Introduction to Omeka – Lesson Plan

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I've taught "Introduction to Omeka" many times at various THATCamps, but I've never done more than work from an outline. Today, however, I wrote it all down, and I am posting it for your edification here. The text is below, and here is a PDF: Introduction_to_Omeka_Lesson_Plan. I've marked the PDF with a CC-BY license, and all the content on this site is similarly marked, so feel free to share and adapt. You may also be interested in the lesson plan for the workshop Teaching with Omeka that I co-taught with Jeff McClurken at THATCamp Pedagogy back in 2011.

One reason I've never written this up before is that I've taught the workshop so many times (perhaps a dozen?) that I felt I knew it backward and forward with just a sketchy outline; I've rarely had the chance to teach anything so many times, and I must say that I've appreciated the chance to practice and improve. It has also taught me to be grateful for the "how to teach technology" training I had at the University of Virginia back when I was a "Teaching with Technology Support Partner" — the model they gave us, which I still remember and use, was this: **Motivate, Define, Demonstrate, Practice**. First, you have to convince people that they want to learn this software and explain how it's different from other software, and show them exciting examples of things accomplished with the software. Then you should define particular terms that might be unfamiliar, then demonstrate key features or tasks, then have people practice using the software while you circulate and help them. It's never as neat as that, of course — in particular, it's usually best to help define a term by demonstrating its use in context — but I do try to follow that rough model when I'm teaching technology.

In any case, here you go.

Introduction to Omeka: Lesson Plan

by Amanda French – amandafrench.net

Preparation

Go to omeka.net and click the big "Sign up!" button. Sign up for the free Basic plan. When you submit the form, you will be emailed an activation link and a username and password. If you don't get the email, check your spam folder. Feel free to explore Omeka on your own while I take you through it.

Introduction – What is Omeka? (10 minutes)

Omeka is a simple, free web publishing system built by and for scholars that is used by hundreds of archives, historical societies, libraries, museums, and individual researchers and teachers to create searchable online databases and scholarly online interpretations of their digital collections. If you have a digital collection of primary sources that you want to publish online in a scholarly way, you'll want to consider Omeka.

"Omeka" (pronounced oh-MEH-ka) is a Swahili word meaning "to display or lay out wares" – swahili_english.enacademic.com/11461/omeka

The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media began building Omeka in 2006; they wanted to abstract the technologies they were using repeatedly to build historical websites, all of which required setting up a searchable database that was integrated with an online exhibit.

One of the first sites to use a proto-version of what would become Omeka was the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, an archive of personal stories and digital records related to the 2005 hurricanes Katrina and Rita: hurricanearchive.org/. Another was the April 16th Archive at april16archive.org/, a commemoration of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting tragedy. Omeka 1.0 was officially released for public use in June 2009.

The free, open source, downloadable version of Omeka is available at omeka.org. This version of Omeka is **self-hosted** software that can be installed on a web hosting server (not on your personal computer, at least not unless you're willing to install a virtual server on your PC). Librarians or educational technologists at your institution may be happy to install and maintain Omeka for you on an organizational web hosting server; if you'd like to buy commercial web hosting for about $100 per year and teach yourself to use it, you can check out the Omeka team's hosting suggestions.

Because some organizations and individuals couldn't or didn't want to run their own server or buy commercial server space, RRCHNM began developing a **hosted** version of Omeka that requires much less technical knowledge, infrastructure, and labor. The hosted version of Omeka, which was beta-launched in October 2010, is available at omeka.net.

When considering whether to use the self-hosted version of Omeka or the hosted version of Omeka, you will want to keep in mind the useful lesson from Spiderman: "With great power comes great responsibility." Concomitantly, of course, "with less responsibility comes less power." In other words, when you download Omeka from omeka.org, you can customize it as much as you want and install it as many times as you like, but creating and supporting those Omeka sites may take a good bit of knowledge and time. When you use the hosted version of Omeka at omeka.net, it's much easier, but you will run up against certain limits of space and functionality. You might also think of self-hosting Omeka as like owning a house, whereas using the hosted version of Omeka is like renting an apartment. Moving from one to the other is perfectly feasible, but it's about the same level of hassle as moving house (it depends on how

much stuff you have, for one thing!). See bitly.com/compareomekas for more on this issue.

Omeka is a nonprofit project; its funding comes from federal funding agencies and from private foundations who support education: IMLS, Mellon, Sloan, and Kress. The fees for the premium plans at omeka.net are used to buy storage space for your files from Amazon Web Services.

Basic Omeka features and definitions (15 minutes)

Here's a typical Omeka site: the City of Boston archive – cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/ (linked to from the main City of Boston Archives at www.cityofboston.gov/archivesandrecords/). I'll define some key terms and features while taking you through this site.

