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eCommons Citation

Jillian M. Slater (0000-0003-0805-3097) and Amy Rohmiller (2012). Mind Mapping Software as a Tool to Facilitate Archival Arrangement. *Ohio Archivist*, , https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_faculty_publications/22

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Mind-Mapping Software as a Tool to Facilitate Archival Arrangement: A Case Study By Jillian Slater and Amy Rohmiller

This case study outlines and reflects on the authors' experience using the mind mapping software, Personal Brain, to facilitate the process of physical and intellectual arrangement of a conceptually complex archival collection. The article is [based on their session](#) presented at the Society of Ohio Archivists 2012 annual meeting in May.

The Marian Library at the University of Dayton, a Catholic and Marianist institution of higher learning, is a religious Special Collection with books and primary source materials related to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is recognized both nationally and internationally as **having the world's largest collection** of printed materials on Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The collection includes more than 90,000 books and media as well as archival materials that support undergraduate coursework, the masters' and doctoral programs in Religious Studies, and the International Marian Research Institute.

In January 2012, archivists began collaboratively processing an extensive collection of rare and unique holy cards, religious ephemera and art research materials pertaining to

the Blessed Virgin Mary and saints. The materials were acquired by the Marian Library around the late 1980s and had once belonged to French collector Mr. Auguste Martin. Almost nothing is known regarding the collector or acquisition. Donor, custodial, and related collection data were not collected at the time of acquisition and approximate dates and geographical data were inferred from the materials. Other than what could be determined from the collection itself, provenance and acquisition information remains mostly unknown.

Prior to processing, most of the boxes in the 36 linear feet of the collection were damaged from a leaking roof and exposure to sunlight. Many were unlabeled and there was little shelf order. After extensive as-



Holy card, circa 1880s, Auguste Martin Collection, Marian Library.

essment, it appeared that thousands of holy cards had been dismantled from original order and re-filed. The scope of the collection was difficult to comprehend; for example, many materials received item-level treatment, but no controlled vocabulary was applied. Overall, determining a plan for arranging and describing the

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disparate materials presented a challenge. Out of the entire collection, less than 5 percent appeared to be in original order. These materials included holy cards arranged by publisher.

Gathering collection and series-level control would allow the archivists to discern overarching patterns existing within the collection. Establishing this holistic view would allow the archivists to identify meaningful access points as well as physi-

cally arrange and describe the materials appropriately and in a reasonable amount of time.

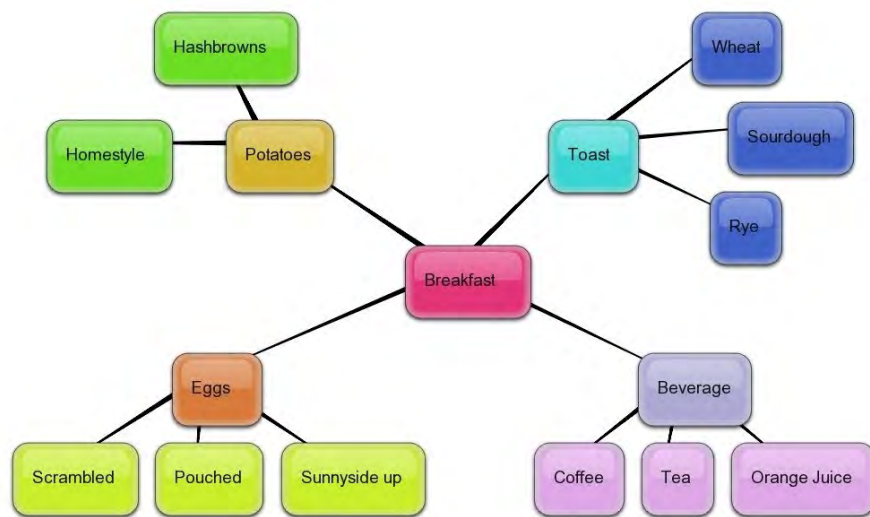
Why Mind Mapping?

This project lent itself to experimentation and thinking outside the box because it was so conceptually overwhelming: traditional approaches to arrangement weren't working.

