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Rare Books & Technology: Collaborating within the Library

Laurel Davis
Boston College Law Library, laurel.davis.2@bc.edu

Chester Kozikowski
Boston College Law Library, chester.kozikowski@bc.edu

Rare Books

Te & chnology

Collaborating within the library

By Laurel E. Davis and Chester Kozikowski

"I wish I could put all of these books in my exhibit. I feel like I'm choosing between my children, but they just won't all fit in the display cases."

This pitiful (and admittedly melodramatic) statement from a frustrated curator to an educational technology librarian led to an incredibly fun and fruitful collaboration between library departments at Boston College Law Library.

Curators spend weeks sifting through special collections, thinking of interesting themes for exhibits, choosing potential items to highlight those themes, and then performing background research. This process, for a dedicated curator with a solid collection, becomes a labor of love. After identifying good candidates for exhibition, a couple of initial questions start weighing on one's mind. First, how does one choose which materials get put in a display case? The inclusion of one item often means the exclusion of another, leading to the aforementioned Sophie's Choice-type quandary. And second, how does one create an exhibit that is engaging and informative but not overwhelming?

Special collections librarians do not have to wrestle with these questions alone. While curators are sifting through rare books, manuscripts, and artwork, librarians focused on emerging technologies are wading through a constant stream of new products, reviews, and techniques that are on track to change library services and instructional methods. Many of these are free and easy to use, but it takes time, expertise, and dedication to keep track of what is available and potentially useful. When there are competing technologies that perform similar functions, it takes a

keen eye to determine which one is most suitable for a particular setting and most likely to outlive the others.

At the Boston College Law Library, we are fortunate to have a position dedicated to the use and support of such technologies—the educational technology librarian. This position encompasses the identification of uses for and training on everything from clickers, tablets, lecture capture, and collaboration tools, as well as course management and law practice management systems. Most special collections librarians have access to some type of technology expert in the form of a dedicated technology librarian, an IT professional, or that person who seems to know a tremendous amount about apps and XML coding. Involving these technology-savvy colleagues in the curatorial process creates a unique opportunity to blend the old and new and to illuminate our cultural treasures by using the latest and greatest technologies.

The curator's earlier forlorn comment was met with an enthusiastic response from the resident educational technology librarian, who quickly rattled off a list of potentially helpful tools. This impromptu conversation led to a collaborative project that was fun and educational for both parties. Moreover,

as with all successful collaborations, the finished product was much richer than it would have been without this interdepartmental exchange.

Specific Challenges

A few challenges, many of which are related, stand out to curators as they put together an exhibit. First, the physical space limitations can be distressing for a curator who has spent a tremendous amount of time choosing and researching items for exhibition. Fascinating items have been discovered and thrilling anecdotes unearthed, but they simply cannot all fit in the display cabinets or cases. How does one still manage to share these treasures?

Second, some valuable materials are in poor physical condition or are unattractive and thus not ideal for physical display. However, these materials may still be relevant to the theme of the exhibit and have internal content that is worth sharing.

Third, physical exhibits have a "one-view" problem because items can only be displayed in one way. This is particularly challenging with books. Does one choose to display the beautiful binding, the gorgeous title page, or the beautifully printed internal page with the famous language or illustration?

The curator wants a visitor to experience all of these, but, again, we run up against physical impossibility.

Finally, if there are many items appropriate for display, the curator faces the problem of editing. If the physical exhibit includes too many items, the viewer might be overwhelmed with information and simply walk away. This leads to a delicate balancing act. One must provide access to ample information for those who have a high level of interest without scaring off those who have a casual curiosity.

Potential Solutions

The serendipitous exchange between curator and technologist led to a discussion about potential solutions to these problems. With the aforementioned challenges and considerations in mind, we set out to find solutions that were either freely available or licensed through the university.

An initial brainstorming session generated a list of goals and concerns that we kept in mind throughout the collaboration: 1) cost to us in terms of time and effort; 2) cost to the user in terms of ease of access and the demand on a cell phone data plan; 3) distractions to other visitors; 4) distractions for other users of Boston College Law School's Rare Book Room; 5) the aesthetic appeal of the option; 6) the ability to use and control the technology with minimal support; and 7) ensuring we had some "wow" factor to draw people in.

