Collection as thing, process, and access: Two proposed models

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Our position paper outlines two models of collection in the digital world presented in recent doctoral research. Both models are based on dimensions of collection as "thing", "process", and "access", identified using a mixed-methods research design including interviews, a survey, catalog searches, and a case study of the British Library's collection for the subject area of social enterprise. Our research revealed a considerable degree of shared understanding of the concept of "collection" by library and information professionals and ordinary people engaged in the field of social enterprise, whether users or non-users of library and information services.

The research [10] identified the following elements of collection:

- Collection as thing, including:

    - Collection as a group of materials
    - Collection as a group of subgroups (organised groupings)
    - Collection as quantity
    - Collection as container or store
    - Collection as a whole

- Collection as access, including:

    - Collection and connection
    - Collection for use

- Collection as process, including:

    - Collection as selection
    - Collection as search
    - Collection as service

Management Level	Collection definition	Example
Strategy	Collection as thing	Policies for: identifying and prioritizing subject areas; scoping collections (local and system-wide); collaborative collection development; preservation.
Tactics	Collection as access	Links to web-based materials and collections; interoperable systems; embedding libraries and librarians within non-library networks.
Operations	Collection as process	Support for community-created content; patron-driven collection; dynamic collection creation; linked data.

Table 1: Proposed collection development hierarchy [3].

Some elements echo earlier discussions of the concept of collection. For example, Lee identifies key characteristics of collection including "access" (p. 80); "selectivity" (pp. 72, 76); "subcollections" (p. 73) and "subject" (p. 76) [9]. Feather and Sturges (pp. 80-81) suggest collection can refer to "all the information resources to which a library has access" [5].

Collection as process is described in Atkinson's discussion of the "process of importation into the control zone," [1] and by Lagoze and Fielding's presentation of collection as "a set of criteria for selecting resources" [7].

The first model based on these dimensions of collection is described by Corrall and Roberts [3], elaborating on a collection development hierarchy based on Edelman [4], Gorman and Howes [6], and Corrall [2] to connect ideas of collection as "thing", "access", and "process" to the management levels of strategy, tactics and operations (Table 1).

In this model, "collection as thing" describes how the boundaries of collection are defined, whether in a physical, virtual or hybrid space. This space may be defined in relation to a single individual or organization, between a group of individuals, or across a range of organizations. "Collection as access" represents the tactics of encouraging and facilitating collection use, such as linking out to web-based content, or developing interoperable systems, such as those which enable movement between separate repositories. "Collection as access" also utilizes physical world tactics, such as printed QR (Quick Response) codes to link people viewing printed material to online content, or embedded librarians who can assist users' access to content in their own real world situations. Finally, "collection as process" describes operational level activities which support the creation, growth or reduction of collections. This element of the hierarchy may take the form of patron-driven acquisitions, dynamic collection creation based

on newly emerging areas of interest, or the automated inclusion or exclusion of particular items or objects (physical or digital) based on particular criteria.

The second model of collection reinterprets the dimensions of "collection as thing", "collection as access", and "collection as process". Instead being presented as elements of a hierarchy, the three aspects of collection are presented here as types of context about content within a collection. Lee (p. 1111) describes collection as context – "sometimes physical, sometimes institutional and sometimes intellectual" [8]. More recently, Wickett et al. demonstrate the value of representing contextual information in collection descriptions and show how aspects of context can be expressed using properties included in the Europeana Data Model. Some of these properties reflect the dimensions of collection described in this position paper, such as "access properties" (pp. 31-32) [11].

Examples of aspects of context suggested by the dimensions of collection as thing, access, and process include:

- Collection as thing

  - Grouped together with
  - Organised by/for

- Collection as access

  - Connected to/from
  - Used by/for

- Collection as process

  - Selected by/for
  - Searchable from/found by searching for
  - Presented as/delivers service

Within this model of collection, interactions with "collection as thing", "collection as access", and "collection as process" may add new context or remove existing context. These may include interactions by collection professionals or by users. Capturing changes in context over time – as well as describing intrinsic context derived from the original collection entity or the items of which it comprised – may add further value to collection content.

Our paper has described three dimensions of collection – "collection as thing", "collection as access", and "collection as process" – suggested by recent doctoral research. We suggest two models which apply these three dimensions: first, to suggest a new interpretation of an existing collection development hierarchy; and, secondly, to explore types of context which collection adds to content. Although developed with specific reference to library and information collections, these three dimensions of the concept of collection may have broader relevance and could be applied to other cultural collections in the digital world.

Acknowledgement

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