

Curation
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Curation is a word undergoing change from a specialized definition owned by experts in particular fields into a wider and fuzzier set of meanings owned by nonexperts. At least, in part, this transition in the meaning of the word curation has been informed by its wider use in digital culture, such that digital curation (the process) or digital curatorship (the set of skills associated with that process) is taking the place of words such as writing, editing, and authorship when making or collecting digital content, from the blog to the social media page, from the uploaded snap to the chat and the tweet around those pictures and thoughts. It has also come to have a set of commercial meanings associated with food, entertainment, and retail activities, so that it is no longer uncommon to see it used in, for example, music festivals (where the programming of bands who will play is curated by a musician or DJ [disc jockey]) or in department stores (where a particular collection will be curated for a time by a guest from the world of fashion). The ubiquity of the term is annoying for some, and its burgeoning presence in the wider world is as much mocked as it is celebrated by media commentators. This entry discusses the origins of the word curation, how it has been applied to the digital world, the differences between curation and editing, and how the idea of curation is important in out-of-school learning.

The origin of the word curation lies in Latin with *curare*, a verb meaning to “take care of.” So, in its most traditionally accepted meaning, curation means the process of looking after and conserving cultural texts, practices, and artifacts for present and future generations, using specific sets of skills and knowledge gained over time. Thus, an Egyptologist would develop particular sets of skills of preservation and interpretation, translating ancient texts, and attempting to communicate information about them and to contribute knowledge about them going into the future. This kind of process requires specialist knowledge about the field in question and a means to provide access to that knowledge for the present generation and for generations to come.

Curation also involves telling stories and weaving together narrative threads. An example of this would be Neil MacGregor’s 2010 BBC radio series and subsequent book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* that attempted to tell the “story” of the human race, using 100 selected artifacts from the British Museum. In an art gallery context, it might also mean assembling a series of artworks in a particular sequence and context to tell a new story about an artistic movement or about a single artist’s life and development. In a 2013–2014 exhibition, curators at the Tate Modern Gallery in London told a new story about Paul Klee by, for the first time, hanging his paintings according to the numbering he himself gave them. In this way, curation, even in its most traditional form, implies a level of storying, engagement, and informing according to new information or changing perspectives, of uncovering and revealing things previously not well understood or even deliberately covered up. Sometimes, this can be politically or socially motivated as in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock’s 1981 book *Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology*, which inspired the feminist reclaiming of women’s art from more patriarchal accounts of art history. Exhibitions followed in later years in which the curators uncovered and retold stories of women artists whose work represented a much-needed retelling of the story of art history. If these are the traditional ways of looking at curation, then what are the new ways and what would digital curation be?

Digital Curation

It is worth pointing out that for some expert archivists of modern media, digital curation is a process not too dissimilar from the expert preservation of other kinds of archives mentioned earlier. There is a great deal of debate over how our digital media can be preserved and whether our digital legacy will last in the same way as some printed manuscripts. It will depend on whether anyone can agree on which digital formats will be preserved and playable on devices long after we are gone. The other huge debates are over how digital content is archived, how it is made searchable, and how

it is to be interpreted as a repository of cultural memory. In this definition, digital curation has both a technical and a social dimension drawing on knowledge of how collections are managed and applying the changed arrangements and practices of digital media to them.

Using this definition, digital curation bears some relation to the traditional meaning of curation, but the really large shift in meaning has been away from a sole ownership of the word curation by experts, with specific sorts of scholarship and training, toward a more widespread ownership and adoption. In 2009, The New York Times ran a piece that suggested that this explosion in other kinds of usage was a way for people to announce to the world simply “I belong.” In this understanding of the term, the personal curation of objects, texts, and artifacts is a process for making a statement about identity and belonging. Nowhere is this more evident in more recent times than in digital culture where the word curation as well as its near relatives, curate and curatorship, have taken hold in blogging, tweeting, photo/video sharing, and content creation of all kinds.

The reflexive impulse shared by many users of social media, that they must narrate their experiences, finds its apogee in the world of social media, particularly in sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These are spaces in which the audience for the curated media artifacts can be limited to family and friends but which frequently extend beyond them to other “followers” or audiences, intentionally or unintentionally. Users of such spaces gather collections of links and media made by others, often alongside media they make themselves, and they “share” this with the world.

But what does this collecting, displaying, and sharing actually have to do with curation? The answer lies in the fact that users know their curated arrangements of media tell particular stories about the people arranging them. The media they put together reference in some way all the other things they have posted, shared, and assembled. Skilled users of social media know how the media they display alongside each other work together to tell stories in new ways. Placing their work alongside something made by someone else changes the meaning of both texts and makes something new. We also saw this in a 2011–2012 exhibition at the British Museum when artist Grayson Perry was given free rein to display works from the collection alongside his own newly made work. The pieces were changed by their copresence.

