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ETD 2001

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Julia Gelfand

The 4th International Symposium on Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD) was held at the Caltech campus in Pasadena, California, March 22-24, 2001 and was the first time this group had met on the West Coast. Thus, in addition to a contingent from Europe, there were a number of participants from Asia and the Pacific Rim. Increasingly international in attendance and presentations, the movement of electronic thesis and dissertation is one that universities from around the globe are learning about and participating in at remarkable rates. The mix of people at this conference was one of the most successful meetings of librarians, archivists, faculty, and academic administrators including deans, provosts, directors of the Office of Graduate Study and Research, systems administrators, vendors from the information industry, a few commercial publishers and related personnel with potential interest in how the ETD will evolve in the next few years.

The ETD was born at Virginia Tech nearly a decade ago, when Gail McMillan took on the challenge of accepting dissertations in digital formats. Today, more and more institutions are learning from that experience and are using the thesis and dissertation (T&D) publications forms that increasingly lead to the more widespread mandate that all T&Ds should be submitted in electronic format.

This conference has grown considerably, as has the scope of topics on the programs. There were several plenary sessions. The first and the last plenary session focused on the Unesco International Guide for ETDs now in the works and featured Axel Plathe from Unesco and Ed Fox from Virginia Tech. The ETD Guide Web site describes the effort (<http://etdguide.org>) and is a resource for graduate students who are writing an electronic thesis or dissertation, for faculty who want to mentor ETD authors, and for administrators and IT personnel who want to initiate ETD programs. The concept, NDLTD (Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations), grew out of the Unesco work and was described by the first panel of speakers. Joe Moxley from the University of South Florida articulated that authors of ETDs use writing space differently and that this is an emerging new genre in scholarly communication. The set-up from the first plenary suggested the importance of the technical issues, how different disciplines are "growing" the ETD and how similar this product of scholarly output is to other open source products, found on <http://www.theses.org> and <http://www.openarchives.org> The first plenary introduced indeed how global all these concerns are together with speakers from Canada, USA, France, India, and Germany.

Like most conferences there were parallel tracks, meaning that one could not attend all the sessions. I chose to attend presentations that described ETD methodology and covered issues relevant to scholarly communication and alternative publishing techniques. The first concurrent was on "Statistics and Evaluation of ETD Projects" and featured the Association of the Research Libraries' new metrics initiatives. Joan Lippincott from the Coalition of

Networked Information (CNI) addressed assessment and how it builds effectiveness in program evaluation. Specifically, she used the NDLTD Web site at Virginia Tech as an example to examine measures for service quality, impact, usefulness of the content, etc. One of the best tools is to survey students about one-year post-degree award to have them reflect on the experience of writing and submitting the ETD.

Sherry Schmidt, the University Librarian at Arizona State University, introduced the E-Metrics Project at ARL and suggested how difficult it is to obtain accurate vendor statistics, to utilize appropriate personnel to interpret the data and findings that indicate how significantly user behavior is changing. The final speaker in this session was Mark McFarland from the University of Texas Libraries. He gave some valuable insights in the library experience of collecting data, working with information providers in order to collect the most appropriate data, and shared how relevant this is to launching an ETD program. He noted how librarians can apply the standards already in place and practiced by the groups such as International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC), PALS in the UK, the US National Commission on Library & Information Systems (NCLIS), Council of Library & Information Resources (CLIR) and Digital Library Federation (DLF) and the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) and how they can drive the national and international directions of the ETD with more clarity and coherence than if we had not had so much experience in other electronic publishing opportunities.

The second plenary session had a very amusing and personal title, "Killing the Duck to Keep the Quack: The Poetics of Access and Closure in Australia's First Online Doctorate." Simon Pockley from Australia shared his experience as the first recipient of an online dissertation in Australia. His highly personal narrative dissertation traced an expedition conducted in 1933 via camel across central Australia. He articulated how this kind of historiography combines two kinds of writing: overwriting, the process of keeping the writing active and engaging; and underwriting, which contains links to different layers. By demonstrating how he included images, photo archives, standard references to notes from open access or public domain resources to private correspondence and diaries, he created a very visual and deep experience that offers long-term access, so that future readers can build on the research. Pockley highlighted how the Dublin Core metadata can be applied and concluded that they encourage the understanding of value in ubiquity, how problematic copyright becomes, and survival is proliferation. Personally, his experience was one where new communities were formed of individuals who shared an association with this journey and thus the dissertation does not seem to be completed.

