Context and Completeness:
Conceptual tools for thinking about digital collections

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Why context and completeness
What are we talking about when we’re talking about context?

**Relationships**
within and among
collections, items, external resources, etc.

Implemented in different ways in different collections

With different implications for use
What are we talking about when we’re talking about context?

Relationships in digital collections obtain between:

item : item
item : collection
collection : collection
item : derivatives

etc.
How context plays out in collections

item : item
How context plays out in collections

item : collection

Black Gotham Stories

Order and Government

The school trustees wanted to maintain law and order among New York's black population by instilling habits of mind and behavior that would prevent any outbreak of social disorder. Their attitudes were typical of the city's white philanthropists who, in supervising charitable institutions for impoverished New Yorkers of varied races, religions, and ethnicities, insisted that these subordinate groups needed to be governed by their betters.

Black community leaders agreed that self-regulation and proper behavior in public were of paramount importance. But there were two issues on which they would not compromise: a decent education that would give their children opportunities not available to the older generation, and the right of free blacks to control their own destiny.
How context plays out in collections

item : collection

NEW-YORK AFRICAN FREE-SCHOOL, No. 2.
Engraved from a drawing taken by P. Reason, a pupil, aged 13 years.

Click thumbnail to view larger, or here to view full size.

NYPL ID number: 119719
19th-century Miscellaneous Collection

DATE: circa 1828
CREATOR: Patrick Reason
How context plays out in collection:
How context plays out in collections
How context plays out in collections

**item : interpretation / story / analysis / use**
How context plays out in collections

• Content
  • What’s there? How and why was it gathered?
  • Data models underlying resource representation

• Navigation
  • Internal and external hyperlinking
  • Search and browse functionalities

• Design
  • Foregrounding
  • Juxtaposition
How much context is enough?

E.g., Is the provision of context via juxtaposition enough?

E.g., do you need to add contextual scaffolding for different user groups?

It depends on what you’re trying to accomplish
Collection objectives

Finding
Collocating
Choice
Acquisition
Navigation

-based on Svenonius (2000)

Boils down to: Discovery and Access
Collection objectives, expanded in light of digital scholarship

Discovery

Access

Making social change
Recovering stories
Serving as collaborative hubs
Gathering new, original evidence
Publishing
Experimenting with new methods
Etc.
Reframing purpose: Completeness

What is your digital collection striving toward?

What is its *logic* or *ideal* of completeness?

This collection would be complete, someday, if...?
A key concept from the collections scholars build themselves

—Palmer, 2004
Contextual mass

“Collections built on a contextual mass model create a system of interrelated sources where different types of materials and different subjects work together to support deep and multifaceted inquiry in an area of research” –Palmer, 2004
Contextual mass

• Responsive to what we know about how researchers work
• Prioritizing interrelationship among items / collections / etc. over critical mass

Contextual mass “is more imperative than ever in the development of digital library collections” as it reflects an active user-orientation to development -Green and Courtney, 2014
Contextual mass in collections and aggregations:

• Content
  • Balancing thematic cohesion with diversity of sources
  • Purposive and self-aware collection development toward completeness

• Architecture and design
  • Abundance of (opportunities for) interrelationship within and beyond collection
  • Platforms for active user participation in forging connections
  • Retention of layers of context (original collection, sub-collections, etc.)

• Added features
  • Secondary information
  • Interpretive affordances
  • Analytical tools
Contextual mass varies

• Optimizing context for different user groups, different collection objectives

• E.g., context for learners will look very different from context for scholars or expert researchers

• But a collection can offer a flexible or dynamic architecture and rich item representations to support both
Hallmarks of contextual mass for learning and teaching

- Fixed hierarchies or paths of movement
- Defined around broad subjects
- Limited narrative explication often without explicit authorship
- Little documentation of the provenance, completeness of sub-collections
Contextual mass for learning and teaching
Hallmarks of contextual mass for learning and teaching

Fixed hierarchies or paths of movement

Civil Rights Movement

Women's Leadership
Meet the women who led the civil rights movement as organizers, political strategists, marchers, freedom riders, and more, from Fannie Lou Hamer to Ella Baker. Through their work in the movement, women were jailed, participated in sit-ins and other protests, and developed campaigns.

