WMU Digitization Center: Open and Online

By Lou Ann Morgan,
Digitization Center Manager

The University Libraries celebrated the establishment of its new Digitization Center with informational open houses in March and April to introduce the library staff, the University community, and regional libraries and historical societies to the capabilities and services available to preserve and/or publish unique resources. Located in three newly constructed rooms on the lower level of Waldo Library, the Regional Digitization Center, funded in part by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), is part of an ongoing initiative to support the research efforts of the University with expertise and specialized technology. The Fall 2003 issue of Gatherings describes the statewide The Making of Modern Michigan project that provided the incentive for the WMU regional center.

The Digitization Center brings to the University the technology and structures needed for planning digitization projects including the specialized equipment and expertise for high quality projects from small film scanning such as 35 millimeter slides to large and 3D objects digitization on many different systems. Also available is assistance with metadata planning and creation for online document retrieval and copyright permission submissions. The staff of the Center will complete several collaborative projects for the University and the greater west Michigan community during the summer and fall of 2004.

The Technologies

Nine systems of varied technologies are among the technologies demonstrated during the open houses. In the computer laboratory, large capacity Macintosh systems digitize film positives and negatives up to 8 x 10 inches. Thirty-five millimeter slides are digitized through use of a high capacity slide-stacker scanner. A system for oversized original reflective materials demonstrates how easily posters, maps, and other graphics can be digitized. There is also a system for long text paper documents to be efficiently scanned into an optical character recognition system and used as editable and searchable documents.

Next door, in the Digitization Studio, large maps and 3D objects can be digitized with high-resolution digital cameras utilizing a “magnetic wall,” 4 by 10 feet, and a special hybrid copy stand. The “magnetic wall” secures, without hanging damage, large items such as maps and architectural drawings by use of flat magnet strips that adhere to metal infused paint. This allows the originals to be properly lit and digitally photographed with greater ease. The copy stand system is a 3D light studio for Quicktime VR and 3D still objects. At the open houses, Manager Morgan demonstrated how three dimensional objects, such as WMU Centennial memorabilia, could be digitized from all sides and then made accessible in an Internet file format in which they appear to turn or spin for the user.

The third room, the Digitization Lab, houses additional systems that can easily digitize fragile books through use of a special adjustable cradle with a programmable lighting and optical system. A second oversized scanner in this room increases the capacity to handle large originals. The overhead digital copy camera system allows high resolution scanning of low relief originals such as engraved plaques, coins, and flat items too large for the 12 x 17 inch scanner. Several production computers and servers add to the Center’s capabilities. Also available through the Center are sound digitization capabilities for recordings.

Some of the equipment for the functions just described was funded by the Friends of the University Libraries. Their gift includes a Nikon 4000ED/SF 2002 Slide Scanner System, work tables, Luna Insight server agreement upgrade, and a Canon 550 Digital Camera and accessories to support digitization projects.

The Current Projects

As one of six regional centers in Michigan involved in The Making of Modern Michigan program, the Center provides training, expertise, and facilities to 11 libraries, “mini-grantees,” in the west Michigan region. A primary goal is to empower small and medium-sized public libraries throughout the state by developing staff skills in digitization at the local level. As a result, these individuals will be able to contribute to and create an online digital collection about key events in the history of Michigan. Among the regional digitization projects that the WMU Regional Digitization Center is currently assisting are:

- Cemetery records including maps for wider accessibility, searchability, and cross referencing (Buchanan District Library);
- “The Making of Modern Michigan Through the Eyes of Dutch Americans,” photographs (Hekman Library, Calvin College, Grand Rapids);
- The Grand Mere Association Collection of documents and maps that helped preserve the dunes and lakes of the area by the establishment of a state park (Lincoln Township Public Library, Stevensville);
- Unique local history materials of the Grand Haven area comprising over 1000 photographs of the tri-cities area, cemetery records, hotel guests registers, oral histories, log mark records, and more (Loutit District Library, Grand Haven);
- The Silver Beach Amusement Park collection of photos, postcards, and documents (Maud Preston Palenske Memorial Library, St. Joseph);

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- is user or person-centered not desk or place oriented;
- increases the number, quality, and sophistication of questions asked since a search is already in progress that is not working;
- provides us with an opportunity to teach or instruct customers at the point of need;
- allows us to monitor how resources are used from the unique perspective of the user; and
- shows librarians as available, approachable, and helpful.

