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Electronic Text Centers: Creating
Research Collections on a Limited
Budget, the Nebraska Experience

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Electronic Text Centers: Creating Research Collections on a Limited Budget, the Nebraska Experience

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In this article, we will describe a slightly different approach to building digital collections. The approach is that of building collections as a by-product of a service center rather than collection building being the primary purpose of the program activity. Specifically, we will discuss how an Electronic Text Center can enhance digital collection development in the humanities.

ELECTRONIC TEXTS CENTERS

What is an Electronic Text Center and why are some libraries establishing them? Electronic Text Centers are both real places, with high-

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tech computer equipment and helpful staff, as well as “virtual” collections of online texts. One definition of E-text Centers, from the Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities (CETH), states,

Electronic Text Centers are a new kind of resource in the world of academic resource sharing. The mission of most Electronic Text Centers is to build online collections of electronic texts, which are machine-readable versions of literary and historical documents or databases of linguistic or textual corpora, and to provide a place in an academic community in which people can access these texts. Because the range of available electronic texts is not as large as that of print materials, most Electronic Text centers also provide facilities for the creation and analysis of electronic texts. There is also a need for education of the community because of the new technology and the new approaches to documents and the documentation of a text that Humanities Computing has developed over the past twenty years. However, Electronic Text Centers are not archives, Electronic Libraries, nor Humanities Computer Centers, though sometimes they are a part of or extension of all of these.¹

Electronic Text Centers focus on particular services of benefit to humanities scholars, rather than concentrating on the development of collections and archives. Staff need to be knowledgeable about humanities research interests and methodologies as well as knowledgeable about the technology used to create and analyze electronic texts. In E-text Centers, the staff may very well be learning needed computer skills even as they are teaching these skills to faculty and students. Creating a community of knowledgeable and technically skilled humanists who can work with electronic texts is a primary mission of many of today’s E-text Centers.

WHY USE ELECTRONIC TEXTS

For humanities scholars the use of e-texts is a natural next step in the process of scholarly inquiry. With electronic versions, students and faculty are able to read, re-read, and interpret texts in ways that were very difficult, if not impossible, for all but the most dedicated scholar when using traditional print texts. As more electronic texts become

available, more scholars will benefit. As noted on NYU's Bobst Library Electronic text page, "humanities instruction and scholarship are text based: they endeavor to re-interpret and re-evaluate our textual legacy. The reading and re-reading of texts is tied to an evolving understanding of a larger historical, social, and cultural context. This comprehension of the larger context is itself based on other texts; the evolution of ideas from text to text, era to era; the acts of borrowing, exchange, dialogue, assimilation, interrogation, explanation, repudiation, and forgetting."² E-text Centers are a natural location for this work, with equipment, software, and skilled staff to assist.

THE MAJOR E-TEXT CENTERS

The major E-text Centers share similar missions and provide us with models to follow in establishing our own centers. The most well-known initiatives are located at the University of Virginia, University of Michigan, Indiana University, the University of Chicago, Rutgers University, and Princeton University. Their missions almost consistently show a two-part effort, to provide service and to build collections. Terms used include "support," "teach," "maintain," and "train" when describing services for users, along with "create," "build," "provide," and "maintain," in the descriptions of collection-building efforts. The two parts of the mission—service and collection building—are very connected in each of the centers.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, our efforts at building an Electronic Text Center and offering the services of knowledgeable and skilled librarians in this area began in the mid-1990s. In 1995, the humanities programs in the College of Arts and Sciences began discussions on how the humanities areas were changing with their use of technology and how humanities programs could retain funding in an era of budget cuts. From those discussions, the humanities departments organized a cross-disciplinary, cross-college proposal to create an area of strength in Textual Studies and to establish a Text Studies Group.

