To demonstrate how theory and praxis can be bridged vis-à-vis digital libraries, I chose to create a digital collection of different media types utilizing a tool we explored earlier in the semester, Omeka. In 2007, I studied abroad in the cradle of Western Civilization, Greece, and over the course of my time spent there, I amassed a massive collection of over 2,000 photographs, videos, and sound recordings. For the past decade, this massive volume of digital files has been stored on myriad data discs that have been locked away in the confines of my personal home library. However, with the increase reliance on digital media to preserve both the cultural and historical records comes the new responsibility to ensure that they are preserved and made accessible over time (Abbey 2013; Borgman 2010; Harvey 2012). With this in mind, the current project demonstrates my understanding of three primary theoretical concepts when analyzing the benefits and weaknesses of employing digital artifacts in the development of successful digital libraries: i.e. preservation, access, and discoverability (Lavoie 2014).

Firstly, one of the most important lessons learned from the first weeks of this semester has been that digital artifacts in all of their myriad formats are inherently more fragile than their physical counterparts (Abbey 2013; Borgman 2010; Lavoie 2014). Being comprised of myriad bits of data that effectively encode and decode the contents of digital files, digital artifacts are subject to many forms of degradation (e.g. bit-rot, obsolescence, physical medium complications, etc.) as time continues to lapse (Abbey 2013; Anderson 2011; Harvey 2012). It is now the responsibility of file creators and information scientists to plan for long-term preservation if we hope for digital content to remain viable in the future (Abbey 2013; Borgman 2010; Harvey 2012; Lavoie 2014). Considering the collection under discussion, I had all of the digital artifacts recording a phenomenal experience in my life stored in only one location; a physical location, it may be said, that is prone to both natural deterioration and potential physical destruction. Therefore, based on the theoretical perspectives learned during this course, I understand the need to begin employing techniques to ensure these files are preserved long into the future.

Secondly, as Borgman (2010) avers, “few are satisfied with ‘dark archives’ that ensure preservation but provide no access” (p. 96). In other words, as digital information resources continue to exponentially increase in number, they do little good if they cannot be accessed and used by potential information consumers (Harvey 2012; Lavoie 2014). In the case under discussion, the digital collection I was haphazardly preserving was only useful to my potential needs, but the vast amount of data constituting the collection could have cultural and historical value for researchers and educators. This value arises from the fact that these digital artifacts record Athens, Greece and its surrounding environs as they existed at one point in time. Since then, much has happened in Greece, from economic and political
instability to the continued reconstruction of many of the ruins depicted within the digital files. In a sense, this collection records a moment in modern Greek history that will be effectively frozen in time. By migrating these digital artifacts into a digital library provided by Omeka, I not only facilitate access to their content for myself, but to anyone interested in understanding Greece as it was in 2007. Additionally, if these materials are going to be useful, they must be discoverable, while at the same time providing the context that will render them useful (Lavoie 2014). Thus, we now turn to the final component of reflection.

Thirdly, this class has demonstrated – by way of the numerous analyses we have had to do on existing digital libraries – that preservation and access ultimately mean nothing if the content is not easily discoverable (Lavoie 2014). One of the ways to ensure discoverability is to employ tools perfected by information and library science, and these tools also have the potential of providing the aforementioned needed contextual information rendering them understandable and useful (Lavoie 2014). One effective tool consists of using uniform metadata standards throughout the entirety of a digital collection (Gilliland 2008; Lavoie 2014). These standards provide the necessary information allowing for both preservation of and access to digital content (Lavoie 2014). By employing robust metadata via the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative provided by Omeka, I am ensuring that all needed information accompanies each digital artifact for its curatorial lifespan within my collection. Similarly, additional tools can be employed to help facilitate this process (Lamb 2017a). In this specific case, overall contextual data was provided on the homepage of the collection; searching and browsing features allow users to quickly access desired components within the digital artifacts; folksonomic tagging was employed to better facilitate discoverability; rights and citation information were provided; and a plug-in was installed to ensure that users can share artifacts via social media. Without these tools, the collection would be just that, a collection. It only assumes the status of digital library once services are fully integrated into the users’ experience (Lamb 2017b).

In the end, this project reflects a personal collection that is being preserved and opened-up to allow for access and discoverability by interested information seekers. However, my understanding of the preservation needs of digital information, the necessity for wider access, and the implementation of tools fostering discoverability may naturally be appropriated within my professional career. If I am ever placed in charge of a digital library collection, I will be able to employ this understanding to ensure the digital library and its collections are best serving user-communities. One of the primary lessons this course has taught me – though it is not reflected within this specific assignment – is the need to create clearly delineated guidelines and specifications for the construction of digital library collections (Abbey 2013; Rimkus et al. 2014). While I did not do that for this final project, primarily because it is a personal collection and I am the only one responsible for its creation and maintenance, I understand the necessity
of doing so to ensure uniformity and accountability for all those involved in massive digital library projects.
References


