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Chapter 10

The CEDAR Project Approach to Bringing Together Dispersed Digital Content to Create a Resource for Teaching and/or Research

Gurdish Sandhu and Libby Homer (University of East London)

Synopsis

The major focus of the CEDAR project was to increase the usability and impact of East London Theatre Archive's (ELTA, www.elta-project.org) content. In order to achieve this there was a need to build more content which could be embedded at the University of East London and in its partners' teaching and learning curriculum. The project added more relevant content from Hackney Empire and Gay Sweatshop Archive and also linked to the Mapping the Moment Archive of Nottingham University thus creating a new web resource, the Online Theatre Histories Archive – OTHA (www.otha.org.uk). This content was enriched through user-added content using Bossa software. The website has gone through rigorous testing and has been improved through constant development. The project has produced four case studies on the usability of the content. There have been challenges, particularly related to collaboration and the perceptions of archives, but the CEDAR project has successfully delivered a tool which enhances the learning opportunities of not just users within higher education but also the wider community.

1. Background to the project and context

The Clustering and Enhancing Digital Archives for Research (CEDAR) project was initiated to enhance and embed e-content in teaching and learning, of the existing East London Theatre Archive (ELTA). The ELTA was a product of a JISC-funded project from the second phase of the e-content programme in 2006, and provided open access to 15,000 digital images of the theatre world and performing arts from East London (UEL). The ELTA project fostered strong collaborative partnerships from which a commitment to further develop the pioneering resources on the website was created.

It was recognised that the ELTA should be embedded into teaching, learning and research at UEL and other higher education institutions (HEIs). In order to do this one of the CEDAR project's aims was to further investigate how digital archives could be utilised in the learning environment. In addition, working with our partners – King's College London's Centre for eResearch (CeRch), Royal Holloway, University of Nottingham and University of Sheffield – CEDAR would create and promote a hub of e-resources for learning and teaching through clustering and enhancing other digital theatre and performing arts archives.

The aim of the project methodology was to examine the use of the ELTA and see how it could be developed to increase usage and be embedded within learning and teaching. The project began this work by analysing the use of the ELTA in UEL performing arts taught modules, and then subsequently developing a new website with greater interactive features. The new website, Online Theatre Histories Archive (OTHA), was then used within teaching workshops at each partner institution and usability testing was undertaken to make the site more intuitive. During the course of the project, research has been conducted on the use of digital archives within the performing arts and gauging different groups' reactions to the use of them.

The project concluded with these main achievements:

- A new website (www.otha.org.uk) was designed, showcasing digital images from the ELTA project and is used by at least four classes (approximately 100 students) at different HEIs
- The OTHA website includes Bossa software and community engagement software which enhance metadata creation
- The OTHA website was embedded in teaching and learning at UEL and partner institutions
- More digital content was created with 500+ new digital images being added to the resources
- Three case studies and one research toolkit were produced exploring the use of digital archives, how they can be embedded in teaching and learning and metadata creation

2. Embedding, collaboration, content clustering and content enhancement strategies

2.1. Embedding and usability strategy

UEL's inclusive culture enables the Library and Learning Services (LLS) to work side by side with academics and researchers to embed e-content into the curriculum. In collaboration with our academics in the Institute for Performing Arts Development, we set the ambitious target of embedding ELTA content in the teaching programmes of collaborative institutions (Sheffield University, Royal Holloway and Nottingham University). Courses and research projects in each institution were identified which could use the content. As each institution has its own unique curriculum and validation methods, it was decided in the beginning of the project that each partner, in conjunction with the CEDAR Research Assistant, should devise their own approach to using the content. The Research Assistant then facilitated workshops in each institution to promote the resources, providing training on them and then capturing the outcomes of these teaching sessions.

At UEL, the ELTA was used in the Institute of Performing Arts-led Networks module which was part of the BA courses in Theatre Studies and Community Arts Practice. The module looked at how the cultural and capital economy of the performing arts is shaped by the 'creative industries'. The ELTA was used as a research tool particularly in the case of the Hackney Empire which has influenced the culture and economy of East London. During this module the ELTA website was tested by students and academics and the OTHA website was developed out of this feedback. As a result of the positive feedback from students using the digital archive, the Networks module has been redesigned and is now called 'Performing the Archive'. This new module looks at the documentation of performance and using the materials on OTHA for devising performance. The development of a module and the use of the OTHA website is a real success for the project and helps to increase the sustainability of the site.