The Text Studies Group, which includes two humanities librarians, has focused upon two interlocking issues: the theoretical and practical questions raised by the replacement of print by digital texts and the impact of recent theoretical approaches to texts that examine both their relationships with other texts and the transformation from one language or medium to another. The definition of texts includes images and sometimes sounds as well as printed or digital words. The Text Studies group brings humanistic modes of inquiry to bear on fundamental questions about how the meanings of texts are constructed and the effects of both cultural and technological modes of transmission on meaning. At issue are profound questions about the future of human culture as well as more immediate questions about the future careers of our students. Most of the Text Group are from humanities backgrounds, including the traditional disciplines—Classics, English, History, Modern Languages and Literatures, and Philosophy—and “applied” areas—the Libraries, the University Press, Public Television, and the State Museum.

Little concrete activity occurred with the Group until spring 1997 when the colleges submitted their 1997/99-biennium budget requests to the University. The budget guidelines called for Colleges to submit plans for budget reductions of up to 4% and proposals for new program funding that were interdisciplinary in nature. The Dean of the College of Arts and Science and the Dean of Libraries agreed to jointly submit a proposal for funding for a Humanities initiative that included support for textual studies and the creation of an electronic text center. The proposal was successful and the College and the Libraries received limited funding for the initiative. However, while the College received funding for both years of the biennium, the Libraries only received funding for one support person and one computer workstation for the second year of the biennium. And so began the interesting process of planning and implementing an Electronic Text Center without initial funding, while working with the Humanities faculty who wanted at times to control the planning process using the funding they had. Fortunately, the planning process took long enough so that the Libraries’ funding became available when the Humanities faculty and the Libraries were ready for implementation of an E-text Center.

EARLY DAYS OF PLANNING AT UNL

A planning group made up of seven library faculty members with experience in both public and technical services began to meet in late spring 1998 to work on the charge of developing an operating plan for the Libraries' Electronic Text Center. The group was asked to recommend services to be provided during the first year; basic resources needed for accomplishing these services; technical specifications for the process, including the search engine, metadata scheme, and coding; and a schedule for implementation.

The planning group met with members of the humanities faculty to explore the role that these teaching faculty members envisioned for the Electronic Text Center. Members of the planning group studied the Websites of digitization projects in order to learn from other libraries' procedures and mission statements. The group also met with staff from the University of Nebraska Press and with the chair of the automated systems department in the Libraries. During these meetings, the planning group learned more about technological possibilities and began to make purchasing decisions for software and hardware for the E-text Center.

Very early in the process, the planning group determined that, like other Text Centers, the Electronic Text Center would have two main purposes: instruction and creation of digital collections. E-text Center staff would assist users in the creation of electronic materials by providing instruction in the use of relevant technologies and information on copyright issues. E-text Center staff would also work with librarians in creating electronic texts as well as in selecting, managing, and providing access to digitized materials. Unlike some E-text Centers that provide access to commercial databases, we decided that these resources would continue to be a part of our regular networked services and reference collections.

STAFFING

In the initial planning phase, and with limited funding, staffing for the center was limited to a half-time project coordinator and 10% of a cataloging librarian's time. No new faculty positions were created. The project coordinator split her time between the cataloging depart-

ment and the E-text Center. The project coordinator's responsibilities included hiring, training, and supervising the Electronic Text Center staff, revising SGML coding, and instructing faculty and students. In consultation with other Library faculty, the project coordinator planned the procedures for processing and cataloging digitized resources. The catalog librarian worked on coding and technology issues. In early spring 1999, the cataloging librarian left for a technology position at another university, and the project coordinator announced that she was leaving for a position at another university.

In late 1998, a new position was created for a staff member in the E-text Center. The staff member in this position is responsible for scanning and coding SGML documents, providing instruction, and helping with the Website maintenance. This full-time position was held by an Emporia State University library school graduate student from January 1999 to January 2000, when she accepted a professional position after graduation.

With the departure of the project coordinator for a position at another university, the E-text Center has new leadership. Currently, the Libraries' Chair of Special Collections and Preservation is serving as the project coordinator. As the new project coordinator had been working with the E-text Center planning committee and E-text Center staff on preservation issues, she was familiar with the activities and focus of the E-text Center staff. Another advantage with the new leadership is increased visibility with a more accessible location of the E-text center within the physical Special Collections area, as well as the project coordinator's level—as a department chair—in the organization. Other members of the Library faculty assist with instruction, serve as liaison to University committees, and organize workshops. The E-text Center's Website was developed by and is maintained by the Chair for automated systems.

