

Providing Access to Digitized Content via the Finding Aid: A Usability Study

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Abstract: As funding for digitization and metadata creation continues to evaporate, cultural heritage institutions increasingly consider delivery of digitized content via the finding aid, to avoid the costs of item-level metadata creation. This approach enables low-cost digitization of even large manuscript collections, and seeks to simulate the user experience in the reading room while providing online access to material that otherwise may never be digitized.

In a grant project partially funded by the NHPRC, the University of Alabama Libraries developed a model for low-cost mass digitization of large manuscript collections accessed via the EAD finding aid. The grant project included a usability test which compared the resulting interface to a similar collection delivered with item-level descriptions accessed outside the finding aid. User groups tested were drawn from predominantly undergraduates and graduates rather than experienced researchers, who have been shown to prefer the finding aid as interface. The results predictably indicate that most students prefer the more familiar item-level-described digital content.

However, the difference in learnability between the two interfaces was only statistically significant in this study in one of two measures, and notably a true test of learnability should cover a longer period of exposure. Oddly enough, those who indicated they had no digital collection experience found the finding aid interface significantly easier than those who did. Thus indications are that the finding aid interface may indeed be learnable for novice users. Participants for whom English is a second language had marked difficulty with the EAD interface. The authors call for further research to establish learnability, and to determine how to make finding aids more user-friendly.

About the author:

Jody L. DeRidder is Assistant Professor and Head of Digital Services at the University of Alabama Libraries. She has an MS in Computer Science and another in Information Sciences, and focuses on digital library infrastructure development and support. Her research interests include developing pragmatic solutions for digital archives, their services and their target audiences.