

Digitisation Done, What Now?

Step by Step Projects

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Rhoda bag designed and made by Sarah Bayley, 2009.
Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University College at Bournemouth.

Background

The Arts University College at Bournemouth (AUCB) is a specialist university college in art, design, media and performance. Established in 1883 it has developed to become one of the leading providers of teaching, learning and scholarship in its subject areas.

The Museum of Design in Plastics (MoDiP) was set up at the University College in 1988 as a collection of objects for learning and teaching entitled the 'Design Collection'. It became a registered museum in 2001. Following a decision to focus on plastics, it changed its name to the Museum of Design in Plastics in 2007. The following year it obtained full accreditation under the Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council's scheme. The museum is now acknowledged as the UK's leading resource for the study and interpretation of design in plastics.



A tortoiseshell effect powder bowl from the 1930s.
Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University College at Bournemouth.

The collection consists of over 9000 items complemented by long-term loans from the collections of the Plastics Historical Society (PHS) and The Worshipful Company of Horners. Together the collections present an in-depth history of the use of natural plastics, as well as synthetic plastics since their invention in the middle of the nineteenth century to the present day.

Expectations

In 2008 the museum was awarded a publicly funded grant from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to improve and create the digitised documentation for 1500 objects within the collection. These objects included over 450 objects on long-term loan from the Plastics Historical Society.

The year long project aimed to create a better resource for the museum's users. Staff were to be afforded the time to document some of the plastics objects within the collection to a greater depth than had previously been the case. Manufacturing methods, materials, and other technical data were the focus in order to increase the value of the collection beyond our institution and also to our own staff and students.

In addition to improved documentation, an archive of high quality images of the selected objects was to be created using professional standard photographic

equipment. The final part of the project was to create a specification document for a new website. The funding was not yet in place for the website itself.



Baby Truck manufactured by Wader Spielen & Erleben in the 1980s.
Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University College at Bournemouth.

Approach

This digitisation project was created as a stage within a larger project. As the museum is a small team of two and a half full-time equivalent staff, the larger project was broken down into easily manageable steps, including: digitisation of the collection; website specification; website building; and development of learning and teaching packages. The JISC digitisation project was organised in a similar manner, with the work broken down into smaller chunks including: assessing resources; selecting objects; cementing partnerships; and finding avenues of dissemination.

At the time, for the dissemination of collection information, the museum relied on a website developed in 2005 as part of a one year plastics network project. This partnership had since disbanded as the funding was not in place to keep the momentum of the group. Without funding, the website was non-updatable other than the 'search the catalogue' pages which had a direct link to the museum's database, Modes xml. The museum therefore intended to build a new website with a content management system maintained by the museum staff.

1. Assessing Resources

The required outcomes of the project made the museum review the resources it had and whether they could achieve what was required. The museum knew that the funding would employ an extra member of staff for the duration of the project, and that there was a requirement to improve the image capturing equipment in order to take greatly improved pictures.

But the project also made MoDiP look at the database it was using; was it correct for them? Was it being used to its full potential? As MoDiP had invested a lot of time and money into the Modes database and Modes is used by a large number of other museums, it was decided that it was cost effective to continue to use it. It was, however, clear that it was not being used to the full extent of its functionality. The museum looked into finding ways of making cataloguing a much easier and more efficient process. It built term lists for material names,

Look-Here! Project Case Studies

manufacturing processes, colours, condition, and linked term lists for classification, type, and object name.

These lists or thesauri meant that the time it took to document a single object was greatly reduced. The person cataloguing could pick a word from the suggested list rather than having to think of a relevant term, check it against similar objects, and, as a result, be sure to use a consistent spelling.



Tupperware Garlic Wonder, 2005.
Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University College at Bournemouth.

2. Selecting Objects

The project was designed to improve the digitisation of only 1500 objects from a collection of over 9000. The museum had to make clear choices about what objects were going to be worked on. Was it to be a cross section of the collection; taking one or two examples of each type of object? Or should it be distinct groupings; all of the radios, or all of the watering cans so that comparisons could be made?

As this project was part of a wider digitisation initiative, which would eventually see the whole collection improved, it was decided that complete groups of objects should be digitised. The museum chose this methodology as it knew that its users often wanted to look at the way objects are designed and to compare like with like. Similar objects tended to be physically grouped together, and, if a box of objects was to be removed from store, it seemed sensible that all of the objects within that box should be digitised to reduce unnecessary handling at a later date.

The next stage was to choose the groups of objects. The museum thought about whom the digitisation was aimed at. In the first instance this was, of course, the students at the University College. The museum was aware of the popular groupings of objects as it keeps records of the kinds of objects that our students regularly ask to study. The most popular are toys, radios, telephones and shoes, so these became our priority groupings.