Unfortunately, as you have noticed, staff turnover has been a constant for the center. The staff turnover means that we will need to train a new group to work with SGML, the cataloging metadata and the technology. Retraining costs are being absorbed by the Libraries and are an unanticipated cost of the center.

FROM THE HUMANITIES VIEWPOINT

From the humanities viewpoint, the E-text Center is a part of the work of their Taskforce on Humanities, Libraries, and Changing Textu-

al Technologies, a subset of the Text Studies Group. The Taskforce works to explore the future of research libraries from the perspective of the humanities and the future of the humanities in a context of electronic texts. The goal of Text Studies with University Libraries Electronic Text Center is to develop a community of humanists at ease with and skilled in the use of computers for teaching and research purposes.

The Humanities, Libraries, and Changing Textual Technologies Taskforce held three major events in 1998 that focused upon the development of the Electronic Text Center. These events included visits by Mark Olsen of the ARTFL project (Project for American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language) based at the University of Chicago; Catherine Mardikes, University of Chicago Library; and John Unsworth, Director of the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities.

Mark Olsen was particularly helpful in demonstrating that computer-assisted research in the humanities is most effective when a project encompasses a very large number of texts, thereby taking advantage of its search capabilities.

Catherine Mardikes discussed the organization and administration of the University of Chicago's electronic text center, the services the librarians provide, and the marketing of those services. She also gave helpful advice on useful software and training opportunities.

John Unsworth provided an overview of the administrative issues involved in developing an interdisciplinary center for humanists doing computer-assisted research: the costs involved in creating the center, its organization and staff, and its methods of engaging faculty at University of Virginia and elsewhere.

The task force also focused on achieving the objectives that were identified in the initial proposals in the areas of standards and equipment.

STANDARDS

During 1998-99, the Libraries, in consultation with faculty from the humanities, agreed on standards for encoding and describing electronic texts. The Libraries are using SGML, the encoding endorsed by other research institutions, along with metadata that includes controlled vocabulary terms. Library staff attended a two-day workshop

on SGML presented by a member of the University of Michigan's Humanities Text Initiative. Library faculty have also attended related workshops on digitization at Cornell University and the Denver Public Library.

Library staff developed a filtering process that will convert SGML documents to HTML, so that the documents can be viewed on the Web, and the Libraries and the University Press are using this filter. Libraries' staffs will also consult regarding the description of images, using controlled vocabulary.

EQUIPMENT

In order to expand access for faculty to equipment and software needed for the creation of electronic texts, the Libraries purchased a Pentium computer, color printer, and worktable dedicated to the creation of electronic texts. An IBM black and white scanner for archival projects and color scanner were purchased. Software for encoding documents and for the OCR of documents was purchased.

PROJECTS

Looking back over the past year, several successful projects have been completed or are underway that fit the original purposes of the Electronic Text Center: instruction in and the creation of a digital collection. Based on the recommendation of humanities faculty, the Libraries' E-text Center completed its initial project, over 600 pages of poetry in *Elegiac Sonnets*, a two-volume set by Charlotte Turner Smith. Staff also digitized and encoded another work by Charlotte Turner Smith, *The Banished Man*. In the area of instruction, the E-text Center has completed a project to make searchable the abstracts of the *Journal of Nineteenth Century French Studies*, a University of Nebraska publication. The E-text Center worked with a faculty member to put the abstracts online and to make them searchable using a search engine. The faculty member was very pleased. E-text Center staff worked with individuals and groups within the Libraries to develop a Web display for the University's centennial celebration of graduate studies—a major campus event occurring throughout spring 2000. Another

interesting project has been the development of a Web presence for the Sandberg-Hallgren Psychological Warfare collection, a collection in the Special Collections Department of unique World War II documents. Additionally, staff assisted with the scanning for the multimedia version of the libraries' for-credit instruction course, scanned images for the Archives/Special Collections department, and provided scanned images for the Omaha World Herald.

