

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Open access to working notes in the humanities

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0nb5g2m4>

ISBN

9781450336666

Authors

Buckland, Michael K
Golden, Patrick
Shaw, Ryan B

Publication Date

2015-08-19

DOI

10.1145/2788993.2789852

Peer reviewed

Open Access to Working Notes in the Humanities

Michael K. Buckland

School of Information
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-4600, USA
01 510 642 3159

buckland@ischool.berkeley.edu

Patrick Golden

Sch. of Information & Library Science
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3360

ptgolden@berkeley.edu

Ryan B. Shaw

Sch. of Information & Library Science
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3360

ryanshaw@unc.edu

ABSTRACT

A web-based tool for making and sharing research designed for authors, curators, and editors in the humanities is described, editorsnotes.org. Notes are a varied genre not limited to annotations. The data for the tool is modeled as three kinds of records: Notes created; Documents cited; and Topics, headings for names and subjects. Structured records are needed for interoperability and sharing. Open access, sustainability issues, and how working notes can complement other infrastructure are discussed in a status report.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.3.7 [Digital Libraries], I.7.4. [Electronic Publishing]. J.5. [Arts and Humanities].

General Terms

Documentation, Design, Economics, Reliability, Standardization.

Keywords

Documentary editions, Editors, Historians, Working notes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The humanities' concern with the human experience is very complex and resists being reduced to tidy simplifications. Multiple interpretations, the lack of clear-cut definitions, and the need to return continuously to primary and secondary sources demand the management of a diversity of questions, notes, and collected fragments of evidence. Working notes have been pervasive in humanities scholarship. A succession of tools have been used: memory techniques, writing, printing, slips of paper, cards, binders, and, now, digital technology.[1] The humanities are rich in interpretations, figurative language, and multiple narratives which are ill-suited for the routinizing of business operations that have dominated the development of digital technology.

Notes on persons, places, events, institutions, and topics are needed to understand context. Working notes vary greatly in form. They ordinarily include fragments of relevant evidence: photocopies, newspaper clippings, quotations, and other material. Often notes start with a question and an answer is gradually

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than ACM must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from Permissions@acm.org.

OpenSym '15, August 19 - 21, 2015, San Francisco, CA, USA

© 2015 ACM. ISBN 978-1-4503-3666-6/15/08...\$15.00

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2788993.2789852>

compiled.

Working notes mostly remain unpublished and inaccessible. The nineteenth-century periodical *Notes & Queries: A Medium of Inter-Communication for Literary Men, Artists, Antiquaries, Genealogists, Etc.*, pioneered the sharing of notes, questions, and evidence with the slogan "When found, make a note of it".

The work practices of the historians and research assistants preparing scholarly editions of historically important documents illustrate the problem well. The documents being edited cannot be properly understood without reconstructing their context. Alternative explanations are possible. Some questions may never be fully resolved. Years of painstaking investigations generate unwieldy collections of notes. Funding, however, only supports the eventual formal published edition in which explanation and supporting evidence can be included only sparingly. The extensive working notes are not shared and are, usually, eventually discarded.

Digital humanities projects have typically focused on notes as annotations of documents, but even documentary editions also have explanatory notes not linked to any specific point in the edited text. More importantly, scholars assemble large numbers of working notes about unresolved questions, sources examined, intriguing leads, and useful explanations, which may not cite a point in some text. Working notes deserve attention in their own right. Not all are worth preserving, but current practice is very wasteful. This paper is based on four years of providing a stable platform for research notes.

2. METHODS

2.1 Technology

The design of the tool is based on:

- Treating working notes as genre liberated from a restrictive focus on annotation;
- The leveraging of Web technology to empower individual scholars to greatly increasing the return on investment in humanities scholarship by making their research open to others;
- A structured data model that promotes interoperability with other humanities and library developments; and
- An architecture designed for robust, low cost preservation and sustainability with reduced dependence on specialized software and service oriented architecture.

The tool is implemented as a RESTful web service for storing and searching over notes, bibliographic data, and their related data, and a browser-based client interface for authoring, organizing, and consulting notes.[2]

2.2 Project History

The Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) is an informal international collaboration based in the University of California,

working notes whether they annotate some text or not, as a genre in their own right.

There are a number of general-purpose note-taking tools (Evernote, Tinderbox) and tools primarily intended for other purposes that also can be used for note-taking (Zotero, Scrivener). The former lack critical features needed for scholarly work, such as integration with a citation database. The latter do not focus primarily on note-taking but on related and complementary practices. All of these tools assume that notes are for personal use and not something to be shared more widely. Editors' Notes is a note-taking tool focused on the needs of scholars but with the goal of making their working notes widely sharable.

3.3 Development

Some additional developments are in progress.

3.3.1 Tools to add data and visualizations

Tools to allow users to add and maintain geospatial or biographical information, events including dates, and other structured data are intended, and a simple interface to allow users to invoke three kinds of visualizations based on targeted Topics: Maps, timelines, and network graphs, which correspond most naturally to places, events, and interpersonal relationships. These intended additional features are not essential but would be attractive enhancements.

