

## ***Negotiating Metadata: Catalogers, Vendors, and Oh Yes, Users***

**WebWise 2006, Los Angeles, CA  
February 16, 2006**

**Elisa Lanzi  
Director, Imaging Center, Smith College  
and  
Principal Investigator, *Cataloging Cultural Objects* Project**

As the nation's largest liberal arts college for women, Smith College offers a curriculum based in the humanities, arts and sciences, but with an emphasis on globalism, practical learning, and leadership skills. 285 professors in 37 academic departments and programs serve the 2,500 undergraduates in Northampton, Massachusetts. The College was an early innovator in teaching with digital images, especially given its size and status as an undergraduate program. The stage was set in the late 1990s when plans for a new technology-driven arts complex, complete with professional staff and tools for imaging, were realized.

Today's discussion centers on the impact and importance of image metadata in a pedagogical setting. These observations are informed by user surveys at Smith in addition to my professional involvement in developing metadata standards such as the *VRA Core Categories* and the *Cataloging Cultural Objects* project. The Talking Points include:

- **From Good Enough Practices to Best Practices**

Image catalogers have practiced original cataloging without the benefit of standards for many years. Because image catalogers have worked closely with primary users, cataloging records are rich, but idiosyncratic. While catalogers eagerly embrace new standards, retrofitting legacy systems and broadening cataloging point of view is a challenge. Training in standards-based metadata creation and use of information technology is essential for catalogers.

- **What are we cataloging?**

Catalogers in diverse repositories across the Smith College campus are cataloging similar things with differing methodologies. For example, the College Archives, the Museum, and the Image Collections are cataloging photographs. Typical concerns involve "What is a title?" or "How do we represent objects that are part of something else?" We suspect that ownership is not as important as a metadata point of view in a virtual world. How can users readily recognize objects that are the same? Enabling connections and context for users is key.

- **Metadata by and for the people**

With the arrival of consumer tools for building personal collections comes a cadre of faculty and student metadata creators. Capturing expert knowledge is an advantage, but a minimum level of standardization is needed when items are thrown into aggregated search situations. Questions about who is the expert and who is responsible for metadata arise. Multilingual cataloging functionality is needed. Intellectual property and privacy come into play.

- **Aggregators and Vendors**

Image aggregators for the educational community are still new at this. In order to offer critical image mass, aggregators are sometimes faced with grooming insufficient or incorrect metadata. Simultaneously, museums are exposing their metadata within increasingly sophisticated Web tools. Who rises to the top and who is the authority? Vendors are implementing metadata standards to some degree, but there remains a fundamental disconnect among vendors across communities.

---

Smith College, Imaging Center

[www.smith.edu/imaging](http://www.smith.edu/imaging)

Visual Resources Association (VRA) Core Categories

[www.vraweb.org/datastandards/VRA\\_Core4\\_Welcome.html](http://www.vraweb.org/datastandards/VRA_Core4_Welcome.html)

Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Works and Their Images (CCO)

[www.vraweb.org/CCOweb](http://www.vraweb.org/CCOweb)