First, to address the challenges of limited space, fragile or unattractive materials, and the one-view problem, we looked for solutions that would allow additional content to be available in a digital forum. Having a digital component also hits on the editing problem. People interested in learning more can have access to the images and information, but it is not intrusive to the casual visitor. For each Rare Book Room exhibit, there is a webpage that contains a basic description of the exhibit's theme

and contents, date and time information for visiting, and contact information. Thus, it made sense to use this as the launch pad to any additional digital content.

But what tool should we use to feature this content, we wondered?

The potential solutions that we identified included creating a PowerPoint and then producing it as a movie with audio narration; adding images and related captions to the Boston College webpage for the exhibit; constructing a MediaKron site, an online tool for presenting and exploring multimedia course content that was created by Boston College's instructional design team; or creating a Prezi, a freely available, web-based zooming presentation editor.

Photo courtesy of Jason Liu, law school technology consultant at Boston College Law School

Once we had identified these potential solutions, it was time to choose.

PowerPoint has the benefit of being a familiar and easy-to-use tool, but there is a certain lack of dynamism. We feared that visitors would see this standard format and lose interest even if the internal content was strong. Additionally, in terms of aesthetics, embedding a

PowerPoint file on the exhibit webpage did not seem particularly appealing. Similarly, the option of creating a static webpage with captions under photos left us less than thrilled.

MediaKron is a terrific tool that has been used with great success in several Boston College classrooms, but we feared a steep learning curve for us as creators and a lack of familiarity for users. At the time, there also was no ability to embed the MediaKron presentation into the exhibit webpage so that users could start clicking right through the content. It does have the benefit of being particularly useful for projects that involve significant comparative analysis or that are based on a timeline; however, we decided it might be implemented more effectively in a future exhibit in which the focus is comparison of different texts or progression through time.

Ultimately, Prezi provided the greatest benefits and was our choice for featuring additional content. It is user-friendly, so uploading images, adding captions, and organizing content is extremely intuitive. The curator was able to take ownership of the presentation immediately and felt confident using Prezi in a short amount of time. Since it works best as a presentation tool that allows you to zoom in, it is great for drawing the user's attention to a particular feature of a given book. For the user, it has a familiar full-screen view with arrows to advance from image to image.

Last but not least, it was simple to embed the Prezi into the exhibit's webpage, so a visitor to that page immediately will see the first slide of the

presentation and can jump right in. (View the exhibit webpage at www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/law/library/about/rarebook/exhibitions/masslegal.html.) It is the perfect balance of simplicity and functionality, and the presentation itself and its presence on the exhibit webpage are aesthetically pleasing. Visitors who want to learn more about the exhibit and our collection now have access to more images and information. Additionally, people who can't make it in to view the physical exhibit can still experience it remotely by accessing the Prezi through our exhibit webpage.

The drawbacks for using Prezi are limited but worth noting. First, a common complaint about Prezi is its tendency to cause a bit of queasiness as one zooms from slide to slide. However, that sensation can be largely alleviated by placing the images fairly close together and keeping the presentation relatively linear. Second, since Prezi is Flash-based, it is not compatible with some mobile devices and would not be viewed best on a tiny screen. However, this was not a substantial concern for us since we felt that the Prezi would most likely be viewed on a computer. Therefore, despite these minor drawbacks, we decided it was still the best tool for our project.

Another important challenge and goal was to enhance and energize the physical exhibit. The curator's responsibility is to create an experience that is informative and easy to follow for someone who visits the exhibit space. In large part, this is achieved by arranging the materials logically and by having concise and informative labels in exhibit cases. However, it also seemed like the availability of an audio tour would help guide visitors through the exhibit. Purchasing new equipment was not feasible, so we began brainstorming about free options. Luckily, the technologist was familiar with the tools and methods for capturing and delivering audio files from previous work with faculty members. For example, Boston College Law School's legal writing professors have provided feedback on assignments via audio comments for many years. This past experience made the integration of audio into the exhibit an easy task.