2.2. Collaboration and partnership

Each project partner has unique strengths, institutional culture and practices. Based on the strengths and interests of partners, we drew agreements (formal and informal) in the beginning of the projects. The following agreements were reached:

- CeRch at King's College has expertise in implementing technical infrastructure and were looking after the ELTA technical infrastructure. We worked very closely with CeRch in the implementation of Bossa software, mirror servers and in the development of the new OTHA website
- Agreement was reached with Royal Holloway and Nottingham University to incorporate the archival content of Mapping the Moment and the Gay Sweatshop Archives
- The appointment of the Research Assistant who also worked in the Institution of Performing Arts and Development at UEL enabled us to receive regular advice on the addition of new content and its usage on theatre study courses

- The Institute of Performing Arts and Development not only provided advice to the project but also played an important role in strengthening relationships with our academic partner institutions

The CEDAR Project was successful at embedding the OTHA website at all our academic partner institutions:

- At the University of Nottingham the CEDAR Research Assistant worked closely with academics Joanna Robinson and Lucie Sutherland to devise a workshop which advanced students' creative thinking and analytical skills by using digital objects from the archive. The embedding was successful; Lucie will continue to run this session as part of her teaching
- At the University of Sheffield, Dr Bill McDonnell is currently devising an alternative theatre movement module which will look in depth and some of the items on the OTHA website, particularly those relating to the CAST theatre company
- At Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL), Dr Chris Megson researches British Theatre Culture since 1968 and much content on the OTHA website relates to this interest. He is further investigating using the website in his teaching and research

2.3. Content clustering

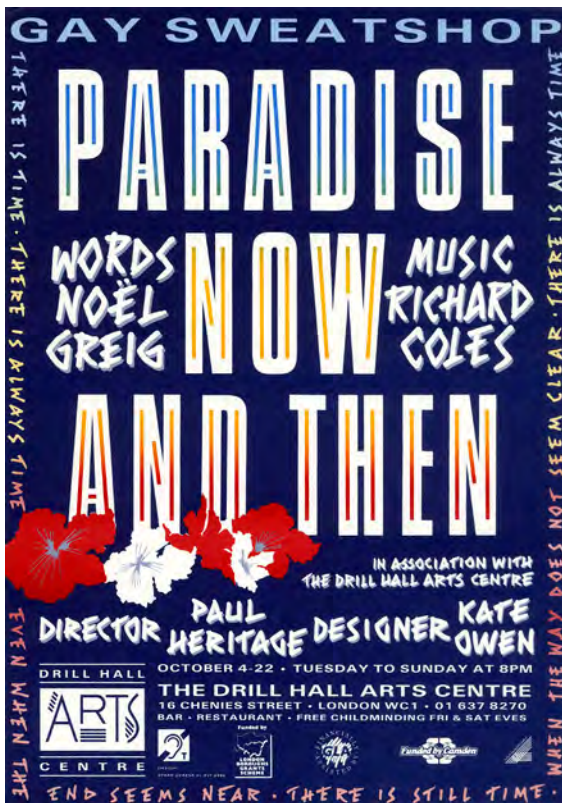


Figure 1. Poster for a Gay Sweatshop production

The need for increasing the content in theatre histories was identified during the ELTA project. It was decided to harvest the content of partner institutions, the University of Nottingham, Sheffield University and Royal Holloway. However, after initial investigation we concluded that Nottingham University's content for 'Mapping the Moment – Performance Culture in Nottingham 1857–1867' could not be harvested and integrated (the reasons for this are described below) so was therefore linked to instead. Different issues occurred with the British Theatre Archive meaning we were unable to incorporate this content into the archive also. However, the project has created more digital content by digitising images from the Hackney Empire Archive (held by UEL) and the Half Moon Young People's Archive and the Gay Sweatshop's Archive (held by RHUL). This content is searchable online for the first time through the OTHA website.



