The Power of Digital Curation

Saskatchewan School Library Association

Gaétan Hammond
Dr. Martin LeBoldus Catholic High School

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Information is, in many ways, exactly like water. Fluid, ever changing, difficult to grasp, sometimes crystal clear and other times dark and murky. And the introduction of the internet means that, for most people, the pool of information that we may now access has swelled from a pond to an ocean. For much of our lives, we are prepared to merely skim over the surface of that ocean and grab those morsels of information that float near the surface. We've all seen this with our students – they Google a topic and rarely look beyond the first three or four hits (if we are lucky). We have probably done this ourselves, because sometimes skimming is a perfectly acceptable strategy. "Where's a close pizza place?" "What's playing at the movies?" "What's the capital of Venezuela?" A simple skim will give us the information we need to answer simple inquiries. But for deeper inquiries, when we really need to research a topic, skimming is insufficient because the most interesting information may not be that which floats readily to the surface. The truly fascinating information is often hiding out of plain sight and learning how to dive beneath the surface to explore the wealth of information hidden beneath is one of our most valuable skills as librarians.

Navigating through the sea of information to find the best pieces is what digital curation is all about. Librarians have always been curators of information – we have guided patrons to the information they need for centuries. Digital curation simply means that while the medium may have changed, the task is as crucial as ever. The power of digital curation lies in the level of connectedness that we now experience. It has never been easier to connect with experts, share resources, and compile information collaboratively. Our ability to gather knowledge has expanded as a direct result of this connectedness. Learning how to get connected to the people and topics that interest you is the central skill behind digital curation.

Jeff Domansky identifies six steps to the process of curation:

1. First, **find** information on the topic you are researching.
2. Next, **filter** the information, and organize it into useful categories.
3. Third, **curate** the information in your categories, retaining only those that are most relevant and engaging for your purposes.
4. Fourth, **create** a presentation of your display that showcases your carefully curated collection.
5. Fifth, **add value** to your presentation by explaining why you selected the pieces or telling viewers about the significance of the piece.
6. Finally, **share** your creation and insights with others.

Applying these six steps to a digital medium provides teacher-librarians with a multitude of different means for collecting information, creating eye-catching collections, adding our personal insights to our collections, and sharing our work to a global audience. Many tools exist to make the task of curating digital information more manageable.

For instance, when searching for information, there are a number of alternatives to consider beyond a basic Google search. When searching for primary and middle-years students, a teacher-librarian may want to consider using KidRex or Kiddle. These are both examples of companies that have attempted to use Google's Custom Search feature to create a modified version of the Google search engine that returns more child-friendly websites. The idea here is that the commercial content is greatly reduced, the websites returned are typically in more child accessible language, and as a result you are more likely to get relevant returns. While these results are not flawless, this is an attempt to make search engines more user-friendly for our younger students.

However, the use of search engines is very much driven from the perspective that I should go out and locate the information that I want. But wouldn't it be better if I could make the information come to me pre-sorted? This is where we begin to see the power of digital curation. Aggregators, such as Feedly, are tools that allow information to flow to you, the user. Categories can be set up for a variety of topics, and users can select which sources will be feeding into the categories. Information begins to arrive pre-sorted, and saves the teacher-librarian from manually trying to surf to each site looking for updated information. One tip if you are new to digital curation tools: start slow. If you are not used to skimming through lists of feeds, it can be overwhelming at first. Start by following five feeds on a topic of high interest to you personally. You can always branch out once you start to get the hang of it. Don't feel obligated to read everything just because you follow it! My personal strategy is to quickly skim

through the titles and only take a close look at articles that look of interest to me, my school community, or Professional Learning Network (PLN).

Another strength of digital curation is the ease with which teacher-librarians can tap into the curated collections of other librarians or experts. LibGuides and Scoopit are both tools which contains curated content on a variety of subjects.   Searching for a topic of interest allows you to tap into content that has already been collected, which can save you a lot of search time. LibGuides allows you to look through collections put together by other librarians in a text-driven format, while Scoopit presents information in a magazine style format. One of the nice features of Scoopit is that you are encouraged to add your own insights to the article that you are sharing, which makes it convenient for adding value.

Once you start having articles of interest coming to you, then you need to find a way to store that information for future distribution to interested parties, or solely or your own interest. There are a number of social bookmarking tools that allow you to gather websites and share them with others. As an added bonus, many social bookmarking tools make it possible to tap into the collections of people who may have a greater interest in the topic, or perhaps more expertise. One of the oldest, and still much respected tools for social bookmarking is Diigo. Diigo is a text-based social bookmarking tool which allows the user to quickly add a website to his or her collection. If you are the more private type, and less interested in sharing with others, Pocket can be a useful tool for storing web content. When gathering web content for my students, I prefer a curating tool that is less text-based and more pictorial. In my own situation, I opted for PearlTrees. PearlTrees allows for the creation of Collections, within which webpages, pdf documents, images, or your own personal notes. You can see examples of my own use of PearlTrees at http://goo.gl/BQ9EZZ. Other pictorial curation tools include Symbaloo and Sqworl.

Social media networks can be another source of tools that can be used for curating purposes. Twitter chats provides opportunity to gather articles and websites while interacting with other educational professionals. Jerry Blumengarten's (@cybraryman1) partial list of education related chats can help you locate an educational chat in your time zone and on a topic of interest. #tlchat and #saskedchat are some active hashtags to follow if you need a starting point. I also use Twitter to gather together Twitter accounts that focus on particular subject areas into lists. For instance, I will gather all the accounts I follow that are news outlets, like CBC, CTV, Global, into on list called News Sources. I can then create an embeddable widget in my Twitter settings that I can place in a website or blog. This provides me with another method of sharing focussed content with my staff and students.

Pinterest is another popular social media tool, and this one is actually ideal for curation. You can gather pins from a variety of sources, you can search other users' boards for

information, you can categorize your pins, and you can share them easily with other users. Pinterest, like most worthwhile curation tools, has a bookmarklet tool that inserts into your browser. I find Pinterest a great source of visual information, so I personal use it when I'm looking for bulletin board designs, library renovations, infographics, etc. The popularity of this tool means that you can find information on an extremely wide variety of subjects, so it is well worth a look.

Curation tools come in all types of formats and styles. I do not recommend using all of these programs at once! It can quickly become overwhelming trying to keep track of everything, and then you are no further ahead. My advice would be to pick one tool that appeals to you, and stick with that. I have gathered together a list of curation tools by type and style at http://goo.gl/J2SBtv for those who wish to explore further. Remember, this is just the tip of the iceberg. New curation tools seem to be popping up almost daily, and the best thing to do is experiment with a few and choose what works best for you. Happy curating!