

A collaborative digital oral history collection: Building a digital collection of student scholarship documenting Latino Americans in southeast North Carolina

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Abstract

A collaborative oral history project was recently completed at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) by students enrolled in a Spanish seminar course and library faculty and staff members at the University. The course, "Hispanics in N.C.: Service Learning and Research," was created and offered as one component of a public programming grant awarded to UNCW by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the American Library Association (ALA) through these institutions' initiative called "Latino Americans: 500 Years of History."

The course provided students with an opportunity to interview individuals in the southeastern North Carolina Latino community about their experiences in the United States. Students captured an audio recording of the interview which they later transcribed and provided a photograph of the interviewee. Library faculty and staff members were tasked with creating a digital collection to highlight the oral histories. Working within a limited timeframe and with no funding for the project, the planning and implementation for the digital collection was completed by librarians in the library's Information Technology and Systems, Special Collections and Technical Services departments. Utilizing technology, systems and skillsets that were already in place at Randall Library, a final product titled, "Somos NC: Voices from North Carolina's Latino Community" was created.

This article seeks to provide a practical discussion of the oral history project, outlining the Library's processes and project workflows as well as assessment and reflections. Synthesizing knowledge gained through the experience, the intent is to provide an example of how, through collaboration and innovation, small to mid-sized libraries can accomplish similar projects.

Keywords

Digital collection, Latino Americans, southeast North Carolina, oral history, inter-department collaboration

Background

The University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) is a member of North Carolina's 17 campus university system and is dedicated to learning through the integration of teaching and mentoring with research and service. The university is committed to diversity and inclusion, global perspectives and enriching the quality of life through scholarly community engagement, as stated in the mission statement. William Madison Randall Library, the main library and intellectual hub of campus, supports the University's mission by providing information resources and learner-centered services and by offering an environment dedicated to the open exchange of ideas.

In 2015, UNCW was awarded the "Latino Americans: 500 Years of History" grant produced by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the American Library Association (ALA). The grant is a nationwide public programming initiative with a purpose of facilitating informed discussions in communities regarding Latino history and culture (American Library Association: 2016a). It supports exploration of "the rich history, diverse cultures and painful clashes that have so powerfully shaped Latino lives and the nation" (American Library Association: 2016b). "Latino Americans: 500 Years of History" specifically outlines three goals for the grant:

1. To bring scholarship on Latino American histories and cultures to new audiences,
2. To engage people in examining and documenting the histories of Latino Americans in their communities, and
3. To foster understanding of local histories in regional, national and international contexts. (American Library Association: 2016b)

Grantees include a variety of organizations such as libraries, museums, community arts and culture organizations, state humanities councils, historical societies and other nonprofits. Awards provide support for a number of local outreach events ranging from exhibits and displays of special collections to performances and film screenings to symposiums on the history and cultural heritage of Latino Americans. Information on the grant and its public programming initiative can be found on the ALA website (<https://apply.ala.org/latinoamericans/>).

Spearheaded by Spanish faculty in the Department of World Languages and Cultures, Centro Hispano (the Hispanic/Latino organization on campus), and William Madison

Randall Library (Randall Library), grant programming at UNCW encompassed a number of offerings including: two lectures, one titled “Building integrated communities: Working with municipalities and immigrants to create comprehensive immigration integration plans,” and the other titled “No child left monolingual: Why and how to promote multilingualism in the U.S.,” documentary screenings of the PBS documentary series *Latino Americans*, episode V, “Pride and Prejudice” and episode VI “Peril and Promise,” and of the film “Speaking in Tongues;” student research showcases; for-credit service learning courses offered throughout the 2015-2016 academic year; and a digital collection to be created by Randall Library faculty and staff in coordination with a for-credit service learning course.

A Digital Collection: Our charge

Randall Library was charged with creating a digital collection that would highlight student work produced in a specific grant related seminar course titled, *Spanish 490: Hispanics in NC: Service Learning and Research*.

Professor's role

The professor's role in the project was carried out through the development and implementation of an assignment in the SPN 490 seminar course. The assignment for students involved conducting an oral history interview with a member of the local or regional Latino community about the interviewee's personal experiences as a member of a minority group in the United States. The assignment included collecting an audio recording of the interview and a photograph of the interviewee as well as creating a transcription of the oral history. The professor was responsible for seeking IRB approval for the project and for securing the necessary permission form. In delegating the assignment to students in the course, the professor provided a background of the project, shared the desired outcome, and defined the expectations. Once the assignment was completed, students submitted materials to the professor who shared them with Randall Library via Dropbox. The professor additionally distributed, collected and forwarded a number of the documents requested by the library for metadata and permissions that were necessary for publishing the collection online. Throughout the creation of the digital collection, the professor was also involved in the decision-making process and developed the name of the collection, "Somos NC."

