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Learning, Sharing, and Collaborating: CHIN's Experience

Summary

Learning, sharing, and collaborating are terms that the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) uses to describe audience behaviour and interaction with the Virtual Museum of Canada (www.virtualmuseum.ca). In turn, learning, sharing, and collaborating aptly describes the fundamental working model for CHIN, a network of over 1,000 member museums from across Canada.

This presentation will provide an overview of CHIN's business model, built around the concept of use and reuse of information through Web services that incorporate the principles of user-centred design. Defining our audiences and understanding their needs and their behaviors in a digital environment has resulted in studies and research that will be briefly discussed. Examples of how CHIN delivers "learning, sharing, and collaborating" with its public audiences and its network of heritage professionals will be provided in this presentation. Conclusions will summarize some keys to success based on CHIN's experience.

Introduction

The Virtual Museum of Canada (VMC) (www.virtualmuseum.ca), a public portal showcasing Canadian museums, contains 407,259 images in the Image Gallery, 300 Virtual Exhibits, 160 Community Memories (local history exhibits created by small museums), 144 games, 770 educational resources, a directory of 2,757 Canadian museums, and 587 museum events. The Virtual Museum of Canada, developed by the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN), entertains close to seven million visits per year. During the month of March 2005, the VMC received 771,039 visits from 193 countries. Learning, sharing, and collaborating are keywords used by the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) to describe audience behaviour and interaction with the Virtual Museum of Canada. In turn, learning, sharing, and collaborating aptly describes the fundamental working model for CHIN, a network of over 1,000 member museums from across Canada.

Canadian Heritage Information Network

In 1972, when automation was still in its infancy, CHIN began working with Canadian museums to create national inventories of collections. The process from the beginning was that of learning, sharing, and collaborating. Working together, the museum community learned about collections documentation, data standards, and automated collections management. Collections documentation and expertise was shared through disciplinary working groups to create the national inventories. This collaborative program shaped the way CHIN and its members work together and the national inventories are still at the core of CHIN's services.

Learning

CHIN strives to build skills, knowledge and professional and institutional capacity in a continuous-learning environment. Efforts are concentrated in the area of creating and managing digital content, which includes digital preservation, intellectual property, standards, and collections management. These efforts are reflected in the CHIN Web site (www.chin.gc.ca), and in CHIN's presentations at conferences, workshops, and seminars. Workshops and seminars are provided in partnership with the Provincial Museum Associations, the Canadian Museum Association, the Library and Archives Canada, and museum conferences internationally.

Continuing professional education in the museum sector is unlike other sectors. Museum professionals cite lack of time, resources, and access to training as impediments to their professional development. A relatively low priority assigned to learning by both individuals and institutions is also core to the problem of making time for learning. (Davis, 2001). To help overcome this lack of time, resources, and access, CHIN has dedicated its site (www.chin.gc.ca) to professional development resources—good practice guidelines, courses, research studies, reference databases. One of the most successful self-directed learning was provided with a 10-week email course on copyright.

Sharing

Museum professionals are known for their generosity when it comes to sharing their knowledge and this has been CHIN's experience as a network since its inception. CHIN facilitated working groups to discuss and develop documentation standards and provided a national database where members could share their collections records. This database, with millions of records, serves as a comparative cataloguing resource, a research and exhibit planning tool.

CHIN and its members have shared their expertise internationally through training programs in Canada and abroad. Recently, CHIN had the opportunity to share expertise with UNESCO for the selection of a collections management software for the National Museum of Iraq using CHIN's collections management software selection online resources. CHIN also

teaches a course every two years at the international university of the Francophonie, Senghor University, Egypt.

In this environment of learning, sharing and collaborating, CHIN members who are initiating projects look at what others are doing within the VMC and seek advice from other members. This is especially true with small museums just getting started doing online projects. Consider this feedback message from one historical society to another:

“We are searching the sites and “hit” on yours. We are impressed. It is so informative and interesting. Congratulations!

Do you have advice for beginners???”

Collaboration

The VMC enables aggregation of museum resources to provide a national view of all museum collections, directory of all Canadian museums, a calendar of events, and access services in English and French for the member network. CHIN promotes and markets the VMC on behalf of the collective. Both CHIN and its members have undertaken collaborative online marketing and audience research for the benefit of the wider community. The VMC and Artefacts Canada provide a low-risk, collaborative research environment for testing of new media, technology solutions, and data interchange, and the quantity of data provides opportunities for the museums to partner with industry, universities and other heritage organizations nationally and internationally.

Collaboration is also encouraged through an investment program for the creation of virtual exhibitions and local history exhibits by member museums. Within the virtual exhibit program, one of the rated criteria in the selection process is collaboration with other museums, or partners to create the online product. With the local history program, member museums must demonstrate that they work with the community.