Figure 2. OTHA logo

2.4. Content enhancement

Bossa software was implemented by CeRch (<http://boinc.berkeley.edu/trac/wiki/BossalIntro>) to enhance the metadata for existing and new images. Bossa allows users to create a taxonomy for each item using a more structured format of questions to generate metadata than general tagging. Bossa has been a great tool in engaging with users as well as enhancing the searching facilities on the website. Bossa has allowed the OTHA website to become more interactive and community focused.

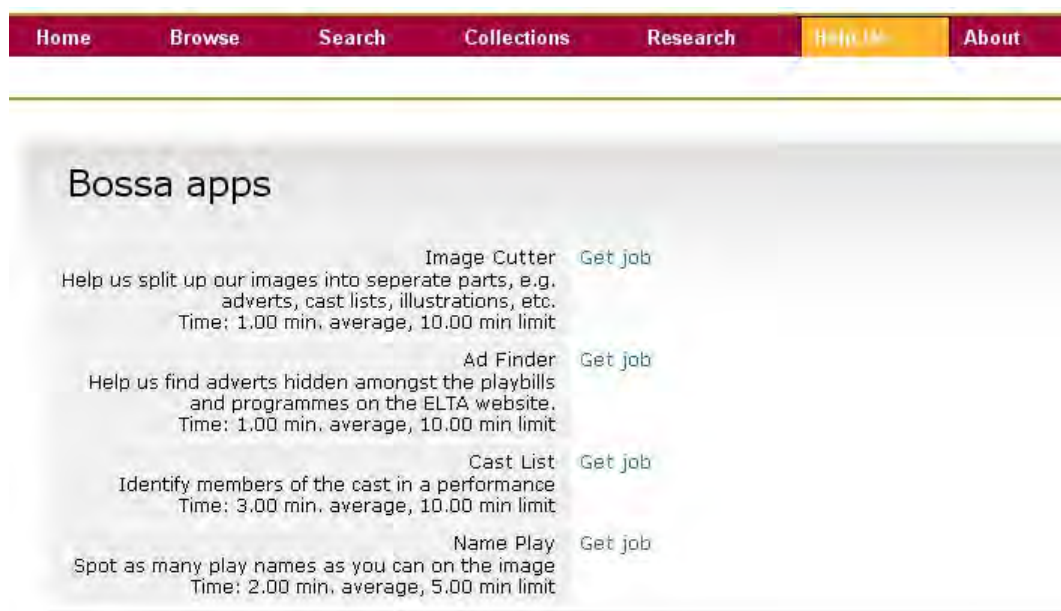


Figure 3. How Bossa allows users to enrich the collection

As demonstrated in Figure 3, Bossa creates tasks for the user to complete. It is very easy for the user to follow the instructions online. Bossa harvests object items from the Fedora back-end database and presents them in the form of tasks for the user to complete. In case of the image cutter (Figure 2) the user is asked to highlight different parts of the image, then classify them into different categories, such as cast list or advertisement, thus increasing the value of the individual object for research purposes.

Image Cutter

Feature Type: submit Can't see any features? - Click [DONE](#)
Notice anything? comment (optional)
Something wrong? Tell us.



Figure 4. Bossa's image cutter

3. Project achievements

3.1. Website developments

A key deliverable for the project was to cluster and enhance the digital resources of the partners to create a hub of archival resources related to the performing arts with cross-searching facilities. All the partners involved have some archives related to theatre. The University of Nottingham's 'Mapping the Moment – Performance Culture in Nottingham 1857–1867' features playbills, newspapers and diaries as well as an interactive map which locates performances on a particular day within the period 1857–1867. The University of Sheffield was involved in the British Theatre Archive project with the British Library which features oral histories relating to theatre and performance. Finally, Royal Holloway houses the Half Moon Young People's Archive, a company for which the ELTA project digitised several thousand images so their archive linked particularly well to the CEDAR project.