Students' role

The students' role in the project was carried out through the assignment in the SPN 490 seminar course. They were tasked with conducting an oral history interview with a member of the local or regional Latino community. Interviews lasting approximately thirty minutes or less were mainly completed in Spanish although several interviewees preferred to speak in English. Conversations covered a variety of topics including place of origin, childhood memories, location of residence, current employment, experiences with discrimination, the current political climate and cultural heritage. In addition to recording the interview, students were tasked with transcribing the oral history and obtaining a photograph of the interviewee. Students were also required to have interviewees sign an oral history permission form. All items (audio recording, transcript, photograph and permission form) were submitted to the professor.

Randall library's role

The library's role in this project was to transform the students' oral histories into a digital collection. A combination of faculty and staff in the Information Systems and Technology, Special Collections and Technical Services departments were assigned various roles on this project and were responsible for collaboratively seeing it through to completion. Randall Library's end goal was to create a searchable collection of oral

histories that was integrated with other library digital collections and easily accessible to the public.

Value

There is intrinsic value in any project and more specifically, any oral history project, that creates connections between students, libraries and the community while facilitating collaboration between campus entities. In recent years, numerous articles and books have proliferated on the value of oral history projects in the classroom as evidenced in Erin Conlin's (2016) extensive listing of literature covering the topic from techniques and interpretation to benefits and challenges to how to's. Furthermore, Allan Cho positions the role of academic librarians as being facilitators in these projects for the creation and collection of historical materials allowing academic libraries to "serve faculty and the public as an institutional memory for the community, while connecting research with community at the same time" (2011: p. 17) Libraries have long recognized the need to be inclusive in collecting scope with regards to underrepresented communities and oral history projects provide one way of accessing this knowledge.

For Randall Library's Special Collections, this collaborative project provided an opportunity to address a significant need with regards to the Oral History collection where voices of the local Latin American community were not represented. Migration of Latinos to the United States has greatly increased within the last 50 years due to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act which "prioritized family reunification and designated an unlimited number of visas for immediate relatives of citizens of the United States" (Gill, 2010: p. 65). It was during this time many Latino families began exploring other southern destinations besides the commonly inhabited border states. Also, in 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) which among other things "provided amnesty for about 3 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States who could prove that they had lived or worked in the country for extended periods of time" (Gill, 2010: p. 66). Latino Americans have been steadily moving to North Carolina and in fact, the Latino population has grown 136% according to a Pew Research Center report completed in 2016 (Stepler and Lopez: p. 32). Since the 1970s, Latino Americans have been the largest minority group to move to North Carolina (Gill, 2010: p. 68), residing in a number of cities including Charlotte, Raleigh and Wilmington.

The value in working with students, faculty and the community is immeasurable. The course assignment and subsequent marketing through the digital collection not only demonstrates values inherent in the University's mission through its use of applied learning, preservation of an underrepresented community and showcase of student scholarship, but also met the three goals of the Latino American grant. It allowed Randall Library to highlight student work while at the same time provide a platform for voices of an underrepresented community to be received and made available to a wider audience. Additionally, this project facilitated new connections between Randall Library and the World Languages and Cultures department and offered an avenue for the library to showcase the efforts of this collaboration with the hope it would benefit the UNCW community and researchers in the future.

Challenges

This project created a unique challenge for the library's faculty and staff members involved as it required finding an innovative approach to a complicated project. Of importance in the planning phase of any digital project is the availability of financial and staffing resources. For this particular project, no provisions were made to provide supplementary funding for technology or staff. Additionally, no similar projects had been

completed by Randall Library in the past that could have been utilized as a baseline during the planning phase. Finally, and most significantly, library faculty and staff were tasked with completing the work in a short time frame of two months. All of these factors had numerous implications for the planning and implementation of the digital collection.

Our Process

Once the grant was awarded to UNCW, select Randall Library faculty and staff were provided with more information regarding the student assignment and details for the digital collection as outlined above. Planning commenced through a meeting called to identify key staff members to form a project team. Two librarians and one staff member were selected as follows: the Digital Initiatives Librarian (representing the Systems Department), the Metadata and Digital Formats Librarian (representing the Technical Services department), and the Special Collections Library Specialist (representing the Special Collections department.)

