Research

The Iter Gateway to the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Collaboration Between Information Specialists and Subject Specialists in the Arts and Humanities

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Abstract: The arts and humanities have received less attention in discussions of the uses of electronic information because their particular characteristics do not appear to lend themselves readily to collaboration through technology. This paper describes some aspects of the Iter Project, which is a web-based project that utilizes extensive collaboration between scholars and students of the Middle Ages and Renaissance and scholars and students in Information Studies. Collaboration takes places at all levels of the Project—between the project partners and between professional and student staff members. Examples of some of the collaborative procedures for one aspect of the Iter Project, the Iter Bibliography, are described. Extensive collaboration ensures quality control for records in the Bibliography and for the management of the Bibliography database itself. The Project is a model for cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration, negotiation across boundaries, and the creation of excellent records for humanities scholars and research projects.

Key words: Web collaboratory, Iter gateway, web information exchange

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1. Arts and Humanities: Characteristics and Projects

The arts and humanities have received less attention than the sciences and social sciences in discussions of web-based collaborative projects because the artistic and humanistic disciplines exhibit characteristics that appear antithetical to the cooperative uses of electronic technologies. Research in the arts and humanities is often carried out by individual scholars, not by teams, and the work of these scholars often depends upon unique materials and objects that can be accessed only in specialized archives, museums and libraries. Such materials include manuscripts, cultural artifacts, original musical scores, architectural drawings, medical instruments and artworks such as sculptures and paintings. In addition, indexes for the literatures of arts and humanities fields are often incomplete and dependent on volunteer indexers who happen to have ready access to the specialized journals and materials of the particular field. The interdisciplinary character of much of the literatures of the arts and humanities also complicates the compilation of exhaustive indexes because important materials may be found in collections devoted to several different disciplines.

These characteristics of the arts and humanities have, however, been addressed in a number of web projects. For example, multi-media representations of museum objects and other cultural artifacts can be seen at the Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO) (http://www.amico.org/home.html). Guides, catalogues and images of manuscript collections are found, for example, at the Perdita Project: Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Collection (http://human.ntu.ac.uk/research/perdita/index.html), at Digital Scriptorium: A Prototype Image Database and Visual Union Catalog of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts (http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Scriptorium/) and at The Medici Archive Project (http://www.medici.org). A example of a comprehensive index to multi-disciplinary materials is Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index (http://haverford.edu/library/reference/mschaus/mlf/whatis.html), which indexes print materials about women, sexuality, and gender during the Middle Ages. Thus, scholars and researchers in the arts and humanities are beginning to become more familiar with electronic information sources, and the genesis and development of projects of these kinds warrants exploration. This paper describes the Iter Project as a collaboration between scholars, researchers and students of the Middle Ages and Renaissance and scholars, researchers, students and professionals in the area of Information Studies.

2. The Iter Project

As its Latin name implies, the Iter Project is a non-profit project designed to provide a digital path or gateway to print and electronic materials in all formats pertaining to the European Middle Ages and Renaissance (defined as 400-1700 CE) (http://www.IterGateway.org). From its beginning in 1995, the Project has grown to include five full partners and two affiliate societies. The five partners are: the Renaissance Society of America (RSA); the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies (CRRS), Univ. of Toronto; the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS), Arizona State Univ.,
This paper deals specifically with the Iter Bibliography, which is the centerpiece of the project and which exemplifies the collaboratory approach of the project as a whole. Other instances of collaboration and integration of functions could be given. For example, scholars with entries in IDS can update information about themselves and their projects at will using their personal passwords to access a web form. Completion of this form automatically updates the IDS database. The most extensive collaboration, however, occurs in the Bibliography, which currently contains about 500,000 records. It indexes 1,114 journals published between 1700 and the present. It also contains records for selected essays from 701 scholarly collections of essays produced between 1700 and the present; and 3) involve the electronic coverage of multi-media materials cataloguing standards; 2) provide comprehensive print and electronic coverage of multi-media materials produced between 1700 and the present; and 3) involve scholars and graduate students in both Middle Ages and Renaissance studies and Information studies in creating and maintaining the records and the database as a whole. This major goal and its strategic sub-goals were important in developing the collaborative working arrangements of the Iter Project as a whole and of the Iter Bibliography as the first of its various parts.