Differences Between Curation and Editing

Although curation as it is now defined may be seen by some simply as editing, curating is a metalevel term that subsumes collecting, cataloging, arranging, and assembling for exhibition, and which, to some degree, subsumes editorial acts of selection within it. Individual texts within a grouping may be edited, but the whole is constructed out of assembling, sorting, and narrating according to the predetermined criteria. And, as we have seen, the pieces of work themselves are altered into new messages and stories by the ways in which they are arranged. Put side by side, each text makes intertextual borrowings from its neighbors to make new meaning.

The other way in which curation in digital social media is different from editing is that it is usually a provisional process, not a fixed one. Changes are made to collections depending on the spaces that frame the content in question, the nature of the audience, the context of previous posts, and more. Exhibitions are years or days or only minutes long in some cases. Writers such as Anthony Giddens would perhaps argue that these exhibitions of the self are evidence of reflexivity—the possibility that, in late modernity, some people exert a kind of control over their life story by knowing how to construct their biography over time. For Pierre Bourdieu, it is possible that he would see people’s curated exhibitions in social media as revealing their habitus, that is, their learned way of being in the world, revealed by their taste and personal consumer choices, their markers of their social and cultural place in the world.

To consider another possible criticism of this approach to curation—How does it really matter? How does this concept of (digital) curation matter beyond the audiences of the developed world? Is it simply a set of connected practices among a relatively wealthy section of the world’s population essentially sharing pictures of themselves, videos of their cats, and the music they love, and nothing more? It matters because it goes to the heart of how meaning is made between people, between communities,

using the many modes of communication in the digital age. It touches on issues of identity and community (because communities also make meaning through curation) as well as safety (because people may not always know the meaning of their curated assemblages or even that they are making them in front of hostile audiences or in unsafe spaces). It involves open, personal, and tacit knowledge about the world and our relationship to it and to one another.

For those offline, not sharing, not connecting for various reasons, through poverty or by refusing in some way, there are other forms of curation, of personal stories, of personal artifacts. From anthropology and the work of Daniel Miller, we learn about the ways in which our arrangements of objects and artifacts, our relationships to them, represent a way we relate to the world itself. He goes further to suggest that our relationship to our possessions and how we organize them finds a corollary in the way we relate to people. As with other social practices, the modes of digital communication make curation visible where previously it existed but was hidden or disconnected; yet it is absolutely not the only location for acts of personal curation.

Curation and Out-of-School Learning

Finally, how is this notion of curation important for learning, especially out-of-school learning? The answer is that it may be of great importance for particular kinds of settings and for particular kinds of learners. The spaces in which learners are most active and agentive may be the spaces in which they are either outside school altogether or in transition between home and school. Or they may even be located in school spaces if the conditions allow for some personal agency and ownership of the activity. In curating their learning, learners have the opportunity to put things that they make and share into new configurations alongside what they have previously achieved. Under the right conditions, this could function as a resource that they can draw on to develop new knowledge, to make new artifacts and productions.

Three examples of this way of working are offered here:

First, in a study of the digital video-making practices of younger learners, one thing that became obvious was the way in which some of their already-established practices around image making were not recognized within the constraints of the formal school curriculum. And yet, in their productions, they had important things to say about formal learning that looked very much like curating their experiences. In doing this, their actions became closely linked to the skill sets of curation more generally, involving things such as care for collected assets, a high degree of organization, and the opportunity to exhibit work and share it.

Second, in a study of children engaged in making computer games from stories, the connection to personal curated archives of procedures they had constructed, tagged, and shared online outside the workshop was an important marker of success. The activity took place in the real physical space of the after-school club as well as in the virtual materials and galleries swapped between users. Learning was skillfully managed by the teachers and computer scientists running the workshop in real time, but personal agency was further enhanced by the children accessing their virtual, curated work online and articulated in the comments they made.

Third, in a study of very young children making stop frame animations over the period of a year in distributed rural settings, the curation of online galleries enabled a shared bank of knowledge about the moving image to be the main vehicle for learning. The resource was both created and curated at school level and fueled further development of the skills needed to make animated films.

If learners have the opportunity to gather and share work, to curate the record of their own achievements and experiences across settings, there is a huge potential for developing an active and engaged disposition toward all learning. However, this is not a simple undertaking; it requires skillful and sensitive implementation. All curating decisions are contextual and contingent, fixed by circumstances that are sometimes well beyond the user's control. The success or otherwise of curated life is founded on the ability to preserve, to narrate, and to see connections between ourselves and the world. This requires some serious thinking about two concepts that make curation different. First, that

it is a reflexive literacy practice and a consequence of the widespread use of digital and social media. Second, that it is a form of meta-authorship, the ability to stand apart from the single piece of work and to see the whole pattern of collection and distribution of a number of texts, artifacts, and practices, of assembling and sharing as part of identity formation throughout life.

Further Readings

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