The major decision facing the project team at the outset of planning was the evaluation and selection of a technology platform that could be adapted to accommodate the

requirements of the project. First and foremost, the project required a content management system that could display audio, text and image files together in a streamlined manner. Additional requirements included use of an existing technology already supported by Randall Library or use of an open source platform and the ability to design flexible and extensible metadata. The project team was also interested in a solution that could potentially be utilized as a host for Special Collections' legacy and future oral history collections. In an article on collection management systems software for oral histories available through the Institute of Museum and Library Services website, Sara Price (2012) states "There are numerous systems available for archiving materials, but there are few that have been successfully designed for managing oral history collections." This statement reflected the situation at the time with Randall Library's collection of oral histories, where transcripts were made available to the public through the archival management system, Archon, while access to the audio and video files was only available by visiting Special Collections. Further complicating the matter was the fact that the library was currently in the process of transitioning to a new archival management system and decisions regarding the home for the oral history collection had not yet been made. The "Somos NC" project was in some ways treated as a pilot project for mapping the future of the larger oral history collection.

With these requirements in mind, the project team completed a quick and cursory survey of the landscape for existing collections with similar digital components. The team reviewed examples of digital collections, digital exhibits and oral history collections made available by a variety of academic institutions, public libraries and cultural centers. Given the short turnaround time for this project, a thorough review of available literature on the topic was not adequately conducted which in hindsight may have eased the planning process, although decisions would have ultimately remained unchanged. Discoveries on this point are later discussed in the takeaways section.

Most examples reviewed by the project team did not cover the core requirement for displaying all three components of the assignment. Other examples involved complicated web design work that would have fallen outside of the designated time frame and skill sets of team members. Eventually, the project team discovered Virginia Commonwealth University's Oral History Archive, a digital collection that is hosted in CONTENTdm (Virginia Commonwealth University: 2016). Specifically, this collection uniquely utilized a feature in CONTENTdm known as a compound object to combine each oral history's transcript and audio file. A compound object binds two or more files together

which can be viewed as a single object record in the user interface. This collection inspired Randall Library's project team to investigate this digital collection platform more closely as a viable option since the library already licensed the software. The team learned that a type of CONTENTdm compound object called a "Picture Cube" solved for the need to combine the three file types in one object record. With the project deadline in view, CONTENTdm quickly became the obvious solution for hosting the Somos NC oral histories.

With the software selected and the files in hand (transferred by Dropbox from the professor to the Library), the Digital Initiatives Librarian began to convert the students' digital files to formats consistent with CONTENTdm standards. All of the transcripts were received by the library in Microsoft Word .doc formats and these files were converted to .pdf files. CONTENTdm automatically extracts text in certain types of .pdf files and places it in a full text search field which enhances and improves the collection's searchability. Audio recordings were received in a variety of different file types and converted to .mp3 files to reduce file size. Finally, images that were not received as .jpeg were converted to that format for consistency.

Given CONTENTdm's utilization of the Dublin Core metadata schema, the next step in the project was to determine what information needed to be gleaned from the audio recordings, transcripts and photographs to provide useful descriptive access. The Digital Initiatives Librarian created an Excel spreadsheet to use as a metadata template to record decisions made with the idea that the template could be reused for future iterations of this and other similar projects. Through a team meeting, decisions were made with regards to the metadata and the project team cross-walked the information to Dublin Core while at the same time establishing appropriate controlled vocabulary terms. An important component of this process was determining what metadata elements were necessary for display at the "collection" and "item" levels of the compound object to avoid repetition in the user interface.

With the metadata in place, the Digital Initiatives Librarian established the collection in CONTENTdm and created a sample compound object for the project team to review. During this process, the team discovered that, aesthetically speaking, there was a preference to create custom thumbnails for the audio files rather than use the original audio icon to generate a uniform look in each compound object record. There was also additional refinement of the metadata fields that would display in the public interface at

the collection and item levels for the compound objects. Once these changes were finalized, the Digital Initiatives Librarian bulk imported the digital files into CONTENTdm using a .csv file to pre-populate select metadata fields with controlled vocabulary terms and assigned the custom thumbnail images to the audio files. A workflow was then created for the project team where by members would use CONTENTdm's Administration web interface to enter remaining metadata at the item level for each digital component, then create a "picture cube" compound object and enter metadata at the collection level. Each member of the project team was responsible for eight oral histories.

Final product

The initial collection of 24 oral histories was completed and published by Randall Library at the end of the fall semester in 2015. A researcher viewing this digital collection can search within the individual collection or all digital collections in CONTENTdm. Additionally, all digital objects in CONTENTdm are included in Randall Library's "bento box" search results accessed via the library's homepage using Summon. Search terms can include first or last name of interviewee or interviewer, any number of subject headings assigned to the oral history or any words included in the indexed

transcript. Researchers can also narrow their search through facets such as subject, geographic subject and interviewee. Individual oral histories in CONTENTdm contain metadata divided between collection and item levels depending on which media type is being viewed. Thumbnails indicating the audio recording, transcript and photograph are located on the right side of the page and can be selected based on viewing preference.