One of the most interesting parts of this conference was the Graduate Student Panel, where recent doctoral recipients from Canada, Mexico and the USA shared their experiences. A range of subject disciplines was evident and each was a very individual product.

One presenter spoke about her research that was conducted at the Deaf Theatre in Sydney, Australia and how she reconstituted meaning by being able to demonstrate it in ways other than only through text. The ability to comment on performances that were included in the ETD by means of video clips, links to reviews, comparing rehearsals with final performances, etc. added a new context for studying and analyzing performance.

Another concurrent session that I found interesting was when Gail McMillan from Virginia Tech addressed "Library Issues and Responsibilities of the ETD." She offered a checklist of how to match the library's goals with that of the university; respond to faculty concerns about intellectual property; the technical support structure of how to submit the ETD, how it is approved by the Graduate School, and how it becomes accessible to the public. Archiving the ETD is a major concern and, at Virginia Tech, students pay an archiving fee instead of a binding fee. Public access to the ETD is achieved via the OPAC, the Web and the campus Digital Library. The technical processing has a different workflow and McMillan shared the savings in cataloging costs of the ETD over the bound volume.

"SFX Reference Linking for ETDs" was the topic of another concurrent session that was very informative. Three speakers, Betsy Coles and John McDonald from Caltech and Jenny Walker from ExLibris, the company that launched SFX, addressed how SFX "allows researchers to seamlessly transition from one information resource to another, for citation tracking, examining footnotes or to find more information about the author, resource or subject" (McDonald). The SFX architecture in an enabled database matches metadata and then takes the user to a specified destination. ETDs have enormous value for SFX, because they contain such rich bibliographic properties and content; dissertations are often still considered grey literature with specialized concentrations and by promoting them with better access they have increased value to a wider readership. The links are very powerful in ETDs and bridge the "source" with the "target" or citation method. If and when the NISO proposal to enhance the OpenURL to include "thesis or dissertation" is accepted, then the strength of SFX demonstrates greater value to the content.

The third plenary session was devoted to two speakers who shared their personal odysseys with ETDs. Tim Brace eloquently spoke about the "University of Texas, Austin's Experience with Instituting an ETD Requirement." The key decisions that have led to a successful program include: making it mandatory with a commitment from the highest levels; support from the library staff, where it was clear that new leaders would emerge to make this happen; and an understanding that digital submission is different than digital dissertations turned in on a floppy or zip or CD-ROM. The outcome is that faculty, administrators and students conclude that the ETD raises scholarship, and serves students' distinct needs more satisfactorily. Institutional infrastructure had to change to accommodate this - academic computing services needed to offer help to students; a listserv was created for students to share information and raise questions; and the bottom line was that students had to figure out the technology early in the process.

Vinod Chachra, founder and president of VTLIS, Inc., shared the goals for a "Uniform Catalog Plans for NDLTD". He said it would be easiest if metadata are submitted in any format and can be updated. There is no reason why this cannot be a global union catalog containing content in all languages. Copyright issues have not been solved. Perhaps a Digital Rights Management for ETDs will offer a new and clearer interpretation of fair use for both authors and readers.

Being a speaker in a concurrent session did not allow me to attend another session. I delivered a paper, "The ETD: What Color Is It? Black, White or Grey?" and explored the changing hues of digital content in the context of changes in higher education and new forms of functional literacy. Following my session, the conference convened for the last plenary session and Professor Jean-Claude Guedon from Concordia University in Montreal entertained how the ETC is a laboratory for many issues. His closing remarks reaffirmed the new emphasis for the research enterprise and how new learning communities have been born. This new publishing mode, usually in pdf, is likely to be a transition phase that will lead to deeper and more structured documents creating an even more open format of mixed media. The history lessons we should remember from earlier formats of parchment, manuscripts, easily reproducible print and now digital suggest that the "PhD is a process that engages in intellectual intercourse and distinguished privilege." Ed Fox closed the conference with a compelling status report on the NDLTD Project and invited participation from those in attendance to join the NDLTD and commit to this international project. Examining <http://www.ndltd.org/> will help inform one of the changing status of this project.

The sense is that there is still much to learn. In spring 2002, the 5th International Conference on ETDs will be held at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia, where there is an established ETD program under way. Conference proceedings from 2001 and earlier conferences will soon be posted on the Web. One can monitor the conference Web site at <http://library.caltech.edu/etd/> to determine availability.

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