3.3.2 Redundant Sustainability

Editors Notes already follows usual best practices for sustainability and data management: open source software on GitHub, adherence to common standards, documentation, regular back-up, and easy content export in standard formats. The Achilles heel in standard best practice is dependence on Internet-connected servers in service oriented architecture. We are working towards a fail-safe collection oriented architecture so that both the content and some of the basic functionality of Editors' Notes could survive catastrophic, irrevocable failure of server and of software and continue life (possibly with reduced functionality) as a conventional hypertextual website.[8]

4. DISCUSSION

The Editors' Notes is a digital tool suited for implementation broadly across humanities research and education not only in institutional settings but also for the independent, individual scholar using a public library. Editors Notes is designed for conventional software sustainability (open source, GitHub, documentation) but also to be "fail-safe" so that the content can survive software and server failure. By treating working notes as a publishable genre they are moved out of obscurity and into the open, indexed Web. This modest technical change can transform scholarly communication and advance the dissemination of humanities scholarship within and between all humanities fields and for all interested audiences.[9] It is, however, a significant change in work practice.

Linked Data promises to facilitate the collaborative production and use of structured information about historical people, places, organizations, events, and ideas. But few processes have been established to assess and improve the quality of Linked Data. Historians, especially editors preparing documentary editions, are

greatly concerned to establish accurate, reliable contextual details concerning events, institutions, places, and persons. Their notes on such points could be prime sources, if accessible, when authoritative resources are needed to establish the accuracy and reliability of Linked Data [10].

The *Unified Library Service for Japan* example shown above illustrates how working notes can complement Wikipedia with its No Original Research policy. Publishing a transcript of this historically important but unpublished and largely unknown document, along with an associated explanatory Note, provided the resources necessary for the Wikipedia article on its author, Philip O. Keeney, to be made significantly more complete [11].

Making notes is basic for learning, for teaching, and for research, so improvements in how they can be managed and shared can have wide benefits. In the humanities there is a continuous need to keep posing new questions, to reconsider old answers, to keep returning to primary sources, and to share ideas widely across and between communities. It is this broad need that justifies investment in the wide-spread adoption of new and better tools for making, managing, and, especially, sharing our notes, questions, and evidence.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank our collaborators and the Coleman Fung Foundation and the A. W. Mellon Foundation for their support.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Krajewski, M. 2011. *PaperMachines: About Cards and Catalogs, 1548-1929*. Cambridge, MS: MIT Press.
- [2] Editors' Notes [Website] <http://editorsnotes.org/>
- [3] Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative [website] <http://ecai.org>
- [4] Editorial Practices and the Web. [Website] <http://ecai.org/mellon2010>
- [5] California State Archives. (Forthcoming). *Records in the California State Archives for the Study of Labor History: A reference guide*.
- [6] *Editorial Practices and the Web: Phase 2. Proposal Narrative*. (2013) <http://metadata.sims.berkeley.edu/en2narr.pdf>
- [7] *Editors' Notes* <https://github.com/editorsnotes>
- [8] Shaw, R, Rabinowitz, A, Golden, P. and Kansa, E. (Forthcoming). A sharing-oriented design strategy for networking knowledge organization systems. *International Journal of Digital Libraries* <http://link.springer.com/journal/799>
- [9] Daniel, W. C. (2013). Open Notebook History. <http://wcm1.web.rice.edu/open-notebook-history.html>
- [10] Shaw, R and Buckland, M. (2011). *Editorial control over linked data*. American Society for Information Science and Technology Annual meeting, New Orleans. Preprint <http://metadata.sims.berkeley.edu/posterassist2011.pdf>
- [11] Philip Keeney http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Keeney

Appendix 1: Note. <http://editorsnotes.org/projects/emma/notes/336/>

Helen Keller — opposition to World War 1

This note is **open**

Related topics
Keller, Helen, 1880-1968

Project The Emma Goldman Papers

Private No

License ©


Author Patrick Golden

Last updated Aug. 24, 2011, 10:50 a.m. ([view history](#))

DESCRIPTION

Question: Did Keller actively oppose the war in Europe, or just US involvement in it? Especially year 1915.

She actively campaigned against the war in general-- and not just US involvement in it-- from the end of 1915. She did not go to Europe with Henry Ford's "peace ship" during this time because, according to her, the peace desired by Ford and other pacifists was one that would leave capitalism intact, do nothing about the exploitation of workers, and inevitably result in more (capitalist) wars in the future. In a speech originally given on December 19 and then repeated in the following weeks, she advocated for the creation of a global union that would unite workers and soldiers against the governments making them fight each other. These views were similar to those held by other radicals at the time who were not pacifists, but rather believed in "no war but the class war."

 "HELEN KELLER FINDS DEFENSE PLANS BAD". *The New York Times*, December 20, 1915.

This Note began as a query and was gradually modified as research yielded explanation. It links to the Topic heading *Keller, Helen, 1880-1968*. Addition, annotated sources are not shown.

Appendix 2: Topic record, http://editorsnotes.org/projects/japanese_librarianship/topics/3522/

Editors' Notes [Browse](#) [About](#) [Log in](#)


[Occupation influences on Librarianship in Japan, 1945-1952](#) > [Topics](#) > [Japan Library School](#)


Japan Library School

[Article](#) [Related Notes & Queries \(2\)](#) [Related Documents \(1\)](#)

The Japan Library School was established at Keio University Mita campus in Tokyo in 1951. Renamed School of Library and Information Science effective 1 April 1968. Keio University was founded by Fukuzawa Yukich (1835-1901), author, Enlightenment writer, teacher, translator, entrepreneur and journalist.

Sources

 Robert L. Gitler, *Robert Gitler and the Japan Library School: An Autobiographical Narrative*, ed. Michael K. Buckland (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999).

 Takahisa Sawamoto, "Keio University School of Library and Information Science: Its Past, Present and Future," *Library and Information Science* 9 (1971): 11-13.

This "Topic" record has a brief explanatory scope note, cites two authority sources, and provides links within the Editors' Notes site to two related Notes and to one related Document.