After some discussion and research, we identified the concept of mind mapping as a tool that may help to facilitate the arrangement process. Mind mapping is visual and flexible, allowing graphical representa-

ture of mind mapping already mirrors the basic structure of archival arrangement: the parent, child, and sibling relationships of a mind-map parallels series, subseries, and components in archival collections. By

graphically representing the concepts in the Auguste Martin Collection, it provided the archivists a completely different way of looking at the information and facilitated teasing out relationships between the disparate pieces.



Example of a mind map.

Image via <http://mededlit.blogspot.com>

tion of difficult concepts. In past projects, the archivists had found this to be a way to make a very large, complex project less overwhelming. It reduces information overload to allow the archivists to view small pieces and determine if and how they relate to each other. Another important feature that the archivists identified was that the basic struc-

Why Personal Brain?

After identifying mind mapping as a tool, the archivists quickly realized there is a variety of mind-mapping software available. Because it fit the archivists' needs well, they decided to use the [Personal Brain software](#) (TheBrain Technologies). Because the archivists were working with limited re-



Screenshot of Personal Brain software.

sources—both technical and financial—the decision was made to use this package. Technically, Personal Brain is very easy to use. If you can click, drag, and drop, you can use this software. There are tutorials and a help function available as well. The archivists also had no budget to purchase any new software. While Personal Brain is available in both paid and free versions, the free version did everything that was needed for this project:

- It facilitated a flexible, collaborative process and can sync to a website, “WebBrain,” that allows multiple people to look at the same mind map (or “brain”) in different locations.

- A user-friendly visual map (“brain”) was conducive to altering arrangement during processing. Features allow the user to add and “forget” thoughts with a single click.
- The notes field allowed the archivists to enter basic scope and content notes while arranging the collection and used the labels field to identify series and subseries.
- Other useful features include search capabilities, attaching a file (box list or inventory), drag and drop, shortcuts, and linking a “thought” to a webpage.

Using Mind Mapping to Facilitate Archival Processing

Using Personal Brain software alleviated the complexity of arrangement for this particular collection. Personal Brain allows any thought to become the central or “active” idea. Viewing relationships relative to the active thought helped to reduce information overload. Graphical representation of data helped the archivists to identify patterns and themes, and facilitated piecing together series and subseries from many small, fragmented categories. Being able to literally see the arrangement and share information in this way helped us to communicate ideas and facilitated collaborative processing. It also worked well because both archivists identify with a visual learning style.

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They had previously been using Excel spreadsheets and using this new tool encouraged enthusiasm in the midst of a daunting project.

The archivists also encountered some elements in this process that were not ideal. They encountered technical difficulties when syncing the project to Web Brain; this feature would have greatly facilitated more seamless information sharing. Since this was an experimental approach, they used the trial version of the software. After the one-month trial, certain features went away. No data was lost, but some features in the upgraded version (like attaching a file or hyperlink to a thought) would have been helpful. Because the archivists had a limited time frame to work collaboratively and did not intend to use the software for future projects, they did not create a project workflow or develop use standards. This was not problematic because of the temporary and experimental nature of the project, but would be essential if the software was a permanent or frequent part of the processing

workflow.

In summary, the archivists felt that using Personal Brain as a tool to assist in visualizing and organizing complex data supported them during the arrangement process. They were able to arrange the collection in a logical and meaningful way while reducing information overload and enhancing the collaborative experience. Although the archivists are pleased with the results, they foresee limitations to the **software's practical application** within the archival community. More specifically, it may be excessive or unnecessary for collections that necessitate an MPLP (more product less processing) processing approach. While they would hesitate to recommend such an experimental approach as being applicable in daily processing tasks, they did conclude that concepts used in mind mapping have significant potential **in other areas of an archivist's** work. Possible application in activities such as developing or revising a classification scheme, visualizing data from a collections assessment—such

as strengths and gaps in holdings—and of course, project management (for example, graphical representation of a digitization project workflow.)

In closing, the archivists reflect on a quote by Chris Prom and Ellen Swaim, who suggest that **archivists must “develop proactive, innovative, and collaborative approaches to fulfill their institutional mission. Amidst evolving responsibilities... processing is at the heart of archival work.”**¹

NOTES

1. M. Manning and J. Silva, “Dual Archivist/librarians: Balancing the Benefits and Challenges of Diverse Responsibilities,” *College and Research Libraries*, 73: 2 (2012): 164–181, <http://crl.acrl.org/content/73/2/164.full.pdf+html> (31 July 2012).

Photos courtesy of author.