Due to preservation concerns, some projects were attempted and abandoned during the first few months, including the Botkin slave narratives, a collection of not entirely processed or transcribed audio-taped interviews with slaves recorded by folklorist Benjamin Botkin. The tapes were recorded on cheap cassettes and have sound quality problems. Digitizing a rare ambro-type photograph of Abraham Lincoln was an early project that was also abandoned, due to the value of the photograph. Both of these projects involved rare collections that we did not really want to use to start our digitization efforts until we knew more about electronic digitization. Other early projects were put on hold, awaiting the purchase of particular equipment or software.

CONSULTATION

The Libraries have worked with faculty interested in developing assignments related to electronic texts. The Electronic Text Center was featured at one of the Text Studies Roundtables. In addition, the library faculty have met with humanities faculty and students to discuss issues related to Web documents.

Our work with faculty began with a cooperative project with one of our English faculty, Steven Behrendt. Dr. Behrendt specializes in Romantic writers, particularly Women Romantic writers. He is working with a project at Sheffield Hallman University (SHU) in England to develop interactive class materials on Romantic writers. The work at SHU is centered on a collection known as Project Corvey. This is a microfiche archive of some 72,000 volumes, primarily from 1790-1834, that were collected by Victor Amadeus in Castle Corvey in Germany. SHU faculty and students are creating a database of the material, including biographical and bibliographical information, as well as contextual notes about the works.

For UNL, Dr. Behrendt suggested a complementary project where we would acquire the microfiche collection, students would work with

the collection providing annotations for the materials for a Web-based database, and the Libraries would digitize materials to complement the Corvey Collection.

With funding from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Libraries, we were able to purchase the Belle Lettres portion of the English language collection. The E-text Center then worked on digitizing works by Charlotte Turner Smith, as mentioned above, to supplement the collection. The Center will also be digitizing additional materials from the time period.

While the project from the faculty member's viewpoint focuses on creating instructional materials by honors and graduate students and for use by the students, for the Libraries, the project provides a focus for collection development in the E-text Center. The project also builds on strengths in the print collection so that our digital collection development enhances our collections rather than having digitization efforts moving in directions that may not blend with our overall efforts.

The E-text Center is also working with a PhD student in English who is preparing to write a dissertation on contemporary Nebraska poets. The student will prepare a series of electronic chapbooks featuring established and up-and-coming contemporary Nebraska poets. These chapbooks are a logical component to University of Nebraska's cultural inventory being prepared as part of our bid to be designated the NEH Regional Center in the Plains. In discussing the role of the E-text Center in working with this student, it was confirmed that Center staff will help humanists refine their projects and offer assistance on technical issues regarding projects, including copyright, metadata coding, advice on scanning, and assistance with search engines.

Projects that would involve significant staff time on the part of the Libraries may require funding. We agreed that we are not in a position to teach HTML or other classes that are available through the University's Media Center or other widely available campus resources. We will not purchase software with the sole aim of being compatible with a particular user's home computer system.

By advising humanists on digital projects and assisting them to construct or design the projects, the Libraries are able to ensure that the project's uses agree to standards, are technologically compatible, and are accessible from both the Libraries and the Humanities Website.

The Libraries' involvement in the humanities program at the service and research level has made it possible for us to begin to build campus-wide digital collections by leveraging both College resources and library resources.

EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS

The creation of the E-text Center has also provided an avenue for the Libraries to use to build a partnership with the University of Nebraska Press and the Press's work at creating the International Willa Cather Website.

The International Willa Cather Website forms the third initiative sponsored by Text Studies and is a pilot project designed to explore and develop an electronic archive on the Internet. By the end of the 1998/99 academic year, the text of the prototype volume, plus representative ancillary material, was available at <http://www.unl.edu/Cather>.

