

When tradition meets technology: Curating purposeful digital collections and tools for learning oral traditions

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Abstract: An essential prerequisite for ethnocultural and diaspora communities to preserve their oral traditions is the willful acceptance and learning of these traditions by successive generations. Thus transmission of oral traditions is of utmost importance for such communities living in the West. While community elders may feel duty-bound to pass on their knowledge using traditional face-to-face approach, community youth often perceive this approach as old-fashioned and inefficient. The in-person transmission of oral traditions is also constrained by time and geography, thus making it even more challenging for learners to remain motivated and engaged. Today's digital age presents opportunities for communities with rich oral heritage to teach and learn traditional knowledge, especially oral traditions, in ways not possible in the past. This paper is based on a community-based collaborative research project undertaken at the University of Saskatchewan Library in Canada to develop and implement a framework to digitally curate collections and tools for learning the oral tradition of gnan (gnostic and devotional hymns) of the Ismaili community. Whether in university or community, educators and elders must ensure that they continue to meet the unique and changing needs of learners and keep them motivated and engaged. This paper will showcase how digital curation is purposefully utilized to enhance and support learning of oral traditions.

Keywords: digital curation, oral traditions, digital library, multimedia technology

Introduction

Today's digital age presents opportunities for communities with rich oral heritage to teach and learn traditional knowledge, especially oral traditions, in ways not possible in the past. However, the debate between community elders and learners on whether utilizing modern technology can help or hinder in traditional teaching and learning of oral traditions remains unsettled. Community elders may feel duty-bound to pass on their knowledge to the younger generations in ways similar to how it was traditionally transmitted to them. However, younger generations often perceive these traditional ways of transmission and teaching as old-fashioned, which is also contributing to their current lackluster attitude and disengagement towards their heritage. The traditional face-to-face way of transmitting and teaching knowledge is also constrained by time and geography. For instance, lack of access to community elders and educators marginalizes community learners living in smaller towns, making it more challenging for learners to remain motivated and engaged. As a result more and more elders depart this world without having the opportunity to pass on the oral knowledge entrusted to them from their elders. The situation is dire and warrants immediate attention and action before the rich and intellectual heritage of diasporic and Indigenous communities finds its way into oblivion.

Children born and raised in today's technological age are often called *digital natives* and *digital nomads*, "who have grown up with digital technologies, and are surrounded by and immersed in technologies in their daily activities. There is a fundamental difference between the current and previous generations of young people, in terms of learning styles and how they access information."¹ Thus one of the major reasons for such a gulf of understanding between community elders and learners today is the failure of community elders and educators to take into account the learning needs and expectations of young tech-savvy learners who live and learn in today's digital age. As educators and academics, we constantly strive to understand what learners think and how they perceive things in everyday life. We do this to ensure that we are able to adjust our instructions and lesson plans to meet the unique and changing needs of learners and keep them motivated and engaged. This is even more important in the context of diasporic and ethnocultural learners as they struggle to find the balance and synergy as they navigate the two worlds — traditional and societal — of obligations and experiences they live in. With digital and multimedia technologies becoming an essential motivator and means for today's learners, the onus is on community elders, leaders, and educators to find ways to understand the needs of young learners to aid in effective transmission and learning of oral traditions.

The Problem of Logocentrism

The current practices of teaching and instruction in the Western academia generally perpetuate primacy of textual sources as means for acquiring knowledge and literacy. The problems and perils of logocentrism (i.e. upholding primacy of word or text) in teaching are well documented in North American educational system, particularly in the area of religion and music;² however we have yet to develop a mutually acceptable framework to incorporate non-Western content and methods with the mainstream teaching and instruction praxis in the West. In contrast, phonocentrism, or the primacy of oral traditions has remained fundamental for teaching and transmission of knowledge in many religious, ethnocultural, and diasporic communities with rich intangible and intellectual cultural heritage. The practice of privileging orality in non-Western communities is grounded in epistemological conviction rather than physical convenience. From a scientific point of view, it cannot be denied that humans are multisensory beings and can benefit from engaging multiple senses when engaged in teaching and learning. Jewitt and Kress coined the term “multimodal literacy” to advocate the need for educators and instructors to incorporate various human modes (such as speech, gesture, vision, etc.) that we commonly use in communicating and representing ideas and knowledge.³ Walsh welcomes the idea of multimodal literacy and sees it as broadening of our ‘textual landscape’ as we transition from print to ‘digital text’ while our educational policies and curricula adapt to “changes that have occurred with the range of digital media that are becoming embedded in people’s lives.”⁴

The Opportunity

This is an important consideration for communities who rely on their youth to carry forward their traditional knowledge transmitted via oral traditions. Today’s digital age presents an opportunity for the Western academy and non-Western communities to come together to find ways to engage youth with “more technology-driven, spontaneous, and multi-sensory” teaching and instructions for learning traditional knowledge transmitted through oral traditions.⁵ What learning strategies could elders and educators use to preserve and pass on their knowledge to young learners and how? Unfortunately, none of the studies in the current literature discuss or bring together these facets together in an educational context. As Beck explains, “religion and music as a singular entity appears to have tumbled down into one of those bottomless ravines between monolithic departments on present-day college and university campuses.”⁶ In addition to being very dogmatic about its disciplines, unfortunately the academy is also a victim of its traditional reliance on, and infatuation with textual traditions and sources, as Stephen Marini states:

The primary reason why sacred music is largely absent from our courses is not the need for special training. The problem lies elsewhere, in the inadequacy of our interpretive and pedagogical models of what religion is in the first place. Most of us have been trained in a logocentric approach to religion that focuses on religious thought, especially belief systems and moral teachings. . . . Sacred song is perhaps the most potent, and popular, synthesis of head and heart in American religious culture. To exclude it is to disembody religion artificially and inaccurately. To include sacred song, on the other hand, invites our students to confront religion for what it has been in human experience: a synergy of belief, ritual, institution, and spirituality that always remains beyond the reach of logocentric inquiry. When our students hear how a religion sounds, their study of it, and our teaching of it, can be fundamentally transformed.⁷

Digital Curation

In what ways can digital curation can be leveraged to complement traditional ways of teaching and learning of oral knowledge? This is the quintessential question underlying this research. Digital curation can be defined as *the planning and management of digital assets over their full lifetime, from conceptualization through active use and presentation, to long-term preservation in a repository for future use.*⁸ More specifically, digital curation in academic libraries involves *digitization, description, display, discovery, access and preservation* of resources for research and education using digital and multimedia technologies. In practice, digital curation in libraries translates to several key functional areas, such as: digitization and remediation; digital repository and preservation; description and discovery (or search); user experience and interface; and data integration and analysis.

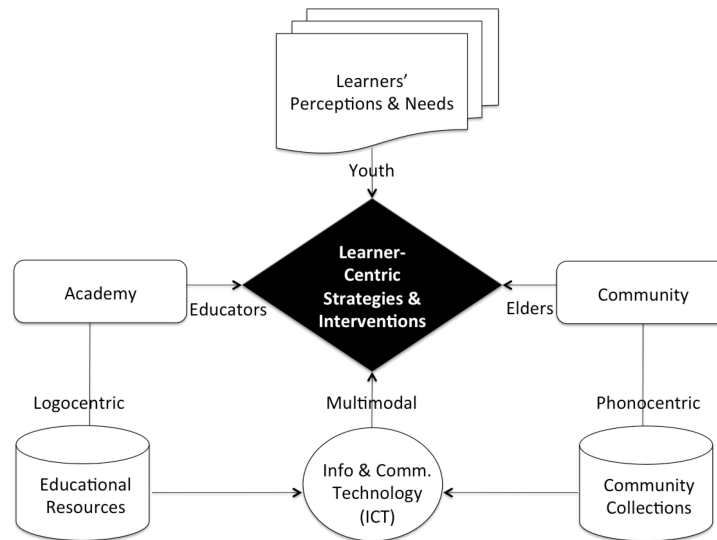


Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework for Digital Curation

This conceptual framework proposes an educational approach for community-and-university partnership to utilize Digital Curation as a technology-based learning-aid to enhance and support learning of oral traditions. Whether in university or community, educators and elders must strive to understand how young people in the community perceive oral traditions today. We should do this to ensure that we are able to develop resources and tools for learning oral traditions to address the needs of our community youth. Using the above conceptual framework, the University of Saskatchewan Library has undertaken a community-based research called *Ginan Central*. *Ginan Central* is a confluence of several community and university-based partnership projects to identify and implement best practices of digital curation to *facilitate research, learning, preservation and access of ginans (gnostic and devotional hymns)* in respectful and responsible manner.⁹

Over the past several years *Ginan Central* has worked on various well-defined *ginan* research and curation projects which are functionally independent, yet technically integrated in order to provide seamless navigation and access to diverse *ginanic* sources and resources over the web. These projects include: *Ginan Recitals* for digital audio files to preserve tunes of *ginans*; *Ginan Archive* for providing digital access to primary sources of *ginans*, *Ginan Canon* to document and preserve outcomes of community's canonization efforts; and *Ginan Studies* for a bibliography of research publications and outcomes pertaining to *ginans*. A key enabler of this projects-based architecture is the *Ginan Master Index* or *GMI* that provides *ginan*-centric access to all available evidence, collections, and resources. With *GMI*, users are able to select *ginans* from an alphabetical list in order to access relevant excerpts of manuscripts, published books and audio renditions.

With use of digital curation, several other tools have also been developed specifically for community learners as part of *Ginan Central*, which include: *Ginan Categories* to access *ginans* based on genres and other filters; *Ginan Compilations* for thematic curation of available resources; *Ginan Concordance* for locating special terms and concepts in *ginans*; and *Ginan Glossary* for learning the *ginanic* vocabulary with multimedia pronunciation guide.

Conclusion

While the use of information technology has become an essential part of pedagogy in the West, these technologies continue to be utilized as vehicles to overcome geographical and temporal barriers in accessing rather than displacing primacy of textual, and by extension Western, knowledge resources. With the use of educational technologies becoming indispensable in classrooms, there is an opportunity for the Western educators and administrators to incorporate and provide equal footing to non-textual sources and practices of teaching and transferring knowledge. From Indigenous as well as diasporic perspectives, this will be a major milestone toward decolonizing their historically marginalized knowledge sources and teaching methods; and also a wonderful way for the Western academy to show support and solidarity.

While this research study is in the specific context of the Ismaili community, its outcomes will have wider relevance to other diaspora and indigenous communities who are facing similar challenges in imparting and safeguarding oral knowledge. This community-based research is also an opportunity for the academia to partner with local community elders and educators to exchange ideas and experiences to identify best practices, tools and techniques to help impart and safeguard oral traditions. The outcomes of this study can make groundbreaking contributions to fill a critical knowledge gap in use of digital technologies in conjunction with traditional approaches for transmission and learning of oral traditions.

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