Collaborative work of various kinds occurs at all levels in the Iter Bibliography. At the highest level of organization, representatives of the five full partners meet regularly as the Iter Executive both in person and as a virtual group to set policies and priorities and to make other decisions for the Iter Project in general and for specific parts of the Project. The Director of Iter and the Project Manager carry out these decisions in constant communication with the partners. Both the Director and the Project Manager are at the University of Toronto, and the central administrative office for the Project is permanently housed at the Faculty of Information Studies (FIS). The general organization chart appears on the Iter website and clearly shows how the work assigned to each of the five partners appropriately integrates the scholarly partners with the information partners. This integration capitalizes on the expertise of both groups, and the expertise of each group complements and enhances the other to raise the scholarly and information level of the Bibliography.

At lower levels of the organization, the two academic centers (CRRS and ACMRS) cooperate in collecting basic bibliographic information such as title and author from journals in their library’s collections at Toronto and Arizona. A series of seven workflow charts has been developed to show how various aspects of the work interlock and how collaborations occur. All seven charts are not reproduced here, but three have been chosen to show some of the collaborative processes. The entire workflow cannot be followed through these three charts, but they serve as examples of the kinds of work integration and collaboration that occurs throughout the Iter Bibliography, and this cooperative work is representative of the Project as a whole.

Figure 1, Choosing New Journals, shows the collaborative process by which new journals are chosen to be indexed and added to the Bibliography project. Journals may be those entirely devoted to the subject area of the database (e.g., Anglo-Norman Studies) or general journals that have occasional articles of interest for the time period (e.g., Annals of Science). Interested stakeholders—Iter partners, subscribers, other faculty members or students—suggest new journals, and these suggestions are sent to the central administrative office at FIS, where duplicate suggestions are removed. Periodically, the list of suggested journals is distributed to the partners, who vote on the level of priority each journal should be assigned. Usually, journals are prioritized on the basis of their world-wide availability, centrality for the field and availability for processing at one of these two centres (ACMRS and CCRS).
Subsequently, one of the centres is assigned the task of providing bibliographic information for each journal. This decision is based on the current workload of the centre and on the completeness of the run of the journal that centre holds. Gaps in the collection at one center can often be filled from the collection at the other center.

Figure 2, Data Input / Subject Analysis Using EndNote, shows the next steps in the process. In Figure 2, “Sub students” means graduate students studying the Middle Ages and/or Renaissance periods who are employed by Iter to collect bibliographic information in their university library. For this work, sub students use EndNote bibliographic software. Templates in EndNote have been developed by the Project Manager so that sub students can easily enter bibliographic details for each article in each issue for the entire run of a specific a journal. The format for entering the information has been standardized and a manual is distributed to each sub student. In addition, information studies students (“info students”) and other Iter permanent employees train the sub students in how to use EndNote templates, answer their questions, and resolve other problems as they arise. These problems are signaled by codes entered into EndNote fields to alert info students that a problem has arisen.

A number of steps are not shown here and involve ftping the EndNote files to FIS and preparing them for further processing. Eventually, the process arrives at Figure 3, Processing Retro Articles and Reviews. “Retro” in this context means pre-1990 articles. In Figure 3, “Info1 students” means information studies students who have been trained to do basic checking and revising of EndNote records, and “Info2 students” means information studies students who have more extensive training in file checking, revising, and subject cataloguing. Each journal is uniquely identified by its ISSN. The processes in Figure 3 also show some of the codes embedded in each record to show which stage in the process a record has reached. For example, “Sub1ok” indicates that a Middle Ages and/or Renaissance Student has okayed the record for transmission to FIS. Of particular interest in the collaborative process is the emailing between “Info1/2s” and sub students when questions arise about a particular record. When all issues for a record have been resolved, it is added to the database and becomes available to users.

