

Digital Images: Pedagogy, Technology & Infrastructure
Speaking notes for CNI Task Force Briefing, 12/4/2006
Rob Lancefield, Wesleyan University

[Welcome.]

Introductions:

- David Green, principal of Knowledge Culture and author of the report we'll be discussing;
- Eric Jansson from the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education, or NITLE;
- and I'm Rob Lancefield, from Wesleyan University.

Map out the course of this session:

- I'll start us off with some introductory comments that offer a bit of historical background for the study, titled *Using Digital Images in Teaching and Learning: Perspectives from Liberal Arts Institutions*;
- then we'll hear what I believe Eric and I see as the real meat of the session, as David summarizes the study's design and methods, and presents its findings;
- then Eric will discuss NITLE's involvement in the project and his sense of the report's potential utility in regional and national contexts;
- and I'll end with a few concluding notes regarding the ways in which the study's findings are looping back to inform campus-specific work at Wesleyan.

After this presentational sequence, we'll have plenty of time for discussion.

So, to begin.

Commissioned by Wesleyan University and the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education, or NITLE, the report asks how digital image use might be changing teaching practices in higher education. Based on information gathered from over 400 faculty at 33 liberal arts colleges and universities in the Northeast, it presents some answers to this query. Recent studies from institutions including Penn State, RLG, and UC Berkeley's Center for Studies in Higher Education have examined related questions, and David will touch on how these reports may leverage each other in complementary ways.

The present study shows how digital images are changing how professors teach at liberal-arts colleges and universities, but often only after faculty expend huge amounts of personal time and resources. It suggests how faculty might harness image resources more efficiently, and it makes recommendations for optimizing the deployment of digital images on campus. David will discuss these findings in more detail, so here I'll just tell a quick back-story of how the study came to be.

For a decade now, a succession of cross-campus working groups at Wesleyan has sought an efficient, workable solution to the underlying question of how best to support teaching and learning from digital images. As have our counterparts at many peer institutions, those of us on these working groups have been acutely aware of the need for better infrastructure to support faculty and students in this area; frustrated with current tools; and cognizant that these dilemmas are widely shared, as other campuses grapple with quite similar opportunities and issues.

Above all, we had a strong but only incipiently defined sense that it would be a mistake to succumb to the tempting notion that some ideal tool could address the dauntingly serious matter of supporting digital image use on campus. Tools are, of course, essential to these processes; but the set of actual and potential practices involved in using digital images for teaching and learning is too complex and nuanced to be somehow largely handed off to, and “handled” by, any piece of software. Seizing these new opportunities requires not only the proper tools. It also—and at least equally importantly—involves developing and implementing strategies for serious, ongoing human support for people who use digital images.

As we at Wesleyan continued to think our way through these issues in the 2004–2005 academic year, our awareness of the importance of fundamentally social, interactional, and organizational factors in effective image delivery continued to grow. This lent increasing weight to our ongoing urge towards soliciting end-user input when evaluating specific candidate tools. We realized that beyond eliciting faculty comments on image management software as such, more broadly scoped investigation into how Wesleyan faculty use, and might come to use, digital images would be more than helpful—that in fact, this would be a necessary foundation for any meaningful and sustainable campus-wide support for the pedagogical use of digital images.

This realization—a fairly obvious one, in hindsight!—led first to the idea of doing survey, interview, and small-scale ethnographic work just at Wesleyan by our working group itself; but in fairly short order, we realized that expanding the project’s institutional scope could enable us to gain a richer sense of context,

to access a deeper pool of experiences and ideas, and to make more efficient use of local resources by collaborating with peer institutions rather than reinventing much the same wheels through independent, but similarly targeted, efforts.

