lamu, Kenya with her unique approach to anthropological research. Her work is like nothing else in the discipline, and it is for this reason we are working with her to create a digital collection. Her work is a model for IWU anthropology students and for non-IWU faculty, scholars and students interested in the field. The Swahili Expressive Arts digital collection is a perfect example of how IWU's Strategic Plan can be enacted with collaborations between library and faculty.

This project is an excellent match to two goals in the *Strategic Plan for Technology and Telecommunications for Illinois Libraries*:

- Strategic Goal #4: Augment training opportunities and outcomes to employ technology as a means for libraries to deliver information and services to patrons and
- Strategic Goal #6: To stimulate research and development: promote demonstration technology grants and additional research and development efforts in use of new technologies.

In addition, *Assessing Teaching and Learning with Digital Collections* will also address an identified Priority Area for FY08, "Use of technology to enhance cooperation and collaboration within and beyond the library community."

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Local Need

The only missing element at this point is the voice of the student. While IWU has an active assessment program and has gathered numerous data regarding student perspectives on writing, diversity, advising, and the quality of their time at IWU, the library has not engaged in much assessment. However, the library is beginning to investigate and explore how we can contribute to these conversations on campus. Internal discussions have included identifying our comparison and aspirational libraries, specific programs and services to assess, and this summer, two librarians will begin to research the topic in earnest in preparation of creating an assessment plan. This project will allow us to tap into student perspectives by administering our survey instrument to anthropology students, as well as possibly running focus groups about their use of the Swahili Expressive Arts collection. I anticipate these conversations will be instructive and thought provoking, and very well may change how we develop our digital collections and their search mechanisms.

This project is, in more ways than one, a test of our capabilities and a pilot for a larger, more formal assessment program for digital collections. Not only will it measure the use and value of the Swahili Expressive Arts collection, it will give us insight into how assessment can work for one area of our librarianship, and how we can create an environment open to assessment, evaluation and most importantly, change and progress based on our findings. Up until this point, we have not had a culture of assessment, relying on anecdotal evidence to prove our efforts were worthwhile. This project will help pave the way for other assessment efforts by involving students directly in the process and connecting the assessment to their interactions with the digital collection materials.

Action Plan

The timeline consists of the initial implementation in the fall semester of 2007 and conclude with the analysis and refinement of the project materials in the following spring semester. The first step of this project will be to research different types of survey instruments and select one best suited for this particular type of resource. The next step would be the creation of content for the type of survey instrument chosen and the testing of the instrument to ascertain its clarity and structure. Once we have the assessment instrument ready and approval has been obtained from IWU's Institutional Review Board, implementation in partnership with Professor Gearhart and her

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students would begin. The subsequent gathering of the resulting data, the analysis of the data, and the discussions between Professor Gearhart and the library about the results would follow and play a major role in the evaluation of the project. Lastly, implementing changes and preparing for the next round of assessment will complete this particular project. The Digital & Media Initiatives Librarian, in conjunction with the Digital Initiatives Team, will assume responsibility for each stage of the process, and will also be responsible for attending any required meetings associated with the grant and for keeping the library administration apprised of the progress of the grant.

Outcomes, Benefits, Results

Our goal for this project is that at the end of the entire process, we will be able to say whether or not the Swahili Expressive Arts collection adds value to the learning of anthropology students at IWU. A secondary goal is to be able to go through the planning, testing and execution process of the assessment with the clear intention that this process will serve as a model for other assessment planning efforts. The expectations are to involve students in a positive, proactive way; to communicate our findings to library and faculty colleagues on- and off-campus; and to use this experience as a learning process and foundation for the future. The library will continue the program after the grant both by using similar assessment tools and by going through the same process for designing assessment instruments for other digital collections. To allow the program to continue after the grant period ends the library will either absorb the associated costs within its overall operating budget or seek other external funding opportunities through NEH or similar entities.