Audience

User statistics—number of visitors, duration of visit, IP address, and referring IP addresses are all important performance indicators for our Web sites but they do not provide the depth and precision of information provided by visitor surveys or feedback messages. The feedback messages often reveal a visitor’s intention and reaction to the site’s resources. Consider this typical feedback message and the model of learning, sharing and collaborating.

“I love this site and the image gallery! I have added about 13 ancestors to my personal museum. I wanted to invite others to see them but would have to give them my log-in info. Need a way to invite them to visit? I am very interested in finding any info on the only portrait ever found on my *[name removed for privacy]* family. You have it at the de Ramezay Museum. Is there any way to get a print or brochure with the portrait printed in it? Please Please Help!

I have been researching my genealogy for over 20 years and this is a Major find for me!!!! Thanks so very much! :-)” *[name removed for privacy]*

The user clearly indicates that she is learning about her family and working on some genealogy research. She also would like to share the portraits that she has assembled in *My Personal Museum*, a password-protected creative space on the VMC. She further suggests that we develop a means for her to share this personal gallery with others—a social space. Her interest in being able to obtain a print may also indicate a possible future service offering for the VMC.

Learning

The VMC provides a resource of authoritative information created by museums. *Museum and Events* are designed to be informative quick references resources, while the *Virtual Exhibits* and *Community Memories* are both educational and engaging and visitors are expected to spend time using the resource. *The Teachers' Centre* is designed as a place where teachers and students can find online resources catalogued according to learning outcomes.

Depending on the user's intentions we need different success measures for the user's experience. A user should be able to easily look up a museum and note the address or learn about an upcoming event; therefore, a quick visit may be an indicator that the resource is working well for the user. However, spending a very short time exploring a virtual exhibit may indicate that the user was not satisfied and perhaps not learning. Users of the *Image Gallery* may just want quick information—an example of an artist's work—or they may want to study and compare images of all of the works of an artist, found in museums across Canada.

Sometimes the user tells you exactly what they have learned:

"I feel this website is a very valuable learning tool... I never knew there were actual fossils in Nova Scotia. I always thought they were in the United States"

Other times the user tells you clearly what they want you to provide to enhance their learning.

"...the artworks you present are spectacular. What I miss is artwork and author description, concerning aspects from historical and theoretical point of view. I know very little about Canadian art and it would be very useful – what you provide is not enough."

This comment is referring to the *Image Gallery*, which features images and cataloguing information from the national humanities database. Most cataloguing records, created to serve internal management of collections do not have the added context found in museum publications, exhibitions or educational programs.

Key findings of a visitor survey conducted in 2004, both online and in the museums, to determine the links between online and in-person visits provided more evidence of the information that users are seeking online. Eighty-two percent of the visitors who used the internet to plan their museum visit responded that they looked for general information (hours of operation, location, admission). People visiting a museum's web site after a visit to the

museum look for rich content: collections' information (50%), schedule of events (39%), images of objects in the collections (32%), and virtual exhibitions (26%). (Thomas & Carey, 2005)

Sharing

Feedback messages are indicative of the inherent need for social interaction—users want to share their ideas and information with the museums and with CHIN, as well as with their friends and family. CHIN will have to develop the means for the VMC to meet the needs for social interaction beyond feedback messages.

In 2001, when the VMC was first launched we had a significant marketing campaign to promote the new site. In order to assess the public's awareness of the VMC, CHIN conducts an annual awareness study. For the first year, this year's results indicated that the internet outpaced the word-of-mouth as a source of awareness. (Decima Research, 2005) This is an indication of the importance of search engine optimization for your Web resource. But people will continue to share with others when they find something of interest on the web.

One of the things not obtained from web logs and user statistics is the sincere messages of thanks from the public. These messages of thanks are encouraging and gratifying for museums large and small. The public appreciates the authoritative information created by museums, and visitors' emails to the VMC express their genuine interest in heritage and their respect for the work of museums.

Collaborating

Consider this feedback message from a visitor to the *Drawing with Light* virtual exhibit prepared by the National Gallery of Canada:

"Visually stunning site. There are 2 things I would like to ask. First, I build various pinhole cameras and have a couple of interesting ones that might be suited for your camera gallery. One camera spins and takes a 360 degree shot and the other is made from a sea urchin. If you are able and interested, you are welcome to include either in your gallery. Second, I do pinhole workshops in the Ottawa area and will run a pinhole exhibition on April 25th, World Pinhole Photography Day (I didn't make it up), highlighting work created by myself and participants of the workshop. It would be amazing if the exhibition could be opened up to a larger audience and a web gallery created and included on your site. Please let me know your thoughts."

The visitor wants both to share their knowledge and experience and collaborate with the museum on the virtual exhibit.