As our thinking about how to manage digital images on our own campus broadened in this trans-local way, Wesleyan—specifically, Mike Roy, to whom I'm grateful for his central role in, and his more recent thoughts on, this process—approached NITLE to propose that this was probably an issue and a focus of interdepartmental energy on many other campuses as well, and that a collaborative approach to analyzing it could yield widely useful results. This fit well with NITLE's agenda, which is to leverage the collective experience of member institutions for the mutual benefit of all.

Eric will say more about NITLE's role in this work, so I'll just note here that a defining, and in fact a crucial, aspect of the project was the engagement of David Green as more than a consultant but in fact our principal investigator and author; and I'll finish this introductory segment by explaining the study's connection to Academic Commons, which has published the report.

Academic Commons, which I'll call AC, is an online forum for new technologies and liberal education. AC focuses on two main areas of inquiry: documenting, analyzing, and critiquing the claim that technology can advance the goals of liberal education, and exploring how technology and new media might change what it means to be liberally educated. This project bears on both questions, and is a natural fit with AC's editorial mission. By means of commenting features,

groups, and a wiki, AC hopes to encourage the community involved in the initial study to engage in continuing dialogue and to share resources and insights, and to expand that community to everyone who is interested. As part of this ongoing process, AC soon will publish a series of interviews with participating faculty; these will drill down concretely into classroom experiences with digital images.

And with that, over to David, who has done the greatest part of the heavy lifting throughout this project, and will continue in that tradition here today.

[then David]

[then Eric]

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I'll wrap up the presentational component of this briefing with a few comments on how the report has fed back into our work at Wesleyan, where the seeds of the project originated in local discussions about how we could implement better support for the pedagogical use of digital images with both the best prospects for adoption by faculty and the best chance of real sustainability over the long haul.

Looping back into this campus-specific context as one local example, the study's findings will play a central role in guiding our evaluation of candidate systems for campus-wide image management and delivery. As context, I should mention that we also will solicit input from students, but that aspect of work lies beyond the scope of this faculty-centered report and presentation. That said, a key framing factor is the knowledge that no image management and delivery system

as such can possibly offers a free-standing solution to these pedagogical needs. On the one hand, this is something we already knew; but on the other, that knowledge is now more deeply, precisely, and empirically grounded in findings that demonstrate the importance of providing image users with human and institutional support—things that both situate and transcend any campus implementation of some chosen set of tools. The well-grounded nature of this finding may prove to make it a touchstone in our future discussions about the true cost of various contending approaches to the more strictly technological aspects of image delivery.

The report also has given us a clearer sense of specific areas of current practice, and of hitherto half-undetected limitations that constrain it, than we previously enjoyed. Two examples of this are the degree to which licensed image resources often languish undiscovered and unused by most faculty, and the need to adopt tools that offer seamlessly integrated classroom delivery of digital images both from institutional and from personal collections. We now have a deeper appreciation of the importance of these and other factors David has mentioned.

Many of us in this room may have suspected these aspects of present-day image use, based on anecdotal evidence from colleagues at our own institutions; but better documentation and elucidation of these concerns bring home the promise and the difficulties of supporting campus-wide delivery of digital images for teaching and learning. This more sharply defined sense of where we now stand in these regards, and of where and how we might, seems a very useful thing as we at Wesleyan chart our course in this area; and we hope that it may prove

equally useful, even if a bit dismaying in certain ways, at other liberal arts institutions as well. Even the potentially discouraging aspects of the current state of practice—not least, the sadly under-utilized status of many licensed resources—can enable us to identify areas towards which we might aim significant energy with real hope of yielding substantive educational rewards.

[Discussion.]

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Rob Lancefield is Manager of Museum Information Services and Registrar of Collections at the Davison Art Center at Wesleyan University. Among his interests are the capture, preservation, and delivery of digital media from cultural materials. He currently serves as secretary on the board of directors of the Museum Computer Network, or MCN. Rob curated the traveling exhibition Performing Images, Embodying Race, which appeared in spring 2006 at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College. He holds a Wesleyan PhD in ethnomusicology.