Items – An "item" is the basic unit of an Omeka site. It might be a photograph with a single attached image file, a three-page letter with three attached image files (one for each page), or a record with no attached files (such as a "person" record). Omeka can handle all the major digital file types for documents, images, audio, and video; audio and video files display as an embedded Quicktime player so that the user can listen or watch. Example: See this site's 77 items at cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/items

Metadata – Data about data; information about an item. Bibliographic metadata is the title, author, publisher, date and so on of a publication, for instance. Omeka encourages you to describe every item with lots of metadata, which is part of what makes it a scholarly system. *Example*: cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/items/show/77

Dublin Core – Dublin Core is a metadata standard used by libraries and archives for digital items that consists of 15 basic fields that can be used to describe any digital object, no matter what it is. Such basic fields include Creator, Subject, Description, Date, Rights, and so on. "Dublin" is Dublin Ohio, not Dublin Ireland; "core" is the same sense as "core curriculum" — the name comes from the 1995 meeting in Dublin, OH where librarians and computer scientists first formulated this shared standard set of essential information needed to describe digital objects. Omeka does also allow adding additional standard metadata fields and creating custom metadata fields, but this may make it more difficult to transfer your data to and from Omeka and other systems, since these systems need a shared vocabulary to "talk" to one another. But the fact that Omeka is built on Dublin Core means that your data is likelier to last longer, because it can be moved to other systems later. There are prompts built in to Omeka that will help you understand what information to put in every Dublin Core field, but you can also consult the Dublin Core User Guide section on Creating Metadata (version 2).

Advanced Search – Every Omeka site comes by default with a basic keyword search and an Advanced Search screen. Any information entered in an item's Dublin Core metadata fields will be findable when a user searches for it, and the Advanced Search lets a user narrow by particular metadata fields. *Example*: Go to cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/items/advanced-search and

search for Date → contains → 1942 to find items from the year 1942.

Item Type – By default Omeka offers 12 types of items, including "Document," "Still Image," "Sound," "Moving Image," "Person," and more. You can also define custom item types, perhaps something like "Coin" or "Poem" or "Quilt," and you can define custom sets of metadata fields to go with those item types. For instance, if you define the item type "Poem," you might define a metadata field such as "Rhyme Scheme" where you can enter that information (such as A'bA" abA' abA" abA' abA" abA'A" for a villanelle). Be aware, though, that creating custom item types and metadata fields may make it more difficult to exchange data between your Omeka archive and other existing systems. *Example*: Go to cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/items/advanced-search and Search by Type = Document to find 7 documents in the archive (as opposed to photos, for instance).

Tags – Tags allow you to link items together with terms of your choosing. When any two items have the same tag, the tag automatically turns into a link. Omeka sites allow you to browse items by tag. *Example*: Go to cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/items/browse/tag/ and click "Hyde Park" to see items tagged with that term.

Featured Items – Omeka sites by default have a space on the home page for recently added items and for "featured" items that are particularly interesting. You can mark items as "featured" when you add them (or afterward). *Example*: Go to cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net to see the featured item. (This site currently has only one featured item, so it never changes; sites with more than one featured item will load a new one randomly when the site is refreshed.)

Collections – Collections are ways of organizing items, rather like file folders on your computer, or like collections in archives such as "Papers of William Faulkner, 1929-1965" in the Special Collections of the University of Virginia. Collections provide a way to organize your items into separate, logically coherent groups. Items do not have to be in collections, but once an item is in a collection, it can't be in any other collection. You can make as many links as you like between items in different collections, though, with tags and exhibits. *Example*: cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/collections

Exhibits – Exhibits are where the scholarly rubber hits the Internet road, as it were. While a March 2010 survey of Omeka users found that most Omeka sites surveyed consisted of just a searchable "collections catalog" of their items, the next highest use of Omeka was for its capacity to build and publish "narrative exhibits." Once you have built an Omeka archive with enough items, you can then use exhibits to interpret those items for the online public. Think of exhibits in a museum: a large museum may own 100,000 items, but at any one time only perhaps 1,000 of them are on display, and a single exhibit may have only 25 or so items. These items have been carefully chosen and arranged by curators, who also often write interpretive text for panels mounted on the wall and for the exhibit's official catalog. You can also think of Omeka exhibits as multimedia essays created using the items in your archive. Many websites about scholarly or

quasi-scholarly topics often decontextualize the images and documents they display, and the reader who wants to know where a particular image came from may be out of luck. This never happens with Omeka exhibits, because any item displayed in the exhibit can be clicked on, and the reader will be taken to the item record with its full complement of Dublin Core metadata. *Example*: Go to cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/exhibits and click on the exhibit about Jesse Harding Pomeroy, arrested in 1874, Massachusetts's youngest killer (only 14 years old!). Go to the exhibit page at cityofbostonarchives.omeka.net/exhibits/show/pomeroy/pomeroy and click on any image, and you'll be taken back to the item record for that file.