At the beginning of CEDAR, data was gathered from each institution with regard to their archive and it was revealed that there would be several issues with clustering their materials. Firstly, RHUL did not have any digital materials which the project could cluster; secondly, Sheffield were unable to allocate the rights to cluster their archives as they had recently moved to a different institution; and thirdly, the technical support was no longer available to cluster Nottingham's archive. Therefore, it was agreed by JISC and CEDAR that instead we would link to these sites and create a new platform with new digital content and intuitive ways of producing new metadata for all the objects. This platform would help embed the resources into learning and teaching and encourage community engagement.

The digital content created by the project has been catalogued and added to the OTHA website. The digitisation of this material was only made possible with the help of RHUL archives and it has helped facilitate engagement with our partners and made the archives become more alive to the users at these institutions.

The OTHA website has been extensively tested through workshops at all our partner institutions and at UEL. Throughout the project, the website has undergone constant development based on the findings of the usability testing. The feedback the OTHA website received was vital to ensure the site was community focused and intuitive for those within higher education and outside of it also.

3.2. Case studies

A large body of work has been undertaken by the project in relation to the use of archives in theatre performance and practice. This began with a literature review concentrating on archives and how performance is documented. Furthermore, the project conducted an audit of current teaching practices and subjects in the performing arts across the higher education sector in order to develop ideas for embedding OTHA across a large number of HEIs. CEDAR wanted to identify what were commonalities across universities in teaching and learning and develop the OTHA website to cater to these.

One of our outputs has been a case study created in partnership with JISC Digital Media. This study is a film featuring key project personnel discussing metadata creation. It was particularly useful for the project team to take part in this case study as it helped analysis of our methods of creating metadata and adoption of metadata standards. Bossa software was also discussed which enabled the team to think of different ways to utilise this technology. The case study itself will be made available on the JISC Digital Media website (www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/tags/category/case-studies) and will act as a guide to other projects wishing to create archives and related metadata.

The other CEDAR case studies concentrate on the issues brought to the fore by workshops, focus groups and interviews with students, academics, archivists and theatre professionals. Case study 3 focused on the use and impact of digital resources in performing arts departments and the tension in the types of documentation for archived and live performance. This case study used evidence from several different workshops where participants were asked to use items from the archive to create performance, and was interesting due to its focus on engagement with the archive and the interpretation of images. It concluded that it was impossible to document performance and that the way in which an institution or archive frames its materials has consequences for interpretation.

Furthermore the project has created a research toolkit which is a guide for using primary resources within digital archives. The toolkit is primarily aimed at undergraduates and concentrates on digital theatre archives but also covers resources in the arts, history and social sciences. In addition, there is advice for academics on using digital archives within teaching, thereby embedding the resources.

4. Challenges and reflection

4.1. Collaboration

There were a variety of issues that arose when collaborating with partner institutions which did prove challenging on this project. In particular, conflicting priorities became a distraction amongst several of the partners and it was vital to engage with them so that they remained focused on the CEDAR project. We therefore arranged regular meetings with all our partners to keep them up to date and raise awareness of the latest project news. When devising the workshops and usability testing for each institution, we ensured that the content would be relevant and enhance the existing teaching on the modules. We attempted to lighten the load for those involved by ensuring the workshops were self-contained with little set-up and advanced help required. In addition, we designed the workshops to demonstrate the uniqueness of the digital resources and thereby get students enthused, which would contribute in helping to embed the resources at each institution. Occasionally we were required to adopt a more formal approach with certain partners in order to guarantee that the work was conducted. The service level agreements which were drawn up at the start of the project were a valuable tool for reminding partners of their responsibilities.

The Advisory Group for the project involved several members who had sat on the ELTA project Advisory Group in order to enhance continuity between the two projects and help to promote the resources beyond the official partners. All members of the Advisory Group have been active participants in the project and their requests for information have been one driver for dissemination of project activities. Not all members have been able to make Advisory Group meetings so we have kept them informed of project updates and highlighted the blog and Twitter feed as ways of gaining the most current project information.

4.2. Embedding content in teaching and learning

The focus of the CEDAR project was not only to enhance the existing digital archive but also to embed it into teaching and learning at UEL and within the partner institutions. This chapter has already discussed how this embedding work was undertaken with the development of workshops and the success of these with different HEIs; however there were challenges associated with the methods we used.

