

Notes from School: A Literacy for the Information Lifecycle: Personal Digital Archiving

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Is this really information literacy? This was the first question I asked myself while crafting a lesson on Personal Digital Archiving for the teaching practicum component of a course on Information Literacy and Libraries. After all, Personal Digital Archiving doesn't rely on library resources. It doesn't take place during the research process—it comes after or, in some cases, before. It doesn't involve the same search and evaluative process that I'd observed during the first seven weeks of the practicum. Instead, it is all about teaching individuals how to avoid digital loss and manage content for the long-term as technology changes. I initially saw Personal Digital Archiving as a way to connect two seemingly separate areas of librarianship that interest me—digital preservation and instruction. Yet, I worried that the lesson I'd crafted was simply a useful workshop, but *not* really information literacy (IL).

As a result of an eye-opening internship experience archiving digital content for a university, I felt Personal Digital Archiving was an important topic to introduce, particularly to college students and faculty. As individuals we face both short- and long-term risks for loss of access and functionality for all the hardware and software we use to create, organize, and communicate. Our most important digital photos, documents, or music is often stored primarily in one place—a laptop or mobile device. The loss, damage or theft of these devices is devastating and often results in permanent loss of content. Information loss can also be out of our control when it comes to online platforms as well. For example, in 2013, a blogging platform, Posterous, suddenly announced termination of services shortly after being acquired by Twitter. Luckily, users were given a small window of time to download all their content before it would become unavailable (Olnaoff, 2013). As the use of online platforms and apps for creating, storing and sharing information continues to rise, it becomes increasingly important for individuals to understand the risks and to consider backup strategies for their online content.

We also face less obvious long-term risks that are related to the obsolescence of hardware and software and the degradation of files overtime. It can be difficult to imagine that MS Word documents may become obsolete or that a digital photo may lose image quality over time, but risks like these exist. For example, in the U.K., in 1998, the Archaeology Data Service took on 220 floppy disks that held 6,432 files of irreplaceable archaeological data. Five percent of the files were already corrupted, 900 files were in unidentifiable formats, and the rest lacked documentation to explain just what the data meant or what excavation the data was linked to (Richards, 2008, p. 182). Because of this, the

data is essentially useless. This is a direct result of obsolescence of hardware and software as well as a lack of awareness by individuals that this important data may eventually (and relatively quickly) become inaccessible.

In order to prevent similar loss of modern content, the cultural heritage sector, worldwide, has been actively working to develop digital archiving and preservation methods for many years. The goal of such efforts is to keep pace with technological changes and design tools to update file formats and storage media and maintain access to digital information overtime. More recently, there has also been a trend towards a holistic definition of the role of librarian and archivist in the lifecycle of digital information. Not only is it important for memory institutions to *reactively* preserve and manage finished content, but it is also vital to *advocate* for digital preservation at the creation stage and *proactively* guide individuals through stewardship of their digital content.

Many individuals are aware that a backup of files on a USB drive or external hard drive is a good method for preventing loss, but how many people are aware of how software and hardware changes affect the content they have created and stored on a device? Are they aware of the risks and benefits of cloud-storage services (e.g., DropBox or Evernote)? Do they know why descriptive file names matter? Too often we don't even realize that our digital content is susceptible to damage or obsolescence until it's too late. This is what makes proactive education so important.

The IMLS-funded Data Information Literacy (DIL) project, which is focused on providing guidance for instruction related to statistical literacy, data manipulation tools, and data management and preservation, notes that traditional IL too often overlooks the role of the “researcher-as-producer” and focuses too much on “researcher-as-consumer” (Carlson et al., 2011, p. 634). The consumer-researcher requires traditional library skills for searching and evaluating information, but as producers individuals take on a multifaceted role that requires a different set of important skills for creation, sharing, and long-term management of information. Some perspectives on IL may address parts of this role through lessons about the writing process or scholarly publishing, but are less likely to discuss preservation of digital content being created and shared.

The DIL project incorporates preservation and management of research data in their list of seven competencies and is an excellent resource for science and social science liaison librarians (Carlson et al., 2011, p. 652). But for librari-

ans supporting individuals who do *not* work in data intensive fields, there is a lack of direction for crafting an IL lesson that incorporates important “person-as-producer” skill for information management. This will quite possibly change soon as the ACRL’s new draft of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2013) recognizes the individual’s role as a content creator, but a well-designed Personal Digital Archiving lesson or workshop can address that role both now and in the future.

This is why, after observing a librarian teach for six weeks and reading about various IL concepts, I ultimately decided to fulfill my practicum requirements by teaching a Personal Digital Archiving-focused lesson. So far, I’ve taught three workshops—for freshman enrolled in a digital research course, as an open workshop hosted at the library, and as an open workshop hosted for graduate students.

The sessions are scalable to audience and time limits. I design my workshops, typically hour-long sessions, based on the Library of Congress’s Personal Digital Archiving resources (<http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/>) which use a structure of *Find, Decide, Organize, Store*. In general, I introduce participants to the risks of digital preservation by highlighting obsolescence of software, obsolescence of storage media, usefulness of descriptive file names, and importance of backing-up files. The *Find, Decide, Organize, Store* steps are presented as a method that participants can take with them to guide the creation of their personal archive and prepare content to be preserved long-term. This might include *finding* all the Word documents created during freshman year, *deciding* what documents are important to keep, *organizing* the important files with descriptive file names and PDF copies, and then *storing* the newly organized files in two distinct places (e.g. laptop and external hard drive). I also encourage participants to bring their own device (BYOD) as this makes the session more relevant and purposeful for the individuals attending. While learning about Personal Digital Archiving methods, participants are able to implement techniques using their own content.

One of the valuable lessons I learned from leading these workshops is that opening with preservation and concerns of obsolescence isn’t necessarily what all audiences will be most interested in learning. For one group of graduate students attending a workshop I hosted recently, the most immediate concern was organization—archiving—of research materials relevant to their dissertation. I led with preservation concerns, but quickly realized this was too overwhelming an issue for individuals still working on wrangling their PDF journal articles, digital notes, and photographs of archival documents for immediate use. Rather than leading with the long-term risk of obsolescence, which is the driving force behind Personal Digital Archiving initiatives, I should have simply led with the *finding, deciding, and organizing* steps of the process. At the *store* step, I could have then dis-

cussed preservation risks in a more logical manner for the participants.

This mix-up shows the importance of first gauging the needs of participants, as time is limited for any one-shot (digital archiving or otherwise). But that is the great thing about Personal Digital Archiving: it is relevant to students and faculty both in their academic and personal lives, so there are many ways to modify the workshop. An instructor can focus on specifics (e.g., long-term preservation of digital photos, not of *all* things) or focusing on a particular time period (e.g., how to properly preserve all the digital works a student produces in semester). Regardless of the format or lesson-plan, it’s important to design a Personal Digital Archiving session with a few things in mind: participants are information creators not simply consumers; strategies need to be manageable and realistic given time constraints and varied technical know-how; participants will feel more engaged if encouraged to bring their own device; participants will likely enjoy sharing stories of personal data loss or contributing tips for effective digital archiving and preservation practice.

So, to answer my initial doubts: Yes, Personal Digital Archiving sessions can be a valuable addition to an information literacy program. With a broad definition of information literacy and acknowledgment of the dual role of consumer and producer, it is possible to see how digital archiving and preservation can be an integral part of an information literacy program. The differences between the style and content of traditional IL instruction sessions and library workshops simply depend on where in the information lifecycle one is teaching.

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