This electronic archive is based on the University of Nebraska Press's Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, with historical photographs, news stories, maps, and other documentary records heavily supplementing the written text. The archive, a powerful reference tool preserving documents in digital form, offers access to documents not currently available, making these resources useable in new ways that can deepen interdisciplinary understanding in this area of interest and also providing information to scholars and others around the world who are interested in Cather.

The project involves transferring to digital form much of the documentary material relevant to the writing of Willa Cather. Scanned images of letters, photographs, maps, newspaper articles, and other forms of evidence will provide historical and cultural context to Cather's texts. In addition, the Cather Archive will maintain a calendar of letters by Cather and her correspondents, a bibliography of research on Cather's life, writing, and related subjects, and information about upcoming Cather-related activities. It will also contain a curricular component and provide links to related Websites.

Once archived digitally, tagged (indexed for retrieval by a standard marking system), and annotated, materials in this hyper media archive will be able to be examined and integrated into a visual narrative of Cather's life, work, writing, and world. Users will also have the ability to manipulate this material through a java-enabled interface which

allows images, audio, video, and text to be selected, annotated, and stored in an online database which can be accessed at any time and retrieved as a multimedia "slide show" presentation. The rich and expansive body of material surrounding Cather will for the first time be juxtaposed in numerous combinations and otherwise manipulated to investigate relationships and trace connections that have heretofore been infeasible.

In designing the Cather site, the Press agreed to work with the Libraries on standards and coding systems. The Press adopted the coding scheme developed by the E-text Center and is using the same search engines and indexing structures. The Websites are linked so that scholars accessing either the E-text Center site or the Press site can learn about both sets of projects. By cooperating at the beginning of the creation of the different Centers, we were able to develop a coordinated campus-wide approach to creating digital texts without having to create a major organizational structure to ensure consistency among the projects. Unfortunately, the person at the Press responsible for this project has left for a position with an Internet start-up company and the position is not being replaced. Once staffing at the Press is reestablished, we will begin again to build a partnership with the Press.

CONCLUSION

By now, you have no doubt noticed that the implementation of an E-text Center is going very slowly. With such limited funding, our ability to provide services is limited. However, the E-text effort has proven and is proving to be one way that we can at least slowly move forward in creating digital collections. The knowledge gained and skills learned in establishing a Center to work with faculty can benefit the rest of the Libraries. Instead of each entrepreneurial librarian with an interest in the Web creating his or her own standards for document creation, we have established a set of guidelines and standards we will all use. Because the standards came from broad-based discussions with the Press, the Humanities, and the faculty, we avoided the problem of each faculty member or librarian developing their own system, as all of them had their own ideas of how digital collections should be pursued.

The librarians involved in the project are also learning about be-

coming publishers. Suddenly, our closest ally and supporter is the University Press, who looks to the libraries for help with technical standards and metadata. In exchange, we are learning about the challenges of publishing in the electronic age from our Press colleagues.

We are also facing the on-going problem of staff turnover. As staff and librarians acquire new skills in digital collection creation and digital publishing, they find they are in demand and are being recruited away from us, both by other Universities and by private companies. We are continually developing and then losing our expertise and then redeveloping that expertise and losing it yet again. Until the skills needed to publish and create digital collections are more widely shared in our profession, we will be a training ground.

Despite all the trials and tribulations of starting a new venture with inadequate capital, the E-text Center is a budding success. Our relationship with the humanities faculty is growing stronger as we are again seen as equal colleagues in a new initiative. The Center has also allowed us to focus our efforts in creating digital collections at a time when many librarians are experimenting with different approaches. By focusing the effort on a service instead of a collection, we are able to move past internal debates on collection priorities to setting standards, learning the technology, and getting projects up and moving.

Now we need to move to marketing our services, once we replace our staff again, and to expanding our digital collections based on the interest of our faculty. At the same time, we can slowly proceed with our own projects, as we build the internal infrastructure and skills needed to move into this exciting area of collection development.

NOTES

1. "What is an electronic text center?" in frequently asked question file [world wide web site <http://scc01.rutgers.edu/ceth/intromat/faq.html>]. [cited 7 February 2000].