Legal Battles
Investigate the court cases and legislation that advanced the fight for racial equality by challenging segregation and discrimination in education, housing, voting, and public accommodations. Famous cases argued before the U.S. Supreme Court, like Brown v. Board of Education, overruled traditional

Organizations
Learn about the organizations that strategized and coordinated campaigns for civil rights, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian

the Atlantic Ocean, the Mississippi River, and the western states of Michigan and Illinois.

Water is Life
Hallmarks of contextual mass for **learning and teaching**

**Defined around broad subjects**

**Browse by Topic**

Highlights of collections from libraries, archives and museums across the United States, organized into easy-to-navigate topics.

This is a new feature designed to showcase content strengths in our collection. Look for new topics in the future!

- American Civil War
- Aviation
- Baseball
- Civil Rights Movement
- Immigration since 1840
- Photography
- Women in Science
Hallmarks of contextual mass for **learning and teaching**

Limited narrative explication (often without explicit authorship)
Hallmarks of contextual mass for **learning and teaching**

Little documentation of provenance and scope of sub-collections

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**Browse by Topic**

Explore DPLA’s rich collections on topics of interest like the American Civil War, Immigration since 1840, and the Civil Rights Movement without having to do a search. **Browse by topic**, one of the newest learning tools on DPLA’s site, features hand-selected items from across DPLA’s collections and is designed to showcase the breadth and depth of our materials in easy-to-navigate lists.
Hallmarks of contextual mass for research

• Multiple points of access to items, collections
  • Multiple ways of accessing, obtaining, using data / sources / evidence
  • Multiple ways in, through, out, among

• Links to external resources, collections, datasets

• Collection presentation dynamically adapts to users

• Collection supports interaction and contribution

• Analytic and interpretive features

• Thorough documentation of provenance and completeness of collections, sub-collections, and underlying data
Hallmarks of contextual mass for research

Multiple points of access to items, collections
Hallmarks of contextual mass for research

Links to external resources, collections, datasets
Hallmarks of contextual mass for research

Collection presentation dynamically adapts to users

Knowledge card search tool dynamically generated by user query
(mockup documented in Fenlon, et al., 2018)
Hallmarks of contextual mass for research

Collection supports interaction and contribution

Emblem annotation (example from Cole, et al., 2012)
Hallmarks of contextual mass for research

Balances research platform with interpretation and analysis

What Palmer (2004) terms “Scholarly contribution” and “Activity support”, Scholarly narratives, interactive visualizations, and functionalities which support user activities while also constituting expert, interpretive or analytic takes on the collection
Hallmarks of contextual mass for research

Thorough documentation of provenance and completeness of collections, sub-collections, underlying data

Description of Materials

People & Relationships

The biographical and relationship information featured on the persons in the case documents. The documents, in most instances, are the only insight into the lives of these individuals. In many cases, the documents are difficult to read due to illegible handwriting, damaged pages, or antiquated grammar and punctuation. For a fair trial, additional records were conducted to supplement the biographical information.

Cases & Documents

The court records for the sessions of the Circuit Court of the District of Washington are located at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The original documents are housed in the District of Columbia Archives and the Library of Congress. These documents provide valuable information about the legal proceedings and the individuals involved. Over time, we hope to present all known manuscripts for any given work of our four authors. Thus, for example, we will be uniting the fair copy of Prometheus Unbound with all of the known drafts. We will be presenting, as closely as possible, the linear sequence of the work and in
Context and Completeness

Recalling the objectives of digital collections...

• Discovery and access
• Making social change
• Recovering stories
• Serving as collaborative hubs
• Gathering new, original evidence
• Publishing
• Experimenting with new methods
• Etc.

• What logic or ideal of *completeness* are we striving toward?

• What would *contextual mass* look like
  • for this collection?
  • for different user groups?
Collections referenced in this presentation (first reference only, slide number in parens)

(5) https://archive.blackgothamarchive.org/
(8) http://crdl.usg.edu/events/brown_vs_boe/
References