Knowledge is kept for our future in memory institutions (museums, libraries, and archives), but a holistic representation of knowledge is only obtained by combining community and personal knowledge with that held by the memory institutions. The *Community Memories* investment program provides small museums with the opportunity to work with people in their community to

create local history exhibits. The online exhibits provide opportunities for users to complete and complement the information no longer available locally as indicated in this example of part of a longer message to a local history exhibit called *Alice Egan Hagen 1872-1972 Nova Scotia Woman Ceramicist* from a relative of the artist:

"...Perhaps if there is information or questions you are looking for you could contact me through my e-mail...We do have some of her work and I have Alice on an audio tape talking about her family history and about her life as an artist. Perhaps you have already heard this since it was taped by my Uncle [name removed for privacy] around 1965 or 66. Again Many Thanks..."

Community Memories feedback messages are always extremely interesting and demonstrate the sincere desire to learn, share and collaborate. These online exhibits expand the reach of the museum and public awareness of their resources. Frequently the message indicates their intention to visit, to donate material, as well as add to the knowledge. In some cases it has also allowed national news reporters to contact the museum for a story or has generated a request to obtain brochures for a nearby campsite to pass on to their clients. In one case the museum had an email telling them the museum was eligible for a new heritage program and funding—good news indeed!

Going Forward

Based on this model of learning, sharing, and collaborating CHIN has a new business model and strategic priorities for the next three years focusing on services and use rather than just presentation. Services, using museum information and a new information architecture, will further evolve to meet the desire of audiences to learn, share, and collaborate. Based on audience research and following principles of user-centered design, CHIN will better serve its three main audiences: heritage professionals, teachers and students, and the general public.

CHIN's strategic priorities for the next three years are:

- Skill development of heritage professionals, leveraging emerging technologies
- Advance the use of heritage content in education
- Increase public engagement and participation
- International outreach.

CHIN would like to increase the use of technology in its capacity-building strategy for its members. The plan is to incorporate more interactive, convenient, e-learning materials and events on the CHIN web site and establish virtual communities of practice for knowledge exchange and collaborative research. CHIN is returning to its roots of working groups dealing with documentation standards and best practice but with a membership of over 1,000 institutions the only way to do that is electronically. With a history of learning, sharing, and collaborating CHIN knows that working groups are going to succeed but there will be a learning curve as CHIN and its members become comfortable with the collaborative software tool.

Based on experience with *The Teachers' Centre*, research into the educational portal market, and consulting sessions, CHIN is preparing to move forward to create a new e-space for teachers and students. This environment will be a collaborative/community space with private or personal workspace as well as public space. Rather than a lesson plan approach, which is difficult in a country with no national curriculum, the decision is to create a space for the use of objects and tools, creating a teacher resource kit. The objects or "learning objects" will be created by museums, and CHIN will define the information architecture to allow the use of objects in a modular way so that students, teachers, and museum educators can work independently or collaboratively with the resources. Current resources within the VMC, along with new learning objects created for this project, will be made available in this environment along with tools to magnify, collect, and present materials to facilitate learning, sharing, and collaborating.

Increased public engagement and participation will be achieved through audience analysis and engaging communication strategies.

An annual environmental scan to understand the current state of the information environment, the technology in use, and the expectations of the audiences will provide CHIN with the fundamental background required for determining technology solutions, planning user services, and analyzing potential business opportunities. Analysis of web statistics with more sophisticated tools will provide a better understanding of user behaviour on the VMC. Feedback messages will be classified and data-based so they can be more easily analysed and related to the discipline of museum visitor studies. Online surveys will continue and VMC services will adapt based on the results.

To support the use of heritage content in education, a new e-newsletter targeted to teachers was implemented in 2004 to increase awareness of the VMC. CHIN is also actively marketing the VMC at teachers' conferences with booths and presentations. Engagement of museum educators—professionals that have not previously worked with CHIN—will be key to the success of the new learning environment that CHIN is creating. Therefore, communications are equally important between CHIN and its members as it is between CHIN and its audience.

CHIN will continue to collaborate with international partners to share Canada's rich heritage with international audiences and to share Canadian expertise abroad in forums such as this CIDOC conference.

The aims of learning, sharing and collaborating are pertinent to museum professionals as they develop programs and services for their audiences, and to the public who has a vested interest in cultural heritage. Cultural heritage organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, are well-positioned to promote, encourage, and enable the attainment of these goals.

As a past Chair of CIDOC, it gives me great pleasure to open this conference on “Documentation and Users”. I encourage you to share, learn, and collaborate with colleagues from around the world—not just for the next few days as you hear presentations and discuss our shared challenges, but in an ongoing way through the CIDOC working groups and email exchanges. It has been my experience as a CIDOC member for the last 15 years that this committee is one of the best models of learning, sharing, and collaborating.

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