

Novice to Know-How Module Text

Course 7: Providing Access to Preserved Digital Content

Module 1: Introduction to Providing Access

The development of this course was funded by The National Archives (UK) as part of the "Plugged In, Powered Up" digital capacity building strategy.

1. Introduction.

In this course, we will be exploring the basics of providing access to preserved digital content and examining several related key issues.

Unfortunately, access is an issue that has been too often overlooked by those undertaking digital preservation activities. Or, at best, little energy has been expended on it.

But providing access should be a fundamental aspect of our digital preservation work. If we are unable to provide access to our preserved digital content, we should ask ourselves, "Why are we preserving it in the first place?" Also, the ability to access and reuse preserved digital content can be viewed as the ultimate proof that preservation has been successful.

2. What Access is Not.

But before we delve deeper into the issues and processes involved in providing access, it is important to define exactly what we mean by access in this context, and what it is not. We will start with what access is NOT.

First, access in this context does not include the digitization of analogue materials to expand their availability to users or to limit the handling of the original objects. If digitized images are included within the preservation remit of an organization, then providing access to these images may be included but digitization, as the process of creating them, is not.

Access is also not just providing users with a portal that allows them to indiscriminately download a deluge of potentially irrelevant digital content. It should be a managed process providing meaningful access to pertinent digital content. As we will see throughout this course, the type of access provided will be dependent on organizational capabilities and resources, user needs, legal issues, and the nature of the digital content itself.

It is also important to note that “access” and “reuse” are not analogous terms. It is possible to provide basic access without facilitating reuse of the digital content. Rather, delivering access methods to users that allow reuse might be seen as a gold standard for access provision.

3. What Access Is.

So, what do we actually mean by access? In this context, we include everything required to allow our users to:

1. Discover digital content of interest;
2. Understand their options for accessing that digital content; and
3. Access the content.

These processes involve interaction between four elements:

1. Your organization;
2. Your preserved digital content;
3. An access system; and
4. Your users.

Any work that we do on access must carefully consider each of these elements and how they will affect access provision. While they all are important, understanding our users' needs is perhaps the most essential. A clear understanding of user needs will help guide issues such as what resource discovery options we offer, what access functionality is provided, what user guidance is supplied, and what file formats preserved digital content is available in.

4. No “One Size Fits All”.

Although users' needs should be the primary driving force behind the decisions we make on how to provide access, there are other issues that must also be considered. As previously mentioned, these include issues such as:

1. Our organization's capabilities and available resources
2. Legal responsibilities around topics such as data protection and intellectual property rights
3. The characteristics of the digital content itself.

The need to take all of these issues into consideration means there is no easy “one size fits all” answer to providing access to preserved digital content. We must, instead,

develop access systems that reflect the user needs, resourcing, and restrictions individual to our organization.

5. Types of Access Systems.

We have established that how you provide access should be tailored to your organization and the issues mentioned, but to help with planning there are some broad types of access system you might consider. Adrian Brown offers five basic models to in his book "Practical Digital Preservation".

The first model, listed as "copy and forget", is the most basic form, simply providing users with access to the bitstreams of the digital content via download or removable media.

The second is described as "informed download", which provides some technical metadata to the user alongside the bitstream. This will usually include details of the file format of the digital content, software that can be used to open it onscreen, and perhaps even details of where to acquire the software.

The next is to provide the digital content in formats for which free or easily accessible viewers are available. For example, you might provide PDF access copies of more complex formats so users can open them using any number of freely available PDF readers.

The fourth is the "provide viewer" model, where you provide not only the digital content but also the environment in which to view it. This could be accomplished online using software such as a video player embedded in a web page, or on-site, by offering a workstation with relevant software installed.

The final, and perhaps ultimate, level is to provide "reuse tools", allowing users to manipulate and reuse the digital content.

Although these different potential models are presented in a particular order, it is important to recognize that they do not necessarily represent a sliding scale of bad to good but rather a simple guide to different options. Aiming for "reuse" may not be practical or desirable for many organizations.

When you are considering these models, it is also important to think about how you will approach resource discovery, and whether access can or should make use of existing systems you have.

6. Levels of Born-Digital Access and this Course.

Now that we understand some basic models for providing access, it is time to introduce an essential resource for planning access developments, the Digital Library Federation's Levels of Born-Digital Access. This document splits access provision activities into five areas: Accessibility, Description, Research Support and Discovery, Security, and Tools. For each of these areas, the document describes three levels of complexity, and

provides guidance and supporting resources to help you achieve that level of access provision at your organization.

This course has been designed to cover the skills needed to achieve Level One of the Levels of Born-Digital Access and to introduce issues included in Level Two. By achieving Level One, your organization will be able to:

1. Provide users with information on the accessibility of the organization's preserved digital content
2. Offer collection-level information about digital content for resource discovery
3. Deliver bitstream access to the digital content on-site, with basic assistance from staff
4. Provide a secure on-site access workstation with commonly available and open software which can render widely used file formats

Along with the skills to achieve Level One of the Level of Born-Digital Access, this course will cover the beginner's level elements of The National Archives (UK)'s Digital Preservation Workflows, and the basic level of maturity for "Discovery and Access" from the DPC's Rapid Assessment Model to provide you with the knowledge and skills for improving and enhancing access at your organization.

To meet these aims, this course includes modules on:

1. User Needs Analysis
2. Accessibility
3. Resource Discovery
4. Providing User Guidance
5. Managing Sensitive Data
6. Managing Intellectual Property Rights
7. Creating Access Copies, and
8. Setting-Up an Access Workstation

So, let us start delving deeper into the issues around providing access to preserved digital content....