Delivery of the audio files to the exhibit visitors became the next challenge. At the time, QR codes were the talk of the day; the technologist had been involved in frequent conversations both inside and outside of the law library about ways to integrate QR codes, so we decided to pilot this method in the exhibit.

We used a university digital voice recorder to capture the audio from a script that the curator wrote and recorded. In a matter of minutes, the technologist uploaded the audio files to university web space and generated the QR codes. This was done by using one of the many free QR code generators summoned from a simple Google search. No equipment had to be purchased; no time was wasted; and anyone with a QR code app on his or her cell phone could now access a streaming audio tour.

Our goal was to have the QR codes be an enhancement, not an intrusion; to that end, we limited ourselves to four codes in an exhibit with 10 display cases. Two of the codes linked to audio files— one was the audio tour that introduced the theme of the exhibit and the general layout, and the other a clip about an author featured in the exhibit. Of the two remaining QR codes, one takes the user to a website that provides a plethora of information on a featured publisher and the other takes the user to the exhibit webpage, which houses the digital edition of the exhibit on Prezi.

This last QR code was also included in the print pamphlet for the exhibit so that visitors could take the pamphlet and have a quick means of linking to the digital edition at a later time. The one drawback here, referenced previously, is that this final QR code is of limited utility for those using mobile devices that do not support Flash. These users would see the text on the exhibit webpage, have the capacity to download a PDF of the exhibit brochure, and be able to tell that there is a related Prezi. However, the first screen of the presentation would not display. The user would need to go to a computer to access the actual content of the Prezi. Again, this was a limitation we decided to accept, given all of the positives.

Throughout this process we discovered QR codes could be used to link visitors to relevant movie and music clips, images, YouTube videos, eBooks—the possibilities are as endless as the Web. It is important, however, to keep in mind potential costs to patrons of downloading data, another consideration when integrating digital content into an exhibit.

We attempted to make the QR code experience as simple as possible for our visitors and as painless as possible for other Rare Book Room users, such as students using the room as a study space. As a result, we took a few extra steps. To keep the file size and the required attention span at a minimum, audio clips were limited to three minutes. The length was noted on the display placard with the QR code. We tested Wi-Fi signal strength in the Rare Book Room to ensure that patrons could retrieve the data without taxing their data plans. We also tested Verizon and AT&T, which both worked in the space. To prevent the audio from interrupting other visitors, beneath the QR code we included a request that the user listen to the audio via headphones. Last, we also included all of this information in the exhibit brochure so that users were aware of necessary equipment and applications, as well as connectivity options.

Before opening the exhibit, we tested all of the codes to make sure they worked properly, particularly the ones that were set back behind glass.

The Spirit of Collaboration

When we proposed this article to *Spectrum,* we initially thought our story was going to be about our use of QR codes in the special collections setting. The more we reflected, however, the more we realized that it was the collaboration— not the specific technologies—that had made the experience exciting and memorable for us. It is hard to overstate how important collaborative opportunities are to libraries, universities, firms, and, indeed, any imaginable setting. We quickly realized that was the story we wanted to tell and the point we wanted to drive home.

Librarians often recognize the problem of "silos" in libraries and the difficulty (real or imagined) in crossing departmental lines. Despite those challenges, it is important to remember how much our individual projects can be enhanced if we keep the lines of communication open and approach our colleagues for their expertise and insights.

This collaborative project made the curatorial enterprise and the resulting exhibit much more dynamic experiences than they would have been had this departmental crossover not occurred. We have since learned of other special collections librarians in the university system who saw our tactics in play and have used them to great effect in their own exhibits. This kind of cross-fertilization is unbelievably rewarding and exciting and can only occur when we embrace the spirit of collaboration.

Technologies inevitably change, and many will become irrelevant. Indeed, QR codes have not achieved the widespread welcome and adoption that many initially predicted. But new opportunities and technologies will spring up in their wake. Regardless, the collaborative process remains all important as librarians search for new and improved ways to share our services and collections with the largest possible audience. ■

Laurel E. Davis (laurel.davis.2@bc.edu) is legal information librarian and lecturer in law/curator of rare books and Chester Kozikowski (chester.kozikowski@bc.edu) is educational technology librarian at Boston College Law Library in Newton Centre, Massachusetts.