Throughout this process, scholars and student employees in both disciplines cooperate in creating accurate and consistent records. One of the most intensive steps is the provision of subject cataloguing for each record. The Iter Project considers the provision of subject headings and classification notation to be one of the most important value-added aspects of the Project because it provides description of documents using controlled vocabularies that enhance the records according to international standards (e.g., MARC communication format, LCSH, DDC) that are used in national libraries and research centers throughout the world, and that are therefore familiar to many scholars and students in both disciplines.

The usual process of subject analysis takes place through the work of an information professional who has been trained in analyzing the subject of a document and in translating that subject into subject headings and classification notations. In contrast, the Iter Bibliography assigns the task of subject analysis to a graduate student in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This student studies a document and completes three tasks that are used by a graduate student in information studies to assign subject headings and notations to the document. These three tasks are: a sentence that describes the “aboutness” of the document; a statement about the time period discussed in the document; and short subject heading-like phrases that summarize the document but that are not expressed in strict subject heading vocabulary and format.

For the purposes of this paper, the descriptive sentence is the most interesting because it provides the basis for subsequent translation by information studies students into controlled vocabularies and demonstrates concretely the kinds of cooperation and collaboration between future scholars in the historical period and future information professionals. An example of such a descriptive sentence is: Article discusses the clientage system [system of patron-client relationships based on personal bonds of loyalty] in France during the Wars of Religion [1562-1598]; the author suggests that there was no failure or collapse of the system during the Wars, though many clients did change their loyalty between Catholic and Calvinist patrons.

The square brackets in this sentence contain explanations that the information studies student will need to interpret the sentence during translation into the controlled vocabularies. In the case of this article, the translation of the subject sentence provided the following terms:

Clientage system
Patron and client – France – History – 16th century
Patron and client – Political aspects – France
France – History – Wars of the Huguenots, 1562-1598
France – Politics and government – 1562-1598

Further detailed description and examples of this process are available in Beghtol (2002, 2003).
Iter Bibliography: Inter-Disciplinary Collaboration in the Arts and Humanities

The Iter Project was initiated by subject experts, and information experts were initially called in for advice on implementing the scholarly, informational and educational goals as described above. As the Project design evolved, information experts became full partners in developing and implementing the various policies and procedures for the Project. The historical development of the Project shows how complete integration and knowledgeable collaboration between two radically different disciplines can result in an excellent outcome that does not compromise the intellectual or practical standards and goals of either one.

In addition, the student employees in each field are being trained both in the literatures and procedures of their own discipline and in the intellectual needs and practices of the other discipline. The advantages of this kind of collaboration include a high level of quality control of intellectual content by scholars, a high level of quality control of information practices by information professionals, the development of the habits of negotiation and mutual trust among researchers and practitioners of different disciplines, and the development of a healthy spirit of cross-disciplinarity. Training in implementing the collaborative goals and procedures is an important part of these students education. The Project partners hope that these future scholars will eventually become ambassadors for extensive collaborative information development and provision. In these ways, the Iter Project is a model for a digital gateway to materials in the arts and humanities.

References


![Diagram of journal selection process](image-url)
FIGURE 2: DATA INPUT / SUBJECT ANALYSIS USING ENDNOTE

1. Sub students collect journals from university libraries
2. Sub students enter data and/or subject analysis into EndNote templates
3. Problems
   Get help
3a. Centre coordinator converts EndNote files to text files and assigns appropriate filenames
   Centre coordinator globally adds record status code, student initials, and ISSN to each file
4. Centre coordinator completes the journal workflow (paper or Web-based) and returns them with the electronic files to FIS (disk or FTP)

FIGURE 3: PROCESSING RETRO ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

7. Journals are assigned to Info1 students at FIS
7a. Info1 searches bibliographic records for journals to the Info1 database, and creates records for each
    FIS coordinator updates the status of the journal in the master database to “Info1 doing”
    Info1/2 communicates via e-mail to Sub student responsible, who e-mails answer back to Info1

N

Y

7b. Info1/2 changes record status to “Info1/2 ok” and removes suppression flag so record is now available to users

Y

All records from journal complete

7a. FIS coordinator updates status of journal in master database to “Info1 done”

N