2. "Using Digital Materials in Scholarly Research," in Electronic Texts at the Studio, NYU Bobst Library, [world wide web site <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/etc/intro.html>]. [cited 7 February 2000].

APPENDIX

Timetable for University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries E-text Center
start-up and activities**1999****January 1999**

Full-time staff person hired and begins work.

First project—SGML encoding of Charlotte Turner Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* as requested by English department faculty member.

SGML software, scanner, OCR software arrives.

Discussion begins on future projects, including:

Other works by Charlotte Turner Smith,

Botkin Slave narratives (tapes found and some are transcribed but this project is abandoned because the collection is not entirely processed),

Lincoln photograph (abandoned because of preservation issues),

Alvin Johnson papers (a varied collection and after examination project is abandoned),

Pacific War Pamphlets (put on hold until color scanner is available).

February 1999

Two days of training for E-text advisory committee, provided by University of Michigan.

Faculty member/advisory committee member with most background working with TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) DTD resigns.

Adobe photoshop ordered.

Discussion/decision on how to view SGML documents (contract with outsider or develop here?).

Preservation expert joins advisory group.

Presentation made to campus as part of Text Studies Roundtable series.

First volume—*Elegiac Sonnets*—is completed.

March 1999

Begin developing application for University Foundation grant.

Second volume of *Elegiac sonnets*—completed.

Staff person learns about Encoded Archival Description (EAD).

April 1999

Foundation proposal "Expanding Digitization and Electronic Text Work" submitted to NU Foundation.

Staff meet with University Press staff to discuss use of SGML and electronic text in relation to Cather website.

Work begins on *The Banished Man* by Charlotte Turner Smith.

Libraries' Automated Systems staffs begin to develop filter to convert HTML to SGML.

Work begins on encoding finding-aids in EAD.
The Humanities Text Initiative begins planning for next year's budget and events.
E-text planning group is asked to contribute names of relevant researchers.
Discussions begin for web display as part of the 2000 Centennial Celebration of graduate studies at UNL.
Begin testing OCR software on a novel.

May 1999

Purchased TextBridge OCR software. (E-text staff and ASO chair work with training on this software but the actual text is still very problematic for the software and the application continues to crash.)
Staff scan images for inclusion in Library Instruction 110 course.

June 1999

Volume 1 of *The Banished Man* is completed.
Volume 2 of *The Banished Man* is begun.
Half-time E-text librarian resigns.

July 1999

Minolta PS3000 scanner is moved to interlibrary loan.
Staff person works with Archives staff to learn archival processing practices.
Work on EAD projects.

August 1999

Volume 2 of *The Banished Man* is completed.
New Archivist is hired.
Cather images and documents are scanned for use in display cases.

September 1999

Preservation specialist takes over as head of E-text planning committee. Two new members (teaching faculty member, librarian replacing one of the original members) join the group.
Faculty member contacts E-text about possibly working to put University publication, *Journal of Nineteenth Century French Studies*, online and making it searchable. This journal is publishing a compendium of the last 20 years, and faculty member would like to have this available to students and fellow scholars.
Sandberg-Hallgren Psychological Warfare Collection, consisting of Pacific war pamphlets, digitization project is begun.
Archivist and E-text staff person begin to work on EAD specifications.

October 1999

Resignation of contact at University Press.
E-text committee members and staff attend imaging workshop at the Ford Conservation Center as part of the Midwest Archives Conference.
Scans done for Student life photos for Centennial Celebration.

November 1999

2nd workstation, a public workstation, arrives for E-text center.

Scans done for *Omaha World Herald*.

Scans done to replace originals in displays.

Development of a brochure to highlight the Libraries' resources in Romanticism begins.

Scan photos for inclusion in *The Link*.

December 1999

E-text staff person resigns.

EAD skeleton is given to Automated Systems department for work to begin on an SGML/HTML conversion program.

Abstracts of *The Journal of Nineteenth Century French Studies* are put on the Library's server with a search engine.