Selected Omeka sites (15 minutes)

Steepletop Library: The Books of Edna St. Vincent Millay – steepletoplibrary.org (my site; I'm using Omeka as a book catalog)

Harlem Congress on Racial Equality – harlemcore.com/exhibit (site built by a student in my Creating Digital History course in the NYU Archives and Public History MA program in 2009)

Greenwich Village History – gvh.aphdigital.org (current site used by Creating Digital History students; NYU partnered with the Greenwich Village Historical Society and other NY institutions for some materials)

Host to the World: The Waldorf Astoria Digital Archive – hosttotheworld.com (terrific content)

Carnet géologiques de Phillippe Glangeaud – bibliotheque.clermont-universite.fr/glangeaud/ (uses Geolocation plugin)

Inventing the Map: Frances Henshaw's Book of Penmanship – henshaw.scholarslab.org (uses Neatline)

Europeana – exhibitions.europeana.eu/

Art Nouveau – exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en

DPLA – dp.la/exhibitions

Indomitable Spirits: Prohibition in the United States – dp.la/exhibitions/exhibits/show/spirits

Robert & Monnoyer: French Botanical Artists of the 17th Century – robertandmonnoyer.omeka.net/ (hosted site, no exhibits, but pretty pictures)

The Appalachian Dulcimer Archive – dulcimerarchive.omeka.net/ (hosted site, no exhibits, but a Simple Page of "Histories" that substitutes for the Exhibit; has audio files of dulcimer playing; uses Geolocation plugin so must be at least Silver plan)

See info.omeka.net/showcase/ for another selection of hosted Omeka sites

See omeka.org/codex/View_Sites_Powered_by_Omeka for another selection of self-hosted Omeka sites

Working with Omeka Demos – amandafrench.omeka.net (10 minutes)

Themes – Themes control the look and feel of your Omeka site: the color, the font, the layout. There are (currently) four themes included with the free basic plan for hosted Omeka sites; these themes can be configured to some extent with custom banner images and different colors and so on. There are more than a dozen themes for self-hosted Omeka sites at omeka.org/add-ons/themes/. You can also design your own theme for Omeka, as many of the larger and more advanced Omeka sites do. The NYU Archives and Public History program got a curricular grant of about $4000 to hire a designer for the Greenwich Village History site, which students in Creating Digital History contribute to, for instance. *Demonstration*: Change the theme and refresh amandafrench.omeka.net to see the difference.

Plugins – Like themes, plugins are separate "add-ons" to Omeka, but whereas themes change the look and feel of an Omeka site, plugins change the functionality of an Omeka site — they change what it can do. There are (currently) 10 plugins packaged with the free Basic plan on Omeka.net, but there are more than 50 very cool plugins for the self-hosted version of Omeka listed at omeka.org/plugins that do everything from enabling anyone on the web to contribute items to your archive (with the Contribution plugin) to tweeting out an announcement whenever a new item is added (with the Tweetster for Omeka plugin). Some of these plugins are developed by the Omeka team at RRCHNM, but a lot of them are developed by people who are customizing Omeka for their own purposes and contributing their code to the larger community. *Demonstration*: Activate / deactivate the Documents Viewer plugin and go to amandafrench.omeka.net/items/show/18 and refresh to see the difference.

Users – You can add as many users as you like to an Omeka site, even when you only have a free Basic plan on omeka.net. You can add users in four roles:

Super – can do everything

Admin – can do everything with items and exhibits etc., but can't access Settings

Contributor – can add items and create exhibits, but can't publish them, and can't modify items added by other Contributors

Researcher – can only see items, but can see all items, including private items that aren't published to the web. Note that all items you add to Omeka are private by default; you must deliberately check a checkbox in order to publish an item to the web. This is useful when you want to include an item in your archive but don't want to publish it to the web, as for instance when the copyright status of an item is unclear. Users who are logged in can see both private and public items in Omeka, so the "Researcher" role allows you to let selected individuals see but not

edit your items.

Demonstration: Add an item

Exercises (10-20 minutes)

Sign up for the free Basic plan on omeka.net if you haven't already; when you submit the form at www.omeka.net/signup you will be emailed an activation link and a username and password. If you don't get the email, check your spam folder.

Log in to your hosted Omeka site on omeka.net and create a site.

Add an item.

Create a collection.

Begin creating an exhibit.

Or try out any of the other features you like. Raise your hand if you have a question and I'll come around to help.

Resources

Omeka.net help documentation – info.omeka.net/

Omeka.org help documentation – omeka.org/codex/Documentation

Omeka.org Forums – omeka.org/forums/
The Dublin Core Usage Guide – www.dublincore.org/documents/usageguide/

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