One of the most basic issues was timing of work packages for the project. We wished to work with our partner institutions over the course of two academic years (a semester from 2009/10 and a semester from 2010/11) however modules at institutions had already been planned and we were unable to find much time within the schedule to conduct workshops. Furthermore changes to project staffing and delays with the new web user interface meant that we were only able to conduct usability testing sessions to begin with. These sessions were very useful, though, in developing the site and we received good early feedback from each partner. In addition, working closely with academics preparing the workshops undertaken in academic year 2010/11 ensured that the workshops were more relevant to the curriculum and this increased engagement with the academics and the students within the sessions. Thus this has had a successful outcome – the time taken to develop tailor-made learning for each institution has created enthusiasm amongst users and promotes long-term community use of the OTHA website.

CEDAR also went beyond the original remit and made some successful attempts to embed the OTHA website within the professional archivists and performing arts community. Throughout the project, the team have been widely disseminating information about CEDAR to professionals through networking, blogs, Twitter, meetings, events, presentations and the OTHA website. We held focus groups with both archivists and performing arts professionals to undertake usability testing of the website. The challenge we have faced with these groups is identifying how they can use the website and embed it into their professional practice in the long term as these professional groups are used to using traditional hard copy resources. Furthermore, we have only managed to contact a very small percentage of people within these communities so there is a great deal more scope for embedding work with these groups.

4.3. Research and perceptions

A major issue highlighted by the research was the perceptions of archives which we encountered from communities who took part in focus groups and at the conference organised with PALATINE, 'Archiving for the Future: using archives to enhance learning and teaching in drama and theatre studies'. The conference, held in May 2010, highlighted that both academics and professional practitioners are uncertain about using archives and that archivists themselves are unsure about how to handle increased usage, access and digitisation. The conference delegates lent support to the key research themes (archiving and theatre studies) already established by the project and had a demonstrated need for more information on how to exploit these resources and strategies for embedding them.

Several tensions arise from the research the CEDAR project undertook. Despite wanting to encourage greater use of archives, archivists they felt it was important to balance the need to respect the materials involved and their time and resources. They expressed a desire to support teaching and learning but felt constrained by their professional values. There was also an issue with using only the archive to document performance, as academics argued that several things make up the documentation of a performance, for example a script and a photo may make up some of this documentation, but interpretation by an audience also documents a piece. Therefore an archive would never include the complete picture of a performance and academics would need to stress this idea to students.

The case studies found on the OTHA website focus on these issues in more depth but the approach adopted by CEDAR was to ensure that research activities undertaken by the project were focused, with an in-depth knowledge of the community being engaged. This was to understand the specific concerns they would have surrounding the topic and begin to think of suggestions of practical strategies that could be adopted to assist in embedding archives.

5. Conclusions

The CEDAR project has had a huge effect on teaching and learning at not only UEL but also within partner institutions. The project has created a resource which the community can add to and which promotes debate and discussion focusing on digital archival objects. The collection is no longer concentrated on just East London and the project has developed ways of using the website across the UK. Both at UEL and at the partner institutions, our success is evident in the teaching that has been based on the OTHA website, with students and users having the opportunity to use primary resources and interpret them in new and interesting ways. The CEDAR project has taught users new skills and created a new learning experience. In addition, it is not just users within HEIs that we have engaged in the development and use of the OTHA website; we have reached professionals both in the theatre and the archives sector and begun the embedding of the website within their professional practice. The Bossa software development offers the ideal opportunity for anyone to contribute to the website whilst creating a taxonomy for each object. This also guarantees the sustainability of the project by promoting community engagement and creating community content.

Furthermore the sustainability of the project is helped by the secondment of existing UEL staff within the Library and Learning Services and the Research Assistant being a member of UEL teaching staff. Therefore they are able to continue the promotion of the site through teaching and at events. Library and Learning Services are also developing a community engagement strategy based on archives and the OTHA website and materials will be utilised as part of this scheme. In the future we aim to gain more funding (either internal or external) to increase community engagement activities particularly outside of higher education to create a greater wealth of resources which add to the whole documentation of a performance. This is a topic which intrigues those who study both the performing arts and archives and the OTHA website provides a unique opportunity to cluster information for a wide section of the community.