We know from current studies and older studies dating back to the 1970s that about 40% of the customers in any library have a question, but are unwilling to ask for assistance. Part of this reluctance to ask a question has to do with customers not wanting to interrupt a librarian who looks busy and/or unapproachable, or is hidden behind a desk in a spotlighted area. Others feel that their question is "too simple, obvious, or otherwise not worthy" of an answer. Some, sad to say, have had bad experiences with librarians in the past. Moreover, some users simply don’t know how to ask the question and don’t want to appear dumb. The bottom line is that walking up to most service points in libraries takes more than a modicum of assertive behavior.

From experience, I have readily observed that students and other users generally “love it” when librarians walk around and help them at the point of need. In fact, after answering one person’s question, it is often the case that several others ask for help because you have just physically demonstrated that you are interested in helping them find what they are seeking. Even if a person does not need assistance at the time, you have just broken the “body language barrier” and identified yourself as a helpful librarian. This person will seek you out if he/she has a question later. As studies have shown, many users relate best to someone of their own sex, cultural appearance, age, and other factors that are perceived as welcoming. However, when the librarian of any age or appearance comes to you, most users are open to asking for help.

The bottom line is that roving reference could be a powerful means by which to improve the image of the library itself. Roving reference should break down the old (and new) stereotype of the unfriendly, desk-bound librarian who is more interested in keeping the library quiet than in assisting the users. Roving reference also provides an opportunity to discover what types of problems students and other users are having. Studies have also shown that by the time a question reaches the reference desk, it is, more often than not, only a directional or locational question. If we ask, “Are you finding what you need?” earlier in the search process, we may be able to help our customers with a more difficult question and, in turn, create more value in our service. We also discover if the Libraries’ Web pages are as clear as we thought they might be, and if our site language is helpful or confusing as the user navigates our home pages.

Roving has been shown to be a highly productive technique that can also be applied to the classroom. Much of our bibliographic instruction is taught to multiple students during a single, introductory session. I normally conduct an interactive presentation in which library tools such as the library catalog and a journal index are introduced and then the students practice what they have just learned. Typical sessions are between one half hour to one hour and fifteen minutes depending on the class. Because of this time limitation, interactive, individual feedback is not always possible with every student.

However, I have taught many two to three hour research methods courses in which the instructor and I help students begin research on their topic after the presentation. The instructor and I “rove” around the classroom and help students individually. This is extremely productive and the students learn how to conduct research at the point of need. This is very similar to a roving reference transaction because the motivation to learn how to conduct research and how to use the information is present. That is why librarians at Western Michigan University highly recommend that the instruction occur in coordination with an assignment. There is then a reason for the student to put the instruction to practice.

As thousands of students and other users access our University Libraries, we want to ensure that our “wealth of resources” isn’t lost to those who enter our physical and electronic doors. “Where is it?” needs to become an historical phrase as our library faculty and staff reach out physically and intellectually to patrons far from our service desks. Our motto for the future may well be “To rove is to respond; to reach out is to serve.”

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- Historical materials for the Niles library centennial celebration (Niles District Library);
- A large regional obituary collection covering a five county area (Van Buren District Library, Decatur);
- A regional history photography collection (Cass District Library, Cassopolis);
- Selections from a late 19th century newspaper (Thornapple Kellogg School and Community Library, Middleville);
- A collection of aerial photographs of west Michigan (Portage District Library); and
- The history of a paper industry “company town” (Parchment Community Library).

In addition, as noted earlier, the Digitization Center is also intended as a special service to support research at the University. The Ward Morgan Photograph Collection that was described in the last issue of Gatherings is being digitized for The Making of Modern Michigan (MMM). Many of its 26,000 images are being scanned through the Regional Digitization Center. Newly added to the collections that will be available in the online image database are parts of the Caroline Bartlett Crane collection, a notable woman activist of the 1800s, from the WMU Archives and Regional History Collections. In addition, the Special Collections department of the University Libraries is making high resolution digital files of rare books useful for research. The initiative includes a book from 1567 and one in which the first printing of Old English appears. This effort will initiate a long-term collaborative project contributing to research in Medieval Studies.

In brief, the WMU Regional Digitization Center is organized to serve two major purposes: the University’s research mission and The Making of Modern Michigan. The digitized collections are scheduled to be available online beginning in the summer of this year, 2004. Further information can be provided by the Manager of the Digitization Center, Lou Ann Morgan, at 269 387-5093. Key Web sites for the digitization projects are:

- Equipment/systems list: http://www.wmich.edu/library/digi/equip/