Takeaways

Somos NC Project

Since completing the initial collection of Somos NC oral histories, the project team has successfully published a second semester of oral histories. Insight and assessment of the process during the first semester that the course was taught provided an opportunity for the team members to work with the professor of the course to implement several new procedures that ultimately helped to refine and streamline the workflow and were beneficial to all involved.

The main issue encountered by the project team during the first semester was the lack of consistent formatting in the transcripts created by the students causing a situation in which team members had to search for pieces of information when entering metadata into

CONTENTdm. Additionally, the project team was responsible for assigning subject headings to each oral history rather than the students who had a more intimate connection with the subject matter. To assist in solving these issues, the project team created separate transcript and metadata templates for students to use with the assignment prior to the start of the course the next year. These templates were then reviewed and revised by the professor and distributed to students along with a completed example. The templates significantly improved the metadata entry process for the project team.

Also, during the second semester that this course was offered, the project team had to proceed without the Digital Initiatives Librarian, assuming new responsibilities with the assistance and support of the Information Technology and Systems department. This positioned the remaining team members to use this project to develop new skills. Through trial and error as well as perseverance and good documentation, the project continued and confidence was gained.

Suggested Guidance

The compressed timeline for developing and completing the initial Somos NC project prevented the project team from conducting an extensive review of similar oral history

projects. Post completion, a review of the literature yielded several discoveries of projects that faced similar obstacles and outlined related workflows, which if used in companion with workflows mentioned here, could provide a foundation for institutions interested in creating digital access to multi-component oral history collections. In reviewing digital oral history projects, the project team sought out literature that included aspects of the Somos NC project such as the use of CONTENTdm, multi-lingual digital objects, student scholarship, and limited budgets.

Oral history collections have significant historical value to researchers and the number of digital collections continues to grow as legacy formats are digitized. One of the first steps that must be taken in order to provide online access for these types of collections is to select an appropriate Content Management System (CMS) as was the case with the Somos NC project. Dean Rehberger provides a thorough discussion of factors that should be included in the decision-making process as well as key concepts to consider and a review of several open source options for oral history collections in his article, “Getting Oral History Online: Collections Management Applications (2013). In many cases, selection of a CMS tends to be predetermined by an existing in-house solution such as a license to CONTENTdm; this was a deciding factor for digital projects such as the *Fruits*

of Their Labors collection at Brigham Young University (Smart and Young, 2013), the *Southeast Kansas Farm History Oral History* collection at Pittsburg State University (McCune, 2012), and to a certain degree, the Somos NC project.

For digital oral history projects where CONTENTdm is selected as the CMS of choice, the compound object feature is commonly utilized to link components of oral histories including audio and transcripts. Caroline Daniels (2009) describes in detail how the University of Louisville used this feature in a grant funded digitization project for the *African American Oral History Collection*, including challenges encountered and decisions made. Similarly, Elizabeth Smart and Kristi Young (2013) explain their use of compound objects in a case study outlining the workflows for the *Fruits of Their Labors* project. When utilizing this feature, metadata can be divided between the single object record and the individual files contained within it. Steven Sielaff (2015) describes the approach taken by Baylor University Institute for Oral History with regards to compound object metadata in his article, “Case Study: Metadata at BUIOH,” providing the template used and a description of metadata policies at the university.

The Somos NC project team considered options for creating bilingual metadata for the collection, however the time constraint was a challenge that could not be overcome in the initial phases of this project. Solutions to express multilingual metadata are generally experimental and not necessarily accommodating to projects with small staff or limited technical expertise. One solution using CONTENTdm is described in an article titled, “Multilingual metadata for cultural heritage materials: The case of the Tse-Tsung Chow Collection of Chinese Scrolls and Fan Paintings” (Matusiak et al., 2015). This project was undertaken by staff at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and outlines their process for creating bilingual metadata records. Another project very similar to Somos NC at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, feeds metadata from the *New Roots* collection in CONTENTdm to a bilingual Omeka website. Jaycie Vos (2015) describes the project and their process in, “New Roots: An Oral History Metadata Case Study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.”

Conclusion

In a small to midsized academic library, collaboration is essential no matter the scope and size of the project. Bringing together professionals with different skill sets offset

additional project pressures and allowed for quick decision making and completion of work by relying on the experience and expertise of the project team members. As previously mentioned, newly created templates and examples provided data entry guidance for students and improved the project team's workflow. Clear lines of communication through meetings and delegation of work allowed the Somos NC oral history project to be successful and created the necessary ground work to easily complete future iterations of the course assignment. Additionally, procedures and workflows developed during this project positioned the Library to successfully work with future digital oral history collections.

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