The final priority group of objects was those on long-term loan from the Plastics Historical Society. It was written into the loan agreement that these would be part of the project. Thorough documentation and digitisation of these objects is an example of best practice as the images and notes record the condition of the objects as they enter the museum collection.

3. Cementing Partnerships

The loan from the Plastics Historical Society and their subsequent participation within the project helped to cement an already long standing partnership. A member of the Plastics Historical Society documented its collection on paper and checked the material and manufacturing processes of the project objects from the museum collection, passing on their expertise and knowledge to the museum staff in the process. This has helped the Plastics Historical Society to feel that they have a connection to the project, and has maintained a link to their own objects.

As part of this project the museum also broadened an existing partnership with the UK Centre for Materials Education who carried out an independent evaluation of the project as a whole and suggested ways in which the use of the digitised collection could be developed.



Anglepoise desk lamp designed by George Cowardine, 1934.
Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University College at Bournemouth.

4. Finding Avenues of Dissemination

As the records on the Modes database were updated with new documentation and images, the data was immediately uploaded to the website plasticsnetwork.org. However, as this website only has a simple search mechanism it was difficult for users to find the improved records. The 1500 objects equates to less than 20% of the total collection, so with any search a few improved objects would be found but still a large number of objects without images would come up too.

The museum needed to find ways to highlight the work it had achieved. One way was to add a new classification into the records of the improved objects. This was the only way the museum staff could affect the search functionality of the website. All of the project objects were given the classification 'artefacts with images' so users could search using a keyword and this classification to find specific objects from the project.

In addition, the museum has also added all of the project records to the Visual Arts Data Service (VADS) and marketed this using a number of internal and external avenues. To view the VADS website please see www.vads.ac.uk, or to view the MoDiP collection see: www.vads.ac.uk/collections/MODIP.html.

5. Outcomes of the Digitisation Project

Within the Arts University College at Bournemouth the input of public funding gave the management greater belief in the value of the collection. This opened up access to internal funding and space to create new on-site storage facilities to house part of the collection which had been stored off-site.

Externally, the ability to show The Worshipful Company of Horners the new standard of digitised records proved that their collection would have enhanced access if lodged with the museum. They saw the value of the digitisation and were happy to provide a dowry to cover the costs of digitising and documenting their objects.

As the museum is a small team it has been helpful to develop partnerships and as such become part of a larger community. It was particularly helpful to have JISC input into helping the museum select the firm to create the museum website specification. The museum has now secured funding for the next stage of the project and is in the process of building a new website. The new online presence will provide better search functionality, a content management system which will be maintained in-house, and improve has improved the museum's contribution to learning, teaching and research at the Arts University College at Bournemouth and beyond.



A cellulose nitrate bangle from the PHS collection.
Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University College at Bournemouth.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The result was a successful project; in the end more than 1500 objects were given superior documentation and digitisation. The objectives were met, but more importantly, the publicly funded project made the museum look at the processes it had in place; why did the museum do things in a particular way?; could the museum do them in a more efficient and effective manner? The museum created and embedded new, JISC-approved digitisation practices into our work. Sustainability is important to continue to enhance the digitised collection and as such ongoing digitisation of the collection was written into our strategic plan prior to the JISC funding, but the funding has given the work greater momentum.

An obstacle to the success of the dissemination of the project was the fact that the project digitisation work was lost within a sea of unimproved records. The museum's website at the time was not easy to navigate and not flexible enough for the museum to do anything about the issues it was finding. Improvements to this situation were in the planning but funding was not available immediately, so finding other avenues to show off the work it had achieved was vital. This issue does not mean that future plans should be forgotten, finances are likely to become available one way or another so having the planning process in place will make the next step of the project easier and more efficient.

Projects of this type, which are dependent on funding, can be very intensive. Organisations planning to take this kind of work on must be willing to work in a 'hurry-up-and-wait' fashion, work hard to meet the objectives of the project in the required time frame and then wait until the next section of the work can be funded.

This piecemeal way of working can be to your advantage, with each step you have more and more to show potential funders. They may well be more likely to fund your next project if they can see that you have achieved the objectives of your previous projects and that the work is part of a bigger picture.



Perspex samples from the Plastics Historical Society collection.
Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University College at Bournemouth.

Key Points

- Break projects down into manageable steps.
- Investigate and understand the limitations of current practices.
- Be prepared to wait for the next lot of funding to address these limitations.
- Be creative in the meantime.
- Don't let the ideas die - keep developing them and be prepared for when the funding does become available.

References

Modes

<http://www.modes.org.uk>

Museum of Design in Plastics

<http://www.aucb.ac.uk/aboutus/museumofdesigninplastics.aspx>

Plastics Historical Society

<http://www.plastiquarian.com>

Plastics Network

<http://plasticsnetwork.org>

VADS

<http://www.vads.ac.uk>

The Worshipful Company of Horners

<http://www.horners.org.uk>

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